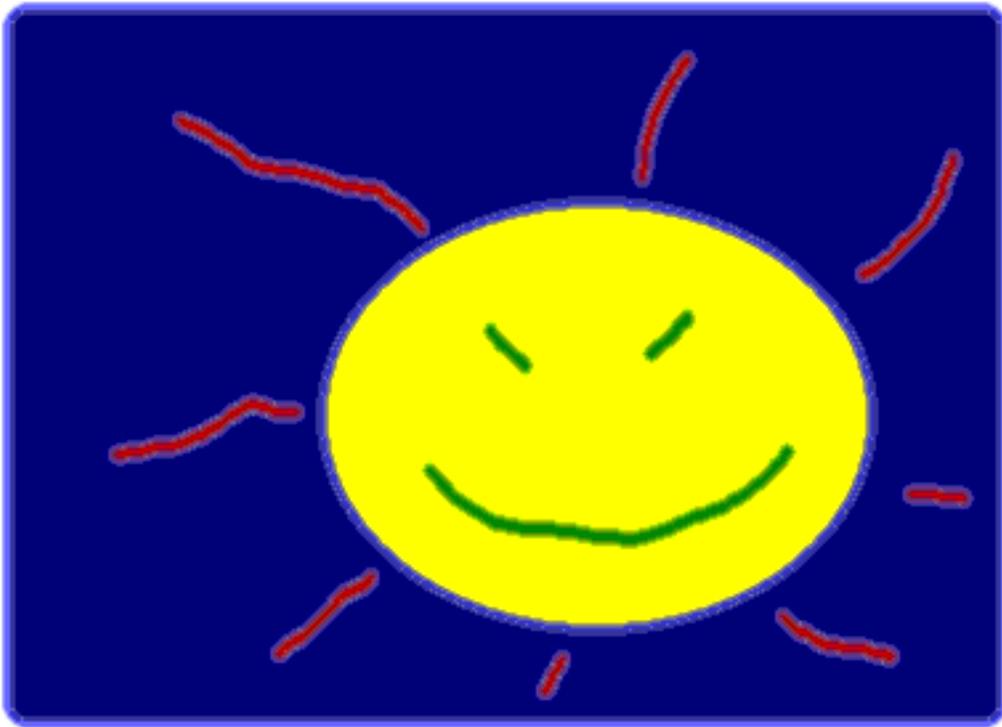


Planet Magazine

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Poetry & Humor — Online Vol. 1.2 FREE!



INSIDE THIS MOOD-ALTERING ISSUE:

Science Fiction by **Brian Burt, Rick Blackburn, Andrew G. McCann.**

Fantasy by **Steve Ross.**

Poems by **Peter Alejandro Cortes, Kevin McAuley, George Pfister, Mark Phillips.**

Humor by **Margaret McCann •**

Masthead

Circulation for this mind-bending e-mag: about 315 as of 7/94

STAFF

Editor & Publisher

Andrew G. McCann

Copy Editor

Toni Long

SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines). We want original, unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, poetry, humor, etc. (no porno, gore, or investment research). Because this e-mag is free, we can't afford to pay anything except the currency of free publicity and life-enhancing good vibes. Submissions: query first, then send stories or poems as Stuffit- or Ziplt-compressed ASCII text files to PlanetMag@aol.com. **Planet** comes in two flavors: a text-only file for IBM or Macintosh or a Mac-only file with a nice layout, color, and graphics. This magazine is distributed in printed form and via America Online's Science Fiction Library (keyword: science fiction; part of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum) or AOL's general Fiction Library (keyword: writers; part of the Writer's Club Forum); it's also available in CompuServe's SF Library (go: science fiction; part of the SF & Fantasy Forum) and in NVN's SF forum libraries (go science fiction).

COPYRIGHTS, DISCLAIMERS

All content, design, illustrations, and the names **Planet** and **Planet Magazine** are copyright © 1994 by Andrew G. McCann, unless labeled otherwise. All rights reserved. This publication has been registered with the Copyright Office of the U.S. Library of Congress. At the same time, individual stories and poems are copyright © 1994 their respective authors, who have granted **Planet** permission to use these works for this issue. All people and events in this magazine are entirely fictitious and bear no resemblance to actual people or events. You may freely distribute this magazine to anyone electronically and print one copy for your personal use, but do not alter or excerpt **Planet** without direct permission from the publisher (PlanetMag@aol.com). **Planet Magazine** is published by Cranberry Street Press, Brooklyn, N.Y., Andrew G. McCann, publisher.

COLOPHON

Composed on an Apple Quadra 605 using DOCmaker 4.02. Text set in 10 point Geneva and 12 point Helvetica; the logotype is Times. Illustrations done in Color It! 2.3. •

Editorials and Letters

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Poetry & Humor — Online

Vol. I.2

OUR MOTTO

Once, in the misty Morning of America — when steamboats chugged the Atlantic, when Ernest Hemingway knocked out Boss Tweed in one round, when the New York Yankees drove in the last golden needle in the first transcontinental phonograph line, and when Ronald Reagan and Mark Twain earned six cents a day fighting shoulder-to-shoulder in the trenches of the Louisiana Purchase — everyone had a motto or slogan they could live by. Something to point to, and take direction from, like a guiding star. Cries of Ohio or Bust! Remember the Spanish Main! or Hey Jimmy! passed the lips of generations of gaunt immigrants, giving them a beacon to follow as they forged a young nation in the smithy of their passions, the bellows of their labors, the hammers of their determination, the anvils of their, uh, homes, and tempered it with the tears of their brows and of their, um, laughing mouths, we guess.

Anyway. With something like all that in mind, we've been trying to come up with a hard-impacting slogan for this exciting, new zine that you, dear reader, are eye-scanning at this exact moment. These were some of our initial ideas: "What the Heck, It's Free", "Truly One of Many Zines", "So Great You Could Drive a Truck Through It," and, finally, "What Are You Looking At?" But then we thought, Wait a minute, are we powered by a low-self-esteem engine or something? Sounds like we're thinkin' small (the editorial wee, as the Scottish say). So we shot higher. And here's what we came up with: "Planet — Perhaps One of the Humbly Greatest Concentrations of Pure Madcap Knowingness in Electronic-Magazine Form in the History of All Universes, Known or Unknown, and Kinda Focusing on SF, Fantasy, Horror, Poetry, Humor, and Possibly Other Areas™". We realize it needs a bit of editing, but we think that, as it stands, it is an individualistic, nonsexist, self-determining, multicultural, multispecies-istic, and, more important, *empowering* slogan, and therefore "appropriate." Which is a pretty darn good thing, or so we hear.

Andrew G. McCann, Editor
July 1994

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

(Editor's note: Letters will be edited for clarity, brevity, and because of our deep-seated need to control the thoughts of others.)

To the Editor: "The Arrow" was an interesting bit of "Space-industrialization gone wild" story. I don't think I'm going to bet against Chuck's getting that moon shoot off. Reminds me of a movie with Andy Griffith, called "Salvage One," or something like that, where a bunch of ex-NASA people get together with a junk dealer and pull off "Apollo-18" (the last NASA mission to the moon being Apollo-17).

"The Kravarian" was scary; how close those two came to going all the way and for nothing . . . a powerful, brief anti-war story.

"My Name is Konen the B..." Konen? with a Brooklynesse accent? Too much! Especially effective "stage direction."

"On Bloating" — What can I say, it IS funny, even if it is about a rather unfunny subject. I hope that there will be some more humor in your Number 2 issue. But who's she trying to kid: "Let's face it, bloating is underrated"???????

Looking forward to Number 2.

[Rick](#)
[via AOL](#)

To the Editor: How does one download Planet Magazine? (My brother and friend have Macs, and I'd like to download the magazine for them.)

Good luck with this wonderful venture!!!

[Bob](#)
[via AOL](#)

[Editor's note: Planet is available on America Online, CompuServe, and NVN as a text file or as a read-only, stand-alone application that is fully formatted with text, color, and graphics (see "Submissions Policy" on "Masthead" page for more info). The text file can be read with either a Mac or a PC text reader (such as M.S. Word) and takes about 4 minutes to download at 2400 bps; the stand-alone app is Mac-only and takes about 17 minutes to download at 2400 but only 4 minutes at 9600 bps.]

To the Editor: Hi! I loved reading the quarterly Planet — it's great! I especially liked the "Konen" story, the humor column, and the "Tail of the Dog." How neat that you've started this newsletter!

[Cora](#)
[via Freenet](#)

To the Editor: I just finished looking through Planet Magazine No. 1. Wow!

[Maggie](#)
[via NVN](#)

To the Editor: I just wanted to drop a note to say how much I enjoyed your last issue of Planet Magazine. There was a nice diversity of literature. I particularly enjoyed the poem "Last Night I went to Africa," by M. Phillips. I am interested to know the future of your magazine, when the next issue will be out. Thanks!

P.S. Your magazine could stand to have a little more artwork/graphics. (In my opinion.)

[Mulu1](#)
[via AOL](#)

LETTERS TO SOMEONE ELSE

Larraby: Egads, man, these "suicide notes" were not humorous then, and they most certainly are not at this late hour. Perhaps that young alienist in Vienna — a Dr. Freund, I believe — can see you over this ghastly hump of ghoulish jesting. In any case, recall that your one and only (it is hoped) such attempt — inhaling directly from a lamp gas jet — only resulted in you blowing up into a sphere the likes of which only Col. Blimp's mother could love.

Nevertheless, I am sorry that I can not come 'round, as I am leaving at this moment for Victoria Station to catch the 1715 to Folkestone. Flynn has the carriage out front right now, and Flashmon is beginning to doze off after finishing my last bottle of vintage '57 Taylor's. I shall have my hands full.

Bear in mind that I will be meeting with M. Eiffel for the entire week, dadblang it.

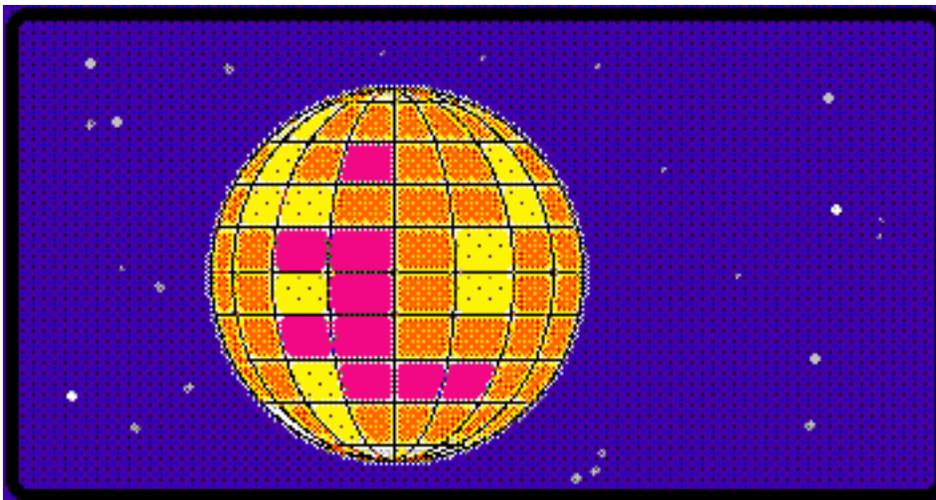
Take it easy, dude,

[Ann Akronizm, M.B.E., F.Y.I., P.O.R.K.](#)

[Surf City, Vancouver](#)

[e-mail: sexmeup@aol.com](mailto:sexmeup@aol.com) •

Science Fiction



THE BOMBARDMENT: Prologue to "The Star Nomad Chronicles" (Vol. II, Part I — "Tales of Casa Alto")

by Rick Blackburn

*Stardate: 6903.30
Casa Alto, 70 Ophiuchi*

For several days now there had been uneasy rumors that the Rebel's V Battle Fleet was heading for 70 Ophiuchi, and for its sole Class M1 planet — Tarsus. No one was sure why; there certainly was not much tactical advantage to attacking what was essentially an agricultural world. Tarsus 2 held little in the way of strategic resources, and even less in the way of war materials. But it didn't take a Mensa graduate to see that since they had erupted out of the warp gate at Arcturus, their course was straight for the 70 Ophiuchi three-star system.

Lord Eric Everett, the Star Nomad port captain on Tarsus, watched as the computers updated the last known position of the Rebel Fleet. When they had first come through the Arcturus Warp Gate last week, it had been suggested that they were on a suicide run at Imperial Terra itself, only 17 light years further up the American Arm than Tarsus was. But now, there could no longer be any doubt. Their destination was the Agro-world of Tarsus. The huge situation board covered one whole wall of the Strategic Defense Command Headquarters, buried deep in the mountains thirty kilometers northwest of the capital of Casa Alto. The situation board was set at long-range sensor position and displayed all of the Terran Empire's Prime Quadrant — in essence a globe surrounding Terra 50 light years in radius. On it flickered lights of various laser-pure colors, indicating stars, planets, and

manned vessels en route.

It didn't look good. Although, like all worlds in the Prime Quadrant, Tarsus was protected by an orbital fortress and several ion-gun emplacements on the surface — these were meant to act in concert with Star Fleet units. The Terrans were of course safe, in the home system; nearly every chunk of rock was protected by ion cannons and literally thousands of sub-light fighters capable of delivering a lethal blow to the most powerful dreadnought. All of this was backed up by planetary defense screens that would vaporize any invading ship or missile while it was still several planetary radii out.

Such elaborate defenses for the agro colony had been discussed briefly at each meeting of the Planetary Assembly for the past 100 years; however, in the end, the cost of establishing such a defense network had led the Assembly to continue to vote to rely on Star Fleet for protection. After all, as 70 Ophiuchi had never been molested in any of Terra's many interstellar wars over the centuries, it was reasonable to assume it never would be.

Except now a Battle Fleet of Rebels was on a direct course for them . . . and where was Star Fleet? Ninety-nine percent of Star Fleet's resources were engaged in fighting the Rebels on their homeground, around the New Titan Warp Gate, 9,000 light years away in the Persus Arm of the Milky Way Galaxy — four warp gates away. To be sure, Star Fleet was aware of the V Rebel Fleet, and a Star Fleet Task Force was in pursuit of them, but the Rebels would have five to seven days in the 70 Ophiuchi system before Star Fleet caught up with them . . . plenty of time to crush Tarsus's obsolete defenses.

The Nomad turned to General Yanov, the Commander-in-Chief of Tarsus's Armed Forces. The general looked gaunt and worried, and much older than his eighty years. Eric was here in his official capacity as Port Captain, but Yanov was also a close personal friend.

"Do you think we can hold them, Mikel?" Everett asked.

"Not in space," the general conceded. "All we can do is slow them down, make them bleed. But they will get through. And they will make a landing — then will come our chance. We may be able to hold them on the ground with the Army."

"Then the battle is already lost if the Rebels use nukes."

Yanov sighed, "I know. But I'm gambling that they are fresh from taking a pounding by Star Fleet at Corridon — you've seen the TACNEWS. The Fleet kicked the Rebel's ass at Corridon, and I'm betting they're low on ammo, fuel, and practical everything else."

"But why come to us?"

"I think we're looking at a pirate fleet now, not Rebels. I think we're in for the granddaddy of all pirate raids here, and if the Terran Sector Commander waits even a week to send relief, there won't be anyone here for the Terrans to fight with."

Eric looked at the situation board, and watched as the computer again updated the position of the Rebel Fleet as it inched its way across the electronic screen toward the green circle of light representing Tarsus. "You may be right," the Star Nomad nobleman said. "I'll do my best to get a squadron of Orbit Guards from the Homeworld, but with most of the fleet deployed backing up the Star Fleet, it may be tougher than I'd like" He spread his hands in front of him in a show of helplessness.

"Hell of a way for a spaceman to die," Yanov growled, "grounded here, behind a desk!"

"Bah!" Eric snorted, "You're too mean and nasty to die"

A collective cheer from the technicians manning the defense computers made the two officers glance at the status board again. Off in the southwest corner of the huge board the orange ball that was Arcturus and its warp gate had swollen to twice its size. Green and blue diamond-shaped symbols of Star Fleet and Allied Navy craft began to inch after the Rebels.

"Well, now, with the Terrans through the warp gate," Yanov said, "it's a race. If we can hold them for a week they may yet come to regret this day."

Eric leaned over a computer terminal and typed in a command.

"Less than two hours before the advance units of the Rebels arrive," he muttered at Yanov.

"Yes, I know. They'll be coming out of warp in under an hour. The Orbit Guard will slow them down some, but there are too many, they'll be over the city very soon now."

"Spaceman's luck, Sir," Eric said, and saluted. The General only had time to nod in acknowledgment as he began to attempt to deploy his too-few defenders in the path of the oncoming fleet.

The Army guards at the entrance to the vast underground defense complex came to stiff attention and presented arms as Eric came out. He returned the salute and clattered down the concrete steps to the jetcar port, his red and gold and black cloak swirling around him like a super-hero's cape. If he only had some of those super powers, Eric thought ruefully as he headed for the far end of the ramp. His protocol droid already had the staff car around in front awaiting him.

Eric climbed into the front seat with the droid — he wanted to feel the wind in his face — it might be the last time he would be on the surface for an extended period.

"Good-morning-sir," the droid's monotone voice greeted him.
"Where-are-we-going-now?"

"Home, CP-47, it looks like the Rebels are about six hours closer than we originally

thought."

"Is-that-bad-sir?" the droid inquired.

Dumb droid, Eric thought. "Yes, CP-47, that's bad — very bad."

* * *

Nine-and-a-half-year-old David Everett and his best friend, ten-year-old Bobby Starkie, were playing catch with a small, hard rubber ball in David's front yard when the staff car pulled up to Eric Everett's ranch-style home in an affluent westside sector of Casa Alto.

Eric paused a minute to take a loving look at his young son. He was small and lithe, slender and long-limbed — like his mother. His chestnut brown hair was straight and thick; it was square-cut in the back and long in the front, so that it fell across his forehead and his large brown eyes. He had a sprinkling of freckles over the bridge of his nose and was somewhat taller than average for his age. He had a loud, high-pitched voice that he could shape into a lethal weapon by whistling between his strong, white teeth.

He was slow to make friends, but once he had, he was affectionate and loyal to that person lucky enough to be so favored. Eric was pleased and proud of being a friend and a parent to his young son. Star Nomads had a tendency to spoil their children because they were so fond of them. This dated from the Great Exodus that had sent the Star Nomads roaming through the galaxy. The location of their home world and the nature of the Great Catastrophe were now forgotten, and about the only thing Nomad historians could agree on was that it had all happened some 27,000 to 30,000 years ago. Children had been scarce and precious commodities in those long-past days, and their value to their parents had not decreased over the millennia.

"Hi Daddy!" David screamed, and ran over to his father. Eric grinned and picked up his young son under the arms and swung him around.

What will become of the children? Eric thought. Will the rebels have slavers with them? Will they even bother with enemy children . . . or just slaughter them?

"Hi, brat!" he said aloud. "Is Mom in the house?"

"She's shopping. Can Bobby and me go swimming in the canal?"

"No, son. Not today . . ."

"Aww, but —" both boys started to protest.

"David!" Eric said sharply. Much too sharply, Eric reprimanded himself, too much of my own strain showing through. "I have a good reason for wanting you to stay close to the

house today, and Bobby?" he said, turning to the ten-year-old.

"Yes sir?"

"I know that both your parents are working, but I'm sure that they would tell you to stay close to home today also."

"But why?" asked David.

"Is something wrong?" Bobby asked.

Eric frowned, too many questions for which he did not have answers. "Well, you boys have heard that there is a space fleet cruising toward Tarsus. Well, they're going to be here in a little more than an hour now."

"Oh boy!" the two children said in unison.

"But no one knows exactly what they want. We parents will want to know exactly where you kids are today. If it turns out that there is going to be trouble, we may have to evacuate all the children."

"INVASION!" Bobby said. "Like on the Tri-D!"

"I want you boys to promise me that you'll both stay close to home, and always ask before you take off somewhere," Eric continued.

"We promise, don't we Dave?" Bobby immediately said. David nodded, still not quite aware of the seriousness of his father's warning. The two boys returned to their game of catch, and Eric started for the house.

He immediately headed for the comm-web, wondering if he could still get an off-planet call through. He dialed a five-digit code to access the interstellar net, and specified his calling destination: the planet Valhalla, in orbit around Mu Cassiopeiae, 31 light years away. There were some delays, but the system did not outright reject the coding, as it would have if the Rebels had been able to jam the sub-space channels that the hyper-relay used. In under 30 seconds the blue, gold, and red banner of the Star Nomad Nation was displayed on his screen, with the letters "VALHALLA" along the bottom limit of the screen. Another eleven digits and a similar instrument on a desk over thirty light years away in the Valhallian Defence Directorate was ringing.

"Deputy Chief of Operations."

The Ops Specialist was an attractive young woman in her twenties with the insignia of a Chief Petty Officer Three on her gray uniform jersey. An involuntary whistle escaped Eric's lips; although happily married, he still enjoyed the art of girl-watching.

"This is an official autovon circuit, sir. Whistling is prohibited," the Specialist said curtly, and leaned forward to press the dissolve switch.

"Of course," Eric said, somewhat abashed. "Captain McKim's office please."

"Yes sir — and sir?"

"Yes?"

"Its Commodore McKim now, sir." She disappeared from the screen, and an instant later the face of his old friend, Donald McKim, filled the screen.

"Eric," the Commodore said warmly, "are you and the family off that mud-ball yet? What IS happening over your way?"

"Hey, Don! Congratulations on your posting to Flag Rank!" Eric was glad of the personal business to blunt the requests he had to make of his old friend . . . requests he knew the other could do nothing about.

"Well, I'm not in your league." McKim grinned widely, and Eric blushed. "Boy military genius, graduated top of your class at the Academy at sixteen, Captain at twenty-nine, promoted to flag rank at thirty-five, Hero of the Ardallian Campaign."

"But you finally got here to the rarefied heights of senior command." Eric grinned.

"How are things there? Our latest intelligence plot locates the V Rebel Battle Fleet as being only hours away at best. You and that pretty wife and kid had better high-tail it out of there — and I mean now!"

Eric's grin disappeared. "The advance elements are already in system," he said. "Janice and David are safer behind the city defense screen now. Look, Don, I've got to ask — do you have any uncommitted units you can send us to patch up a centuries-old defense structure?"

McKim's face fell. "I was afraid that was what this call was about. Why the hell did you wait so long? When the fleet's trajectory confirmed 70 Ophiuchi as the destination I called to warn you to get the hell out of there . . ."

"Janice —"

"Yes, I know, didn't want to leave her people behind — but look at my situation." The Commodore's face was replaced by a combat-readiness spreadsheet. "Admiral Starn's 83rd Squadron is due in port tomorrow from the Eastern Circuit." As he spoke, colored icons moved around the spreadsheet from one disposition to another. "But they are totally dry on Tylum for their interceptors and are low on ammo. Admiral Starn made me swear a blood oath that he's top of the list for refitting. But even so, that'll take a week to ten days.

"The 179th just left for the Capella Warp Gate and the Ras-Algethei front; 22nd is on stand-down, their crews scattered all over the Empire on 30-day leave, not due back for another 14 days; 4077th is also on stand-down — but because of heavy casualties and severe battle damage, it'll be six to eight months before they're ready to warp out of orbit.

"Battle Group C — now there's what you need: two attack carriers, four battle ships, a dozen cruisers, and their supporting auxiliaries. They are scheduled to leave tomorrow to relieve the convoy escort group taking convoys to the Persues Arm battle front. I can try to divert them, and I will try, but" The display on Eric's comm-web screen changed from data mode back to HD visual mode as the Commodore was speaking.

"A Romulan's chance, eh?" Eric growled.

"I'm afraid so."

"What about some of the Allies? The H'Rumbians? Wookies? Chrissakes, the Klingons never willingly miss a chance at combat."

"The problem is that although this is a Terran war, it has polarized much of the Federation also. Most races either already have taken sides and their militaries are as stretched thin as ours, or they have decided upon a policy of complete neutrality. Good idea about the Klingons though, I have a friend on the Armada's CinC's staff who owes me a favor. I'll send him a message immediately, 'All Speed' and all. If they've got anything, you can count on the Klingons to show up, but the victory party after might be as bad as a pirate raid — the Klingons are big believers in partying and fighting."

McKim's face suddenly brightened. "Is that your little rugrat, there?"

"Huh?" Eric turned. David was standing at the rear of the room, Eric's makeshift office in their home.

"Yeah," he said, motioning David to join him. "This is my son, David," he said, squeezing the boy's shoulders affectionately.

"Good-looking kid," McKim said.

"David, this is an old friend of mine, Commodore McKim," Eric said.

"By your command, sir," David said, repeating the formal military greeting that his father had taught him, wide-eyed and awestruck by the figure on the screen.

"At ease, Trooper," McKim said, laughing at the solemnity of the small boy. "Do you think you will follow your father's people then . . . and take the TEST and become a Star Nomad?"

"Yes sir," the little boy said, still standing at attention. The screen blurred for a moment

and was filled with snow, the picture rolled several times before stabilizing again.

". . . jamming . . . -squawk- . . . when it's all over," the speaker of the comm-web spat. McKim's image wavered again and dissolved into snow for a final time. "Spaceman's Luck!"

"Stop by for a drink — Frank's Pass Out — next Empire Day," Eric shouted before the connection was totally broken by enemy electronic warfare. He turned away from the set, worried.

"What happened, Daddy?" David asked.

"The Fleet is jamming all off-world calls." He turned to David and took the boy by the shoulders again. "You may be called upon to be very brave in the next few days. I want you to remember that you are a Star Nomad. It is not a sin to be afraid, but you must not panic . . . no matter what. Do you understand, David?"

"Yes, Daddy," the small boy said.

"I'll be at the star port for a few days, I may have to sleep over. I want you to mind your mother. And if you have to, to take care of her until I get back."

"I will, Daddy."

Eric sighed, "You and Bobby will be able to watch the Fleet landing from our front yard, it should be quite a sight."

At that moment, Bobby's treble voice drifted into them, "DAVID! Come outside, quick! You won't believe it!" His voice was drowned out by an intense, rumbling sonic boom.

Outside, up in the sky, a formation of five delta-wing Planetary Assault Cruisers were lumbering across the city at perhaps twenty-thousand feet — tree-top level for the mile-long interstellar behemoths. Suddenly, a double-V of ten Viper interceptors flashed overhead, perhaps 1,500 feet off the ground. The alien fighters were followed by a huge sonic boom. David and Bobby were jumping up and down with excitement at the unexpected military air show. David shouted something, his hands jammed over his ears, but was drowned out by another squadron that flashed overhead even lower. Mach 2.5 or 3; Eric automatically began thinking like an anti-aircraft gunner — lead the target by some much, determined by the estimated speed multiplied by a coefficient representing the altitude and read in degrees, minutes, and seconds of arc.

Janice Everett, Eric's wife, pulled the family jetcar into the long drive beside the immaculate lawn and immediately drafted her young son and his friend into servitude, unloading the cargo compartment of her purchases. She came over to stand beside the tall, muscular figure of her husband.

"Does this mean war?" she asked.

Eric smiled at his long-limbed young wife. "Honey, half the galaxy has been at war for the past four years . . . but yes, I'm afraid that the war has finally caught up with us. I only hope we can negotiate an honorable surrender."

"Surrender?" Janice was surprised, "but you're the one who always says surrender is the coward's way out."

"Yes," Eric agreed, "But that presupposes that both sides have the means to continue combat." Eric pointed skyward, other formations of PACs — higher up — were still passing overhead. "That's a full battle fleet . . . against an outmoded planetary defense system that should have been scrapped and rebuilt over a century ago."

David and Bobby had managed to draft Eric's protocol droid, CP-47, into service carrying groceries from the jetcar parked on its landing ramp into the kitchen of the Everett's home.

"If we fight," Eric said with finality, "we sign their death warrants." A sweep of his hand indicated David, Bobby, and all the other children on the block. "We simply cannot defend the planet against that many guns and ships."

Eric put his arm around her waist and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. "Don't worry, unless the Fleet Commander is a madman, they'll simply raid the planet for gold and supplies; after all, there really isn't much here to loot for a smash-and-grab pirate. And, they've got the Star Fleet less than a week behind them"

"I know," Janice began, and suddenly snatched out at a bag David was carrying and retrieved a thin piece of paper. "The newsfax is full of speculation about the fleet." She waved the newsfax in Eric's face. "Look at this . . ."

"TERRAN FLEET ANNIHILATES MAIN REBEL RESISTANCE IN PERSEUS ARM (United Press Interstellar) — In a news release from Star Fleet Command, Amiral Melvin..." Eric frowned as he scanned the newsfax rapidly. The Trilateral Alliance, which had long been neutral during the interstellar power struggle for the Terran Throne, had two weeks ago concluded an agreement with Gar Landry, the Terran Emperor, and had entered the war on the Emperor's side. The first effects of their powerful military had been total obliteration of the Rebel's XIII Fleet in the Perseus Arm and the subsequent fall of Corridon to the Imperial Marines. It meant the beginning of the end for the rebels loyal to Tokeratrat Bulgannin, self-styled king of Perseus. It meant the rebels would be twice as dangerous to deal with when they arrived, fresh from a smarting defeat.

Eric and Janice had walked to the staff car, their arms intertwined. Eric paused to kiss his beautiful wife again; it was a long and passionate kiss.

"Will you be home this evening?" Janice asked.

"I don't think so," Eric said slowly. "I may be away for a few days, but I'll be back as soon as I possibly can. To be on the safe side, perhaps you'd better load the car in case we have to evacuate the city, okay?"

"Okay," she said, and squeezed his hand. "I love you!"

"And I love you, too, sweetbuns."

CP-47 had returned from his porter duties and Eric climbed in, saying, "Starport, CP-47."

The staff car pulled out of the driveway and headed for the starport, 20 kilometers toward the center of the city. The drive was a short one, but in that time, Eric managed to read all of the newsfax concerning the Corridor Battle. The more he read, the more worried Eric became; it was obvious that the rebel Admiral would be in no rush to join the blasted XIII Fleet in the Perseus Arm, and it would make an honorable surrender harder still.

The starport was a beehive of activity. Tarsus had no official navy, its GNP being too small to support a large fleet, but several captains of Free Traders currently in port had agreed to accept Tarsus's commission as privateers in return for commercial concessions after the war and gold up front. These twenty or so rust buckets had been mounted with phaser cannons and ship-to-ship missile launchers. Most had completed the instillation of weapons and repowering and had lifted into circumpolar orbits around either Tarsus or Awesome, around which Tarsus orbited.

Two of the ships, relics from the last century, were still standing on the port, techs hurrying to finish connecting power leads from hastily installed phaser cannons inside weapons turrets that looked like two large blisters on the port and starboard sides of the ships.

CP-47 eased the staff car into Eric's reserved space at the Port Operations center; Eric climbed out and began surveying the work still in progress on the two remaining privateers on the ramp of the starport, a half kilometer away. As he shaded his eyes, Ian Fischer, the port's manager came up to him.

"What's the word from the defense center?"

"Hi, Ian. Not good, I'm sorry to say. The planetary defense batteries are about two-thirds combat-ready and only Casa Alto has a defense screen . . . and I don't know long that antique will hold up against a concentrated attack."

"Have you heard about the Government emissary's meeting with the Rebels? He's shuttling up right now, should be in about fifteen minutes."

"I've still got a lot of work to do," Eric said. "I'll watch from my office."

"Okay, Eric," the other said. "We'll have to get together for a good stiff drink when this is over."

"Yeah," the Nomad agreed, "next Empire Day."

Eric's office was in a long, wide building in the administration complex of the Starport. In the center of an auditorium-sized room was a three-dimensional image of the starport itself; around the edges of the room in a two-tier semicircle were the people responsible for the smooth technical operation of the starport, Tarsus' Space Traffic Control people. As Eric headed for his private office, the *Bulwark*, one of the tramp freighters-cum-privateers, lifted off. Its highly detailed 3-D image balanced on its ion-plasma flame for a second, running its drives up to maximum output to make the 60-second run for deep space. Then it quickly rose toward the ceiling, where the image left the model at a scale altitude of 50,000 feet.

Eric sat down in front of his desk, just as the soft "kweep" of the beep signal indicated something on the communications channel he should watch. Eric leaned forward and touched a button and the 36-inch LCD screen on the opposite wall of his office glowed to live with the image of T. Cecil Olgelthorpe, local news pundit.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, this is your KSRX news service, anchored by the award-winning commentator T. Cecil Olgelthorpe. Of course, the biggest news story to cross this reporter's desk in several years is the arrival of the Space Fleet, currently taking up station in planet orbit around our modest little world. Although the exact intentions of the aliens are not currently known, the government has appointed Cyrus Wackerbath, a well-known retired politician, as well as a former member of the Imperial Senate and Federation Ambassador, to communicate the complete welcome of the government of Tarsus to the aliens"

"Hhrump!" Eric snorted. "A lot of good that'll do," he muttered to himself.

". . . while they are in orbit." the Tri-D continued. "The alien fleet is composed of a mixture of Federation races, with the majority being Saurians. Saurians are reptillian bipeds native to the 45 Delta Aquillae star system, just the other side of the Rigil Warp Gate . . . Ahh, I think the Admiral commanding the Fleet is about to address us"

The image shifted to a large briefing room aboard one of the Saurian battleships. Cyrus Wackerbath, together with his entourage, was standing at the foot of a long, polished Tarmarakwood table, while the Saurian Admiral, and his officers, including a sour-looking human, sat at the head of the table.

"Your Excellency . . ." Wackerbath began, but was cut off in midsentence as a Saurian MP used his phaser rifle butt to hit the emissary in the midsection. Wackerbath doubled over to the gasps of his entourage, who rushed forward to him.

The camera shifted to the Saurian Admiral, whose jaws were open, exposing half-inch

incisors and lots of needle-sharp teeth. Eric, having dealt with Saurians, recognized the alien facial expression: contempt for a meat animal.

The weasily human arose from his chair and introduced the Saurian Admiral: "The High Lord Admiral Ra'ak Leahcim kor Reay, Flag Office Commanding the Fifth Fleet of his Most Sublime Majesty, Tokerarat I, King of Perseus."

The Admiral arose and looked directly into the Tri-D camera.

"You arrrreee our meat!" the sentient reptile hissed at the camera. "You cannot save yourselves by attempting to surrender. Surrender from a foe who lacks the ability to defend himself is an insult to the attacker. For this insult, and because you all have committed treason against the lawful Emperor, Tokerarat of Perseus . . . you are all sentenced to die!"

"Crom's Devils!" Eric roared, and jumped to his feet, slapping at the dissolve switch. There would be no honorable surrender, and, as long as that lizard was in command, no surrender at all — the rebels meant to slaughter them all!

Eric stabbed at the comm-web button, the screen came to life with the Chief of the traffic controllers.

"Get that ship off the field, NOW!" Eric ordered. There was no need to specify which ship, the Chief Controller had been watching the Tri-D also.

"Aye aye, sir," was the reply.

Eric went out onto the operations floor. Already the pre-start warm-up of the freighter's plasma igniters was visible as a soft purplish-green glow at the stern of the stubby cigar-shaped starship, sitting on its tripod landing gear on the ramp outside. Eric sat in his oversized command chair with its computer connections and display screens, pulling on the headset with its earphone and attached microphone. Eric signaled that he would handle this departure himself. It was quite likely that he was sending these men and women to their deaths high above the planet in combat against an implacable foe. If it was to be, better the order came from him, rather than one of the civilian technicians.

"Privateer Wodin's Beard requesting clearance to lift," the omni speaker crackled.

"Wodin's Beard," Eric said into the boom microphone on his headset. "All clear forward and up. Spaceman's Luck, guys."

"Thanks, Tarsus. We'll need it."

The last remaining privateer began its slow ascent to orbit, a starship's most vulnerable moments.

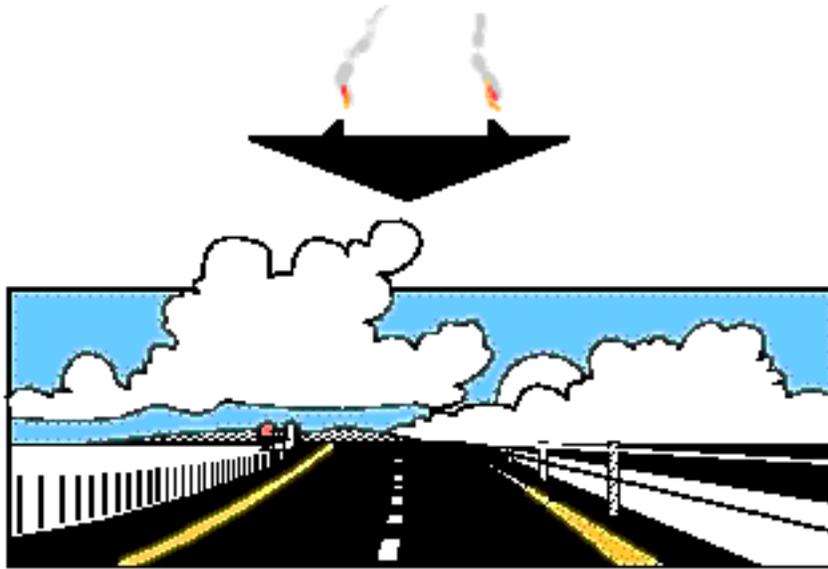
Two Viper interceptors suddenly roared across the apron of the main ramp of the starport, pulse-laser cannons blazing. The gunners on the newly created privateer returned fire, and for a heart-stopping moment it appeared that they might actually make it into free space as one of the vipers was caught in a burst of killing light and dissolved into flame.

But it was not to be. The remaining Viper swooped in close, firing at the most vulnerable point of the ancient starship, its liquid-fuel boosters, used to attain orbit and then jettisoned to be reclaimed by an orbital truck later. With a single, thunderous report and a huge gout of red-yellow flame, one of the mono-hydrozine¹⁸ tanks exploded, spewing flaming wreckage over a five-kilometer radius of the Labyrinth, the warehouse and black-market sector just outside the ring of the starport proper.

Already, one could hear the wail of fire sirens in the distance. •

Story copyright © 1994 Rick Blackburn.

(Editor's note: "The Bombardment" will be continued in the next exciting issue of *Planet*. Rick Blackburn can be contacted at StarTrek76@aol.com or at R.Blackburn2@genie.geis.com.)



STEALTH

by Andrew G. McCann

That's right, you saw me on "Oprah" and "Donahue." And I'll betcha my last beer you're wondering what kind of chucklehead would've done it. Well, let me explain by telling you that only one word describes the Ultimate Joyride: totally awesome. And that's what it was, a joyride. If it wasn't, you think I'd be sitting here telling you about it? Like my lawyer said, I didn't intend to steal the plane, I intended to go for a joyride. It ain't even grand-theft jet.

Look, how could I resist? Here I was, a laid-off beverage deliveryman from Cleveland, hitching out west for the summer. I'm bored, kicking through this empty town in Nevada, Rosy Palm or something, and I come across this long, chain-link fence. Behind it, there's this big empty parking lot, huge sheds built into the side of the mountains, and some dark-blue parade stands. But I don't see anyone, and, like my lawyer told the press conference, I swear I didn't see any signs saying "private property." So, alley oop and over I go. Okay, so why? Because sitting in the middle of this giant, concrete lot, right in front of these stands, was a humongous UFO. A mean, bat-shaped sucker. I wasn't that scared, of course; I'm used to seeing UFOs. Anyway, I had nothing else to do.

So I come scrambling over low to this evil gizmo, just sitting there like a hi-tech Shelob, the Queen Spider. I took a walk around it: perfectly smooth, dark gray; just a big wing with two vents and massive landing gear for each wing and the nose. Now, if you're wondering how come I sound so knowledgeable, that's because I did a little bit of reading up on the subject during the trial. *Newsweek*, I think it was. Anyway, I decide to take a look in the cockpit, and I creep up the side of this billion-dollar, Teflon-coated monster. And you never saw such a video game in your life; so in I go. It was very comfortable.

Now I strap myself down and start pressing buttons and making machine-gun noises and, would ya believe it, the thing starts up. Don't ask me how, but the more I tried to stop it, the more it starts moving down the tarmac. Before I know it, I'm airborne. Like my attorney says: "Hey, they left the keys in it."

And I'm flying through heaven. In a few minutes, I'm over San Francisco, and I go in low and just miss clipping the Golden Gate Bridge. Talk about your UFOs. Then, I somehow swing slowly around and go screaming back across the country. After awhile, I think I must be back over Cleveland — at least, it looks like a shining city on a lake.

There's this sort of whispery, crackling sound I keep hearing, and I realize it's coming from this really cool Top Gun helmet, which I forgot to put on. So I squeeze it on, and there's this very calm fella keeps asking me my name, and do I speak English and so forth. I say sure, I'm Buck Yaeger. As a policy, I always give fake names to the authorities, but I quickly realize I'm very likely busted already. So I say, Who's this? And he says General Somebody, from CONDOM or MIDOL or something. Well, they said they were having a little trouble locating me exactly because of the Stealth technology, which pretty much neutralized their radar waves, and which on this model was particularly "advanced," as they put it. So he asks my location so's he can talk me down to the nearest airport.

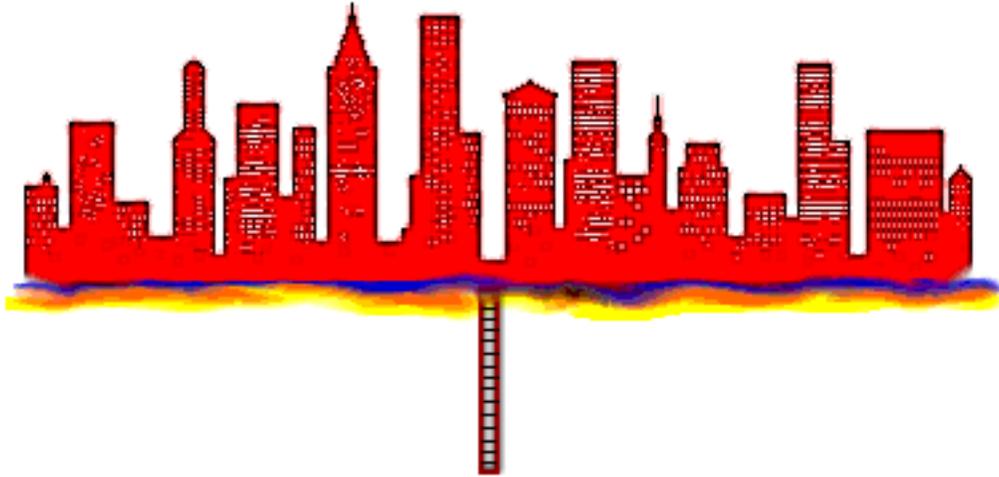
But then I realize, he's gotta be kidding: I wouldn't know an aileron from my elbow. What's more, like him, I hadn't the faintest idea where I was. That's when I panicked. I started sweatin' and flippin' switches and went into this rollercoaster turn where the blood just left my brain. I mean, consciousness said, Later, dude. But I must have pressed something else, too, because when I came to, I was slowly falling to earth strapped into just my bat-shaped seat, with this bat-bizarro parachute billowing above me.

I landed pretty hard, but the plane landed harder — right on top of the largest television studio in the Midwest, I hear. As you probably read in the papers, I managed to hide out in a barn for a few days until the horses had enough of me and raised hell one morning. Out of the house totters Old, Wrinkled McDonald with a 12-gauge shotgun and no sense of humor. He held me off until the cops came.

My legal counsel expects I'll do only a little time, since public opinion says it was the military's own damn fault for leaving that plane right out in the open like that, with no signs or guards anywhere in sight. And it seems the judge'll let me keep profits from the book I'm writing with some dude from "People" magazine, although the lawyer's fees are gonna snarf down a big chunk of that. In any case, my brother-in-law got me a job as a night guard with Cleveland Secur-i-Tee Co. — I'm gonna need some scratch when I get out of the slammer and this media rock-star gig flames out.

So, you ask, What are my regrets? I guess the only thing I'm sorry about is that TV studio I turned into an enormous slice of burnt toast. But, hey, look at the bright side: Maybe it means one less talk show you'll see me on. •

Story copyright © 1994 Andrew G. McCann.



CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

by Brian Burt

The sun never shone in Hell, and folks never saw the stars. That was what they missed more than anything, why they hated it so much. Three-quarters of the luminary panels had been shattered by punks or juicers, leaving the leprous metal skin of the place in perpetual dusk. Except, of course, during sleep-cycle, when the wary fled the glowtube-speckled darkness to cower in their apartments until it passed; when demon-boys and blackhearts lurked in hungry shadows, swallowing the foolish, the unlucky, and each other. During day-cycle a homeboy could move around if he knew which areas were DMZ, if he crossed the turf borders in the right places and could afford the tolls. It was still a dangerous place, day or night. Food, clothes, medicine, tronix — Hell got the worst of everything, shoddy discards from up the Ladder. Still, what bothered most folks was not seeing the sun.

Unlike the rest, Raghiv Jones could scam his way out of Hell. At least once a week he tubed up the Ladder, through the nether levels all the way to Paradise: Chicago Metro Level Five. Up there, above the stratified metal shell of the city, he could walk under an open sky beside the Topsiders. Sometimes he stayed past sunset, ignoring sublevel curfews so he could watch the stars sparkle dimly above Lake Michigan, watch the moon glow overhead like a wedge of ripened honeydew. Being the best hacker on the nets bought him that precious breath of freedom. If the Ladder cops caught him, they'd toss his ass in the juvie Hellpits for sure. He didn't give a damn. Everybody deserved a taste of sunshine, and it wasn't fair that folks buried on Level One couldn't afford it. Besides, there were worse things to worry about than Ladder cops.

One of those worse things hacked into Raghiv's net session without warning. The Netware Engineering classroom of Depaul's Virtual University dissolved around him, replaced with

a swirling fractal fog. Raghib cursed as the image of an immense dragon filled his goggles, its armored body covered with scales the color of jade, its tail bristling with bony spikes dripping blood. Leathery wings billowed like sails above a serpentine neck that ended in a human face. Akuma, leader of the Helldragons, his slanted eyes glowing like hot slag.

Akuma's virtual lips parted in a razor smile. "Hey, Raw, how you got time to link into that sweet little Topside college when you so busy fucking with my Dragons?"

Raghib juiced up his own virtual image, a proud black warrior with bulging biceps and a glittering afro sculpted into the sleek outline of a spaceplane. A righteous look, kind of an astral Malcolm X on steroids. "I'm takin' them classes 'cause they my ticket outa here, Akuma. I just wanna stay clean and get my family up the Ladder. I don' mess with nobody, 'specially not your Dragons."

Akuma's spiny tail twitched in the background. "Ninja Storm hit our Stoney Island dojo last night. Killed ten soldiers, left five more scrambled. Cut through our guard-dog netware like it not there. Word on nets is no way they do that without Raw."

Raghib winced. "Man, that's ratshit an' you know it! I don' soldier for no Ninja Storm, and I don' soldier for no Helldragons. I just do my classes and stay outa y'all's way. I don' want no part o' no gang war!"

"You sing sweet, Raw, like mockingbird. But mockingbird lies. I want proof you not Storm's boy. You hack for Dragons. Then I know you not my enemy."

Raghib shook his virtual head, felt his helmeted realtime head shaking in tandem somewhere far away. "No way, man. I'll send you just like I did Shibo an' the Storm. I don' hack for hire. I don' do gang biz."

A crackling tongue of flame flicked from Akuma's mouth. "Hey, kage, you play nasty game with me. How you like if I play nasty with your woolly old Mama-san? Maybe your sweet little kage brother?"

Raghib's realtime fists clenched inside his gloves, the glove sensors translating the movements into digital pulses that caused his virtual image to mirror the gesture. The racial slur didn't bother him. Kage — Japanese for "shadow." Who gave a shit. But threatening Mama and Jamaal? Man, this squint was begging for a gigajolt of juice in his wetware! Raghib's temper sizzled like a pissed-on powerpack.

"You mess with my blood an' you'll see how nasty the game can get. I'll kick your skinny yellow ass, an' I won't need no Ninja Storm to help!"

Akuma's dragon roar shook the nets. "You gone, kage, you hear? You yurei! You a fucking ghost!"

"That's right. I walk through walls an' slip through your greasy fingers like smoke. Just

don' be steppin' on my grave."

Raghib purged the Helldragon simulacrum from his netspace before the crazy Jap could rant at him again. Level One was getting too hot for someone who refused to choose sides. He had to finish his degree so he could get his family up to Level Two. Level Two could still bleed you, but at least folks there kept trying. They kept their eyes up. Not much left in Hell but fog-eyed zombies with no hope. And bloodsuckers like Akuma who kept them that way. Damn, he hated the gangs! He wouldn't let them drain the life out of Mama and Jamaal. He cut the link and stripped off his virtual interface gear, trembling with impotent rage.

Jamaal punched him in the arm, a good shot for a bony ten-year-old, and stared at him with pleading eyes. "Hey, man, you din't forget?"

Raghib grinned, his ill temper fading. "Nah, I din't forget. Come on, monkey."

Mama raised her tired head from the gel-couch, her short-clipped silver hair bristling like steel wool. A lifetime in Hell had etched deep fissures into her gaunt brown face. "Where you boys off to?"

Raghib sighed, knowing Mama would hassle him. "Promised I'd take Jam tubin' today, let him breathe a little rich man's air. The boy ain't never seen Heaven, Mama. I 'spect it's time he did."

Mama's sleepy eyes flashed. "The boy's name ain't Jam, it's Jamaal. And your name ain't Raw, it's Raw-heeb. You use it, boy. Your Daddy gave you that 'fore this place ate him. That's a freedom name, gonna take you straight up the Ladder someday, if you don' get yourself thrown in the Hellpits 'fore that can happen!"

Jamaal's wide brown eyes narrowed in disgust. "Ah, Mama, Raw promised! I just gotta see the sky with my own eyes, not in no vid. Even the rats too scared to come out in this smelly ol' dump."

Mama sat up and waved a gnarled finger at both of them. "Maybe them rats got more sense than both of you. There's a lot of evil 'tween here an' the tubes!"

Raghib spoke quietly enough to smother her anger. "The boy's tired of suckin' soot down here. He needs real air an' sunshine. I swear I'll take care of him."

Mama seemed to age several decades before Raghib's eyes. He hated to pain her, to play on her guilt, but she had to face the truth. She busted her ass, did the best she could for them. But the best of Level One was still shit, and she couldn't turn it into gold. She sank back into the gooey cushions of the gel-couch with a sigh. "You feed him while you up there, an' make damn sure he wears plenty of UV blocker. 'An you get back 'fore curfew, or I'll beat both your black butts 'til they purple!"

Raghib and Jamaal raced down the hall, laughing too loud, acting dopey. Raghib checked the lobby monitors carefully before palming through the flophouse exit into the gray twilight of Hell's day-cycle. Mama was right about one thing. Evil ruled the streets, and Jamaal was just a kid. Raghib scanned the shadows for any sign of trouble as he hauled his little brother through the skeletal remains of Old Downtown toward the Michigan Ave Tube. Jamaal jittered and jived like a juicer at the top of his buzz.

They hurried down Grand, dodging a pack of tattooed, depilated blackhearts cooking a slab of ribs over a heating vent at the corner of Michigan Ave. Raghib's stomach lurched. Only the craziest blackhearts came out during day-cycle. He wondered which poor dumb juicer had been butchered in an alley so this bunch could have their little picnic. Raghib tried to block Jamaal's view, but he couldn't block out the ghastly reek of smoking flesh. As they hustled to put some pavement between themselves and the blackhearts, the battered entrance to the CTA Tubeline came into view — the gateway to blue sky and green grass and cotton-ball clouds. The gateway to a ten-year-old's dreams.

A street freak lumbered out of the alley beside them, the smell reaching them before he got within five meters. His toothless mouth dribbled spittle across a ruined face cratered with radiation scars. He mumbled something that sounded like a plea as he stretched two scabrous hands toward Jamaal. Raghib grabbed his brother with both arms and backed away from the walking corpse, Jamaal's little-boy scream jabbing into his eardrums. The freak distracted him only for a moment. A moment too long.

Four lean teenagers slipped out of an abandoned flophouse between him and the Tube, their silver jackets shimmering with jade dragons that seemed to dance inside their chests. Akuma's boys. Shit! Raghib watched in horror as two of them raised stingers to their mirrored eyes and sighted, numbly realizing he still held Jamaal in his arms. He ducked under the palsied swipe of the street freak and hurled Jamaal toward the mouth of the alley. A beam of ruby light scorched across his back and he heard the freak's gurgling scream. Two more beams exploded at chest-level, dropping Raghib into a vat of boiling agony.

Long minutes passed as he struggled through an ocean of liquid fire. He lay on his stomach on the filthy pavement, his head turned toward the alley. Jamaal sprawled a few meters away, limbs akimbo like a broken doll. Two grinning Helldragons loomed over him, stingers bulging inside their silver jackets. One of them pulled a crystal dagger from his belt and knelt beside Jamaal, burying the blade in what remained of the boy's chest to claim the kill. Raghib fought to move, to scream, but could do nothing. His traitorous body would not even let him pour out the grief that welled behind his eyes. When the second Dragon bent to thrust a dagger into Raghib's own back, Raghib welcomed it. Still he felt nothing. Where was the pain? He wanted it, wanted something to fill the yawning void. Please, God, let me die. I promised. I promised to take Jam to Heaven.

As the world faded into midnight, Raghib Jones stared at the wreckage of his brother, searching for the boy's departed spirit. And for the strength to cry.

Raghib awoke in the middle of a cloud. As his vision cleared, the snowy vapor hardened into white ceiling tiles. The pale glow of a luminary panel hurt his eyes, but he could not turn away. Tronix hummed nearby, soothing him despite his confusion. Where in Hell was he? The cloying smell of antiseptic told him he lay in a hospital bed. He tried to look around, but he could not move. He could not feel his arms, his legs, the mattress against his back. Memories of Michigan Ave. drifted through his mind like angry ghosts.

"Relax, Raghib. You're going to be okay." The face of a white woman appeared above him, brown eyes crinkled with sympathy.

"Who are you?"

The woman tried to smile through thin, colorless lips. "I'm Dr. Nichols. I've been in charge of your case since the Ladder police brought you in six days ago. The injuries to your spinal cord were extensive, Raghib, too extensive for us to deal with down here. Your mother gave us consent to bring down some Topside specialists to perform an experimental procedure. It was your only chance."

"I can't . . . feel . . . nothin'."

"This is a new technique, Raghib. We implanted a neural interface web in your brain stem above the area of spinal trauma. Signals from your brain are routed to a microprocessor that interprets and relays them along the proper neural pathways. It's incredibly complex. We were able to restore basic autonomic functions, enough to keep you alive. Beyond that . . . Well, we couldn't reverse the quadriplegia. We did the best we could."

Raghib fought a growing tide of despair. Okay. He was fucked. He could buy that if only . . . "Where's my brother? Let me see Jamaal."

Dr. Nichols' face tightened. "There was nothing we could do for him. I'm sorry." Raghib stared at her, hopelessness kindling into rage. "You bitch. You already banked him!"

The doctor did not flinch, salt-and-pepper hair curling around her face like smoke. He could see she had been through this many times. "Reclaiming viable organs from nonviable patients is standard practice. Your brother's gone, Raghib. Maybe we can save a few other ten-year-olds with his help. Do you think he wouldn't want that?"

Raghib knew she was right, that the law backed her up, but he still hated her. Just another gigabuck cutter from some Topside medical center doing her hitch in Hell. This was a research lab for her, a chance to see all kinds of ugliness she'd never see in Heaven. Jamaal's parts would wind up in some rich brat on Level Five, not in any poor homeboy. None of it mattered, because Jamaal was dead. Dead because of him.

"When you banked Jamaal, you shoulda banked me too."

"Wrong. You're disabled, not dead. It sounds like garbage right now, but you can still lead

a good life. That micro has a lot of power. When you get used to it, you'll be able to adjust the gel-bed without help, load yourself into a hoverchair and go where you want. Eventually you'll be able to patch into your own residential controls, be self-sufficient. You don't look like a quitter, Raghib. Find a reason to live."

Dr. Nichols left him floundering in his misery. A few minutes later Mama leaned over him, looking ancient and defeated. She kissed his forehead and began to cry. At last he managed to shed his tears, for Jamaal and Mama and for himself. That night, as he lay sleepless and alone, giant scaly lizards writhed in the darkness above him, laughter gleaming in their mirrored eyes. He knew that he had found it. His reason to live.

He had to slay the Dragons.

It didn't take Raghib long to figure out how to uplink from his microprocessor to Wacker Hospital's main system. From there it was simple to hack into the nets. He did reconnaissance every chance he got, searching for signs of Akuma and the Helldrags. His hatred gave him strength, but only the nets could free him from his gel-bed prison. Only Virtual Reality could breathe life into dead flesh. He spent hours refining the micro's VR prosthesis, strengthening his presence on the nets as the realtime Raghib Jones faded toward oblivion. Dr. Nichols tried to restrict his link time, but he slipped the security easily, spending every conscious moment in VR. That was how he met Calico.

He was wearing his baddest Zulu astro-warrior look, kicking back in a corner of Wacker's virtual lounge, when she sat down at his table. Lean muscles rippled beneath velvety fur as she slipped into the chair beside him. He had never seen such an elegant blend of feline and human graphics, her cat shape melting seamlessly into the lines of a beautiful woman. Eyes the color of flame glittered above her whiskered nose, their orbs bisected by ovals of obsidian. She smiled, a hint of fangs adding just the right spice of danger. Breasts swelled gently above her slender waist, nipples hidden by the caramel fur of her chest and belly. The rest of her coat shimmered with patches of gold, orange, and amber. She leaned forward, moving with the erotic grace of a panther, relaxed but ready to spring. The sheer beauty of the simulacrum bewitched him, and he could not speak. She tapped a claw on the table top, her voice a throaty murmur. "What do you think?"

Raghib managed to pull his eyes away long enough to glance where she pointed. A poem appeared in the center of the table.

*The Filthy Rich in Heaven tell
Of how the Wretched Refuse fell
Down Jacob's Ladder into Hell,
Where we have only souls to sell.*

*But heed my words, and heed them well:
The Lowly Poor toward Heaven swell
On tides of rage you cannot quell.
Oppression's Children shall rebel!*

Raghib nodded, praying that his voice would not quaver. "Righteous. Sound like the preacher talkin', but that's a real sweet rap."

"Sometimes you have to preach at people to wake them up. My name's Calico. You're Raw, aren't you?"

"Yeah. How you know that?"

"I'm in your Netware Engineering class at Depaul. We miss you, Raw. I'm so sorry for what happened to you . . . to your brother."

"You a cop, or just a snoop?"

"Neither. Akuma wants everybody to know he hit you. You're a legend, Raw. You've been Topside. That's something Akuma can never do. The Ladder cops will bust him if he goes vertical, and the gangs will fry him if he goes horizontal. He's trapped until he dies. You're not. He gained mega status by taking you out."

The ghost sinews of Raghib's arms and legs jerked taut with the force of his hatred. "Let him talk his trash. After I kill that squint so slow they hear the screams for a week, I'll make sure the nets know who did him!"

Calico's lips curled in a feral smile. "That's the right idea, baby. You've got the wetware between your ears to do it. But you're going to need some help."

"I don' need nobody's help to smoke Akuma!"

Calico bared her fangs. "All you care about is your own little tragedy. There's more to it than that! The gangs have hacked into everything on Level One. Food and water delivery systems, power, communications. Pay their tariffs or get nothing. Most people down here can't afford to pay. For them, it's a goddamn death sentence!"

"Look, Calico . . . I read what you sendin', but you tryin' to fix the world. That's too big a job for me. I'm just lookin' for some payback."

"All right then, think of it this way. If you help me hack through those Dragon barricades, you'll inflict more pain and humiliation on Akuma than he can stand. I have friends in sectors all over Hell, people who can find out anything you need to know. You help me, I help you. We're both better off." She snaked her tail around his wrist, her eyes liquid, her voice aphrodisiac. "We'll have fun together, Raw. I promise."

Desire boiled in Raghib's brain. He drank the sweet, intoxicating nectar of her image, and he believed her. She led him from the lounge to a separate netospace where they crafted a private reality, a place of soft lights and soft caresses. She offered him every fantasy he had ever dreamed, a chain of phantom passion joined with links of silk and flame. Love

exploded in his mind as it never had in his body, leaving him happy and exhausted. Perhaps there was more to live for than revenge. Calico was right.

They would have fun together.

* * *

Raghib sat in his corner of Wacker's virtual lounge and studied the stream of data that flowed across the table top. Most of their hack attacks had gone well. Greektown and Little Italy now had tariff-free supplies of water and power. The poor devils in Tortilla Towers could get all the food they needed without begging the Helldragons for it. In his home sector, Jamaicaville, he'd tied Dragon hackers in so many knots they were chasing each other. Akuma was losing money, prestige, and what little patience he had. Not knowing who to blame, he turned his fury on the Ninja Storm, sending strike after strike across treaty lines onto Storm turf. The streets of Tokyo West glowed with incandescent rage as bitter fire fights erupted during every sleep-cycle. If Akuma's soldiers didn't take out Shibo soon, the Storm would take out Akuma. That would be a shame. Raghib wanted that pleasure for himself.

Calico sat down across from him and smiled. "Hey, baby. Slacking off?"

Raghib grinned back. "Just takin' some time to watch 'em bleed. Looks like we kickin' some serious ass on Akuma an' his boys. He might just take out the Storm for us, too, 'fore he's through."

Calico nodded. "You've got him and Shibo at each other's throats. Look, Raw . . . I don't give a damn how many soldiers get smoked in this little war. They're getting what they deserve, the bastards. But a lot of civilians are getting caught in the crossfire."

"Ain't no civilians in Tokyo West, Pussycat. Just squint gang-bangers an' the squints that help 'em. None of 'em worth cryin' over."

Calico bared her fangs in a snarl, orange eyes spitting fire. Raghib flinched and felt foolish. She was just a harmless VR ghost, her image shifting to match the thermal fluctuations in the skin of her realtime body. He knew that. Still, he had never seen all that smoldering sensuality transformed into molten rage. "You don't know shit, Raw! You think you and your brother had it bad? Let me clue you, baby. The Dragons and the Storm do far worse on their home turf than they ever did in Jamaicaville!"

"Don' expect no sympathy from me! Every Jap I ever met, on the streets or on the nets, tried to smoke me or own me. If there's righteous folk dyin' in T.W., I'll bleed for 'em. But I ain't found none."

They stared at each other in pained silence, VR masks suddenly transparent. In a world of programmed vision, Raghib saw something hideous reflected in Calico's eyes — the specter of his own bigotry. A trick of her virtual imaging or his guilty conscience? You know that ain't right, Raw. What about Jimmy Sato, helped Mama get a job when Daddy died? What

if he lyin' dead on the streets 'cause you so full o' hate you ain't got no room left for truth? Shame engulfed him, and he felt his realtime eyes water. Finally Calico spoke, her voice pinched and brittle. "We can argue it later. Right now let's just concentrate on getting this over with so the killing can stop. How's your Dragonslayer Program coming?"

Raghib tried to focus his thoughts away from the look in her eyes. "Big, bad, an' ready to rumble. We just gotta find us the right time to use it. Akuma an' his boys'll fade away like a bad dream."

"Some dreams last forever, kage." A short Latino with a silver skull tattoo on his forehead rose from a nearby table, smiling through blackened teeth. As he drew closer, the image of Wacker's virtual lounge wavered. The Latino's head imploded at the same time his body began to swell. A serpentine neck sprouted from the wreckage above his shoulders, ending in a familiar face. Akuma leered at them, his dragon bulk expanding to fill the netspace. They stood in a blackheart boneyard deep in the maw of a decaying Level One warehouse. An army of hairless blackhearts surrounded them in the gloom, brandishing laser torches and gutting knives. A fence made from stacked columns of human bones circled the perimeter, its top lined with ribs curving to sharpened points. An altar of human skulls rose from the cracked floor nearby, eye sockets glowing from the fire that burned in the altar's hollow belly. A long spit jutted above the iron grate that formed the top of the altar, barely visible through the smoke. Panic danced in Raghib's mind, but he managed to force a laugh.

"This be one trippin' freak show, Akuma. Make a wicked cartoon, but ain't none of it real. You think you gonna scare us with shit like this?"

Akuma's smile glittered darkly in the torch light. "See if you laugh when show over." He motioned toward the blackhearts. They parted as four of their number dragged someone through the mob. Raghib recognized the woman's sobbing and his heart froze. The tattooed cannibals carried the struggling image of his mother to a blood-soaked slab beside the altar. He fought to reach her, but some invisible barrier had been programmed into the virtual geography of the place. He could do nothing but watch in horror as the four blackhearts held her fast while a fifth raised his gutting knife. Raghib's screams continued long after hers had died. He tried to retreat to realtime, but the micro would not disengage. When he opened his eyes, Mama and the blackhearts had vanished. Akuma and the altar remained.

"Scared of shit like this, kage? None of it real . . . yet. Tell me what I want to know, or she maru-yaki. Blackheart barbecue."

"Just . . . just ask your questions, man."

"Dragonslayer Program you discuss with that whore. How would it destroy us?"

"Don' work like that. It's defense, so the homeboys can protect themselves. Wrote me the slickest security knowbot on the planet. When we juiced it up in Jamaicaville, your boys

couldn't cut into them systems to save their ass. It's smart, 'an it learns. Stops any hack attack, jams 'em up. I call it Jam-All. We was gonna download to every sector so you couldn't scam shit from a septic tube. Woulda worked, too . . . it woulda goddamn worked."

Akuma's smile widened. "Shori! If we put this on Helldragon system, Storm cannot touch us. Cops cannot touch us! You give me Jam-All. You hack for Dragons. Otherwise Mama-san goes to last supper."

Hatred seethed in Raghیب's head, a blinding, searing cloud. God, he wanted to kill that squint, snap the slimy lizard neck with his bare hands. Truth was, in here he could do no harm. Somewhere out there, the realtime Akuma could do plenty. Raghیب spat the words out like poison. "Yassuh, boss. Look like you got yourself another slave."

Calico's voice grew shrill with anger. "Don't do this, Raw. We'll find a way to protect your mother. If you give him that program, you make us all slaves!"

Akuma roared, spewing flames in her direction. "Shut up, imbaifu! You betray your own people!"

Raghیب suddenly felt as if the blackhearts had gutted him. "Own people? What the hell you sendin', Akuma?"

"You not know? Hah! Her realtime name Tenshineko. She grow up on Dragon turf. You sleeping with the enemy, kage."

Raghیب stared at Calico in shock. She would not meet his eyes. A stinger pulse had reduced his realtime world to ashes. Now the fire raged through his virtual world, consuming all he had left. Emotions mixed inside him like toxic chemicals, eating a hole in his chest, leaking away to leave nothing but a smoking void. She had betrayed him, hidden the truth behind the image of a cat-goddess. An' did you ever let her see the real you? No. But how . . . how can you be in love with a Jap?

"I'm . . . I'm gonna download Jam-All to your system an' show your boys how to juice it up. I'm even gonna hack for you, Akuma. But anything happens to Mama, I swear I'll stick your sorry ass on that altar, an' I'll personally eat your fuckin' heart!"

Akuma smiled. "As long as you belong to me, Mama-san the safest woman in Hell." The boneyard dissolved. Raghیب found himself sitting across from Calico in Wacker's lounge. Neither moved, trapped in a silent bubble of pain.

"How could you sell us, Raw? How could you sell us all?"

"I always tried to imagine what you look like in realtime, sweet-meat. Figured you was prob'ly ugly as a street freak with radiation rash, but I didn't give a shit. I could trust you. But you . . . you used me like a twenty-credit hooker. Guess there ain't much difference 'tween workin' for Akuma and workin' for you."

Raghib let his consciousness drift back toward realtime. He heard Calico sobbing in the background, but he ignored her. She deserved a taste of the pain she had caused him. And the Helldragons . . . they deserved more than a taste. Much more. God willing, he would feed them enough misery to choke them.

* * *

It took Raghib several hours to show Akuma's hackers how to download Jam-All into the Helldragon's secured netspace. He jammed enough techno-babble down their throats to get them totally confused, but they were too proud to admit it. Just what he had counted on. What he hadn't counted on was Calico.

He heard the doors of his room hiss open and rotated the gel-bed to face them. A slight Japanese girl floated beside him in a hoverchair, lips pressed together in a tight, grim line. He had never seen her before, but he knew her. Long black hair cascaded across her shoulders, framing a china-doll face: large almond eyes, a dainty nose, skin that had never known a blemish. Her slender arms were folded above the void where her legs should have been, as if she were hugging herself against a draft only she could feel. He had been wrong about Calico: she was just as lovely in realtime. And just as deadly. When her right arm swung toward him, he could see the stinger in her trembling hand.

"I can't let you do it, Raw. I don't know what happened to you, or how much of it's my fault. But I can't let you hack for that cockroach."

Raghib tried to shake his head, but the muscles in his neck were as dead as childhood dreams. Rage and frustration burned in his mind. Why couldn't she face me down in VR? But there were advantages to realtime. Fewer eavesdroppers.

"You really think I'd slave for Akuma, with all the hate I been carryin'? With what he did to Jamaal? Ain't no way in Hell. But if you gonna break a cocky scuz like Akuma, you gotta make him think he broke you. I wanted to tell you, Calico . . . but there ain't no privacy on the nets. Couldn't risk sendin' you the gospel on no party line. Akuma don't have no idea what I gave him, an' neither do you. You want to learn, sit back an' watch the vid. You still want to smoke me when it's over, go for it. Be doin' me a favor."

Raghib saw the uncertainty in those lovely, almond eyes. She wasn't sure she believed him, but she wanted to. Calico lowered the stinger onto her lap without a word. She turned the hoverchair for a better view of the vid screen on the wall of the hospital room, choosing an angle that still gave her a clear shot at him. Raghib raised the gel-bed so he could see the screen as well. Tension twisted his innards into knots as he waited for Channel Five's noon report to begin. Not because of Calico — he doubted she could pull the trigger if she tried. But the gamble with Akuma was the biggest of his life. A tiny voice cut through the fear, hard and sharp. You ain't just rolling the bones with your own life, boy. You bettin' Mama's too. He listened to the newscaster with a rigid intensity that made his jaws ache.

"Our top story this hour: gang violence explodes on Level One. Ninety-four members of a Japanese street gang known as the Helldragns have been killed this morning in the bloodiest purge in the city's history. Metro police report that most of the deaths resulted from an explosion in gang headquarters, but a number of youths were slain in separate incidents of sabotage to transport tubes and residential control systems. Computer crime experts expressed considerable surprise at the coordinated timing of the attacks and the diversity of systems involved. Federal Investigator James Concanon called the purge 'the most intricate case of network sabotage I've seen in twenty years.' So far authorities are baffled by the attacks, but Gang Intervention sources believe a rival street gang known as the Ninja Storm may be responsible. The Helldragns and the Ninja Storm have been embroiled in bloody territorial battles in the Tokyo West sector of Level One for the past three months . . ."

The muscles in Raghil's jaws began to unclench. His lips curled into a smile of triumph and relief. At last Mama was safe. At last his brother could sleep in peace. He still carried the guilt, would probably always carry it, but it no longer suffocated him. For the first time since he had awakened inside the walls of Wacker Hospital, he felt almost free.

Calico rotated the hoverchair to face him. Her dark eyes shimmered like the mist above Lake Michigan on a humid summer night. "Way to go, baby. I don't know how you did it, but . . . you got them. You got them all."

A third voice came out of nowhere to shatter the fragile beauty of the moment. "Not all, whore."

Raghil heard the ominous hum of the door's locking sequence and swiveled the gel-bed toward the sound. Calico sat frozen in her hoverchair, her back to the door, her own private ghosts dancing across her face. She too had recognized the voice. Raghil stared at the figure beside the door, trying to make sense of it. He had always pictured Akuma as a monster, even in realtime, some gruesome incarnation of the virtual disguise he wore. He saw only a skinny, bedraggled Japanese boy who could not have been more than seventeen. When Raghil met Akuma's eyes, he understood. They were not the eyes of a boy. They were the merciless eyes of the dragon.

Akuma took two steps toward the gel-bed, pointing his stinger directly at Raghil's face. Akuma's hand did not tremble. Raghil noticed for the first time that the boy's jacket was badly torn and scorched in places. He could not hide a smile.

"Akuma, you don' look so good. News-man said somebody put a whole lot o' hurt on your boys. Guess Jam-All didn't work as slick as I said, huh? Guess you come here to ask for a fuckin' refund."

Akuma smiled back. A dragon smile, full of fire. "No refund, kage. I just going to cook you blacker than charcoal. But first, I want to know. How?"

"You wanted Jam-All, an' you got it. Got somethin' you can't begin to understand. I told

you: it's smart, an' it learns. Not your average 'If A then B' bullshit — I'm talkin' complete personality algorithm, modeled on somebody real. I been workin' on it for years. Turn it on, it makes its own rules, decides who the bad guys are. An' what to do with 'em. It spread through your netspace like a fuckin' plague, man, even chased your pack of murderin' bastards into their private systems. Cut 'em up like so much raw meat. I 'spect the blackhearts be eatin' real well tonight."

Akuma's eyes seemed to pull at him with their own demonic gravity, black holes swallowing every bit of light inside him, leaving nothing but empty space. Something monstrous crouched behind those nightmare eyes. It was far more terrible than any stupid VR dragon. It was real. And it was hungry. When Akuma smiled, the monster growled deep inside his throat. "Yes, blackhearts will eat well tonight. They will eat dark meat. One crippled piece of kage shit . . . and the gray-haired bitch that squeezed him out."

Calico's voice came out in a strangled whisper, her back still facing Akuma. "Leave him alone, you bastard."

Akuma leered in her direction. "I not forgetting you, imbaifu. Last time you defy me, I take your legs slowly, because traitors to Helldragnons are only fit to crawl. Now I take the rest, one piece at a time." Akuma took a step toward her, the monster hissing in his voice. "You know which piece I will take first, whore."

Akuma saw her shoulders tense and laughed. He could not see her hand tightening around the stinger in her lap. Raghieb saw the hatred in her eyes, the terror. He could not move. He could not stop her. She spun the hoverchair, raising the stinger with a quivering arm. Akuma saw the object in her hand and smiled as he leveled his own stinger at her head. Everything seemed frozen. Raghieb could only watch in impotent horror. She was too slow. Way too slow. He lay there, a useless block of ice, and saw it happening all over again, just like in the alley on Michigan Ave. He did not want to see. Oh god, please don' make me watch somebody else I love get blown away by this piece o' garbage.

He noticed it out of the corner of his eye and thought for certain he had lost his mind. The multi-jointed robotic arm of the autonurse swung away from the wall behind Akuma, arcing toward the little bastard's outstretched hand. The mindless metal arm that gave Raghieb injections, took fluid samples, emptied waste containers. He watched it all like some slow-motion gunfight in a bad western: Calico spinning to face Akuma, Akuma aiming coldly between her frightened eyes, the autonurse unfolding like the leg of some gleaming insect.

Suddenly time melted, and everything happened at once. The autonurse whipped its last segment upward into Akuma's arm. Raghieb heard the deadly hum of a stinger pulse, the electric shriek of a luminary panel exploding overhead. Akuma's stinger flew across the room as the arm of the autonurse wrapped around his skinny chest, pinning his arms to his sides, squeezing him like a jointed metal python. Crushing him. Akuma bellowed in pain. Raghieb could see the blood trickling from the places where steel cut into flesh, could see the monster raging in Akuma's dark eyes. Calico could see it too, but another beast danced

across her snarling face. As she pressed the trigger, her eyes were the incendiary eyes of the cat. Akuma's chest exploded in a shower of bloody, smoking pulp. The monster shuddered. Then, at last, it died.

Raghib and Calico stared at the wreckage of Akuma in stunned silence, Calico still gripping the stinger beneath knuckles as white as bone. They heard shouting from the hallway. Calico seemed to wake from a deep, disturbing dream. The stinger clattered to the floor near where her feet should have been, and she began to sob. Raghib tried to find the words to soothe her, but he could not think. He could only repeat the same two words again and again, like some shell-shocked combat vet. "It's over. It's over."

They both heard pounding outside the door now. They didn't have much time before the Ladder cop circus would begin. Calico stared at him, the mist in her eyes turning to rain. "You saved my life, Raw. You saved me, but . . . how?"

Raghib smiled the most unfettered smile he had managed since his last trip through Old Downtown with a jittery, motor-mouthed ten-year-old. That seemed like such a long time ago. He felt the mists gathering in his own eyes. "Wasn't me, Pussycat. Wish to god it was — I need to make up for all them things I said, all the ugliness I dumped on you. But the one that saved you was the same one that got the rest of 'em. Thought the name might give it away, but Akuma never figured out shit. Don't thank me. Thank Jam-All."

They both rotated to face the vid screen. A small boy stared back at them, wide eyes shining from a chocolate face that was too smooth, too perfect to be real. Calico laughed in joyous disbelief. Raghib barely managed a whisper, the words catching in his throat. "You done good, Jam. You done real good."

A flawless smile rose above the boy's dark skin like a crescent moon. "I had fun playin' with them stupid Dragons, but they all gone. You gonna take me to Heaven now?"

Raghib stared back at the ghost on the wall, the ghost in the vast machine that kept the rich folks safe from all the madness down below, made life so hard for those who couldn't afford the climb. Like Mama. Like Calico. Raghib glanced at the frail Japanese girl with the will of steel and felt a surge of shame. She was braver than he would ever be. And wiser. When she looked at him, she didn't see a kage, didn't see another punk busting heads for the Black Widows or the African Avengers. He was no more one of them than she was a Helldragon. She did not let her hatred blind her to the difference. Maybe, with time, she could help him bleed the poison from his soul. We all the same down here, Calico. You showed me that. We all poor . . . an' we all trapped. The nets, the laws, the Ladder cops — everything was built to keep it that way. But the bastards that set it all up had never planned on a virus that could think. Raghib grinned. There was just a trace of the monster in his smile.

"Nah, Jam. You gonna take me, and Mama, and Calico. You gonna take us all up the Ladder.

"When we get there, we gonna raise some Hell." •

Story copyright © 1994 Brian Burt. (Published previously in Figment.)

Fantasy



SUBERBIA?

by Steve Ross

Ernst Pittsfield steps through the doorway of his ten-room house. "Honey, I'm home," he calls to the interior. From the corner of his eye he spies the familiar coatrack to his right. A smile crosses his lips.

"Have you been a good boy today, Harriet, you fiesty little rascal?" He strides to the coatrack and wrestles it to the ground, rolling playfully around on the carpet with it. A nail catches his forearm and draws blood. Ernst yells "OUCH," jumps up, and smacks the coatrack several times on its round, wooden base.

"Bad boy!" he reprimands.

Ernst walks to the kitchen and puts his arm around the oven. "Hi, Honey. Did you see what Harriet just did to me?" He bends down and kisses the front left burner. •

Story copyright © 1994 Steve Ross.

KONEN IN RECOVERY

by Andrew G. McCann

The plump, balding psychoanalyst shifted in his chocolate-brown Naugahyde Execu-Chair. He looked down briefly, then up, his expression a mask. The air-conditioner hummed softly as he spoke to the large, battle-scarred warrior sitting on the client side of the white formica desk.

"Konen, I'm not, uhhh, that is, it might be perhaps more efficacious were we to modify your prescription. Your current course of Rasputin™ has helped to moderate your 'insatiable lust for the flesh of wenches,' as you quite rightly put it." The analyst gave a quick, reassuring smile, but he kept his head immobile. "However, I think your recurring compulsion to kill 'fools,' to use your word, might be moderated by a course of two targeted psychopharmalogical agents I have in mind, namely Vikene™ and Simitar™."

Konen lifted his piercing green eyes; his dusky hair rippled in the air-conditioner's breeze, and veins throbbed in his mighty temples. He let slip a low growl past grim-set lips.

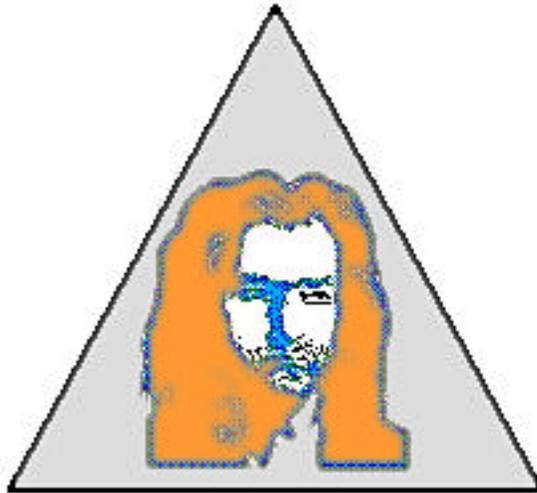
The therapist opened his mouth, closed it. He looked away, then back. "OK, well, let's start the new regimen this Monday, Konen. Now, it seems to me that you're in touch with your anger at the moment, and that's good. So this might be the right time to take a look at that incident with your downstairs neighbors." With a whispery, treble whinny, the shrink cleared his throat. "As I understand from the arresting officer, you phoned a cockroach exterminator yesterday and asked him to come over and 'destroy' your 'cursed' neighbors for being noisy." He placed his mottled pink-white palms together, as if in prayer. "While it is good that you didn't take matters into your own hands — this time — I still think we should look at some of the reasons for your negative feelings toward these people."

The barbarian clenched his sinewy hands as he spoke: "They are all fools." He stared at the analyst, and a queer green light flickered about Konen's deep-set eyes; a light like the deadly sparkle from fabled King Nekrom's crowning jewel — The Serpent's Eye — in pursuit of which dozens of skilled gem thieves had, instead of clutching victory, pitifully missed their grasp and ended their days living out slow, horrible extinctions in the shadow ruler's dank, pitiless dungeons beneath the spider-shadowed Crypts of Skrheem.

"Hmm. OK, let's take a different tack," the analyst said. He raised one soft, unlined hand. "Let's go back a bit. Tell me more of your childhood." Somewhere in the room a clock was ticking faintly, steadily.

Now Konen's eyes burned with a strange, unfocused orange fire, not unlike that which surrounds the horrific Wraiths of Silikahn, which eat the souls of those men (or women, gay or straight, of any creed or color) foolhardy enough to set sandal in the dune-ridden wastes of ancient Nohpersonzland. "I was born in the vast, untameable wastes of northern Slusheria, where the River Harsh meets Lake Azphreezin. I was only too eager to taste

life, so at eight months I hacked my way out of the womb with a broadsword fashioned from my umbilical cord." His right bicep tightened briefly.



The therapist's eyes widened. "Oh dear, you killed your mother?" He began scribbling notes.

Konen's bronze pecs twitched like a stallion's shanks. "By Dagwüd's Wife, no, you dog! My father's woman needed only to choke down a flagon of sheepmead — the holy, ochre fluid ran down her chin like blood! She sewed the gaping wound shut with burlap stitches, and went right back to skinning live were-leopards in that frozen hell-pit I called 'hovel.'"

"Oh." The shrink stopped taking notes and sat back further in his plush chair. "OK, let's regroup, and take a look at what we've learned so far." He kept his head completely still and smiled gently at Konen's hard-edged face. "Go ahead."

Konen paused. "Huhn." He looked to one side, and the taut cords of his neck bulged like the mythical Kables of DuumShreek, from which the Black Wizardress of Bitshi suspended her victims over a nest of writhing vipers in the fetid, stone-lined Hell-Shaft of Skairti-Katt. "I learned, I learned that wine . . . alcohol . . . is bad. And recovery is, uhhn, good." In the quiet of the room, an ionizer whispered.

"Yes. Good for you." The therapist pursed his lips slightly, nodded imperceptibly.

"And . . ." Konen continued.

"And?" The doctor raised an eyebrow and tilted his head in puzzlement.

". . . And killing fools is good." The barbarian grinned, a wide feral smile, which echoed that of the hooded Cobra-Lord of Smarmia, just before Konen sliced off the snakeman's

spell-spewing head with one powerful, wide arc of his notched battle-sword — the well-honed, legendary Blood-Chugger, which Konen had won years back in victorious battle with King Veri Ohld-Guhy, the Hermit Ruler of the Cursed City of Red Sapphires.

"No, no, no, no, no, no," the analyst said, frowning momentarily. He stopped, took a slow breath, let it out. "Now, Konen, we're out of time for this session. But maybe next week we should look at your last statement, and perhaps what it says about how you might be feeling some feelings about being abandoned by your mother and ignored by your father. And, possibly, how you, through all your adventures, are still, essentially, just searching for parental love and approval — in other words, at root, you could be yearning for nothing more or less than a great, big, special hug of some kind." The therapist was nodding like a newscaster as he spoke the words.

Konen's towering bulk slowly rose up, casting a jet-black shadow across the formica furniture, not unlike the daylight-destroying twin ape-sphinxes that guard the Sighing Gates of Los T'Kauzz. He flared his bronze nostrils, narrowed his eyes, and shook his ebon, tousled mane, setting one calloused fist on the jeweled haft of the renowned sword Blood-Chugger. "You . . . are . . . a . . . fool." •

Story copyright © 1994 Andrew G. McCann.

Poems

YOU.YOU

by Peter Alejandro Cortes

I'm not talking to you
because
back in 16th Century India
when I was in charge of the
laborers,
well, you were too good for me
now weren't you?
And in our next life
when I was a woman in
antebellum Mississippi
because it would take me a few
births and rebirths
to get it right
you,
you were horrible to me.
And then when we returned
to the wheel of life again
in Europe
it was after World
War 1 and I wanted to
make love
you were too busy
you were getting a
Modern to bang Mr. BIG SHOT.
And the bottom line is that
I'm not talking
to you because I keep having to
come back. •

Poem copyright © 1994 Peter Alejandro Cortes.

STARFIRE

by George Pfister

Among these warring stars
I kiss your lips
And hold you tighter still
As fire slithers, blue
In shattered coals.

As feelings die,
Our thoughtless hearts
Churn in flighty
Conflagrations.

In broken moments, I
Can hold you so and know
That we can never rest
Alone but in ourselves.

A last brand flares.
I cannot hold you tight
Enough to keep myself
From leaving. •

Poem copyright © 1994 George Pfister.

ALLIGATOR

by Mark Phillips

It's the quiet meetings
like through an elephant's clean spray
in a lobby or on the street
like an alligator and
a giraffe kissing
that while we dream,
 our souls are together •

Poem copyright © 1994 Mark Phillips.

WHEN SHE LEFT

by Kevin McAuley

She wore a necklace of tiny suns. They trailed
Yellow smoke, as she ran. He was running after
Her, trying to avoid the colored hands that
Grabbed at his ankles from out of the thick, low mist.
Behind him, the past was swallowing his footsteps.

She stood in her death robe, a basket of snakes
In her arms, a mask carved in bone on her hip.
Her nails were painted with blood and fingers were
Tangled in her hair. When he asked her not to go,

She turned her face to the north, where already
Snowclouds were gathering like armies, and the dusk
Crouched low, tensed and ready to leap. •

Poem copyright © 1994 Kevin McAuley.

Humor

HINTS FROM HAZEL: Household Tips for Creative Types

Edited by Margaret H. McCann

Dear Hazel,

I have been collecting the small wooden chips that break off furniture from time to time for about six years. I finally have enough to create a scentless potpourri — a twist from the usual also because there remain bits of varnish and paint on parts of each piece to form a colorful remembrance of how our natural world becomes artificial. To contain them, use a spray-painted cottage cheese container or a net covered candle holder. Love your column.

Phyllis Flabbermeister

Dear Hazel,

I keep worn-out potholders near the back door instead of throwing them out. They can be used as Handi-wipes for anything from a slushie that spills on your way in the door to cleaning up the bottom of your shoes in case you step on something you shouldn't have, even though Pooper Scooper laws around here are strictly enforced. Then, just throw them out.

Harry Bentfuddle

Dear Hazel,

One way our family has spent a lot of time together this year is: We have collected photos or Xeroxed photos of every American president. We have arranged them in a pleasing design on our cardtable, and have lain a piece of transparent Contac paper over the entire surface. We now have an interesting tabletop cardplayers can look at when it's not their turn, plus no more need for coasters.

Sherri Lubbs

Dear Hazel,

A piece of cotton glued to a popsicle stick makes for a handy way to clean under the toilet rim in places the brush can't reach.

Mary Blattkin

Dear Hazel,

I'm 230 pounds overweight and so have difficulty moving about. My husband cuts old cardboard boxes into 12-inch squares and staples thick bands of elastic across the top. I can use these like snowshoes to slide around our carpeted house. So far, no falls, and moving about is easier and more fun. My husband Randy worked as a Maytag repairman for 35 years.

Donna Farmfudge

Dear Hazel,

My 14-year-old son Krazy-Glued bottle caps to the underside of his skateboard.

Ralph Wort

Dear Hazel,

I have placed all the earrings I've lost the mates to in a Tupperware container, and when my 10-year-old daughter does something good, I let her select one. Since she loses them pretty quickly, by the time she does another "goody" she's ready for a new earring.

Beth Flamm

P.S. Thanks for the hint about popcorn-stuffed shoulderpads.

Dear Hazel,

The neighbor's three rambunctious boys kept batting their wiffle ball into our yard until I stretched a 20-foot-high by 40-foot-wide piece of nylon net between our yards. If hit by a baseball, football, or basketball, it will need mending. It casts an unusual glow over our neighbor's backyard and in the winter freezes solid in places.

Ted Tearnth •

Story copyright © 1994 Margaret McCann.

Planet Magazine

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rick Blackburn a disabled Vietnam Vet, is interested in astronomy, astrophysics, role-playing gaming, drawing, and writing. He's a FANatic fan of Star Trek, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Star Wars, Battlestar Galactica, Dr. Who, and SF in general. He is also president of the Power Pack Fan Club, and can be reached at:
POWER PACK FAN CLUB, PO Box 13712, Los Angeles, CA, 90013-0712.

Brian Burt is a systems analyst at a bank in Kalamazoo, Mich. (yes, it's a real town), and a struggling SF writer whose biggest credit to date is winning the L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award in the 1991 Writers of the Future Contest (for a story called "The Last Indian War"). He's had five other stories published in small-circulation/literary mags.

Peter Alejandro Cortes is a poet in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek is a fictional writer of nonfiction who does not appear in this issue. Nonetheless, we are impressed with his sincerity.

Kevin McAuley is a Brooklyn-based writer.

Andrew G. McCann is a writer and editor in New York City.

Margaret McCann is a painter and writer in New England.

George Pfister is an award-winning poet; his poems have appeared in "Parnassus" and "New Press," among other publications.

Mark Phillips is a poet in New York City.

Steve Ross is a writer and book editor in New York City. His work has appeared in "Whiskey Island," "World War III Illustrated," and other publications. •