

# *Planet Magazine*

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Humor, Poetry - Online™ Vol. I. 3 FREE



## INSIDE THIS FICTION-CENTRIC E-MAG:

Science Fiction by **Rick Blackburn, Brian Burt, George McCann.**

Fantasy by **Romeo Esparrago.**

Poems by **Peter Alejandro Cortes, Kevin McAuley.**

Humor by **Steve Ross.** •

# Masthead

Circulation for this mind-bending e-mag at 10/94: [Cthulhu Knows](#)

## STAFF

### Editor & Publisher

Andrew G. McCann

### Copy Editor

Doug Houston

## WHAT IS PLANET MAGAZINE?

Planet Magazine is, believe it or not, a free quarterly (or thirdly) of science fiction, fantasy, horror, poetry, and humor written by beginning or little-known writers, whom we hope to encourage in their pursuit of the perfect story. Planet is nationally distributed in electronic form via American Online, CompuServe, Acorn, and NVN, as well as in printed form via the editor and his pals. Feel free to pass this magazine along, in an unaltered state, electronically or as a printout. We welcome submissions (read below for details on this and other matters). Send any questions or comments to [PlanetMag@aol.com](mailto:PlanetMag@aol.com).

## SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines). We prefer original, unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, poetry, humor, etc., by beginning or little-known writers (but no porno, gore, or ads from immigration lawyers, please). Because this e-mag is free and operates on a budget of \$0.39 per annum, we can't afford to pay anything except the currency of free publicity and life-enhancing good vibes (of course, that and \$2.50 will get you a double-tall cafe mocha with powdered mesquite ash, but it's still a head rush to see your name in print). To send a submission: query first, whatever that means, then send stories or poems as Stuffit- or Ziplt-compressed ASCII text files to [PlanetMag@aol.com](mailto:PlanetMag@aol.com).

## WHERE TO FIND THIS MAGAZINE IN OTHER FORMS

Planet is distributed as a B&W printed magazine and in two electronic versions (simple and fancy). The e-zine varieties can be downloaded from the following sources:

- The **America Online** Writers Club Forum (keyword: WRITERS; look for the Writers Club E-Zines folder in the Writers Club Libraries folder) carries a stuffed, or .sit, text file (which can be read by Mac or IBM, using some version of Stuffit and a word-processing program). The WC forum also carries a stand-alone, read-only

DOCmaker file that incorporates full color, graphics, and a suitable layout (Mac only); this file is also available in AOL's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (keyword: SCIENCE FICTION; look for the Sci-Fi Library in the Science Fiction Libraries folder).

- The **CompuServe** Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (go: SCIENCE FICTION; look in the Science Fiction literature library) has a .zip file version, which can be read by Mac or IBM using some form of Ziplt and a word-processing program.
- The text file is also available in the **Acorn** BBS's "newsstand," in the **NVN** fandom library of the SF forum (go: science fiction), and Cthulhu knows where else.
- No **Internet** site for this magazine exists yet, but we haven't tried very hard to find one. Still, we're open to suggestions.

The text file takes a few minutes to download at 2400 baud. The DOCmaker file takes about 15-20 minutes to download at 2400 but only about 5 minutes at 9600. The latter option is the coolest (hint: click on the illustrations).

## **COPYRIGHTS, DISCLAIMERS**

**Planet Magazine** as a whole, including all text, design, and illustrations, is copyright © 1994 by Andrew G. McCann. However, all individual stories and poems in this magazine are copyright © 1994 by their respective authors, who have granted **Planet Magazine** the right to use these works for this issue in both electronic and printed forms. All people and events portrayed in this magazine are entirely fictitious and bear no resemblance to actual people or events. This publication has been registered with the Copyright Office of the U.S. Library of Congress. You may freely distribute this magazine electronically on a noncommercial, nonprofit basis to anyone and/or print one copy for your personal use, but do not alter or excerpt **Planet** in any way 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 4.1. 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, and Humor — Online™ Vol. I. 3

## THE "CONTROVERSY" CONTROVERSY

Like other publications that wallow in the very thing they condemn, we take exception to the unchecked availability of free electronic magazines that focus on SF, fantasy, humor, and the like. And it's this very comment of ours that is part of a larger, recurring problem in journalism today — all of the so-called editorialists who have nothing better to do than manufacture some "controversial" issue when they actually have, as I just stated, nothing better to do. It's the proverbial storm in a teacup masquerading as, say, a nor'easter in a Frost Giant's tankard. (An actual storm in a teacup, though, would be worth writing about: lightning like broken toothpicks, clouds like a kitten's hairballs, rain like a spritz from a bottle of Calvin Klein's Maternity ["One Spray and You're Pregnant — for Men or Women"].)

Of course, the most egregious example of journalists who manufacture opinions are the Noze-Boxians of the Tahbloyd star system, who, as everyone must know by now, communicate solely through anti-celebrity gossip on an all-band telepathic signal. I mean, who appointed these self-appointed experts? These "exo-journalists" spend their days pretending to be in a state of high dudgeon over the activities of whatever actor *du jour*, solely because they feel the compulsion to "fill space." Perhaps these over-commentating windbags believe what they are doing is all in fun (the editorial "wheeee," as my young nephew says), or maybe they believe it's all true and necessary. Whatever the Noze-Boxians' reasons, I say their sort of activity must stop.

This brings me to the real issue at hand — I hereby call upon the combined member-planets of the Galactic Council to quickly set up a task force to begin looking into whether or not to recommend considering some sort of non-binding suggestion to encourage the diminishment of the aforementioned behavioral manifestations, eventually even looking into the Noze-Boxian problem, perhaps. As such, I humbly add that I would be available to chair that august body and am more than willing to set down the task force's conclusions in a brief quintilogy of novelized autobiographies filmed in 4-D VR that I envision completing by my 65th birthday.

I think I've made my point.

**Andrew G. McCann, Editor**  
**September 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.)*

**Dear Editor:** Really enjoyed this last issue. In particular, I really liked Brian Burt's "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" and would like to see more of his work. The others that stood out were the bizarre little story by Steve Ross, Cortes' poem with the reincarnation theme, and Andy McCann's story on Konen's therapy session.

Way to go,

[Brian M.](#)

via AOL

**Dear Editor:** I thought your first issue was great (the best S.F. on-line magazine I've seen yet). Is issue No. 2 out?

[John](#)

via AOL

[Editor's note: See "Where to Find This Magazine" in the Masthead section.]

**Dear Editor:** NICE ZINE!

[Tony](#)

via the Internet

**Dear Editor:** Great second issue guys! I am still impressed. I also have a thought on how to improve the 'zine just a bit. (It's free, so I am sure not complaining, believe me.) From time to time I've seen programs with bookmark capability. If it's not too tough to do?... It would sure be a benefit to someone like me who is too busy to sit down and read the 'zine all the way through. I put it down and pick it up a week later... and can't remember which story I left off with. Anyway, just a thought. Great job!

[KingJohne](#)

via AOL

[Editor's note: This suggestion was passed on to Mark Wall, author of the DOCmaker software program that *Planet* uses.]

**Dear Editor:** Brian Burt's "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" was a really fast-paced story that was disturbingly realistic. If we don't all want to live in that world, we'd better start trying to make changes right now. Re Margaret McCann's "Hints From Hazel," my favorite was "The neighbor's three rambunctious boys...." I enjoyed your second issue very much, and am looking forward to No. 3.

[Rick](#)

via AOL

## **FAKE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**Dear Editor:** Given Jupiter's enormous mass, I think it's quite likely that the denizen's of that planet's ancient and distinguished democracies are quite wide and low in terms of

body type. Thus, it is doubly a tragedy that, given these individuals' large "areas," so many were no doubt slaughtered in that terrible, brief reign of Carmaker-Chevy, the cometary body whose fragments sewed death and destruction everywhere amongst the Golden-Espired Cities of the Great Bruised Spot. Now I imagine that, in the wake of this horror, a tyrant usurper has gained control of the Jovian Imperial Senate. I ask you, then, who better than the citizens of the U.S.A. to contribute cash, via me, to help these suffering Freedom Fighters of Jupiter in their just cause to topple the Dictator Or-Tegah (or whatever its name is that's probably in ruinous power). OK? So send your money via e-cash to [BuyJove@aol.com](mailto:BuyJove@aol.com).

Yours in Galactic Personhood,

[Fay Kappel](#)

**Howdy, Kid** (shifts stance slightly and squints into the rising sun; a bead of sweat rolls down furrowed forehead to drop off left eyebrow; right hand hovers lightly over holstered pistol; fingers flex once, stop. Far overhead, a lonesome dove calls for the mate it will never find. A young boy, standing near the door of McGoon's hardware store, suddenly crunches down loudly on a mouthful of Ruffles® potato chips.): Didn't mean no harm. Yuh made yerself real plain. Ahm jes' talkin' to th' lady. I understand — she's with you. I got no problem with that. I'm a happily relationship-ified man. Now, I'll jes' be movin' along and gittin' outta yor'n way. No hard feelin's. I understand. Oh, yeh, 'n' here's muh piece (extends gun handle-first, but spins it suddenly and shoots, hitting the Kid squarely in the heart at nearly point-blank range and killin' him stone-daid). Oh yeh, 'n' there's muh bullet, too. Har-har.

Backin' slowly away,

[Pork City Slim](#)

[The West](#)

**Esteemed Editor** (scattered, throaty chuckles from the audience): As one of the stage's greatest actors (sudden, respectful silence), it was most interesting to receive your rejection letter (abrupt roar of laughter). I have given some thoughts to your comments (single bark of mirth from balcony, dropping to sustained titter) on my autobiography (general applause rises and fades; sole titterer continues). However, I am angry (body topples from upper tier; a scream is suddenly cut off). And don't think for one, bloody minute that I'm enjoying any of this (tightens tie with a swift jerk; face reddens). After all (hush settles over audience; faint whimpering recedes as usher hustles out wounded), WHO ARE YOU? (Thoughtful, sustained applause, segueing to standing ovation). Thank you, thank you (roses, handkerchiefs, book contracts, bratwurst tossed onto stage; curtains close, house lights go up, and audience departs, with armed guards emerging from the wings to clear out stragglers.)

As Ever,

[M. Point d' Epée](#)

**Dear Editor:** You might not believe this, but last night I saw President Clinton in my living room. He just walked in, stood in front of my red couch from Ikea, and began discussing his vision for universal healthcare. After a while, he left. That's it. Anyway, charming as he is, it was just as well he took off because I wasn't in the mood for technical

details about anything, as I was in the process of coming down from a two-day binge of vodka and Despair, the new designer-drug for the mid-90s. However, I think I did hear our President say something about retaining funds for low-Earth-orbit detox wards, a notion that I strongly support.

Earnestly,

[Ava Goode-Weekend](#)

[Hell's Kitchen, New York](#)

**My Dear Maharajah:** Thank you for the amusing letter written in the Cockney Style. Your "Leopard" alias seems most fitting, as it brings to mind our "big cat" hunt of November last, which, excepting the tragic loss of Fiona and Crispin in the Vale of Mosquitoes, was absolutely grin-filled. Your missive also recalls the infamous Feather Incident back at Eton — no, but I shan't embarrass you with the details! With Kindest Wishes for the Health of You, the Royal Family, and Courtiers,  
[Junior Lance-Corporal Lancelot Korpirell, Jr., HMRAF](#)

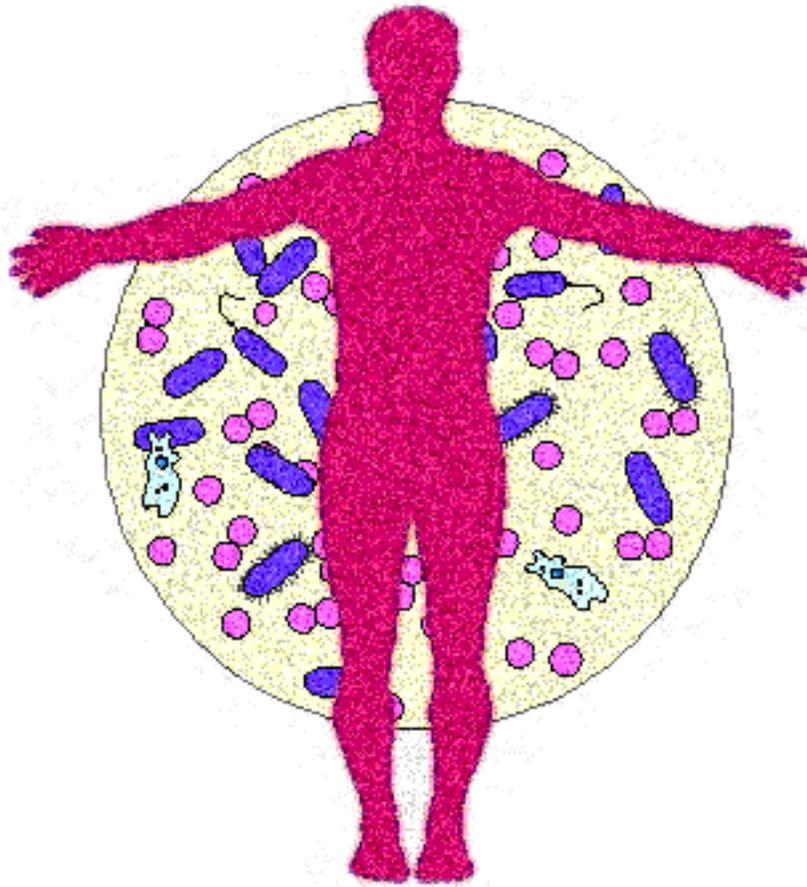
**Dear Editor:** Thank you for your recent letter and resume. At this time, we do not have any administrative positions open in any of our prefectures on Mars or the Moons of Saturn. For these jobs, in particular, we prefer to promote from within, as a certain combination of judgment and diplomacy, tempered by unique experience (such as the recent, successful repression of the cyborg revolt at the Titan ammonia mines) is a must. Nonetheless, with your experience, we encourage you to apply directly to the Outer Planets Division of United Galaxy Inc., where we could very well find something administrative for you in the Division's Planetary Governing Bureaus. In this way, after a few years of grit and determination, you might be able to work your way up to a governorship on the Moons, or perhaps even a small-town mayoralty on the red planet itself. Good luck and best wishes.

Holographically,

[Magneto X. HENCHPERSON, Asst. Director](#)

[UGI Personnel Div., Center City, Phobos, Mars M0010](#) •

# Science Fiction



## **NO MAN OF WOMAN BORN**

**by Brian Burt**

Karyl Carson dipped the wings of his solar skimmer and dropped low over the field of pherns. The photoelectric plants flashed beneath him like an emerald sea, their fronds twisting with indiscernible slowness as they tracked the sun's path across the sky. This field covered four hundred square kilometers, its intricate root network supplying power for the surrounding farms and the capital city of Olygius. He leveled the skimmer and sighed. So lush. So beautiful. To the west, a stand of methuselah trees rose above the pherns, one of the few species native to Verdis that remained untouched by the bioengineers. Trunks as thick as buildings stretched gnarled limbs in all directions, dangling leaf-webs to catch the golden rays of Prometheus. From this distance the methuselahs looked like an army of giant, hairy ogres. Some were older than humanity itself. When he gazed at them, Karyl felt certain that they were the guardians of Verdis, ready to cast the human invaders back into space at the slightest offense. If he did not

handle the next few days just right, their wrath would be upon him.

He lifted the skimmer's nose to clear the forest and continued westward toward Olygius, eyes twitching heavenward. Somewhere far above him, the mothership from Titan orbited Verdis like a third moon. Its cold shadow followed him wherever he went. He tried to push his thoughts beyond the darkness, to enjoy the graceful cityscape approaching beyond the trees. Olygius grew out of the fertile soil of the Makarri Plain like a sculptured oasis, filling him with a pride that temporarily burned away the shadows. His ancestors had shaped this place, nurtured the interconnected web of green towers and living structures that made Verdis unique in all the galaxy. His great-grandfather, his grandfather, his father — all brilliant biochemists, all wise leaders in their time. Now the mantle of power passed to him as the only son of Gabriel Carson, a right of succession guaranteed by planetary charter. A great honor. A greater burden.

He banked the skimmer toward the city center, landing on the pad beside the Ministry complex. One of his aides — Curry, or Curren, he couldn't remember — rushed to help him from the craft, wide-eyed and breathless. "The Titanians have confirmed the meeting, but for nine o'clock instead of ten. Minister Bailey says they want to show us who's in charge."

Karyl nodded. "For once, I agree with him. Let's move, we don't have much time." The two of them strode briskly toward the private entrance to the Central Ministry, stepping through the security membrane without pause. Karyl winced as the veil of protoplasm recognized his tissue and oozed around him to permit him entry. Anyone not authorized would find the membrane as impermeable as a wall. Safe and reliable, but the gooey stuff still made his skin crawl. He hurried down the main artery of the complex after Curren, his footsteps muffled by the pliant skin of the corridor.

A few minutes later Karyl and his aide passed through a second security membrane into the Control Center. Karyl quickly scanned the wall of screens and monitors, a marvel of bioelectronics. Security Minister Jepson turned to meet his gaze. "Morning, sir. We received their transmission about twenty minutes ago. Mallow and three of his deputies should be shuttling down from the mothership any time now. It's one mother of a ship, all right. Twice the volume of our entire complex, five times the mass. More armaments than a whole squadron of Star Patrol. Signal beacon identifies it as the C.S.S. Titanic."

Karyl let out a staccato burst of laughter. "The Titanic! There are no students of ancient Terran history on board that ship."

"Excuse me, sir?"

Karyl's grin faded and he shook his head. "Never mind, Jepson. I can see you flunked history too." He saw the man's face tighten and instantly regretted the barb. Why did he bait them? Why did he alienate them all? They could not always hide the mockery behind their eyes, the patronizing smirk beneath a smile. Sometimes they did not even try. A tiny voice echoed in his head, shrill and chiding. You're a freak, Mr. President. Any man

brought to term in his mother's womb instead of in a gestator is not fit to lead. Any man who has not been genetically enhanced must be inferior. In a world of perfect people, he stood out like a mutant with his rounded belly, his balding head, his hooked nose. The eccentric 'back-to-nature' beliefs of his parents made him an outcast on the planet he commanded, filling him with bile.

Karyl abandoned his dark musings and turned to his aide. "Have Ministers Bailey and McMahon report to my conference chamber."

His own problems would wait. The Titanians certainly would not.

\* \* \*

Karyl slid through the membrane that secured his inner office, grateful for a moment of privacy. Pacifico lay curled beside his desk, one orange eye fixed on him. He bent to pick up his pet glitter-dragon, stroking the creature's iridescent scales with affection. Nerve toxin on the scales quickly paralyzed the dragon's predators in the wild, but it had a delicious soothing effect on humans. God, how he needed that today! With great reluctance he released Pacifico and passed into the Presidential Conference Chamber.

Science Minister McMahon was already seated behind the long conference table, while Diplomacy Minister Bailey paced in front of it. Karyl gave Bailey a curt nod and returned McMahon's smile. Evan McMahon was one of the few people inside these walls who treated him like an equal. The young science minister was also a genius with phytometallics, a fusion of plant chemistry and metallurgy. Bailey, for all his intransigence, was breaking new ground in phytopolymers. They were all scientists by choice, administrators by necessity. Science had built this world. Karyl always felt far more comfortable in his private lab than inside the somber walls of the Ministry. He took a seat beside McMahon, lowering himself onto the form-fitting petals of the lily-chair. The elegant chairs were McMahon's own creation. They usually impressed visiting dignitaries, but Karyl doubted that Aldous Mallow would even notice. He motioned to Bailey with annoyance. "Sit down, Quentin, before you bruise the floor."

Bailey glared back, his voice edgy and a touch condescending. "You might want to do some pacing yourself, Karyl. This new Premier of Titan is not one for negotiation. You'll have a much more difficult time of it than your father did."

Karyl winced. The wound caused by Gabriel Carson's death was fresh and painful. "You're right. Old Killian was tough but fair. He wasn't out for conquest. Mallow is a different breed. My contacts on Arsenia say he's effectively annexed their planet. They're calling him the Wolf of the Outer Rim. I wish to god Killian was still alive."

Bailey sighed. "I wish to god your father was."

McMahon shook his head in disgust. "You're way out of line, Bailey."

Karyl smiled tightly. "Forget it. That's something else Quentin and I agree on. But right now, the three of us have to present a united front. If Mallow senses weakness, he'll chew us up. And Verdis with us."

Karyl's comm badge beeped before either man could answer. "Mr. President, this is Jepson. The shuttle is down. Premier Mallow is on his way."

Karyl and his ministers settled into their lily-chairs and waited in tense silence until a security trooper appeared outside the entrance to deactivate the membrane. Aldous Mallow stepped inside, followed by three burly deputies. The man was even more menacing in person than on the holovids. Like all Titanians — descendants of the first human colonists who had settled Titan centuries ago — Mallow had been genetically engineered to endure the frigid climate of his homeworld. He stood at least two meters tall, his face buried beneath a shaggy mat of hair, mustache, and beard. Tufts of body hair curled over the edges of his purple dress uniform. His smile unleashed a feral vision of fangs gleaming in a dark forest. The Premier of Titan looked like a mythical Terran werewolf frozen halfway through his transformation.

Mallow extended a beefy arm, his growl a perfect complement to his appearance. "President Carson, a pleasure. My condolences for the loss of your father."

Karyl rose and offered his hand in return, watched it disappear into Mallow's massive paw. Both parties found their seats, the Titanians not without trepidation as the lilies strained to support their bulk. "Thank you, Premier Mallow. Congratulations on your new office. I understand your victory was a landslide."

"Yes. The people of Titan need help. I offered it, and they responded. That is why I am here. In the past we have relied heavily on food imported from Verdis to support our growing population. The shipments you send are much appreciated. But we find ourselves in a crisis situation. Titan is a cold, harsh planet. The narrow agricultural belt along our equator cannot support us. Hydroponics cannot support us. Current imports from Verdis cannot support us. We need more, and will gladly pay for it."

Karyl nodded warily. "I see. How much more?"

"To meet our immediate needs, let us say twenty times the current level of grains and vegetables."

McMahon whistled. "With all due respect, Mister Premier, you can't be serious."

Mallow's lupine smile faded. "I am very serious. Children are starving on Titan. It is my duty to feed them."

Karyl stared at the Premier without blinking. "It is my duty to feed my own people. Verdis depends on a delicately balanced network of ecosystems to keep its biosphere intact. We have limited our population to the Maximum Planetary Load, per Galactic

Commonwealth directive. When we have crops in excess of that required to support our population, plus a contingency factor, we export them to Titan. We will certainly continue to do so, but we will never be able to supply twenty times our current exports. Your children are starving, Mr. Premier, because Titan has allowed its population to expand well beyond its certified MPL. That is the problem you must face."

Mallow's face darkened. "Whether we have exceeded some Commonwealth bureaucrat's arbitrary limit is irrelevant. My people are dying. We must have food."

"I repeat, we can't give you any more without endangering our own people. However, we have developed some advanced agricultural techniques that may prove useful on Titan. The details of those techniques are freely available via STARNET for your bioengineers to review. I suggest you make use of them."

"We have no time to learn techniques. My people need to eat now, today! I had hoped you would appreciate our situation. However, if you refuse to compromise, we are fully prepared to take what we need. The choice is yours. You can be paid for it, or not."

Karyl stood, propelled to his feet by growing anger. "My ancestors spent centuries creating Verdis. They wove a living, breathing technology into this planet. I'm not about to let Titan's greed strangle it."

Mallow's glare became a snarl. "I won't take insults from a freak who was carried in his mother's belly. I bet she squealed like a pig when she squeezed you out!"

Karyl bounded around the table, his fist curving up into Mallow's shaggy face with a thud. Mallow roared in rage. Before he could raise his own fists, the petals of the lily-chair clamped his arms against his sides. He struggled to break free, but the phytometallic tissues of the chair held him fast. He bellowed useless orders to his deputies, who were similarly shackled. Karyl cradled his bloody hand and smiled. "My science minister designed those chairs well. Struggling will only make them bind tighter." He pressed his comm badge and a dozen security troops slipped through the membrane. "Gentlemen, please escort the Premier and his party back to their shuttle."

One of the troopers deactivated the chairs to release the Titanians. Aldous Mallow looked as if he were about to spontaneously combust. "You sealed your own fate, freak. Verdis will get nothing from us. Nothing!"

Karyl nodded. "We ask nothing but to be left alone. Verdis has its own defenses, Mr. Premier. Remember that."

Mallow stormed out, escorted by Jepson's security team. When he was gone, Karyl sank into a chair. "Evan, get a medic in here. I think my hand is broken."

Bailey shook his head in disbelief. "Losing your temper is one thing, Karyl, but you... you had to punch the most dangerous man in this part of the galaxy."

Karyl studied the red smear on his knuckles. "Mallow decided to swallow Verdis long before today. And I needed to draw some blood."

"You drew it, all right. Was it worth a planet?"

Karyl Carson studied his bloody hand. "It might be, Quentin. We'll see."

\* \* \*

**Karyl was working in his private laboratory** when the comm badge beeped. Through a haze of exhaustion he realized that Prometheus had risen above the tree line, that he had worked all night. He strained to put authority into his voice. "What is it?"

McMahon's voice sounded as lifeless as his own. "Karyl, it's Evan. Mallow hit us this morning — hard. We need you at the Ministry."

Karyl's innards burned as if digesting broken glass. "Did he kill anyone?"

"No human casualties, but... Look, just get here as fast as you can."

Karyl nearly ran to the skimmer. When he touched down outside the Ministry complex twenty minutes later, McMahon and Bailey were there to greet him personally. The fact that Quentin Bailey seemed too shocked to fire a verbal salvo told Karyl enough to make his chest hammer with dread. "What's happened?"

Bailey could only shake his head. McMahon grabbed Karyl's arm and pulled him toward the entrance. "Wait until we're inside." Karyl did not even have the energy to shudder as they squeezed through the gelatinous membrane and hustled down the corridor into the Control Center. Security Minister Jepson stood in his usual place, tight-lipped and somber. "Morning, sir. Come to survey your handiwork?"

Karyl saw it then, in Jepson's face, in nearly all the faces. The unspoken accusation. McMahon spared Karyl the need to answer. "Give him a break, Jepson. He doesn't know yet. Just put the aerial view on the monitor." Karyl stood silently, a condemned man awaiting his execution. The main screen shimmered, coalesced into a bird's-eye view of an immense crater. As the camera pulled back, he recognized the surrounding scenery and moaned.

McMahon whispered as if at a funeral. "At around eight o'clock the Titanians obliterated ten square kilometers of the Galayo Forest. The heart, where the oldest stands of methuselahs grew. Jepson thinks they used some kind of antimatter beam. There's nothing left, Karyl. They even vaporized the first three meters of topsoil."

Karyl's knees nearly buckled beneath the weight of his despair. "A thousand centuries of living history gone. Just... gone."

Bailey finally managed to find his voice. "You challenged him to attack, and he did. It looks like he figured out how to hurt you the most. He sent a transmission thirty minutes ago to say this was just a demonstration. If we don't comply with his demands, he'll start taking out the phern fields next. He'll cripple us."

Karyl closed his eyes to escape the nightmare image. "I can't believe it. I can't believe even Mallow could do this."

Bailey's tone grew shrill. "He might not have if you hadn't baited him like you bait everyone around here. Damn it, Karyl, you dared him to do it!"

McMahon's voice rose to meet Bailey's. "You were pretty invisible during that meeting, Bailey. Didn't have the guts to say a goddamn thing, but you're the first to criticize the man who stood up to that hairy bastard."

Karyl struggled through a fog of exhaustion and misery. "Stop bickering over what's done. Let's decide what to do next. Jepson, is there any way we can neutralize the Titanian beam?"

Jepson shook his head. "Whatever it was, the beam left no trace, no radiation signature. We have nothing to analyze, so there's no way we can stop it."

"What about the anti-meteor defense net. Could we adapt that for an offensive strike against their mothership?"

Jepson frowned. "Good idea, but it won't work. The satellite net is designed to deflect large meteors so that they pass by Verdis, not to destroy them. The Titanian ship is made of some alloy we can't identify, but it's tough and scanner-proof. The worst we could do is shake them enough to make a few of them spacesick."

Bailey's voice broke the silence, his words edged with panic. "Look, we're a sovereign planet, a registered member of the Galactic Commonwealth. We're entitled to protection! Why don't we just contact Star Patrol?"

Karyl's laughter came hard and brittle. "We're on the Outer Rim, Quentin. Thirty thousand light-years from the galactic center, fifty thousand light-years from Terra. We're part of the wild frontier. They're not sending Star Patrol out here unless it's a full-fledged war. If it comes to that, we'll be gone before they get here. No, we're on our own."

Bailey could not keep the fear out of his voice. "All right, Karyl, you tell me. What on Verdis do we do now?"

The chamber suddenly grew as silent as a tomb, disturbed only by the hum of the bioelectronics. Karyl scanned the faces, some filled with hope, most with resignation.

Silently he cursed his father for dying. "What we do now is contact Aldous Mallow on the Titanic. We invite him to a parley tomorrow morning."

Security Minister Jepson did not flinch. "What do I tell the Premier, sir?"

"Tell him we want to discuss his terms."

Karyl left the chamber with as much dignity as he could muster amid the angry buzz of the Security staff. He saw a new look in the faces now, even in McMahon's. He was no longer just a freak. He was the freak who had sold their heritage. With ponderous steps he made his way back to the skimmer and turned its nose toward home. There was work to do.

\* \* \*

**Aldous Mallow stared across the table** with bright, predatory eyes, as if he had just eaten a fresh kill. Or was about to. A pair of deputies flanked him, while McMahon and Bailey sat on either side of Karyl. Mallow's guttural voice rasped against the walls of the conference chamber. "So, President Carson, we try again." He bared his teeth and leaned closer, his words pitched low. "You have no insults for me now, eh, freak? No fists?"

Karyl swallowed the urge to swing at him. "I just want to end this little disagreement, negotiate a treaty to benefit both Titan and Verdis."

Mallow leaned back, smiling magnanimously. "That's what I've wanted from the start. My deputies and I have drafted just such an agreement. We are prepared to establish Verdis as a Titanian protectorate. The Outer Rim is a dangerous place, far from the security of Star Patrol. We will furnish a portion of our fleet for a base on Verdis, to insure your planet's safety. In exchange, we will accept fifty percent of your agricultural production."

McMahon looked angry and slightly sick. "Half our crops? What are our people supposed to eat?"

Mallow smirked. "They can eat methuselah mulch for all I care. You had a chance for a better bargain several days ago, but you chose to spit in my face. Now your people suffer the consequences. We can build an operative orbital base in two standard months. We will, of course, begin taking our agricultural allotment immediately. That is our offer."

Karyl tried to keep the tension from his voice. "Fifty percent would expose Verdis to extreme hardship. Can we compromise at, say, forty percent?"

"The percentage is not negotiable. If you question it again, our share will be sixty percent."

Karyl's head drooped and his shoulders sagged, the picture of a broken man. He hoped Mallow would see it that way. He turned to Bailey and McMahon, but neither said a word. There was nothing to say. He turned back to his hulking adversary. "It will take time to

discuss this with the rest of the Ministry. If you could give us a few days, we'd be grateful."

Mallow's eyes glowed. "You have until tomorrow. If we do not hear from you, we will be forced to dissolve your government." The Titanians stood in one motion. Karyl rose as well, extending his hand. Mallow smiled quizzically before taking it, pressing hard enough to grind the bones to powder. "Until tomorrow." The Titanians lumbered from the chamber without another word.

McMahon slouched forward, all color draining from his face. "Well... that's it, Karyl. Verdis is finished."

Karyl smiled a thin, desperate smile. "Not quite yet. I've just begun a little experiment with our friend the Premier."

Bailey shook his head sadly. "This is one you can't bluff your way out of, Karyl. What can we possibly do?"

"We can wait, gentlemen. And we can hope."

\* \* \*

**Karyl Carson was sitting in his office** with Pacifico in his lap when Jepson hailed him. "Sir, we've got a priority visual transmission from the Titanic. Premier Mallow demands to speak to you personally."

Karyl gave the glitter-dragon one last stroke for luck before setting it aside. "I hear you, Jepson. Tell the Premier I'm on my way."

When he stepped through the membrane into the Command Center, McMahon and Bailey were already there. He moved onto the holoivid platform and faced the ghostly image of Aldous Mallow, who looked less than his usual intimidating self. Mallow slouched in a chair, apparently unable to stand, and glared at Karyl with tangible hatred. Karyl noticed the unnatural cant of his head and felt a rush of triumph. "Mr. Premier, how convenient that you contacted us. We were just about to transmit our response to Titan's offer."

Mallow tried to scowl as spittle oozed from the corner of his mouth. "Carson, what have you done to me and my crew?"

"Are your personnel experiencing a slight loss of muscle control?" He had never seen such a pure embodiment of rage as Mallow struggled to reply.

"You know what we're experiencing! Half the crew are completely paralyzed, the rest shuffling or crawling through their duties. What kind of poison is this, freak?"

Karyl shook his head. "I'm afraid your people are suffering from a virus that affects some

of our livestock populations. It attacks the central nervous system, gradually disabling neuromuscular control until the victim is little more than a vegetable. It's harmless to us, but we suspected it might mix poorly with Titanian physiology. I'm afraid you and your deputies must have contracted it when you shuttled down here."

Mallow raised his shaggy head with what looked like immense effort. "I consider this an act of war. We could vaporize your cities in a matter of hours."

Karyl nodded, his stomach twisting into tight, hard knots. "You could. But then you'd be destroying the anti-viral serum along with us. Without it, the Titanic will be a ghost ship by the end of the day."

Mallow struggled to sit up, his words slurring into a barely comprehensible stream. "If you can cure this accursed sickness, Carson, then this may be your lucky day. I'd be willing to spare the life of your planet for the lives of my crew."

"I'm afraid that's not good enough. We've reviewed your treaty offer and that's not good enough either. We've drawn up our own agreement whereby Titan guarantees the sovereignty of Verdis and agrees not to pass within five light-years of the Prometheus System without the express invitation of the Verdisian government. It further stipulates that Titan will furnish Verdis with complete, detailed specifications for its antimatter beam to promote mutually beneficial sharing of technology. If you would just affix your electronic signature to the treaty and transmit the specs for the antimatter device, we'll make both available to STARNET. We'll shuttle up a medical crew to the Titanic immediately afterward."

Mallow's reply dissolved into obscene static. "You cowardly, blackmailing son of a pig. If I give you the antimatter beam, it will be one blast at a time!"

Karyl forced a grim smile, fighting to conceal his terror. What if I've misjudged this maniac? What if his temper is stronger than his instinct for survival? He ignored the shrieking anarchy in his mind — it was too late for second thoughts. "That's your choice, Mr. Premier. Feel free to discuss it with your deputies. But I'd suggest you do it quickly. In a few hours, I doubt that any of you will be capable of transmitting a response."

Karyl could only stand there as the seconds stretched, staring into Mallow's rabid eyes. He saw the accusing ghosts of his own people reflected in their fevered light. Dear God, he's crazy. He'd rather die than lose. Karyl felt his own sanity eroding in the silence. When Mallow finally spoke, it took Karyl several seconds to comprehend the words. "We accept your terms. I underestimated you, freak. I won't do it again."

As the image of Aldous Mallow vanished, the Command Center erupted into bedlam. All around Karyl people cheered and clapped. Evan McMahon nearly shook his arm off, and old Quentin Bailey actually hugged him. Tears of relief welled in Karyl's eyes.

It was Bailey who first regained the power of speech. "Brilliant, Karyl. Brilliant! How

did you do it?"

"It didn't take a genius to figure out that Mallow would come after us sooner or later. For the past several months I've been studying Titanian medical records on STARNET, looking for a weakness in their structure, a way to exploit it without harming us. Pacifico gave me the answer. Glitter-dragon toxin soothes us, but with some adaptation it can be made to identify and attack Titanian neural tissues. I was fairly sure it would work, but I needed a test. That first meeting, when I so diplomatically slugged the bastard, I drew enough blood for analysis. After a few trials I refined the chemistry as much as I could and spliced it into a quick-acting retrovirus. I made sure my skin was coated with enough of the stuff to guarantee Mallow would be infected during that last meeting. Like us, the Titanians have been enhancing fetal genetic structure for generations. They've produced a planet of near-duplicates with very little genetic differentiation. That made it easy to come up with a plague that would affect virtually all of them."

Bailey blanched. "My god... the same thing could be done to us."

Karyl did not say a word. There was no need. He saw something new behind the eyes of the men and women in the Control Center. The voice in his head no longer taunted him. We understand now, we who are so alike, so perfect. The same thing could be done to us... but not to you. McMahon grinned and patted him on the back. "You've given us something else to discuss when this is over. I think it's time you had some company."

After an hour of hugs and handshakes, Karyl excused himself to the privacy of his office. He stroked Pacifico and let waves of tranquillity wash away the terror of the past few days. For the first time, he was truly the President of Verdis. For the first time, he did not feel alone inside these walls. For the first time, he fully appreciated why his mother had borne him the way she had. So did others in the Ministry. Things would change on Verdis. There would be more human variety, good and bad. Evolution instead of stagnation.

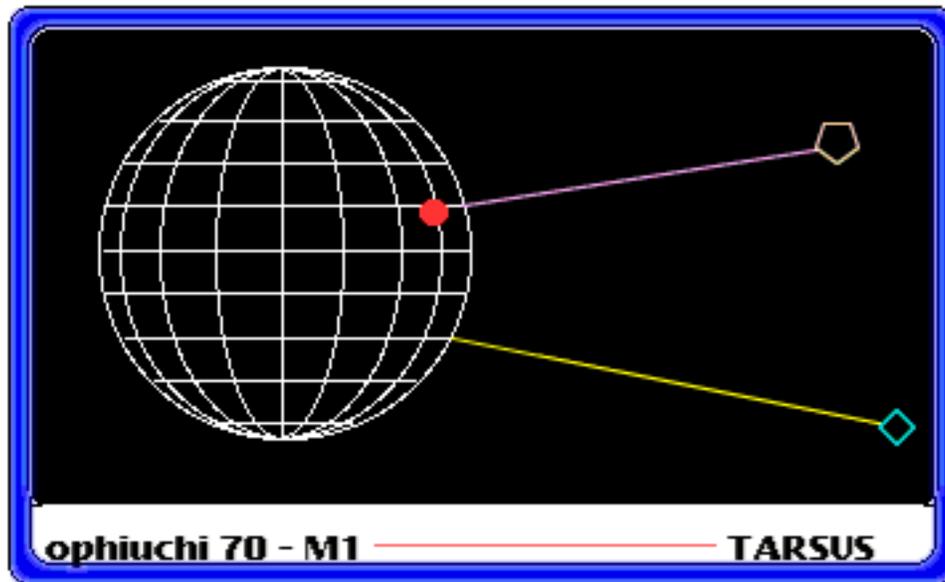
There would also be changes on Titan. Designing a virus to attack the Titanians had been difficult. Creating an anti-virus to cure all but one of them had been nearly impossible. But he had done it. The crewmen aboard the Titanic would respond well to the serum, but their commander would grow sicker and sicker. Aldous Mallow was already a dead man. He was just too dangerous to be left alive.

Karyl could only pray that the next Premier of Titan would be more benign. If not, Karyl would arrange to meet him.

And Karyl Carson would be sure to shake his hand. •

*Story copyright © 1994 Brian Burt.*

*(Editor's Note: This story has appeared in AOL's Fiction libraries.)*



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

**by Rick Blackburn**

*Stardate: 6903.30*

*Casa Alto, 70 Ophiuchi*

[Editor's note: "The Bombardment" is the second installment of a tale of invasion that began in Planet Magazine No. 2.]

After the interceptors had gone overhead, the neighborhood children had waited excitedly for more thrilling sights. But when half an hour had passed with no further action, while the children talked excitedly about the possibility of invasion, Bobby, David, and several of the neighborhood kids had gone to the mini-park at the end of the cul-de-sac court where they lived and began a spirited game of kickball. It was said that kids on ancient Terra, since before the advent of space flight, had also played this game. It always gave David a sense of awe, thinking of those dozens of generations of kids playing kickball since the dawn of time.

When the Vipers had again flashed overhead at supersonic speed, everyone had stopped playing for a moment to look up. Their view of the Starport was obscured by distance and a glade of trees, but when the "Wodin's Beard" blew up, it was heard all over the city.

By the time they got into the street, there was an enormous cloud of dense, black smoke

towering into the sky. As the kids watched, the cloud was shot through several times by hints of red and orange flame. From a long way off came the warble of fire sirens.

"David," one of the older kids said, "You're an expert, your dad works at the Starport. What do you think it was?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Maybe a CRASH!" he said excitedly.

The last crash at the Starport had happened several years ago, when an ill pilot had lost control of a giant freighter during landing. It had plowed into one of the large mono-hydrozine storage tanks at the edge of the Starport. It had caused a fire that had raged for several days before being brought under control by the Fire Department. The possibility of a crash at the Starport caused much excited conversation.

Janice Everett, 29, long brown hair and hazel eyes, pulled the family jetcar up to the curb and leaned out the window to yell at her son in the park. "DAVID!" she shouted, a little exasperated because David was being stubborn and pretending not to hear her calling him. "DAVID!" she shouted louder. Thankfully, one of his playmates nudged him and pointed at her. David came running up to the jetcar.

"Come on, David. Get in."

"Aww, but Mommy, we...."

"David," his mother said, in the tone of voice that said she was cross and in no mood to argue. "I'm not going to tell you again."

"Aww," David whined, but turned to wave good-bye to his playmates, unaware of the fact that this might be the last time he saw them alive, and climbed into the jetcar next to his mother.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To your father's office," Janice said, trying to remain calm. Eric had sounded grim as he'd outlined what the Saurian Admiral had said, and now she was frightened for her child's life.

"Leave everything that isn't already in the car," Eric had told her, "and you and David get to the Starport at once. There's still a chance that I can get us safely offworld and out of this mess."

"The Starport?" David asked excitedly. This wasn't so bad after all, he thought, considering the extra status he would have in the gang by being able to report on whatever had happened at the Starport, first-hand.

**The Terran Imperial Marines** at the Starport gate recognized the car and came to present arms in salute. They both grinned despite the seriousness of the situation as the

Port Captain's small son returned their salute. At that point, neither of them were aware of the death sentence hanging over all the children of Tarsus.

David jumped out of the jet car before Janice had completed the landing cycle, while the skids were still six inches off the ground. She wished that David had not seen his father do the same thing countless times, leaving the car on auto to complete the landing cycle. Janice mistrusted automated equipment of all kinds and insisted on retaining manual control of the jetcar at all times.

Thankfully, Eric was waiting for them outside the Port Captain's bungalow, and David streaked up to him, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Daddy, daddy!"

Eric effortlessly scooped up in one arm the twenty-seven kilograms of affectionately squirming little boy. "Hiya, Brat!" He said, grinning down at his young son.

"Can I go if you have to go up an inspect a starship?" David asked eagerly.

"Yes, I promise. You and Mommy are going with me everywhere I go now," he said.

David was puzzled, the words sounded great and promised great things in the future, but there was an undercurrent of tension in his father's voice that David was not used to. For a moment it bothered him, but then he happily put it out of his mind as he walked into the office and realized that there were other kids here today.

He recognized several of the other kids; there was Christopher and Laura Random, age eight and eleven — the son and daughter of his father's chief lieutenant. Christopher and David delighted in teasing Laura, who was just beginning to discover boys in a whole new way. Laura, although she dearly loved her little brother (and could stand David — the little snot) considered both younger boys to be almost unbearable pains in the behind.

As far as Laura was concerned, the single most important person in the room was twelve-year-old Michael Bryhers — much cuter than her last boyfriend. Taller than average for his height, Michael had chocolate brown hair and green eyes. Laura thought he was the most delicious-looking boy she'd ever seen.

Michael, searching the faces in the room was glad to see his friend, Tyrone Sanders — and a little distressed to see Laura Random. He knew that Laura had the hots for him and she had already let it be known at school that she would very much like to go steady. For three days the youngster had been trying to duck her — it wasn't that she was unattractive (just the opposite, in fact) but he simply was not ready to get that serious with any girl yet. With Tyrone here, he'd have an excuse to pester his friend's dad in the control tiers....

It was less than a half hour later that the adults, by unanimous vote, decided that the children should play outside in the small, grass-filled park area across the access road from the Port Captain's complex.

With a mixture of joy (because they would be outside) and sadness (because they might miss something), the children went outside. Soon a vigorous game of chase was under way. As the sun began to inch toward the horizon, the children were glad to see that their parents had apparently forgotten about the time and had not called them in. By mutual agreement among the two dozen children, no one found it necessary to remind the adults of the time and the impending sunset.

**The swollen, blood-red disk of the sun** was just touching the horizon when the attack came.

Inside, Eric Everett swore and reached for the comm-web as he watched the Distant Air Warning Radar, which electronically patrolled the air space around the capitol. On it, a squadron of Planetary Assault Cruisers could be seen, streaking toward the city from out of the west. They were accompanied by hundreds of Viper interceptors. On the comm-web the face of Major McKinnison, the Marine Detachment Commander appeared.

"Mac," he said to the Marine Major, "It's started. Get those 40mm ack-acks limbered up."

"Aye, Aye Sir. The ack-acks are manned and ready. We'll knock down as many of those slimy lizards as we can."

"Spaceman's Luck, Major."

"And to you sir." The comm-web screen went dark.

Outside, the children looked up as a half dozen Vipers roared overhead, shot straight up, and did a bloom over their heads. The younger children "ooed" and "aaahhed" as the spectacular sight unfolded. The older children looked at each other with a premonition of danger.

The Vipers began their strafing runs, firing at everything on the ground. Sun-bright flashed intensely; pure red, green, and yellow-white crisscrossed the sky as the Vipers fired on ground targets and the Marine ack-ack batteries returned fire.

David stood, his mouth open. For a moment he didn't understand what was happening. Then a pulsar beam struck a warehouse across the wide access street from where the children were playing. The building exploded into a red-orange fireball with a deafening report.

Another Viper roared overhead, strafing the ground. One of the hyper-laser blasts struck Laura full on as she attempted to shield Christopher — both children vanished in a puff of ionized gasses. An instant later, another laser beam struck the building where David's mother and father were. With a loud crack and a huge gout of brick-red flame, the building fell into a pile of rubble.

"Nnooohh..." David shouted, and ran toward the debris of the Port Captain's office. A cloud of choking smoke nearly smothered him as he desperately tried to dig through the rubble

with his bare hands. Crying bitterly, he finally uncovered a hand sticking out of the rubble. The signet ring he recognized as his father's.

Gradually, David managed to uncover most of his father's upperbody — the man's legs were still pinned under a huge steel joist beam.

Eric was semiconscious as he lay trapped in the rubble of what had been the seat of Star Nomad power on the planet — the Port Captain's office. David was shocked at the weakness of his father's grip as the man took his son's hand.

"David," he croaked, and suddenly blood began to trickle out of the corners of his mouth and from his ears. "You have to listen carefully to me, I don't think there's much time left."

"Don't talk, Daddy. You're hurt. I'll try to get you out. I — I haven't been able to find Mommy yet...."

"David," Eric said softly. "You remember I told you this morning that you might be called upon to be brave — braver than any nine-year-old should have to be — this is that time."

David began to cry softly.

"Mommy is dead," Eric said bluntly, "And I'm dying. There is nothing that you or anyone else can do about that now...." Eric paused to pant and try to clear his lungs.

Outside, the attack was still going on. Michael Bryhers, the only other survivor of the group of care-free kids who had played together a short half hour ago, staggered into the ruined building, and automatically began to work at helping David dig Eric free.

"David, I'm dying, and the next few days are going to be very hard for you — but always remember that you are a Star Nomad. Someday this will all be over and the Star Nomads will return. YOU must go to Valhalla, and stand before the Eagle Clan. I am sorry that I will not be there on your thirteenth birthday to see you participate in the TEST, which will be your passport to Nomad citizenship." Eric took the heavy gold signet ring from his finger and handed it to David. "Always safeguard this," the Nomad said. "It is the symbol of your birthright ... and your proof of right, should any challenge your right to stand before the Eagle and take the TEST."

David's sobs had turned to sniffles, but the boy managed to say, "I promise, Daddy."

Eric used the last of his life force to turn to Michael. "I'm sorry about your parents," he said. "You and David must watch over each other ... Spaceman's Luck...."

And with those words, Eric Everett, Lord Commodore of the Fleet, Knight of the Realm, and small boy's hero, departed from this corporeal, three-dimensional existence and entered infinity. Deep star probe had always been Eric's favorite assignment.

Michael looked at the man and knew that he was dead. Poor David, he thought. His own relationship with his father had been strained at best, and now the 12-year-old found that he could not cry over the loss of his parents. David had buried his face against his father's chest and was weeping uncontrollably now. Awkwardly, Michael tried to pull the younger boy away.

"No! NO!" the nine-year-old cried.

Finally, Michael managed to pull David away. "You heard what your father said," Michael tried to scold him. "I'm suppose to watch out for you now ... you're gonna be like my little brother now...."

He could do worse for a brother, Michael reflected. He'd always liked David because he wasn't a showoff or a crybaby ... like most kids his age.

"Yeah," David said, sniffing and wiping his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. "I — I guess you're right. Where are we gonna go?" He looked up at Michael. David was an only child, and the idea of having an older brother was a new and exciting concept. David comforted himself partially by observing that Michael looked a bit like what he imagined his father might have when he was a boy.

*KKAAHHH BOOOMMM OMMM! OOMM!*

The shock wave of exploding mono-hydrozine washed over them with a painful pressure on their ears.

"Come on," Michael said, heading straight for the jetcar park. "The Starport is going to be a major target for the aliens."

They reached the jetcar park. It had not taken a direct hit, but the debris of several buildings close by had piled up in the park. Brushing shards of blasted, blackened permoplast off a sleek sports car that still looked in good shape, the two boys climbed in.

"I've always wanted to drive one of these," Michael said with authentic enthusiasm. Michael fired up the ignition cycle, and the jet car rose into the air. He nosed it out onto the vast expanse of Starport Avenue and headed east, opening the throttle wide. The boy kept the car low to the ground to provide the worst possible target for the prowling Vipers. The jet car howled up the avenue at 300 kilometers per hour, half a meter above the high-density concrete.

**The air overhead suddenly flashed**, and then a flickering yellow-gray replaced the deep indigo of the Tarsan twilight as the city's defense screens were switched on. Immediately, it came under bombardment from the alien fleet. A several-square-kilometer patch of the screen shifted up the spectrum from yellow to green and finally to blue-white as a volley of photon torpedoes smashed into the screen, detonating against the intense counter-energy field generated by the city's defense.

The Vipers who had been caught inside the screen were, of course, living on borrowed time. One by one, that time ran out as the city's ack-ack cannons caught them or they ran out of fuel. The Saurian pilots knew this and were attempting to cause the maximum amount of damage.

The PAC's had landed and disgorged hundreds of troops and armored vehicles that were even now being engaged by the Armed Forces of the planet Tarsus. Luckily for the boys, the Saurian main attack had centered on the power-generator complex, far to the southwest of the city's center, where the Starport was located. As they drove through the six-kilometer-wide expanse of Grand Central Park, they could see the flashes of high-energy weapons exchanging fire to the south.

Michael breathed easier when they had crossed the open expanse of the port. The smoking corpses of several dozen vehicles marked where others had not been so lucky. It would have been easy for a Saurian fighter to swoop down on them. Here among the skyscrapers that lined Starport Avenue, the boy felt more secure — less chance of a successful staffing run in here.

Neither Michael nor David were aware of the Viper coming up from behind, traveling faster than sound. Suddenly, it was upon them and firing.

*ZSWOWW! ZSWOOW!*

The pulsar cannons fired on the Saurian Viper. There was fire and smoke everywhere as the street around them burst into a preview of hell with a sharp

*CRACK.*

The jet car turned over. David was thrown clear as the car skidded into the safety rail on the side of the street. Michael managed to pry himself out of the wreckage and ran toward David. The jetcar burst into flame with a dull

*FFWUUMMPHHH .*

The concussion of the explosion threw Michael to the ground, almost on top of David.

"You okay?" The older boy asked.

David struggled to get to his feet. His left arm, shoulder, and hip were badly bruised, and it hurt to breathe or to move his left arm. His favorite playsuit, faded blue cotton/nylon weave with one of his father's old unit patches sewn on the sleeve, had a long rip up the left outside seam, and was torn in other places and streaked with sweat, blood, and soot.

"I'm okay," David said, and went over to stand beside Michael to watch the wreckage of the jetcar burn. Michael's clothes were no more than tattered rags now, and he shivered as an

especially cool breeze warned of the near-freezing temperatures of midnight in Casa Alto.

As the two youngsters stumbled down the street, their muscles loosened and it became easier to move.

"You live close to here, don't you, David?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, we'd better get to my house, or we'll freeze out here. I live about a kilometer down this way and a couple of blocks over." David indicated a direction.

"Okay, let's go. There doesn't seem to be any smoke over there — maybe everything'll be okay."

**A half hour later, the boys arrived in David's neighborhood.** All the trees in the park were shattered like they'd been hit by a tornado. All the houses were rubble, and some were still burning. The street lights were out. What light there was came from the stars and the half-lit bulk of the planet Awesome, now two-thirds set in the west. There was no sound except for the far-off barking of a dog and the howling of the wind. The two boys felt very alone and stood close to each other with their arms around each other for mutual warmth and compassion. They turned up the driveway to what had been David's home. Two walls and a corner portion of the roof were still standing intact — the corner where David's room had been. Slowly and carefully they picked their way through the rubble and entered what was left of his room. By some miracle the power was still on.

"Tom Zimmerman, who used to live next door, was about your size," David said. "Maybe you can find some of his clothes."

"Okay, I'll go look." Michael said, and quiet as a shadow slipped out of the ruined house.

David stripped out of his dirty clothes and reluctantly threw his favorite play suit in the corner. The autowash was still operational, and the youngster stepped into it and let its soothing warm water and ultrasonic sound wash over him. The autowash's medicomp scanned his body and injected the proper antibiotics into the spray to deal with David's cuts and bruises.

Five minutes later, as he stepped out of the unit, Michael was stripping. He'd found a playsuit and thermal jacket that fitted him.

"I thought you'd never get out of there!" Michael chided the younger boy good-naturedly, and brushed past him on his way to the healing spray of the autowash.

While Michael was in the autowash, David found one of his playsuits and a thermal jacket he'd need for tonight and — shivering in the 20 C cold — he hurriedly got dressed. When Michael was out of the autowash and dressed, the two boys filled their pockets with the emergency ration sticks his father had kept for emergencies.

"Ever tasted these things?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. The rice and chicken isn't too bad, but the rest of the flavors are yucky!"

"Okay. But they do have everything your body needs to stay healthy and to keep you alive, so we'd better take them. Who knows how long it'll be before this whole thing is over with."

"I guess you're right," David said as they stood in the middle of the street, looking back toward Starport Avenue. "But I still think they're yucky!"

Overhead, the defense screen was illuminated occasionally by the blasts of detonating photon torpedoes, but it looked as though the bombardment had slackened a little over the past few hours.

"Well, let's try to find another jetcar," Michael said. "Maybe my neighborhood is in better shape."

"Okay," David said, falling in behind his 'big brother.' He almost stumbled over something in the dark, and he bent over to see what it was. It was a chunk of nondescript metal — he couldn't tell if it had once been a cherished toy, a favorite tool or just an empty container that had been blasted and fused together into a lump by the fury of nuclear fires unleashed by the invaders. He dropped it and gave it a kick. With an unreal, tinny scratchy noise it clattered down the street.

"Who's there?" a small voice whispered out of the dark to them.

Surprised, but pleased to find someone else alive, the two boys immediately yelled back: "David ... David Everett, and a friend, Michael Bryhers. Who are you? Where are you?"

"David?" the voice seemed unsure of itself, and then suddenly Bobby Starkie was running toward them.

"David!" he shouted, "it really is you!" The two young friends were happy to see each other — each had come to the conclusion that they would never see each other again.

"Who's this?" Bobby asked, pointing at Michael.

"Oh, that's my friend, Michael. His father works at the Starport with my father."

"We heard on the Tri-Dee that the Starport had been destroyed," Bobby said, "and I was afraid you were dead." By silent agreement no one mentioned missing parents. As they talked, four other children silently came up to stand around the two newcomers.

"I thought that all you guys were dead also, when we came and saw all the houses blown up."

Of the two dozen children in David and Bobby's playgroup, only six, including David and Bobby, had survived the initial attack. The oldest of the surviving children was eleven-year-old Debby Carson. She and Michael immediately took joint command of the small detachment of children. Debby's nine-year-old brother, Daniel, and ten-year-old Marcia Valdez rounded out the survivor's band.

Of all the little girls in the neighborhood, David was glad that Marcia was still alive, because he liked her the best. She was slim and athletic, with brown hair and jade-green eyes. Although she was still too young to have lost her "little-boy" build, except for an almost imperceptible beginning of a bust-line, David thought she was perfect. Although older than David, Marcia also liked him, and on two occasions had allowed the nine-year-old to think that he had 'stolen' kisses from her, and once had surprised the younger boy by passionately kissing back. They had also played 'doctor,' taking turns as the physician examining each other's body.

"It's getting cold," Michael said. "I think we'd better find a jetcar and start looking for someplace with four walls and a roof to sleep in tonight. We might try my neighborhood, it's further from the Starport on the north side ... most of the fighting seemed to be to the south. Maybe my neighborhood is in better shape."

"Yeah, I agree," Debby said. "But first we should have some supper. I've got a fire going and some hot dogs roasting that Bobby found. It might be awhile before we get to have anything again."

For a brief happy moment, they were able to shut out the sight of the blasted buildings and destroyed environment; the stench of cordite and tylium fumes; the chaos of battle around them. They pretended that they were on a camping trip all by themselves. They cuddled together under a large bedspread and some blankets, and watched the distorted glory of the galactic hub regions through the defense screen rising over the tops of the ghostly silent buildings around them, while they ate their hot dogs and planned for a drastically altered future amid the blasted ruins of civilization.

\* \* \*

*(See the following two chapters for Glossary and Appendixes to the Star Nomad Chronicles.)*

## THE BOMBARDMENT — Glossary

1) **CLASS M PLANET** As the human race expanded into the local stellar neighborhood right after the discovery of the Stutter Warp Drive in 2014, many different classes of planetary bodies were discovered. In 2030, the Solar Alliance Exploration Directorate issued a classification scheme in which Class M was Terra-norm. The criteria for a Class M planet is mass = 1.15 to 0.85, radius 1.4 to 0.75, oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere with a surface air pressure of 1100 mb to 950 mb, abundant hydrosphere covering at least 35% of the planet, surface temperature range = -303 C to +303 C.

2) **TARSUS** The only Class M planet in the 70 Ophiuchi star system. Tarsus is identical to the earth in mass, radius, surface gravity, atmosphere, and hydrosphere. Tarsus is remarkable only because it does not orbit 70 Ophiuchi directly, but the star's brown dwarf companion (at 1.65 AU from the primary), and it does not receive as much energy input from 70 Ophiuchi as Terra does from Sol. The climate on most of the land area of Tarsus is semi-arctic, only because the brown dwarf, Awesome, is close enough to Tarsus to supply the energy deficit by direct infra-red radiation and tidal heating. Because of the intense tidal heating, Tarsus is very tectonically active.

3) **70 OPHIUCHI** 17.1 light years away, this was one of the first star systems settled by humans from Terra (c. 2057). It is a double star, the primary being a KO dwarf, and its companion, separated by 38 AUs, is a faint M6 dwarf. From Terra, these stars appear to be magnitude 6.0, barely at the edge of visibility.

4) **AMERICAN ARM** At the dawn of the Stellar Age, when only the Stutter Warp was available to humanity, this drive's peculiarities mandated an exploration pattern of leaping from one star to the next in a branching fashion. Although the discoveries of the Hyperwave Warp and Transwarp Drives eliminated these restrictions, several dozen worlds were already inhabited and three major exploration "arms" (the American, the French, and the Chinese) already were firmly established in a trade-route configuration. Because of this, the archaic "American Arm" is still used to describe the "path" of explored and inhabited planets from Sol to Mu Hercules.

5) **ION GUN (CANNON)** A particle-beam weapon employing a dual-particle beam array. The inner, or core, beam is composed of positively charged ions — normally iron nuclei; while the outer (or "coaxial beam") is composed of neutral particles. The neutral particles interfere with most designs of ship's defensive shields, while the inner beam of charged particles is normally of sufficient energy to produce total destruction of most targets with a single shot. (Author's note: Think of the Battlestar Galactica two-part episode titled "Gun on Ice Planet Zero.")

6) **PLANETARY DEFENSE SCREENS** Most civilized worlds have some form of planetary defense network. Among the best (and most expensive) are Defense Screens. These are multi-layered force-fields similar to a starship's combat shields. But unlike a starship, which has a limited amount of power available to pump into its shields, the Planetary Defense Screens are powered off the planet's primary power distribution net.

Thus they are thousands of times more potent (and harder to break through) than a starship's shields. Defense Screens are incompatible with matter, and any material object coming into contact with them is instantly vaporized. On Tarsus, a PDS was deemed to be too expensive, but a smaller version WAS installed in the capital city, Casa Alto.

**7) ORBIT GUARD** Performs the same function for a planet as the Coast Guard does for the United States.

**8) JET CAR** A combination of a jet and a car, just like its name says. It is basically the same size and shape as any 20th Century American car, except it has a more complex wheel-skid arrangement for landings. It depends upon the use of electro-gravitic fields for lift and a rather conventional turbojet engine for thrust. It can operate at altitudes from inches off the ground to about 6,000 meters, with "normal" jetcar corridors in metro areas like Casa Alto being 10 to 20 meters for east-west traffic and 40-50 meters altitude for north-south traffic. The turbojet engine in a stock jet car can accelerate at about 6 gees and reaches its maximum (controlled by a governor) velocity of 0.95 Mach in about 20 seconds. Although it is illegal, the power plant/propulsion package on most jetcars can be "souped up" substantially.

**9) COMM-WEB** A communications device combining video-phone, computer, fax, and locator file in one piece of equipment about the size and shape of a standard phone (albeit with a three- to seven-inch LCD video screen attached).

**10) AUTOVON (network)** A dedicated sub-space communications network reserved for the military. It can be used both for official traffic and for "personal" messages to help boost morale on isolated military bases or starships on patrol.

**11) The TEST** The coming of age ritual that Nomads go through as they leave childhood behind and embark on their adult lives. The TEST is a psychological/mental/physical/psychic experience, which has its closest analog in some of the Amerind tribes of the West and South West. In these tribes a boy who wished to become a man purified his spirit by fasting for a period and then was left in the wilderness to experience a "vision." In the Nomad version, sensitive psionic amplifiers and sentient computers are used to delve into the TESTee's unconscious and create a "vision." The results of each TEST are confidential, unless the TESTee chooses to reveal the details. It is a draining experience, both physically and mentally, and only by the possession of a superior mind can one "pass" the TEST. The age at which an individual takes the TEST varies greatly, with girls tending to qualify in the pre-screening a little earlier than boys (as with puberty). The average for girls is 12, while for boys it is 14. A person who does not pass the TEST on the first try can try again, as many times as he can pass the pre-screen qualifications. Those who are unable to pass the pre-screen qualifications never take the TEST and hence are never full citizens. Although the Government attempts to squelch discrimination against those who are unable to pass the TEST, those people have a status similar to the victims of mental retardation in the mid-20th century on Terra.

**12) VIPER** An interplanetary interceptor carried on a mothership, similar to the way

fighters are carried on aircraft carriers. These are single-seat fighters, mounting two pulsed phaser cannons and capable of carrying external ordnance such as rocket bombs and guided missiles. The Viper's home environment is the vacuum of deep space, where it can accelerate at up to 12 gravities with combat thrusters and achieve relative velocities in excess of 1,500 km sec-1. Vipers can also operate in planetary atmospheres, where they can attain speeds in excess of Mach 3.

**13) PHASER** A class of energy weapon widely used in the United Federation of Planets. It can be as small as a book of matches or as large as a conventional artillery piece. PHASER stands for PHased Array laSER. Its operational beam consists of two components, a visible beam of charged particles which gives the phaser its characteristic cyan-blue beam and an X-ray laser component which does the actual damage to the target. Phaser energy can either shock into unconsciousness, thermally fry, or disintegrate a material target, depending upon the power level and frequency of the X-ray laser. At maximum output, the phaser generates a beam of closely focused X-rays with a wavelength of 175 e; while in the stun setting, the X-ray laser portion of the beam is disabled and only the particle beam is used, producing a taser-like electric shock to any organic material.

**14) TRI-D (Tri-dee)** The 24 Century descendent of TV, it is used both as a three-dimensional form of recreation and as a method of displaying data in military, business, or commercial applications. The display unit is usually a globe-shaped unit from 10 centimeters to 3 meters in diameter, but it can be displayed with semi-3D from a flat LCD display.

**15) SAURIAN** A reptilian race of 45 Delta Aquillae, sometimes also referred to as "Dracs." They are the technical and military equal of the Terran Empire, and some say the philosophical betters because of their complex and logically grounded philosophical work. The United Federation fought a war with the Saurians in the 22nd Century, and after nearly a decade of undecisive battle a peace treaty was finally signed. The Dracs have been staunch supporters of the Federation's ideals since then, but have remained the commercial and economic rivals of the Terrans in several sectors of the Federation, especially in the Federation Outer Territories. It is unknown why they choose to align themselves with the self-styled King of Perseus.

**16) TARMARAK** The Tarmarak tree is native to the home world of the Pentapods (DM+43B 1953); it is tough, nearly indestructible, and is used in the Pentapod "organic" starships as the outer hull and for radiation shielding. It is a tenacious plant and can survive in a wide variety of environments, from glacial to subtropical. Because of its hardiness and extreme utility, it is the "cash" crop of more than one frontier planet.

**17) CROM** The male half of the neo-pagan dual-deity Crom/Mitra. After the Interregnum and the fall of the Theocracy on Earth, billions of people turned their backs on Christianity, believing it to be "demon-inspired" with its puritanical credo of "If it gives pleasure, it MUST be sinful." The worship of Crom/Mitra is the primary religion on the Nomads' home worlds, and since it has many of the same tenets as Christianity, it was eagerly accepted as a replacement for the discredited Christian religion. It should be noted

that although the term "Christian" is used here, it should rightfully be restricted to the fundamentalist, evangelical "Believe MY way or I'll KILL ya!" type of Christian. That kind of "Christian" will be in for a terrible shock when Judgment Day arrives.

**18) MONO HYDROZINE** Mono Hydrozine is an inflammable liquid used in rocket propulsion. Mixed with liquid oxygen, this artificially created fuel yields a specific impulse of over 9,000 seconds, thus rivaling the fission nuclear rocket but without the radioactive contamination problems associated with fission drives.

**19) LABYRINTH** The Labyrinth which surrounds Casa Alto's Starport is among the oldest parts of the city. The streets here are narrow and mostly wind back upon themselves or lead to cul-de-sacs. The Labyrinth from the air resembles a giant maze (thus the name) and is primarily composed of warehouses and light industry with low-income housing and skid row hotels. Deals are negotiated here to import hundreds of tons of exotic drugs, or to export prostitute/slaves of all ages — along with the more mundane legal import/export business found around any starport.

**20) TERRAN IMPERIAL MARINES** The Marines trace their origin to a number of pre-space Terran military organizations, including The United States Marine Corps, the United States Army, the Red Army, the British Army of the Rhine, the French Foreign Legion, and so on. The Imperial Marines are divided into two major commands, the Fleet Marines, which are directly attached to Star Fleet ships and serve as security personnel and weapons specialists/gunners, and the Line Marines, who inherit all the dirty little jobs of war. They get very little glory and a lot of slogging through alien mud fields under fire or attacking armored bunkers on some frozen asteroid in full vacuum armor. The Line Marines also pull Starport Security. Under the Charter of the UFP, starports are interstellar ports of call, they serve a specific planet, but like an embassy, the planet's jurisdiction ends at the starport's gates. Inside a starport's perimeter, Imperial Law exists, and is summarily enforced by the Marines. An attack on a starport is an attack on the Federation and is severely dealt with.

**21) ACK-ACKs (40mm)** A medium anti-aircraft phaser cannon, with a 40mm diameter bore. The most common arrangements are in batteries of two (pom-pom guns) or in fours (Quad-40s). They are meant to be used as point defense guns from zero to 20 kilometer ranges. They can be either visually aimed by a gunner or connected to a computerized Target Tracking Array. They are rated as 60% lethal to air targets in their zone of conflict (0-20 km radius; 0-30,000 meter altitude).

**22) PERMAPLAST** A building material of the 24th Century. It is stored as a powdery substance like normal plaster. When it is to be used, it is mixed with water and a fixative and then sprayed onto a wire or wooden mold. When it dries (in 1 to 6 hours, depending on the overall size of the structure) it is the consistency and density of obsidian. It is widely used on the Frontier to build "temporary" buildings that are expected to remain temporary for centuries.

**23) PHOTON TORPEDOES** A photon Torpedo is a starship's main offensive weapon.

Basically a tiny bit of antimatter which is compressed into a cigar-shaped projectile by gravitic-magnetic force fields. These force fields keep the antimatter from detonating until they have reached the indicated target. Once there, the force field dissolves and the anti-matter (normally in the 1 to 10 gram range) causes an explosion equal to a 20 to 200 kiloton nuclear device. Other devices, dubbed "Planet busters" may have as much as a ton (106 grams) of antimatter and produce a blast equivalent to a 200 megaton nuclear device.

**24) GRAND CENTRAL PARK** Casa Alto was laid out in accordance with the Sierra Club Urban planning program developed in the mid-1990s by the ecological group on Earth called the Sierra Club. Its basic tenet was to "split up" vast megalopolises into numerous suburban centers, each connected by wide belts of natural growth and land. Thus on Tarsus, contractors must leave 5 square kilometers of "park" land for each square kilometer developed.

**25) AUTOWASH** The autowash is a combination shower unit. It sprays half water and half ultrasonic sound. In most models, a computerized auto-med facility also does a medical scan of the person and adds water-soluble antibiotics, vitamins, etc., to the water spray to be directly absorbed into the body while one washes.

\* \* \*

*(continued in next chapter)*

## THE BOMBARDMENT — Appendixes

### Appendix 1

**WARP GATES** Warp gates are essentially bi-stable worm holes, artificially created by an as-yet unknown alien intelligence between six and a half and seven million years ago. The first warp gate was discovered in close orbit around the KO orange giant star Arcturus in 2043, and a year later a second warp gate was discovered in orbit around Capella. The warp gates connect two points in three-dimensional space and have the effect of allowing the traveler to instantly travel between the two points without actually traveling through the space between the points.

The warp gates are the product of unknown alien technology. Although the effect is easy enough to understand (and use), the exact method of achieving this effect has so far eluded the brightest minds in the Federation. The warp gate seems to be related to the transporter system in wide use through out the Federation and known space, but whereas the transporter causes a physical overlap of two spatial frames, allowing an individual to disappear from one and instantly reappear at the other; the transporter is limited in both the range of propagation and the time such a frame overlap can be held.

The transition from one side of the warp gate to the other is instantaneous, there is no apparent "time lag" through the warpgate. Warp gates are stable; a trip through them always deposits the traveler in the same spatial frame. The warp gates are bi-directionally stable: that is, flight through the warp gate in one direction results in destination A, while reversing the flight brings one back to the point of origin. Thus the warp gates can be looked at as a string of beads, or as "stations" on an interstellar monorail network.

So far, all of the discovered warp gates have been found in orbit around massive stars or black holes. One theory of operation suggests that the warp gates use the gravitational energy of the parent object to generate the stable worm hole. Although all warp gates are identical in structure and physical dimensions, there appear to be two separate "types" of warp gates. The first type offers a choice of two directions for travel, and tends to be located around "normal" giant stars. A second type is located around higher-mass stars and black holes. These gates allow the selection of four destinations. All of the warp gates so far discovered are identical in dimension and composition. The warp gates are doughnut constructions of meteoric iron and stone with alien crystal "components" sunk into the structure. The warp gates are exactly 113.787 kilometers in diameter and 0.939 kilometers "thick." The center hole measures 39.323 kilometers in radius.

Actual transition through the warp gate involves passing through the exact center of the gate at zero velocity relative to the motion of the warp gate in orbit. If a functional stutter warp drive passes through a warp gate, this results in a nuclear explosion; while ships employing active hyperwave drive units have never been seen again. Type I warp gates, like the one in orbit around Arcturus, have two entrance vectors, identified as RED and GREEN, that are totally reciprocal. Type II warp gates around very massive stars or black

holes have four entrance vectors, the normal RED and GREEN, and a second set of reciprocal vectors, designated BLUE and YELLOW.

So far, no Federation warp gate has opened on to territory served by warp gates accessed by any of the known alien races, and it is theorized that they never will, being closed systems unto themselves. Most warp gates tend to cover more than 1,000 light years, and so far as anyone can tell, there is no limit in sight to the network of warp gate stations. Currently, the Federation routinely makes use of a network of seventy-four warp gates. The furthest single warp gate shift is between the Cygnus X-1 black hole and the 1E2344 + 18 quasar science station, 16.3 billion light years away.

What about the race who built these wonderful objects? So far, even less is known of them. From radiological dating it is possible to say that all the known warp gates were built during a half-million year period between 6.5 and 7 million years ago. Of the builders themselves there is no evidence. Although it is believed that the warp gates were designed to have living beings in supervisory positions, much like the telepaths of ITT are acting today, there have been no finds of other artifacts or records of the enigmatic builders.

The best that can be said about them is that the warp gate builders appear to have been contemporaries of the First-Wave activities of another vanished race, the Preservers, who are responsible for the propagation of so many humanoid life forms in this sector of the galaxy. Although it is tempting to identify the warp gates as Preserver artifacts, much more is known of the Preservers than of the race that built the warp gates. It may be that the Preservers constructed the network of warp gates throughout space and time; however, there is currently no concrete evidence of that.

(Related topics: Preservers, Pre-Galactic Races, Arch of Time, The City on the Edge of Forever, Prof. Alexander H. Pickering [20th Century scientist - anomaly].)

\* \* \*

## Appendix 2

**STAR NOMADS, ORIGINS OF** There exists no firm documentation of the origins of the human race that we now call the Star Nomads. There are, however, abundant references to them in the mythology of several dozen alien races, beginning around 30,000 years ago. The following then is an amalgamation of dozens of myths, legends, and oral traditions from races scattered halfway across the galaxy.

A long time ago, so long in fact that no one knows for sure how long ago it was, there was a world of human beings who learned the secrets of faster-than-light propulsion. Shortly after this milestone, the First Wave Expansion took place. It is commonly accepted that the dating system of the First Age was based upon the death of a great martyred religious or political leader, later believed by many to be the incarnate representative of God. An alternate but sizable minority view claims that the First Age dating system was based upon

the first successful release of nuclear energy. Whichever system is used, it is certain that the First Age began more than 30,000 years ago. The First Age is today considered a Golden Age of learning and exploration for the inhabitants of Dariahbar.

**The First Wave Expansion** This was a nearly random explosion in all directions from the mother world. The exploration ships were quickly followed by colony ships, which within a span of a few thousand years spread the human race across three million worlds in a sphere with a radius of about 1,250 parsecs. Some of these colonies prospered and grew wealthy, others did not, and some failed altogether. Although the speed of the expansion slowed, it never stopped. In advance of the political hegemony of the Imperium, Free Traders made tenuous finger and toe holds through the terrifying distances of the galaxy. Months or years might pass between landings on an Imperial world. Their ships were often nothing more than patchwork quilts of repairs and improvisations, but these Free Traders were in a real sense the ones who tied the human worlds of the galaxy together into a single political entity, the Imperium.

Near the end of the First Wave Expansion, the Imperium, welded together from the old warring factions of the human race and the other intelligent species encountered in man's centuries of space exploration, became the diadem in the crown of human/humanoid civilization. The Imperium brought culture and prosperity to all the star nations. But the expansion of the frontier had been much too fast — the frontiers were expanding exponentially. Each year, thousands of new worlds were discovered and hundreds were colonized by the older, more technically advanced worlds of the Imperium. Civilization had reached the point where communication and trade routes were stretched beyond the maximum and were collapsing. The frontier "burst like a soap bubble," leaving the inner core of civilized worlds totally isolated from the worlds of the still-expanding frontier.

**The Dark Ages** Slowly, but unavoidably, the Frontier began to slip behind the core worlds in living standards, technology, and economies. Even the civilized worlds of the Frontier, established long enough to provide an industrial base, began to slide backwards because of the isolation, and they gradually lost contact with the rest of the civilized galaxy. The Free Traders were able to keep a few tens of thousands of worlds from total isolation, but the sheer magnitude of the problems associated with interstellar logistics and the bureaucracy necessary to administer the Imperium began to add to the drag on civilization and hasten the coming of what so many scholars dreaded, the fall of the Imperium.

Hundreds of independent star kingdoms began to rise and declare their independence from the Iridium Throne as the Imperial nobility began to think of themselves less as vassals of an Emperor on far off Dariahbar, and more as the local royalty. At first, these successions and rebellions were dealt with militarily and brutally, but more and more worlds began to slip away from the centralized authority of the Imperium; and there were limits to what even the Imperial Armada could do to prevent brushfire rebellions and the less spectacular, but more efficient, bureaucratic malaise. Without anyone actually realizing it, the Dark Ages descended upon the Imperium. The dark ages lasted approximately 3,000 years and extended from 4050 to 7200, as annotated by the local

calendar.

**Colonization of Caesius** During this period, a small colony fleet set out searching for a new home with 25,000 people and their plants and animals. Their origin is unknown, but many traditions place the origins as one of the outer core worlds that had been settled from Dariahbar a thousand years earlier. After pushing far past the ten established boundaries between the Imperium and unexplored space, they came to a small golden sun far to the rimward edge of the Perseus Arm of the Milky Way. This star, along with a dozen others, were "hidden" in a dense dust cloud covering a sphere two parsecs in radius. Historians have speculated that perhaps this particular colony was not "approved" by the Imperium, because the choice of location seems to have been selected for maximum concealment: Far beyond where another colony ship would have stopped and at a star in the center of a nebula which cut its photographic magnitude by a factor of 106.

Circling this golden star was a beautiful, blue water world, which the colonists named Caesius. It was a rich world in both natural resources and climate; civilization quickly took hold, and life for the new colony was prosperous.

Some 9,000 years passed, and the expanding Imperium found Caesius. It had become the seat of a small stellar republic covering about half of the available Terra-norm worlds of the Nebula, with a population of approximately 24 billion. The Imperium, dimly remembered from old records, songs, poems, and myths of the Before Time, was welcomed by the Caesians. Unfortunately, the Imperium had mutated from the benevolent instrument of galactic culture and civilization into a vast, decadent, corrupt, and evil empire supported only by the might of its armed forces. The Imperium now held a million slave worlds in thrall by the force of arms. The Imperial nobility was always on the lookout for more worlds to conquer, more slaves, and more raw materials and natural resources to feed its vast war machine.

**The Imperium's Reemergence** The squadron of the Imperium's Armada that finally discovered Caesius was commanded by Archbishop Jeremy Hicks, who was a devout fundamentalist. The Rt. Rev. Minister believed that his "mission" (ordained by God himself) was to violently convert all the savage races of the Galaxy to the One True Religion. The religion of Caesius was branded neo-paganism by the Archbishop and spelled doom for the establishment of peaceful relations between the Imperium and Caesius.

The military commander of the squadron of six warships was Commodore Sir Cybeer Mjarkyn-ahkbarr (literally: Cybeer, the fist of God), an ambitious man who dreamed of high political office and the almost unlimited power that came with it. Cybeer saw in the Caesian Republic the chance to vault into the ranks of the political elite as the governor-general of the newly discovered and "pacified" region that now lay before him.

The Caesians, who had over 9,000 years of peace and prosperity and respect for the individual, were appalled by the Imperium's demand for tribute in the form of gold, radioactives, dylithium, and slave children. The demand was immediately rejected by the Caesian Legislature and the worlds of the Republic reluctantly began to prepare for war.

In a savage, month-long battle, fought entirely within the home nebula, the Caesian Star Fleet crushed the Imperium's forces, mostly by sheer weight of numbers. A few stragglers aboard a heavily damaged cruiser were allowed to flee into hyperspace, and the Archbishop and the Commodore were able to escape the total decimation of their joint command.

**A Brief Victory** The Caesians knew that they were in for a real fight now. It was expected that the crippled cruiser would flee at the maximum velocity its damaged warp generators would allow to their command base to tell of the disastrous defeat — a defeat inflicted upon the Imperium's squadron by a miserable backwater world out beyond nowhere. Caesian scientists and engineers began to analyze the wreckage of the other Armada units that had been salvaged from the battle ground. The enormity of the technological gap between the Imperium and the Republic became all too apparent as research continued at a frantic pace. A crash program of research and development was launched to narrow the gap in weapons technology.

The Imperium was at that time ruled by the mad Emperor Fedak XXIII, who took the defeat of this squadron as a personal insult. In one of his more lucid moments, he ordered the Caesian Republic totally destroyed and its population either killed or enslaved. A huge battle fleet was assembled from all the vast forces of the Imperium's space military and placed under command of Admiral Kyle (the Butcher) Bolasko, who had recently returned from the Deryennie Wars, where he had distinguished himself by ordering the massacre of 15 million inhabitants of one of the smaller Deryennie colonies.

**The Imperium Returns** The battle fleet set out for Caesius in 15802 and immediately and without preamble attacked the outermost world of the Caesian Republic. Lyric, the attacked world (and the vast majority of the other outlying planets had been evacuated immediately after the original defeat of the Imperium, five years earlier) fell in less than a week, its defenders pausing only long enough to complete the booby-traps and destroy all things that might have proved useful to the invading Imperials. The Republic's defense strategy revolved around the three main worlds of the Republic: Caesius, Topaz, and Sylph. These three worlds, protected from attack by a variation of a starship's defensive screens and armed with giant particle-beam cannons powered by the planet's power grid, were virtually impervious to attack.

However, Admiral Balasko was not a man to easily give up on a problem, and he immediately laid siege to the remaining worlds of the Republic. For five years the Imperium besieged the three worlds of the Caesian Republic. Then in 15807, Imperial agents managed to bribe a traitor in the defense screen controller station of Topaz. The energy screen that had protected the planet was lowered, and Topaz was bombed into submission by high-yield neutron bombs within a month of the initial penetration of its shields.

This defeat demoralized the two remaining worlds because it was unknown that the Imperium had found (and later executed) a traitor in the Republic's Defense Forces. The republic instead thought that some way had been found to neutralize the energy screens. The Legislature of Caesius attempted to negotiate with the Admiral. Balasko made a show of

being willing to talk and only after his forces had landed on both Caesius and Sylph did he renege on this original agreement and restart the attack on the Republic. The remainder of the war went very quickly, and always in favor of the Imperium's superior technology and weapons. Within a year, both planets had been totally subjugated. Fewer than ten percent of the original population had managed to survive the war with the Imperium, and now only one in ten or twelve would survive the wrath of Fedak the Mad. Extermination camps were set up all over the two worlds, and only those with useful technical skills, and pre-pubescent children old enough to walk, were spared.

Those who did survive were taken on board slave ships and transported to the Imperial Prison World of Haydes. True to its name, Haydes was a hell world of nearly unbearable heat: thin, nearly unbreathable air choked with noxious gasses in sub-lethal doses and a gravitational field 1.85 times as powerful as Caesius. About 100 million men, women, and children were dumped into the concentration camps of Haydes to work the dylithium and radioactive mines, of which the planet had many.

Exposed to cosmic Beritol rays, gamma and X-rays from the mines, and other radiation and chemical pollutants, the population soon began to shrink. For forty years the slaves worked in the mines, and their numbers and their fertility declined drastically, to the point that by 15878 only 2.3 million remained.

**Rebellion on Haydes** During this time, Fedak the Mad was involved in a civil war with his half-cousin, Marlyn the Usurper. A slave rebellion broke out on Haydes. The Emperor, occupied with his half-cousin thousands of light years away, was unable to reinforce the guard garrison on Haydes. The rebellion was short and had a surprising outcome.

True, the Guards had energy weapons and powered combat suits, and were backed up by combat vehicles including light tanks. And the slaves had only their own bodies and improvised weapons crudely constructed from mining equipment — but the slaves had one other thing. They had been forced to live primitive lives, exposed to all that the hell world could throw at them, and so had adapted to this environment — whereas the Imperium's troops had not. When the vehicles broke down, or were caught in ingenious traps, and when the powerpacks of weapons and powered armor ran out, the Imperials were trapped and slaughtered by vengeful slaves.

**The Great Exodus** After the guard garrison had been slaughtered, the one-time slaves bargained with the forces of Marlyn the Usurper and traded the metals-rich hell world for starships. The survivors of the Caesian Republic, along with the other assorted undesirables who had been on Haydes, again fled across the stellar frontier and into unexplored territory. Instead of continuing up the star-rich Purseus Arm, the ragtag fugitive fleet turned to the 5,000-light-year-wide gap between the Purseus arm and the Cygnus Arm. This later became known as the Great Exodus. Still fearing pursuit by the Imperium, the commanders of the fleet set their navicomps to select a random course that would carry them deep into the unexplored reaches of the Cygnus arm. Finally, after traveling spinward another 25,000 light years, the hunt for a suitable world began, not so

much because the fugitives felt safe now, but because more and more of the decrepit starships were reverting back to their natural state: rust.

Because of the long exposure to high levels of ionizing radiation both on Haydes and on the relatively unshielded rust buckets that had carried them across the void, the birth rate had dropped to such an alarmingly low level that biological extinction was a real threat. A crash program of biological research began. It used most of the store of technological equipment available to the new colonists.

Of the live births, less than half were healthy, viable human children. There were 10 still-births of monstrous mutations to every normal birth. At the verge of racial extinction, biologists managed to stabilize the population by 16393 at the dangerously low level of 45,000 individuals.

Within a few centuries, the little bits of technology that the colonists had managed to salvage from their ships had run down or disintegrated. The colony quickly reverted to a wood-and-bone-tool Neolithic level. By 17650 (about 10,000 BC Terrestrial Standard) the gene pool that today's Star Nomads evolved from had been mostly cleansed and stabilized, and the population began to increase. Because of the hard times during the war with the Imperium and the Great Exodus, when the live birth of a healthy child was a miracle, the children of the Star Nomads have continued even to this day to be "spoiled rotten" by their parents.

Finally, The Star Nomads regained civilization and eventually an industrial and technological society about 2,000 years ago.

At this point the record switches from being based upon myth and legend to one supported by the systematic records of history.

In 1422 AD (Terrestrial Standard) Nomad scientists discovered that the star they had originally settled around was near the end of its stellar life and threatening to explode into a nova, thus scouring life from the surface of their planet. In a vast program of research and development, the Nomads managed to create a stardrive with which to evacuate their race. The problem was that this drive created a very precise wormhole, from an exact point A to point B.

By coincidence Sol (Terran Home System) was selected as the Nomads new home. The Nomad escape fleet, with 3.5 billion inhabitants crammed into eighteen huge colony ships, arrived in the Sol system in 2005 AD to find it already occupied.

Diplomatic contact was made with the Terrans and peaceful relations established, with the Nomads eventually establishing their colony in the Sol Asteroid Belt.

\* \* \*

## Appendix 3

**THE PRESERVERS AND HUMANITY** For centuries, ever since man has started his exploration of the galaxy, one mystery has stood out above all the other unanswered questions of life in the galaxy. Why are there so many totally human and humanoid races in the galaxy today?

In this context the term "Human" refers to any species that can successfully inter-breed with the human race of Terra. Thus the Klingons are human and the Vulcans are humanoid, because no special preparations either biochemical or mental have to be made for a Human/Klingon pair to breed; while vast technological support is required for the creation of a viable offspring from a Human/Vulcan or Human/Romulan mating.

Although the overall humanoid "shape" could be attributed to some vast galactic morphogenetic field (and indeed there is some indication of the existence of this field) such an explanation cannot be invoked to explain the so-called "genetic mystery" which links such divergent races as the Terrans, Klingons, Correllians, Nomads, and Taurens. These races apparently "born" on worlds scattered across half the galaxy are all genetically identical.

In the mid 22nd Century, a Vulcan scholar, M'brien, advanced the theory, supported by hundreds of archeological finds on dozens of worlds, that there existed at one time (circa six to seven million years ago) a super-advanced race who toured the galaxy and "seeded" the human race in several places.

They are called the Preservers because, in several cases, they carried out vast stellar engineering projects requiring the administration of astronomical quantities of energy. The only reason for most of these vast projects was the health and well-being of a human "colony" on the world so affected.

Little is known of the Preservers, except that they had god-like powers of creation and destruction, and that they DID pass this way some seven million years ago.

\* \* \*

## Appendix 4

**THE THIRD INTERSYSTEM WAR** Although the Clone Wars officially ended in 2354, the Terran Psychology Service continued to maintain a heightened state of alert, and this, coupled with the Federation-wide paranoia generated by the Spectral invasion, contributed to the bloody Third Intersystem War fought between 2361 and 2369. This war was a power struggle within the Terran Empire for the Throne.

The Assassination of Jasilonis XI by agents of the Corporate Sector Authority was the primary trigger causing the Empire to fragment into several power blocs. By far the two largest of these blocs were led by Gar Landry of Terra, the old Emperor's Prime Minister,

and Tokerarat Bulgannian, self-styled King of Perseus. In the opening days of conflict, both sides ruthlessly used their power and influence to weld together coalitions from the other lesser power blocs. Gar Landry was eventually declared Imperator by the Imperial Senate on stardate 6012.24, and the Star Fleet and Army immediately swore their allegiance to the new Emperor. Bulgannian's group immediately declared themselves in rebellion against the illegally crowned Imperator and quickly crowned Tokerarat Imperator instead. The Rebels quickly withdrew, seizing the New Titan Warp Gate as they left, declaring it to be "Imperial property" of the King of Perseus, one of Bulgannian's titles.

The new government petitioned the United Federation of Planets for recognition as the rightful owner of Terra's influential seats in the Federation's Grand Assembly of Sentience and the powerful Security Council. The debate was fast and heated, with several of Terra's rivals seeing this as a way of bringing the haughty Terrans down a peg or two. In the end however the Assembly voted 563 to 70 against recognition of the rebel government and 633 to 0 against seating the Rebels on the Security Council.

Bulgannian scored his biggest victory of the war in 2361, when the Corporate Sector Authority, with its own indigenous military arm, decided to join with the rebels in hopes of strengthening their power over the political rulers of the human race.

Within a month of that, Galron, the aging Klingon Emperor and First Secretary of the Council of Peers, decided that Gar Landry was the most likely to win in any Terran version of the Komerex Zha. Although they stopped short of actually taking sides, preferring to hedge their bets with official "neutrality" (a relatively new concept to the Klingon people), the government of the Komerex Klingon did not forbid its citizens from seeking glory in the conflict.

For nearly six years the war was fought, mostly between Star Fleet and the Corporate Sector Authority, aided by the latter's mercenary troops. Although the fighting was long, hard, and bloody, neither side could win a decisive victory.

The battle of Corridon III in the Draconis Delta star system was the last major naval engagement of the war and was also the only decisive space battle fought during the war. Star Fleet won a resounding victory by luring most of Bulgannian's strategic reserves into battle and then springing an ambush, backed by both Klingon and H'Rumbian mercenary vessels. The battle essentially broke the back of the Corporate Sector Authority and left Bulgannian with a scattering of auxiliary police craft and older reserve cruisers.

Rebel survivors from the battle, mostly belonging to the V Battle Fleet, retreated through the Warp Gate complex toward the Federation Outer Territories, finally emerging into the Terran Prime Quadrant through the Arcturus Warp Gate. The Rebels paused and stopped long enough to attack and seize the refueling depot in the 70 Ophiuchi star system on their way to a suicide raid on the Terran Capital world itself.

Known for its agricultural productivity and the exotic terrain of the western continent

caused by the collision of a planetesimal in prehistoric times, the planet Tarsus was a sleepy little backwater world, dependent upon its agricultural production and its strategic location (in orbit around the gas giant Awesome) as a liquid-hydrogen propellant manufacturing and distribution plant; it was no match for the half-crazed rebels of the defeated V Battle Fleet, who took out their rage on the civilian population of the planet, using the cities as target practice for its remaining cruisers and destroyers.

The Tarsan Aerospace Defense Forces did more than their share of fighting a delaying action, keeping the rebels busy and unable to refuel until the pursuing Star Fleet squadrons were able to catch up with them.

\* \* \*

## References

**Blackburn, Richard**, DEFENDERS OF THE CROWN, c2371 Imperial War College Press, Star Fleet Academy, Mars, Sol IV. •

*(Editor's note: This story, which began in the previous issue of Planet Magazine, is excerpted from Mr. Blackburn's novel in progress. Rick Blackburn can be contacted at PwrPack@aol.com.)*

*Story copyright © 1994 Rick Blackburn.*



## **THE SWILLER MANIFESTO** by **George McCann**

**Bloody bell rang** and I reached out to shut off the alarm. Pitch-dark outside, but I had set the wake-up for daybreak. Damn, this was 2094 A.D., and people still couldn't invent a clock that worked properly.

But the bell rang again and the organism, benumbed by sleep, finally tracked the source: the video-fone. I activated it, flicked on the screen and fine-tuned the sound.

"Swiller here."

"You're wanted at Top Base," from a voice I did not recognize. I jiggled the screen switch, but it remained blank. So the caller was either an infiltrator or some HQ wallah testing security at 0300 hours. If the latter, better humor him.

"Parole, please." Then the face materialized on the screen. Good God, it was Smithers, among the nastiest of the base staff and a poof to boot.

"It is a far, far better thing I do," Smithers intoned, "than I have ever done before or ever

hope to do in the future, so help me Henry Higgins and the Houses of Parliament," all of it in a more than passable Mayan dialect. May they rip his bloody heart out, I thought.

Top Base has been making the paroles overlong and setting them in exotic tongues since Goldberger came a cropper last June on the third moon of Jupiter. Fooled by a short Yiddish parole, of all things. It was "Bupkis," and Goldberger thought the contact said "Cupcakes." Never had a chance when the suspicious contact turned on his pocket downmelter.

"Good. Now that's settled," I snarled, "you realize I'm not ready to go out again. Only got back from Alpha Centauri Monday and I'm shot. We do a mission, we get the next six weeks off; that's the rule. I'm off for Bournemouth in the morning. Get yourselves another errand boy."

Nothing. "Did you hear me?"

"Of course, old cock," Smithers drawled. "Just making notes. Want to be sure to get it all right when I tell Braun you're not up to the mustard anymore. Cutting it, you know. . .or not, as the case may be. Heh-heh."

Braun, that bastard. He'll hand you a job for a defector extraction on the rings of Saturn and while the opposition is setting charges at your safe house door he'll radio to ask you to pick him up a jar of that jellied Kling-off squid he's taken a fancy to. Cold as ice, the man is.

"What's Braun got to do with this?"

"He's running the board on a hot mission, says you're the only man for it. Wants to give you Goldberger for director in the field, says he's harmless now he's brushed up on the Yiddish. But I'll be happy to tell him you're too played out, old boy."

I was dressed in five minutes and stepping into the MART (molecule assemble/reassemble transporter). I'd be at Top Base in seconds, provided I organized my arrival correctly. In the fluid molecular state, one must be rather precise about slotting one's entry into an unoccupied spatial allotment. Not long ago, Jenkins, semi hung-over, pushed the wrong button when he arrived at Top Base the same second as the charlady. Poor chap wound up as some sort of cosmic Cockney hermaphrodite. Still a good intelligence man, of course, but wants to wash the floor all the time. They've got him in Files these days, until the shrinks are through with him. If they can't separate out the charlady — poor old dear — Jenkins may be stuck with the cafeteria hostess job.

\* \* \*

**Braun's office is as intimidating** as the man. Big, dark, over-furnished, with him in deep shadow by the shuttered windows. He looked up from his desk, squinted and acknowledged my presence tentatively.

"Er. . . Swiller?"

"Sir."

"Dreadfully sorry to abort your holidays," he tittered, "but we have a mission no one else can handle and I entreat you to accept it."

No one else could handle, my blooming foot. Probably didn't want to pay the overtime to the chap on duty when the signal came down.

"I'll have to know more, of course, before accepting."

"Understood. But what I can tell you is limited. You know better than I that the less you know, the less jeopardy to the mission. If you're captured by the black hats, we wouldn't want you to have to bite the capsule."

All agents are required to sign out a poison capsule before a mission for use in case of certain capture and interrogation. The capsule is really a two-pound kielbasa, which is bloody bulky to conceal on one's person. What's more, it must be cooked with fried chips and sauerkraut before the poison goes to work. Deuced difficult.

"Understood, sir. No disrespect intended."

"None taken, old fruit. You'll appreciate hearing that the mission is Earth-based. America. Washington, to be exact. You have Russian, Vietnamese, Basque, Urdu, Finno-Ugric, Han and Mandarin, so you should get along famously in the States.

"The problem is a mole, maybe more, in the White House itself. Yanks asked our help, since we just apprehended the 1,779th mole in our own MI5. Success rates like that merit attention, don't you know. The new president is a Southerner. Good old boy, but Oxford, too. Doesn't trust the Washington crowd, so he's come to us."

I wasn't quite sure how to phrase my next condition; wouldn't want Braun to see me getting nervy. "I'd like some assurance I won't be left hanging if the mission turns sour." They'd left Morton to his fate in the Tibetan nunnery when the Chinese rolled up his Lhasa network and no one at Top Base will look you in the eye when his name comes up.

"Useless request, old fellow," Braun replied, almost too quickly. "All of you executives accept the sacrifice condition when you sign on."

"You're giving me Goldberger for DIF?"

"Yes. Is that acceptable?"

"Acceptable. You're sure about the Yiddish lessons?"

"Absolutely, plus a new hearing aid."

"Fine. But I want no back-up and he's to stay out of my way."

"Agreed."

\* \* \*

**We sign out various equipment** once we're activated. I refuse, of course, to carry a weapon. Hate the bloody things. So the lady clerk always tries to sell me one. Tiresome, but brightens up her mean little life.

"Poison pill?" she simpered. I nodded.

"Hebrew National or Eckrich? Beef or turkey?" I put it in my briefcase. Always worries me the foe will smell the bloody thing.

"As usual, no next of kin? Insurance to the Battersea Battered Husbands Relief Society? And" . . . she looked up at me knowingly. . . "one red rose for Sheldon?"

I caught the 9:30 a.m. TAR (Trans Atlantic Rocket), after checking for tags at the spaceport. Bit of a delay there as a party of Kling-offs scuffed by in handcuffs and leg irons enroute to their filthy ghetto in the Seventh Galaxy. Nasty brutes, stink like pigs, and, with those four arms, nothing's safe around them, not your wallet, not your wife.

Kling-offs are 8 feet tall and covered with bright orange hair, but they keep slipping past the Earth security belt because, under certain conditions, they can alter their metabolism, reduce their bulk and stow away inside the smallest space on an Earth-bound space transport.

Once they're here, they assume the appearance of humans, but we always catch them because they must remetabolize after a year or so. Gives you a start, I must say, when you're dining in Greek Street and your maitre d' suddenly inflates to 500 pounds and turns orange. They plead persecution in their homeland and cry for asylum, but we ship them back, and right away. The smell, you know.

We landed at Kennedy at daylight and a clean-shaven CIA agent was waiting for me at my gate. He was, in every respect but one, your typical CIA spook. Neat. Subdued clothing for lower visibility. Short haircut. Ankle holster. J. Press shirt with pocket protector. But he was only 5 feet tall, so to talk with him as we went to baggage pick-up I had to carry him. He was doused in a choking cologne.

"The chief wishes he could have briefed you more leisurely at our place," he said, "but it seems you're wanted at the White House immediately. Not so tight; you're hurting me. The president and secretary of state want to confer with our limey cousin who's so effing smart

he's better than the entire CIA."

I detected hostility. This was not going to be as easy as I had hoped or Braun had hinted. The spook squirmed again; he might be short, but he was getting to be a heavy little sod. I tried to improve my grip and in so doing scratched his hand. Must have gone through the coating of cologne, for a whiff of pure Kling-off assailed my nostrils.

Quickly I dropped the little bugger onto the baggage carousel, as he began to remetabolize to his natural bulk. Too late or too soon, he achieved full size and that beastly orange color just as he came to the carousel's re-entry hole in the wall, sticking there while luggage cascaded around him. I blew him a kiss, picked up my two-suiter and ran for the cab stand as Kling-off mini-missiles exploded around me. Welcome to Washington, I thought, as I ducked into the cab and told the Inuit driver to head for the White House.

\* \* \*

"**Dawg bite mah peckuh**, Mr. Swiller, but it's good to hear a sissy Brit accent again. Used to make out with mah economics professor at Oxford and she talked just lak y'all." C. P. Bobbett, President of the United States, grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the far side of the Oval Office. There were some fifty other people in the room with us, a press conference, the president said.

"Didn't mean to get y'all messed up with the media, but don't worry about security. Thayuh too interested in mah wife's Jovian commodities investments to ask any questions about moles. What a bunch of peckuh haids. Here, Ah want you to meet the secretary of state, Mortimer Tippietow, and my C- Ah-A director, Percival Skulk. Neither one's worth a chicken's left foot, but Ah'm stuck with 'em."

Skulk moved right in, cutting off the secretary of state. "Here's the scoop, Swiller. We're leaking badly around here. Eyes-only material from the State Department turns up in the papers, so we know there's a mole. Maybe more. What's more mysterious, the files from which the stuff was taken smell terrible afterwards. Takes us a week to get rid of the stench. Problem is, no one has access to those files, except the president and Tippietow here. I'm stumped."

An usher went by with trays of drinks and canapés and the president took out his handkerchief to wipe his brow. The crowd was heating up the room. But I caught a flash of something from the corner of my eye. Not anything definite so much as an anomaly, something that set the organism to shivering and wheedling that it wanted to go home. Took all I could do to restrain it.

The usher went by again and this time I watched him as he passed the president. I saw the president seize a drink with one hand, snatch a canapé with another, wipe his brow again with a third hand and, with a fourth, grab a large piece of the behind of the Chinese woman who covers the White House for CBS. The newswoman was appalled and was about to kneel the president when the hand with the handkerchief blocked the blow, two more encircled

the correspondent, while the fourth rubbed her buttocks. I heard the president whisper through pursed lips, "C'mon, honey, pucker up and Ah'll let y'all do mah shirts."

More quickly than I would have imagined, Tippietow was at the president's back, one hand over the chief executive's mouth, one hand around his neck, one hand restraining an encircling arm and a fourth hand hammering the president's back. Tippietow yelled: "Mr. President, Mr. President, this is not diplomacy, this is barbarism."

"Hell with you, Tippietow," the president chortled, still trying to kiss the newswoman, "get yo' own broad." The Secret Service were so addled by the sight of the multiple arms that they were frozen in astonishment.

It was so obvious. Kling-offs somehow had appropriated the bodies of the president and secretary of state and had leaked the top-secret files, probably only to sow mischief, dissension and confusion, a favorite Kling-off pastime. But their natural need to remetabolize had been set in motion, and the game was up.

"Stop it," I cried to the two disguised Kling-Offs, "or you'll get a double dose of Ivory suds." This is a threat that will reduce any Kling-off to pleas for mercy, and it worked again. I told the cringing aliens, "I don't know who you are, or what you've done with the real president and secretary of state, but you're going back to your own miserable galaxy."

"Oh, no they're not," came a husky alto voice. I turned and there with a Pocket Patriot in her hand, aimed at me, was Hillary Tonya Bobbett, the president's wife and the most powerful woman in America. "I know he's not my real husband. I've known it since the first time he ran all four hands over me. I want him. Now put down your gun.

"I don't care what he's done with my real so-called husband, Mr. Swiller," said the First Lady. "I have no use for Old Corn Pone; I run this whole shop anyway all by myself. This is a real man, whatever else he is. You can return to England now. The nation is safe."

"One question, ma'am." I said. "When their cologne wears off, how do you stand the stench?"

She laughed, a rather nice, tinkling sound. "Oh that, Mr. Swiller." she said. "You forget that I lived for 20 years in Arkansas."

I didn't know what Braun would make of all this and frankly I didn't care. I was headed for Bournemouth at last. •

*Story copyright © 1994 George F. McCann*

# *Fantasy & Legends*



## **The Bell, The Bridge, and The Binalatongan River Maiden**

**by Romeo Esparrago**

In the country of the Philippines lies the kingdom of Pangasinan, so named because of the riches borne forth from the Asin (salt) that comes from its earth. There is a town named San Carlos in that land. This town was built in the 18th Century, rising alongside and across the San Juan River from the older village named Binalatongan.

During that period, Spaniards still ruled the land and a rebellion was taking place. The freedom fighters were in retreat. The Spaniards were better armed, better organized, better led, and more numerous in their number of soldiers. They were fast approaching Binalatongan.

In a church of that village, there existed what was then the largest bell of the country, the Bell of Binalatongan, wrought of iron, laced with copper and gold flakes, and etched with strange, unknown markings. It was prized by the entire community and admired by all who came to visit.

It was said that this bell originally had been taken from an Aztec or Mayan temple from the

newly conquered America and had been transported by the annual galleon's voyage across the Pacific. Legend also had it that the Bell was originally a sacrificial altar, and when the Conquistadors brought it to the Philippines they turned it upside down and changed its purpose to that of a church bell. Villagers whispered that it still retained its magical powers.

**In the village church where this bell resided** lived a young maiden named Mangatarem. Her task was to care for the Bell.

At the height of the rebel retreat, Mangatarem sensed that the Spaniards were beginning to close in on the village. Mangatarem began to ring the Bell, warning of their coming.

The community decided to burn down Binalatongan to slow the Spaniards and prevent the remaining rebel forces from entrapment and destruction.

As the villagers began to abandon their homes and set fire to the buildings, Mangatarem could not bear to leave her beloved Bell. The order was given to save it and a large cadre of rebel soldiers came and brought the bell down. They tied it onto the biggest, most sturdy cart they could find and gathered the town's three strongest karabao (water buffalo) to pull it.

The burdened cart was the last to approach the bridge that spanned the San Juan River, with the karabao pulling, the contingent of freedom fighters and Mangatarem pushing. All strained to get the bell across. Binalatongan blazed behind them. Cannon balls began to land from the Spaniards, some bursting in the air above them, others exploding within the conflagration, a few splashing in the river.

It has been argued that a cannon ball struck the bridge, but many believe the bridge collapsed because of the enormous weight put upon it. One of the karabao had already crossed, but two of the animals, the Bell, Mangatarem, and the soldiers fell into the river as the bridge crashed into the roiling waters below.

All the beasts and the men were able to swim to the river bank and reach San Carlos. The Bell sank into the dark depths of the San Juan River. Mangatarem was never found. The Spaniards arrived and saw only the mounds and ashes of ruined Binalatongan and no bridge to cross the river.

Eventually, the Spaniards were able to move forward and occupy San Carlos. The rebellion, as with many that followed, was crushed.

\* \* \*

**Since then, many have tried** to recover the Bell of Binalatongan. Spaniards, Americans, and Japanese during their respective periods of occupation, as well as Filipinos and other visitors to Pangasinan, have sought unsuccessfully to get their hands on the Bell. But a strange story has arisen from the numerous failed attempts.

It is said that whenever the Bell is pulled from its watery grave, something would grasp it and pull it back: a pale figure, purported to have the face and upper figure of Mangatarem but to have the lower shape of a fish.

The place where the village Binalatongan once stood is now overgrown with weeds and vegetation. No marker identifies its location. The deep river still cuts its course through there. Within its folds, the San Juan River retains its hold on the Bell of Binalatongan and on its guardian, the mermaid named Mangatarem. •

*Story and illustrations copyright © 1994 Romeo Esparrago  
(Editor's Note: This story has appeared in AOL's Fiction libraries.)*

# Poems

---

## ROADS OF TIME

by Peter Alejandro Cortes

I'm sluggish on that blunted  
sands in the hour glass  
soap-opera crap.

How can

I understand time when all I know of it is  
absence and craving? Time as a wheel  
when time is a flower.

There was a time and there was a place  
where and when the crossroads spoke.

I have moved so far from the center of the crossroads that all I can do is accept that I'm  
here. Now.

And now, I mean, could you imagine what Flatbush Avenue would have to say at, oh, about  
noon on the 13th day of the month — yeah, sure: traffic.

But what I search for is time enough to lose dim human vision; the cluttered roads of  
time avenged and re-opened.

I am crystals and seeds and a body. I can be time. •

*Poem copyright © 1994 Peter Alejandro Cortes*

## AFTER THE FEAST

by Kevin McAuley

Now the meal is over.  
Only bones and scraps of meat remain.  
Birds twitter at the back window,  
Eating the black bread you set there.  
Falling away, like pendulums,  
They swing low over the trees  
And disappear northward,  
Carrying the touch of your fingers  
Inside warm bellies. •

*Poem copyright © 1994 Kevin McAuley*

# Humor

---

## LETTERS TO THE HOUSE DOCTOR

by Steve Ross

*Planet Magazine is pleased to premiere this new feature for our readers. All questions will be answered by our "House Doctor," Rob Vila, M.D., former host of "This Old Body," chief homeopath at the Rickel Hospital and Editor Emeritus of "The New England Journal of Renovation and Repair."*

Dear Rob:

Our attic ceiling recently started to show water stains that get bigger after every rain. A contractor inspected our roof and said that we need new shingles, but I'm reluctant to give the go-ahead. My wife's never had shingles, but I had a pretty bad case in the late 70s, and they were no party. Besides, the contractor who did the inspection had no medical training whatsoever. What would you advise?

**-Shingle-Free and Happy in Crown Point**

*Dear Shingle-Free and Happy:*

It has become increasingly common for rooves to develop the viral infection called herpes zoster, or shingles. You could try covering it with tar, but this is really a short-term remedy that doesn't get to the underlying virus. Instead, you should have your contractor apply several coats of a topical antiviral ointment, using paint-rollers and cotton swabs.

*-Rob Vila*

Dear Rob:

My wife and I have raised five children in our home, but recently we have been experiencing difficulty with our male/female coupling, and as a result have not been able to turn on each other's lights in over a year. I personally think that her outlet receptacle is eroded, but she says that my plug is probably malfunctioning. In addition, our circuitry is pretty old, and I'm worried about blowing a fuse. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated.

**-In the Dark in Tuscaloosa**

*Dear in the Dark:*

It sounds to me like you need an extension cord. No matter what they say, length is important; after all, if it can't reach the receptacle, a live plug's no better than a bump on a log. As far as the age of your circuits is concerned, our resident specialist on such matters, Dr. Ruth Westinghouse, feels that you shouldn't worry, that you should do what feels right. However, you should probably keep an extra fuse handy, ready to screw in,

just in case.

-Rob Vila

**Dear Rob:**

Every time I think of doing any work on or around the house, I get a headache that knocks me flat so all I can do is sit on the couch, watch television, and munch out. Would you please explain, for my wife's benefit, that this is possible? Thanks, guy.

**-Pabst in Pittsburgh**

*Dear Pabst:*

The condition you describe is known in the medical community by its original French name, pomme de terre de chaise longue ("couch potato"), and is so widespread that it is practically a cliché. It is also the reason why home repair professionals such as myself have been able to make such a comfortable living.

-Rob Vila

**Dear Rob:**

I love my house, I really do. I've replaced her aging details and supported her sagging floor; I've sealed and joined her with rabbets and dadoes when nails would've been easier but less attractive; I've reinforced her corners with gussets and then covered them because I know she's shy. In short, I've sanded and shaved and polished and maintained her, through up and down real estate markets, and all I've ever asked for in return is fidelity. I'd always felt confident about it, but lately, well, I don't know. On three separate occasions I've walked into a room and found studs where they didn't belong. Last week I noticed the stains of a penetrating sealer in her tongue-in-groove flooring. And then, this past weekend I was looking for something in the attic, and I found distress marks on her collar beams. Now my coping saw is on its last teeth, my spirit level's down, and I feel unhinged. At any minute I might just grab my rivet gun and power drill and, well, you can imagine the rest. Am I awl wrong, reading the signs incorrectly? Do you think I'm mistaken?

**-Carpenter Cuckold in Kansas City**

*Dear Carpenter Cuckold:*

I'm afraid I can't help you. You need either a psychiatrist or a private eye.

-Rob Vila

**Dear Rob:**

I'm writing you because we have, well, a leakage problem in the bathroom. I am concerned that it might be my husband's prostate, since my Uncle Lou had a similar problem some years ago, but our plumber claims that it's a common problem for people with rotating-ball faucets, and that a new washer might do the trick. Should we replace the washer, or get a new and different faucet?

**-Drained in Detroit**

*Dear Drained:*

Your plumber is both right and wrong. Single-handle rotating-ball faucets are fairly recent inventions, and one of their advantages is that they replaced the outdated and problem-prone prostate with a cam-and-ball assembly that is, unfortunately, subject to leaking. A new washer is indeed a short-term remedy, but new piping might be needed to address the chronic underlying condition. Urethra-width copper piping, sealed with Teflon tape instead of sealing compound, is the most suitable replacement. In addition, a diverter valve with hose clamps will provide your husband with greater control than he's probably ever experienced; he can even have a pressure valve installed that would give him enough power to knock a bottle off a fence post from fifty yards.

*-Rob Vila •*

*Story copyright © 1994 Steve Ross*

# 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.

**Romeo Esparrago** is an engineer in Sacramento, California, and aspires to be a children's writer/illustrator someday. His nightly dream has been to have a bio in the "About the Authors" page of Planet Magazine.

**Biedermeier X. Leeuwenhoek** once again does not appear in this issue. He is currently working on a fantasy trilogy based on a race of elves who reject fluoridation for their Fountain of Arrogant Youth™, with dire consequences for their teeth. Perversely, he also once abducted an alien, taking it for a two-hour car ride across the Triboro Bridge.

**Kevin McAuley** is a Brooklyn-based writer.

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

**George McCann** is a retired corporate-PR type who teaches art history.

**Steve Ross** is a writer and book editor in New York City. His work has appeared in various small-press publications. •