

If - E - Zine™

Issue #11

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Issue #11
May 2008



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Editorial

At the risk of tooting my own tooter, I still can't believe this is the fifth year of If – E – Zine™'s existence. Perhaps it speaks of my age, perhaps it speaks of my work ethic that constantly keeps me busy and unawares, but the time has sure flown by.

I would like to thank all of the friends I've made on MySpace and Facebook. Earlier this month If – E – Zine™ mad its 1000th friend on MySpace. That's nothing compared to some people who have a ba-zillion friends, but considering I don't have any television or radio exposure yet and the grass-roots nature of the ezine, I find 1000 friends to be some small milestone. And I'm appreciative of the friends.

In August I will be publishing a special five-year anniversary issue of the ezine and I'm toying with the idea of publishing it with a 'Fan Guide', being a collection of notes and appendices covering the first five years of If – E – Zine™. The 'Fan Guide' will include the origins of certain stories, how some characters came to be and additional behind-the-scenes information and trivia.

But that's in August. Let's talk about this issue!

In issue ten we saw the beginnings of four – count 'em – *FOUR* different stories! I'm happy to see you all back here. In this issue we carry on with those four tales.

In part two of "Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra" we find our hero still in a cell in the clutches of the evil sorcerer Rasiki-Ha. As Zalam makes his escape attempt, will he discover foul play that could jeopardize his liberation? And his life?

Then in "Rescuing the Dead", The Sarge and Diego meet their new squadmates and are given their first mission as a new unit. Will they be able to find the family of the little girl from the original story? Will they gel as a new unit? Also in part two, I'm adding basic drawings and schematics of the new weaponry for the soldiers. Look for them! I hope you like them!

Our first story in this issue features our cover model. In "From Here to the Stars!" Tad Manly and company find themselves catapulted across the universe to an alien world where Gato Loco closely resembles a god. Will they be well met? Or will they face dire consequences?

Finally, Captain Destiny explores the planet Atrius-99 and discovers it populated by more of the giant reptiles. What happens when his spaceship *Quequeg* crashes on the planet and he has to survive there? Find out in "Captain Destiny and the Creature from Atrius-99"!

Enjoy,

Charles Shaver, editor

P.S.: Be sure to look for If – E – Zine™ on Facebook.

You can find If – E – Zine™ on MySpace here: <http://www.myspace.com/ifezine>

Also be sure to check out Atomic Swan Serials, my official blog wherein I post serialized fiction on a regular basis, at: <http://lordshen.blogspot.com/>



“From Here to the Stars!”

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PART 2

Tad Manly grabbed Cósmico about the shoulder and neck, delivering a brutal powerslam to his opponent in the middle of the ring. He pinned Cósmico for the three count and got to his feet, raising his hands in victory and to jeers. The crowd reacted horribly, throwing paper cups half full of soda and beer into the ring. One hit Tad Manly in the side of the head and the crowd went wild with laughing.

He stepped out of the ring, challenged a few of the audience members and walked back towards the stage before making his exit through the curtain.

Cósmico got up, grabbed a microphone and told the audience. “It’s alright. I lost tonight, but that’s okay because I promise you, as God as my witness, I will one day pin Tad Manly! I will make him tap!”

The crowd cheered.

The match over, Tad Manly returned to the backstage area of the small auditorium. His friends Super Guapo, King Gato and Adrienne Lo were there. They said nothing of their encounter with Cósmico. “Good match,” King Gato told him.

“Thanks,” said Eddie, the man that played the part of Tad Manly, as he removed his mask. “It’s tough being a bad guy, though. I don’t like it.”

“It’s a part of the game,” said Super Guapo. “Everyone that knows you knows you’re a decent man.”

“Thanks,” sighed Eddie again.

Cósmico stepped behind the curtain where they were all standing. He glared at them. “I didn’t appreciate that stunt out there, Eddie!” he raged.

“What stunt?” Eddie asked. “I did as needed. I boosted our feud with a win and got you a bigger crowd pop.”

“That finisher. You could have ended the match cleanly, and most others would have, but *you* went for the high-end, flashy finisher to put yourself over me. I’m the hero here!”

Eddie fell silent at this, unsure how to respond.

“You should thank him, Cósmico,” said King Gato.

“*Thank him?!?*”

“Yeah, thank him. It takes a master luchador to make his opponent look good. You got the pop of your life out there. You should be down on your hands and knees kissing his toes.”

Cósmico’s eyes widened. Disgusted, he cried out, “Never!” before storming off in a huff. They watched him go.

“I have to go do my little dance.” Adrienne kissed Eddie on the cheek, her bust almost falling out of her bustier. She grabbed her giant feathered fans and headed out to the ring.

The three luchadors stood nearby, peaking through the curtain to watch Adrienne’s fan dance.

Adrienne was warmly welcomed by the crowd. Robust, raunchy rockabilly music played as she danced in the middle of the ring, pulling the fans before her one at a time, teasing the crowd with the promise of flashing them with her beautiful body. A spotlight was all that illuminated her. Little by little she shed her clothes with sleight of hand skills behind the fans. Each time she brought the fans away the audience saw more of her and cheered wildly. At last she was wearing no more than a g-string and the bustier. With one more pass of the fans the bustier fell to the ring's mat. She spread her arms wide just as the lights were turned off, the audience barely getting a peak of her topless.

"She's some entertainer," said King Gato.

Adrienne screamed out in the darkness. The three men jumped, peering through the curtain to catch a glimpse of what was happening. They could see nothing. Someone called for the lights, fearing Adrienne had fallen and needed to see to get backstage.

The lights came on, but Adrienne could not be found.

"In the audience!" King Gato pointed.

Looking, Super Guapo and Eddie saw C6smico, with Adrienne slung over his shoulder, hastily running through the audience.

"Get him!" cried Eddie, donning his mask so as not to break the spell of his false identity as he ran out from backstage towards the audience. They chased C6smico through the audience and into another area backstage, the crowd cheering and thinking it all a part of the show.

They entered the area where cargo trucks normally unload items for whatever show or attraction might be performing at the time. No lights were on here, but the whole area was lit up with a crackling ball of energy twenty feet high and ten feet wide. Nearby stood a stranger, a man dressed in a slim white lab coat adorned with heavy silvery black buttons. His hair was balding and wild, white. He wore thick, thick goggles that reflected all they looked upon. He also wore heavy black rubber gloves and boots. In his glove-adorned hands was a small mechanism, a metal box with odd controls.

C6smico paused before the crackling ball of energy. Adrienne screamed for help. Turning, C6smico glared at Tad Manly and his friends, then jumped through and disappeared inside the ball.

"What the hell-" Tad Manly gasped.

"Go after him!" Super Guapo yelled. "We'll take care of this weird-o with the controls!"

Super Guapo and King Gato charged the stranger. He cried out in a high, screeching, terrified, feminine wail and ran for the crackling ball of energy.

Tad Manly also charged at the ball. He could feel the hairs of his body rise up as he approached. Heat flowed off the mysterious thing. He wondered how smart or dumb it may be to charge such an oddity, but he thought of C6smico and the screaming Adrienne and suddenly didn't care what would happen to him.

The stranger entered the ball of energy first. The ball started shrinking.

"No!" cried Tad Manly. He jumped after the stranger followed by Super Guapo and King Gato.

The three friends found themselves floating, falling through outer space. Stars streaked by them. Nebulas passed over them. None of the three could make out which way was up. Sickened by vertigo and a loss of direction, King Gato vomited. They then felt their legs moving once more as they ran through another ball of crackling energy.

They stood panting, confused and angry. Tad Manly looked around. They were in a plain of tall grass with a few alien trees. The ball disappeared behind them. The grass was all burned away where it had been.

“Where are we?” asked Super Guapo.

King Gato straightened. “Beats the hell outta me, chico.”

Tad Manly looked around. “Do you see Adrienne?”

They all scanned the area.

“I see nothing,” said Super Guapo.

“I do,” said King Gato. He pointed. Far away, towards the horizon, came several flying figures. “I think they’re coming this way.”

“What the hell did Cósmico get us into?” Tad Manly groaned.

“Let’s stay calm,” responded Super Guapo. “Let’s see who this is and take it from there.”

The three friends were in awe as the figures approached. There were seven of them and they all looked like the offspring of men and lions. They each had massive brown-feathered wings growing from their backs. Their heads were as the beasts. Five had manes braided or otherwise decorated. The two without manes, the women, had breasts. The one that lead he group had a dreaded mane. They all had tails and were muscular. They each had human-like legs and carried Hasta spears with human-like hands at the end of human-like arms. They wore centurion lorica segmentata armor and leather aprons.

They landed nearby and drew nearer. The dreaded lion approached King Gato, sniffing at him. King Gato backed away nervously.

“Liro,” growled the lion. “You have returned to us!”

King Gato stared at him in confusion.

The lion turned to the others and exclaimed, “Our savior has returned to us!” All the lion warriors knelt before King Gato, bowing their heads.

“What?” King Gato asked in confusion.

Understanding, Super Guapo addressed King Gato, “Liro, perhaps it is in our interest to entertain them.”

“What?” asked King Gato again.

“We may need their help,” added Tad Manly.

“What? What?” King Gato looked at his friends. Slowly the idea came to him. “Oh!”

King Gato stepped forward. “Uh... umm...” he rubbed the back of his head nervously and smiled a toothy, embarrassed smile. “Uh, could you please stand up... *please*? You don’t need to bow to me.”

The lion warriors stood. “You are a most gracious savior,” said the dreaded lion.

“Not gracious, no. Having people bow to me creeps me out!” King Gato laughed nervously.

The dreaded lion cocked his head curiously. “I am Storn, leader of our people. We have waited a long time for your return, Liro. When we saw the bright light to the east, we came to see its cause. Now I see that it was your return, Liro. This is a most blessed day.”

“Uh, yeah. About that, um, you see, it has been a long time and my friends and I may need your help to reacquaint us with this world.”

“It would be my honor. We are the Chogin, the People of the Plains. Follow us to our village. We will hold a big feast and conduct many rituals in your honor.”

Storn and his six lion warriors flapped their wings and started to fly. “Follow us!” King Gato looked at Super Guapo and Tad Manly. He then called to Storn. “We can’t fly!”

The seven Chogin landed. “What?” asked Storn. “It is said that you could.”

“Well, ummm...”

“I’m afraid,” interrupted Super Guapo, “his journeys have changed your savior. Not all those changes have been to his benefit.”

Storn nodded. “We will walk by your side.”

The hot sun was setting when they came into a small village made of muddy grass huts and populated by more Chogin. The whole village bowed as King Gato entered their midst.

“Please!” proclaimed Storn. “Our savior has already expressed his displeasure with our bowing. He is a most modest man.”

The whole village lined up and, one by one, they took turns pawing gently at King Gato. “Uh, guys?” King Gato looked to his friends for help.

“Enjoy it,” Super Guapo chuckled.

A feast was made and many rituals held as Storn had promised. It was well into the night when the three friends were sitting with Storn and two other Chogin around a campfire, the rest of the village resting or cleaning from the day.

“Storn,” said Super Guapo. “Where are we?”

“This is the Plains of Freedom,” Storn answered. “Though they have not lived up to their name in three generations. We are the only free people here now. Once, our empire filled and commanded this plain, but no more. Not since Ho the Horrible rose up with his armies in the east.”

“Ho the Horrible?” asked Super Guapo.

“Yes. He is an interloper in these parts. The child of a wealthy family, he wrested that wealth for his own and bought land, men, soldiers and soon had an empire. Now his armies are on conquests all over the world to expand his riches. He does so, I’m afraid, on the backs of people like us Chogin. Many of our people have fallen into his slavery.”

“That’s horrible!” cried King Gato.

“Hence his name,” confirmed Storn. “For a long time the last hope of our people has been the stories of Liro’s return. And here I sit with you. Our savior has returned, things will change for us!”

King Gato gulped, pulling at his collar.

“If I can,” interrupted Tad Manly. “We were brought here by a man in a white coat and with massive goggles. We were chasing a rival of mine who stole away with my girlfriend over his shoulder. Would you know where I could find her?”

“A man in a white coat?” Storn asked. He considered this. “It sounds like Dr. Ecks, one of Ho the Horrible’s closest confidants, a physician.”

“Where could we find them?”

“Ho the Horrible’s castle is far across these plains, through a massive desert and on the other side of Mount Kaynor.”

“That sounds far,” Tad Manly’s voice had a faltering defeatism in it.

“It is,” confirmed Storn. “But if it is your mission, and the mission of Liro, to rescue her then you can be assured of my help.”

King Gato and Tad Manly thanked him.

“Tomorrow, at first light, we will go to the Cave of Steel and return your Oracle Belts to you.”

“Oracle Belts?” asked King Gato.

“Yes. Don’t you remember? When you and your last two companions were here, many generations ago, you sealed them away in the Cave of Steel. Their mystic powers should be of great help in your quest.”

“Oh, yeah! I forgot about those!” King Gato lied, shrugging at his friends.

* * * * *

After a night’s rest the three luchadors followed Storn through part of the plain to an underground cave. Using torches, they wandered through the deep cave until they came to a hollowed out room. There, three pedestals carved of stone each held a gold belt atop of it.

“Wait a minute,” Tad Manly raised a torch to look at the belts. “I came into this foreign land to get a gold belt?”

Super Guapo chuckled. “Yeah, I coulda paid a booker back home to write me into winning one.”

They laughed.

Storn frowned, incapable of understanding the jest.

King Gato, afraid his friends had offended their host, said, “Will you two shut up? These aren’t just any gold belts. They’re Oracle Belts and they mean a lot to Storn’s people and, should I remind you, to us!”

Tad Manly and Super Guapo lowered their heads in shame.

“Should I take one?” King Gato asked Storn.

Storn nodded. “Yours is the one in the middle.”

King Gato approached, grabbing the belt. The belt gave his hand a slight tingling sensation and glowed as he touched it. He stared at it. “It’s beautiful. And I can feel some sort of power in it!”

Storn nodded, smiling.

King Gato donned the belt about his waist. As he did, his mask and wrestling outfit became harder, thicker as it turned into lightweight armor. The fur on his mask grew into a long mane. It also formed a lion’s muzzle with long teeth baring themselves from out the sides of the mouth. A yellow-gold cape appeared on his shoulders, hanging down his back. King Gato could feel the cape as though it were an extra limb. Concentrating on it, King Gato felt himself rise off the floor of the cavern and float there. “Ohmygosh!” he cried. “I can fly! I can fly!”

“That’s great, Peter Pan, but can you sing?” Super Guapo chided.

Tad Manly laughed.

“Perhaps the belts give you the ability to fly,” Storn suggested.

Tad Manly and Super Guapo grew excited. “Do you think our belts would let us fly?” Tad Manly asked.

Storn shrugged, “Perhaps.”

King Gato cried, “I feel powerful! Haha!”

Tad Manly and Super Guapo almost tripped over each other trying to get to their own belts. “Does it matter which one we take?” Super Guapo asked.

Storn laughed uproariously and said, “Of that I’m not certain. I simply know that the one in the middle was worn by Liro the last time he was here.”

Super Guapo and Tad Manly stood before a belt each. They looked at one another before they grabbed them up and put them on.

Super Guapo's mask and outfit did the same as King Gato's, becoming armor. A long black cape appeared upon his shoulders. It was decorated with gold Dia de los Muertos-style skulls stitched along the edges. "I feel stronger!" he cried. He concentrated on the cape and began to float off the floor of the cave as King Gato had.

Tad Manly, too, found his mask and outfit growing into armor. Around his biceps appeared frilly, colorful bands whose ends hung down to his elbow. "Streamers? All I get is lousy streamers?"

The other three laughed at him.

Tad Manly concentrated on the new frills on his arms. He, too, began to levitate off the ground.

"Perhaps our journey won't take so long after all," said Storn. "But we should still get going if we're going to save your girlfriend and usurp Ho the Horrible."

King Gato gulp. "U-usurp?"

"I know it's a big word," Super Guapo teased, "but it means 'overthrow'."

"I know what it means! I'm not certain we're capable of doing that."

Storn said, "Of course you are! You're not called our savior for nothing!"

King Gato gulped once more.



Will Tad Manly and company find and rescue Adrienne Lo? Will they have to meet and defeat the perilously evil Ho the Horrible? Be sure to read the third and final installment of "From Here to the Stars!" in Issue 12 of If – E – Zine™!

Reading & Viewing List

- 1.) **Freaks** – A classic and controversial movie. It still holds up with creepiness and powerful imagery. It's at least worth a watch, if you like off-beat weirdness.
- 2.) **Power Rangers: Jungle Fury** – I rarely watch Power Rangers, but I caught the first few episodes of this series and I have to admit it's got a decent story and funny moments. It's not great, but it's fun to watch.
- 3.) **TBS High Noon** – By the gods, how do you take a classic icon of the western movie genre and make it mediocre? Oh yeah, add TBS into the mix. This movie was just plain-assed boring. It wasn't *bad*, but leave it alone anyways.
- 4.) **Beowulf** – This all CG movie, while pretty and gets some of the original tale right, in the end fails in quite a few ways. That doesn't mean I hated it overall or that I wouldn't suggest, because it's a fun romp... but it's no epic.
- 5.) **Dragon Wars** – A cheesy, cheap movie in every sense. Kaiju fans rejoice! We perhaps have a new series to follow. At least, I hope we do. I wish that the flashback sequences, however, that detailed the back-story was the real movie. I'm hoping for a prequel! It's not going to blow your mind or change your life, but I recommend this little flick for a few laughs and enjoying story.
- 6.) **Forbidden Kingdom** – I loved this movie in every way. It's not the greatest kung-fu movie I've ever seen, but I honestly believe it's good enough that I'll be owning this at some point in the future.
- 7.) **The Protector** – Tony Jaa's Ong-Bok was amazing, especially considering the small budget and low production quality it sported. I naturally thought The Protector would be on par or better. I was mistaken. The movie jumps around throughout the story, the editing is the worst I've seen in years and the action is inferior to Ong-Bok. It's rare I suggest passing over any kung-fu flick, but you can easily skip this one.
- 8.) **Dr. Strange** – This is the animated Marvel, straight-to-DVD movie. It was okay, but far from what it could have been. The people behind it wanted to explore Stephen Strange's early years, especially throughout his training. What resulted was some lame mish-mash of Americanized wannabe eastern philosophical crap that bordered on bad kung-fu flicks. Kung-fu? Dr. Strange? The Master of the Mystic Arts needs no martial skills! BAH! Skip this one.
- 9.) **Combat!** – This ground-breaking TV series is a favorite of mine. Anyone who enjoys military fiction or military science fiction might consider checking out this show.
- 10.) **Iron Man** – Robert Downey, Jr. needed to carry this superhero movie and help make it reasonably believable. He nailed it. Other than two small jumps in the story, which I'm assuming were producer-influenced edits after the original cut by the director and that I hope will be restored in the DVD version, this movie was incredibly solid. A great way to kick off the summer!



“Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99”

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PART 2

The glittering flying saucer made a rough entry into the thick atmosphere. It rocked some, but evened out to a steady flight eventually. They crew was still shaking from the sight of the odd dinosauran creature, massive and mutated so they assumed. An open field amidst dense forest was chosen for a landing spot.

“Something’s following us,” said First Mate Nal.

Captain Destiny looked at monitors and fiddled with switches and buttons. “It’s not following, it’s chasing! Abandon the landing, we’ll try to outrun it!”

Nal programmed the ship for a higher speed. The flying saucer rotated no faster, no slower, but propelled forward and gained speed.

Captain Destiny watched as a giant pterodactyl flew closer. “Full speed!” he cried.

“She’s *at* full speed,” Nal claimed.

The leathery, flying dinosaur flew closer. “It’s going to catch us, no two ways about it,” Captain Destiny said. “Ready the Shocker Field.”

Nal attempted some evasive motions, but in the end the giant flying reptile lowered its talons and clamped a hold of the Quequeg.

“Now!” cried Captain Destiny.

Nal punched two keys. A field of electricity bolted through the outer surface of the saucer, shocking the creature until it screeched in pain and let go, flying off in horror.

The Quequeg’s flight had been disrupted. It warbled uncontrollably. Its crew was thrown about inside.

“Steady her!” Captain Destiny commanded, but his commands could not be fulfilled.

The Quequeg crashed in the forest, pluming up great billowing clouds of smoke.

* * * * *

After the smoke had cleared, after the fire dousing foam had melted, damages were assessed and casualties confirmed.

“How many?” asked the good Captain.

Nal shook his head. “All of them.”

“Every last one?”

“The only survivors,” answered Nal, “are you, me and Atagar.”

Atagar was a young alien from the planet Calliope. He had been hand-picked to be a member of the crew by Captain Destiny himself. “How is he?” he asked.

“His arm is sprained,” said Nal. “I helped him into a sling. He’s sitting at the back of the ship now, drinking some space ale.”

Captain Destiny nodded. “How long before we know if we can repair the old girl?”

Nal shrugged. “Maybe by the end of the day.”

“Good. Get yourself a space ale or two and take your time. We’ve still got some supplies. As long as we don’t have another run-in with the creatures that live here we should be in good order.” The Captain left Nal to do his business and headed towards the back of the crashed saucer, towards the recuperating Atagar.

Atagar was native Calliopian and as such had the features of the indigenous people there. His features were as a feral cat, with tufts of black and gold fur along his cheeks and on the head. The rest of his body was covered in a thin layer of gold and white fur. He wore the coveralls and heavy work boots he had been issued as a kitchen hand. Mostly he had been hired to clean dishes, but he and Captain Destiny both had hoped he would one day play a bigger role aboard the Quequeg. It would seem that day came sooner than they both thought.

Atagar sat against a tree, his back to the saucer, slowly nursing a bottle of space ale.

“How are you, boy?” Captain Destiny asked as he approached, kneeling nearby.

Atagar couldn’t answer, his throat constricted and voice choked. He knew when he had signed on, despite his youth, that he would most likely see some tragedy as well as triumph aboard a spaceship. He simply didn’t expect to see so much tragedy in the course of the first mission. They had crash-landed on the planet they were contracted to explore and more than thirty people were now strewn about the alien forest, dead.

Captain Destiny, unsure of his words, said, “I’m happy you survived.”

Atagar nodded his thanks and agreement.

“I know you need time to yourself, but work will best help you now. Trust me in that. I need you. There’s a lot of our mates dead and they deserve proper burial. We owe that much to them. I would do it all myself, being the captain of the ship and all, but the quicker they’re buried the quicker we can figure a way off this rock.

“I need you, Atagar. Let’s get to work.”

Atagar nodded. He swallowed the last bit of his space ale and looked at his captain. “You think we can get out of here?” he asked in his almost purring voice, wanting to leave the tragedy all behind him.

Captain Destiny nodded. “I’m sure we can.”

They stood. Atagar reached into the ship and threw the bottle away in a disposal bin though it all seemed useless now. They then began the long, arduous task of collecting and burying their dead.

* * * * *

The days were long on Atrius-99. By nightfall they had buried all their dead mates. Atagar felt useless with his arm in a sling. He removed it and used the arm despite his better judgment. He went inside the ship and gathered some foodstuffs while the captain built a campfire. All three made a meal, ate and drank some more space ale under the forests’ canopy. A few stars winked at them from high above.

“How many repairs have we got to do?” Captain Destiny asked.

Nal sighed. “The good news is that the ship can be repaired, although its outer shell will make for a rough ride home. I’ll only be able to do so much with it, but the rest of it can be done. The bad news is that it’ll take at least three Atrian days.”

“And the days here are long,” said Captain Destiny.

The other two nodded.

“What now, Captain?” asked Atagar.

“We’ll grab some laser carbines from the ship and sleep right here for the night. Then at first light Nal will get to work as you and I set up a perimeter and explore a little.”

Captain Destiny and Atagar each got themselves a laser carbine. Nal, being so large, could not use such a small weapon but rarely needed one.

As they were falling asleep, somewhere between exhaustion and frightened wakefulness, they thought they could hear the far away cries of engorging reptiles.

* * * * *

The jungle creaked and popped, chirped and cawed with life. Captain Destiny and Atagar, their laser carbines in hand, struggled through tall elephant grass, between trees. Captain Destiny had armed himself with a machete besides the laser carbine and was busily using it to cut through thick hanging vines.

“It’s taking us forever to get to that clearing,” Atagar said apprehensively. “Nal will be done with the ship before we can have a look around.”

Captain Destiny gave no reply.

“Are we going straight home, Captain?” Atagar asked.

Captain Destiny stopped. He thought. He spoke, “I had assumed we would. Our employer couldn’t possibly argue after the crash.”

“Oh,” Atagar sounded forlorn.

“Did you want to stay?”

Atagar shrugged. “I can see how we should leave. Maybe it’s my youth and the fact this is my first real trip into space as an explorer, but if I can be honest-”

“You can.”

“Well, then, a part of me still wants to complete the mission and have a look around... maybe collect some samples and make our report.”

Captain Destiny stopped his advance through the jungle to look at his crewman. “That’s my boy!” he finally said with a smile. “I’m not sure how much we can expect to get done, just the three of us, but maybe we should have a look around after all.”

“You think Nal will be up for it?”

Captain Destiny thought of a long-ago talk he had once had with his first mate, of how Nal was being hunted for the murder of a man and of how much he wanted to remain in space every chance he got. “He won’t mind,” said the good captain.

A roar filled the air. The ground shook. The two men squatted low, peering through the thick jungle. Straining, they could see the open field they were working towards. A small herd of bipedal reptiles ran by, birds filled the air.

“Something’s spooked the whole jungle. Something big,” Captain Destiny said.

A few moments passed and all was quiet. They returned to their work trying to cut a path to the open field.

When at last they stood at the field’s edge, they stopped. Atagar produced two bottles of space ale from his coveralls and handed one to his captain who smiled and gladly accepted the drink. They stood surveying the land. The star of the system was hot here and made them sweat as much as slashing their way through the jungle had.

After their drink, they skirted the edge of the field, not wanting to be caught in the open by any hungry beast that may spy them as a tasty treat. Another roar filled the air. More giant, ancient birds lifted into the sky.

They drew near a spot where the sound had come. They looked back into the jungle. It was thinner here and some ways in was a massive mound. They checked the payload capacities on their laser carbines and slowly entered the jungle again with hopes to discover the mound's purpose.

The mound was massive and had a hole punched in its center on top. They climbed the sides and looked in. Muddy, sweaty smells filled the air here. Flies as big as a man's arm buzzed all over.

"We're so very small here," Atagar said.

Nearby a path of destruction was carved out of the jungle. Trees had been knocked down, brush destroyed and trampled. Dirt reigned here where green, green life abounded immediately all around.

Captain Destiny peered into the center of the mound. There he found thirteen eggs, each a half meter long, and most cracked and dry. One final egg remained. It wobbled and cracked. They watched in horror and awe as they witnessed the birth of an ancient reptile.

"What is it?" Atagar asked.

"My knowledge of such creatures is minimal, but I would say a triceratops."

Another roar shook the jungle. It came to them from somewhere down the dirt path. The ground shook and kept shaking, getting worse with each successive rumble. From out of the deepest depths of the jungle came the very beast they had seen on their first pass over Atrius-99, the odd Tyranosaurus with the mandible claws.

"It's the mother!" Atagar cried. "We have to go!"

Captain Destiny watched the creature approach, looked at the newborn in the mound. "No it's not!" he cried back. "It's been eating the eggs as they hatch!" He slung his laser carbine over his shoulder and ran down inside the mound.

"Captain! No! What in space are you doing?" Atagar called after him.

Captain Destiny drove his hands through the goop that had spilled out from the egg and scooped up the chortling, now screeching baby dinosaur. The creature filled his arms and he struggled back up the side of the mound.

"Captain!" Atagar yelled. He shouldered his laser carbine and shot once, twice at the approaching Tyrano. The creature howled as it was hit both times in the chest. Blood spurted and stopped. The laser beams were nothing more than scratches on the giant beast's scaly skin.

Atagar slung the laser carbine, reached down and grabbed his captain by the elbow, helping him out of the mound.

"Run!" the Captain commanded.

Atagar gladly followed the orders.

Together, with the crying newborn in the Captain's arms, they ran out into the open field.

"Where's the path we cut?" asked the Captain.

"Over here," Atagar answered.

"Let's go in through there and hope the damned thing can't follow us."

They ran.

The giant chased after them.

They dove into back into jungle.

The giant stopped short. It slammed its head and tail into the trees there to little effect. The jungle was thicker here, harder to plow through than it had near the mound-nest.

Captain Destiny ran ahead. Atagar followed, his arm throbbing with pain and peering back on occasion, keeping his laser carbine ready in his hands. “Captain,” he finally said. “I think we’ve escaped.”

They slowed, broke from their own path a bit for greater cover and looked back. There was no sign of the beast that had been chasing them.

They gulped air. The small triceratops screeched in the Captain’s arms. “Shhh,” he soothed. He looked at Atagar. “You okay?”

Atagar nodded, feeling a headache growing in his temples. “I could use another space ale, though.”

They laughed.

In the distance, an angry, hungry creature roared.



Will Captain Destiny and the remnants of his crew be able to survive long enough on the terrible, dinosauran-filled planet Atrius-99? The third and final part of “Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99” will be published in Issue 12 of If – E – Zine™!

“Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra”

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PART 2

Zalam stood in the cold, dusty gray dungeon cell. He was incredibly tall, gray-skinned. His four arms extended forward and his four hands grabbed at the bars of the steel door. He looked down. “How did I come to be here?” he asked.

“That is what Rasiki-Ha would like to know,” the stony man grveled.

“‘Rasiki-Ha’ is no golem name.”

“You know I am golem and not golton?”

Zalam nodded.

“I wish Rasiki-Ha did. He is not golem. He is human. Rasiki-Ha is the ruler of Adul-Ra and your captor. I am Olmec. How did you come to be here?”

“Of that, I am uncertain. I remember last a blanket of cold white enveloping me. The desire to rest was strong, yet I knew should I rest I would freeze and die. I was traveling the Argonian Mountains,” Zalam’s memory awakened. “I was last traveling that range when the cold overcame me, it would seem, unless your hand was a part of the matter.”

Olmec shook his head. “You were found. Within the Argonians you remain. Who are you?”

The derderoid’s back straightened, his chest swelling, “I am Zalam, King of all Protuculus.” His chest fell. “At least... I was until human filth overthrew me.”

“Strange are the strangers from another world.”

“They are invaders! The humans came to our world with an army of soldiers constructed entirely of steel and razed the landscape, torturing the people here with their *science*.”

Olmec nodded. “Rasiki-Ha has a similar such army, though most are made of stone. They are called goltons and resemble my people quite closely. Rasiki-Ha has always called me a golton.”

“How did a golem come to be in the Argonians?” Zalam asked. “Thought I that your people were jungle-dwellers.”

Olmec lowered his head in thought, the three feathers tied to his forehead with thin leather dangling in the dank air. He gripped his iron staff tightly as he spoke. “Know you of the Golem-Lizaran Wars?”

“Quite well,” Zalam nodded.

“Long ago, Rasiki-Ha presided over peace talks for our two people. The talks were successful, a truce was made. Rasiki-Ha would use his magics to build impenetrable barriers around the main villages of the two people, freeing all within from fear of invasion and harm. In return, Rasiki-Ha asked for two servants, slaves to tend to his every need.” Olmec looked up at Zalam, craning his neck to look him in the eye. “So long as Rasiki-Ha keeps the peace between our people, I and Lizarus remain indentured to him.”

Zalam considered this. Seeing Olmec straining his neck, Zalam knelt to bring his face closer to the smaller man's eye level. "But," he spoke, "the golems and lizarans have *always* warred."

Olmec blinked. "What say you?"

Zalam nodded. "For the entire length of my life I have known the southern jungles to roil with the warfare betwixt the two people."

"It cannot be!" Olmec denied.

"This I swear."

"You lie!"

"I've no reason to lie," defended Zalam.

"Of course you do. Freedom is enough to lie," Olmec grew angry, his deep voice going deeper.

"Keeping one in servitude," Zalam spoke, "is also enough to lie."

* * * * *

"You desssire my pressence?" the scaly skin of Lizarus shivered with disgust as he bowed to Rasiki-Ha. He refused his tongue to exit from his mouth when near the old human. He found his master's age foul-tasting and dry o the air.

Rasiki-Ha, an ancient human, floated in the throne room atop an ensorcelled pillow. His legs were crossed as they always were. As he spoke, dust kicked out from his mouth. He did not open his eyes. "I required your assistance an hour or more ago. Now your presence serves as distraction from my meditations and nothing more." The dust waterfaling from his mouth became motes on the air.

Lizarus sighed. "My apologiesss, my lord. I wasss in the city."

"Carousing, no doubt?"

Lizarus' scales shifted uneasily once more. He feared lying to Rasiki-Ha directly for he knew not if the human's magics could uncover the veil of lies. "Conducting... bussinesss," he finally replied.

"Business with... women?" asked the ruler of Adul-Ra.

"Not quite."

"Come, come." Rasiki-Ha prodded. "There is no shame in intimate relations. If it were not for my thousand and some years of life, if this old husk did not agonize over the smallest movement, I might have joined you in defiling the women of the back alleys of our fair city."

Disgusted, Lizarus rocked on the balls of his feet wanting to leave. He said, "That wasss not my purposse within the city." He tried desperately to think of other matters besides Rasiki-Ha's fornications and copulations.

Rasiki-Ha knew then he might press the issue and discover truth to his suspicions. His brow furrowed, his closed eyes opening into a squint, his torso leaning ever so slightly forward. "Pray tell," his mouth moved laboriously as an un-oiled hinge might, his voice creaking the same, "what other purpose would you have within the city?"

Lizarus looked down, avoiding Rasiki-Ha's gaze. If the ruler wanted to believe his servant indulged in pleasures at every hour, no harm could come. Lizarus acted ashamed as he spoke, though he was not. "You are mossst correct. I wasss ssseeking pleasssuresss of the flesssh." Lizarus' scales shivered a third time. Rasiki-Ha, he thought, made him itch.

Rasiki-Ha leaned back. His eyes remained open though they lost their squint. His levitating pillow floated slightly higher, placing him a little above his servant. “We have an interloper, an outsider,” he wheezed.

Lizarus looked up at him. “Here? In Adul-Ra?”

“In the dungeon. My goltons found him while on patrol, unconscious and frostbitten. Olmec has been attending him with his herbs. The outsider awoke recently. Go to Olmec’s side, question this outsider as Olmec could not. Put the hot irons to the interloper if need be, but ferret out the truth of his presence here within the Argonians and Adul-Ra. Take two goltons.”

Lizarus smiled. He could not restrain his tongue from lashing out in pleasure and appreciation for the chance to torture, the Lizaran’s one release and true pleasure in Adul-Ra. He bowed, turned and headed for the dungeon, his mind not so much on the outsider but the fires and branding irons he would soon use.

* * * * *

The city of Adul-Ra was not large. Rather, it was more of a hamlet. The people were broken, battered, deformed from the womb after generations of inbreeding. The population was largely human. Poverty was nonexistent, though there were definite delineations of class and wealth. What the people could not provide for themselves, Rasiki-Ha provided with his magics. As he had promised the golems and lizarans yet never fulfilled, he had enclosed the city of Adul-Ra with a barrier completely impenetrable and blocking out all sight and sound, in or out. The mystic barrier also held the harsh ever-winter of the Argonian Mountains at bay. Adul-Ra was a fabled city outside its barrier because it could not be found lest Rasiki-Ha allowed it or if someone knew the city’s exact location and the exact magics to counteract the barrier.

Falstilis approached a dark section of the mountains. No snow fell here. No winds blew. Only the rustle and crack of stirring feet disturbed the landscape.

“I thank you for your aid, Aeris,” Falstilis said.

His companion, a young human of thin build with black hair and a goatee upon his chin, replied, “Thanks are for favors. What we do is mutually beneficial. Few know of ways in or out of Adul-Ra like I. If what you promise be true, what I do now will help our citizens escape servitude to my great-grandfather.”

Falstilis looked at Rasiki-Ha’s great-grandson as they walked. “Not many may wish escape. Ignorance of freedom murders desire for it.”

“Then I will become new ruler over Adul-Ra,” spoke Aeris-Ha. He smiled, adding, “I could not rule worse than the current man.”

They came to a small clearing.

“I am most fortunate,” Aeris-Ha said. “Most would have to study years to learn control over magics, but my great-grandfather’s magic is so strong in my blood such control comes naturally for me. Not once did I have instruction, not until I reached the age of sixteen.”

“No one in Adul-Ra wields magics beyond your lineage,” Falstilis complimented unnecessarily.

“You are not exclusive in benefiting from my ability to negate my great-grandfather’s magics. At sixteen I escaped and discovered the Temple of the Fraebrothers. Our meeting was quite educational. It was they that convinced me to return to Adul-Ra to use my magics to benefit those that live here.

“Of course, even at that age I knew they encouraged not the good in me but the hope of one day learning my family’s magics. Their hunger for such knowledge makes them voracious wolves.

“But that tale’s end will come in due time. Have you all you need?”

Falstilis wrapped his heavy robe about him. “Indeed. You are certain Rasiki-Ha will detect nothing as usual?”

“Has he ever detected your leave-takings? Or mine?”

Falstilis shook his head.

“He may detect some small disturbance, but magic is a thing of nature. Even its greatest masters cannot always even its tides. He will detect it as nothing more than a natural flux.”

Falstilis nodded, unsure but trusting, especially if in the end he met his goals of ousting Rasiki-Ha as ruler of Adul-Ra.

Aeris-Ha spoke some whispered words as though in prayer, waved a hand and a small hole appeared in Rasiki-Ha’s mirage. Snow leapt in at them in harsh gales. The cold pouring in was intense. Falstilis bundled himself tighter.

“Go!” Aeris-Ha urged, knowing his magics would not last long.

Falstilis looked at the wintry storm covering the purple Argonian Mountains. He hesitated no longer, stepping through the portal.

“Do not forget the appointed time!” called Aeris-Ha as he and Adul-Ra disappeared from view, the barrier reshaping and closing the hole.

Falstilis was alone in the wild winds. Though his robe was heavy, he found the biting cold bitter, angry and harsh.

He bundled himself tighter still. His feet compressed the snow beneath him. The world seemed horrendously loud outside of Adul-Ra. *At least Rasiki-Ha got that much right*, he thought of the quietude of Adul-Ra.

He turned, heading east, climbing to higher ground where a cave he had found on his first attempted escape sat in the side of the mountains. He, too, had been coaxed back to Adul-Ra during his escape but by something other than the Fraebrothers. In that cave was where he had been coaxed to return to Adul-Ra not so long ago. It was in that cave, while escaping torrential winds, he had been met with the vision of a god. Falstilis was comforted by the thought of his god now as he climbed towards the cave.

The winds whipped and battered the mouth of the cave. He looked around before entering, hoping he would not be found by a patrol of Rasiki-Ha’s goltons.

Once inside, he stood at the back of the cave. Its walls twinkled with quartz and multitudinous crystals. He closed his eyes in prayer, speaking softly, “I come to you, Lord Norikahn, seeking counsel in the next step to rid your mountains of Rasiki-Ha.”

* * * * *

Stones statues lined the great chamber of Rasiki-Ha’s throne room. The ancient sorcerer floated atop his plush pillow. With a finger’s twitch he was controlling a small crystal ball floating before his face. He peered into it.

There he saw his great-grandson disrupt the barrier that kept Adul-Ra safe and hidden. He saw Falstilis leave the city through the portal to trek towards his beloved cave. To date, Rasiki-Ha could not understand the fascination with the cave. Though Falstilis spoke inside and performed crude rituals, Rasiki-Ha could see or hear no response. No magics could be sensed.

Rasiki-Ha thought on this. He waved a finger of his free hand and one of his stone statues came to life. It walked to its master's side.

Without taking his eyes off the crystal ball, Rasiki-Ha stroked the shoulder of the large golton with a light, loving touch. "It would seem," his voice cracked, "you are my only loyal subjects."

He looked at the golton. "Go to the armory. Retrieve more of the great, tall metal armors. They will be needed soon."

The golton walked away, fulfilling Rasiki-Ha's commands.

Rasiki-Ha's finger twitched above the crystal ball. The image he saw within shifted as smoke clearing from a fire before the eyes. The new image he saw was that of Lizarus descending the immense stairs into the dungeon. He watched as the lizard-man stoked a fire, placing branding irons in the coals, preparing them for the coming tortures.

* * * * *

Lizarus approached through the dark dungeons with two golton escorts. "You are needed elsssewhere," he told Olmec.

"Does Rasiki-Ha command this?"

For a moment Lizarus considered lying to Olmec, but decided instead not to entangle their master in his own deceptions for fear of future tribulations. "No," he said.

"Then I'll go nowhere," Olmec defied.

Zalam stood behind the bars, watching the exchange of words and nervous glances.

"Only my ssskillsss are needed here, but if you wisssh to witnesssss my work, feel free to ssstay."

Olmec grumbled unintelligibly. He looked at Zalam. Olmec's emerald eyes almost seemed to soften. He walked around the goltons and left the dungeon.

Lizarus turned his attention towards Zalam. Zalam stood, towering over the squat lizaran. Lizarus craned his head backwards to look up at the derderoid.

"You are quite tall," Lizarus said.

Zalam answered with a grunt.

"And," Lizarus added with a smile, looking the imprisoned Zalam up and down, "look at all that unmarked flesssh." He motioned towards the two goltons. They approached the door of the cell.

"Do not ssstruggle," Lizarus warned. "They can do great harm."

Zalam grunted. "So can I." He stepped away from the cell's door, eyed the area and planted himself in a sturdy, defensive stance.

* * * * *

Norikahn entered the control room with a flourish of his violet cape. The room, once Zalam's sleeping chamber, was filled to overflowing with newly installed computers, machines and monitors.

A lone derderoid rose from his station in front of a monitor at Norikahn's entrance. "All hail Lord Norikahn!" he exclaimed.

"Sit," Norikahn commanded. "What is it?"

The derderoid sat and fiddled with controls as he spoke. "The human in the cave is attempting to contact his god once more. His request came less than an hour ago. He

has remained praying. It's an odd thing, those dilox crystals. They focus and concentrate our satellite's feed. The cave this human found must be riddled with them."

"The greatest fortune is in the magics of this world cannot sense human technology," Norikahn commented. "Allow him to summon his god."

Norikahn moved before a device that scanned and projected his head holographically into the cave before Falstilis.

Though human, Falstilis was so many generations removed from contact with the origins of his people he did not recognize the face before him as being projected by technology. He instead assumed it the face of a god appearing magically before him. Norikahn never objected to this.

"Oh, Great Lord Norikahn! I am humbled once more by your visage," Falstilis said.

"Tell me, what developments have occurred in our plans?"

"Great Norikahn, the militia is gathered and armed. Soon your mountainside will be rid of Rasiki-Ha's pestilence. None other than I and his great-grandson will lead the rebellion. All that is required now is your instructions for the final step."

"You've all the instructions needed. Execute them at your discretion." As added incentive Norikahn added, "It would well please me to out the city of Adul-Ra. I care not if it exists or is destroyed in your efforts, but I cannot allow people to remain hidden on my mountain.

"Falstilis, I instruct you now: bring a smile to this old god's face."

"Oh!" Falstilis cried. "I assure it, Great Norikahn! Thank you! Thank you!"

"When will you command this rebellion?"

Falstilis paused in thought. "Before daybreak on the morrow."

Norikahn smiled. "Good. Assure yourself nothing has changed prior to the assault; that the guards are all on exacting routine; that Rasiki-Ha's sleep comes as usual. No change must occur within Adul-Ra. The smallest thing could falter your strategy."

Falstilis shook his head. "All that has changed is that Rasiki-Ha has taken on a prisoner."

"You are all Rasiki-Ha's prisoners," Norikahn reminded.

"Indeed, but this one he keeps in his dungeon and is not of Adul-Ra. He is an outsider."

"An outsider? How would he have found Adul-Ra?"

"It was Rasiki-Ha's golton servants that found him, not he that found Adul-Ra. He was near frozen in the snow. A derderoid."

Norikahn's mind exploded, his face contorting with thought. He grimaced. His next words were slow and exacting. "Who is this derderoid?"

Falstilis shook his head. "I know not his name, however it is assumed he is an interloper as he carried with him a warrior's blade."

"A warrior's blade?" Norikahn echoed with increasing interest.

"Three blades precisely. All upon one hilt."

There remained no question within Norikahn's mind the identity of the derderoid. His thoughts formulated quickly. "Use him," he told Falstilis.

"Great Norikahn? How might I use him?"

"Use him to usurp Rasiki-Ha. He is a mighty warrior and will not allow himself to remain in captivity for long."

"You know of this derderoid?"

“Indeed, I do. He has escaped from impossible odds before. I doubt Rasiki-Ha will be able to contain him. Forge an alliance with him. He will prove most useful to our cause.”

“As you wish, Great Norikahn.”

“But, be warned: make the alliance with him temporary. Do not grant him knowledge of anything less than eternal, undying friendship for he has his own agenda within this world and, once free, will only stand in the way of our plans.

“When the battle for Adul-Ra is complete, as Rasiki-Ha lay bleeding and breathless, as this derderoid interloper pants with strain from the fight, quietly slide your own blade into his back.”

Falstilis nodded. “As you desire, Great Norikahn.”

* * * * *

With a silent, unseen gesture Norikahn’s projected image faded and disappeared, ending the broadcast. He stood thinking in Zalam’s old sleeping chambers. He turned to his derderoid aid at the nearby control panel.

“Summon General Severin. Have him gather an army of a thousand – no, *two thousand* men with instructions to head to the southern tip of the Argonian Mountain Range.”

The derderoid stood, ready to execute his orders. “And the general’s orders once in place?”

Norikahn breathed deep. “To await reception of Zalam’s body.”



It looks as if our hero is doomed! Will Zalam be able to escape the fabled city of Adul-Ra? Or will he succumb to the evil schemes of Falstilis and Lizarus? Find out all this and more in the final chapter of “Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra” in the up-coming Issue 12 of If – E – Zine™!

“Rescuing the Dead”

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PART 2

The Field Marshal pulled a leather five-finger cigar pouch from his deep red coat. Opening it, he offered one each to Sergeant Drake and Corporal Diego.

“No, sir. Thank you, sir,” Diego said.

“Hand made?” The Sarge asked.

“And imported from Altea,” the field marshal confirmed.

The Sarge took one. “We’re at war with Altea. I thought these were still contraband.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

The Sarge smelled the cigar, then tasted it. The field marshal offered him a laser cutter with a small torch on the end of it. The Sarge lopped off one end of the cigar and lit the other end, drawing the thick, Altean tobacco smoke into his mouth. Handing the cutter back, he thanked the field marshal and looked to Diego, “Sure you don’t want one? Whatever the field marshal has to say can’t be good, with all respect to his position. You might as well take full advantage of what we’re about to be hit with.”

The field marshal grinned, stating, “You’re sergeant is battle-wise.”

Diego shook his head.

“I am Field Marshal Antonio Fisk and I’m your new commandant. You’ve been reassigned.” Field Marshal Fisk leaned against the desk, lighting his own cigar. “There’s a recon patrol in field right now. They’re collecting local rumors, intel. They’re looking for a village. Hardly a village, more a small group of people. The family of that little girl you returned with is among them. Local rumors say they’re all like her. We’ll be looking for them. Your previous contact with the girl coupled with how you handled yourselves against those Death Dealers have lead us to recruiting you in finding those people.”

Diego twitched, looking to his sergeant to gauge his reaction.

Smoke rolled from the Sarge’s mouth. “We were told never to speak of that mission again.”

“And I’m telling you otherwise,” said the field marshal.

The Sarge nodded. “To be honest, we had help in defeating those Death Dealers. Running across the girl was an accident. Are you sure you want us? Luck had more to do with any success we had than our own selves. And I don’t consider losing three men a success.”

“Who helped you?” asked the Field Marshal. “The girl?”

The Sarge nodded.

“No matter. We retrieved and recycled the bodies of the fallen squad. We witnessed the evidence. She killed only one. The rest died by yours hands.”

“And three of my men dead by theirs.”

“They died valiant deaths. They died following SOP orders. You should take no offense. If they were religious, then they dine in the Cosmic Halls tonight. If not, war is the business of death and land-grabbing. I would have figured you would have learned that by now.”

The Sarge remained silent.

Diego’s mind raced with thought, but he too remained silent.

“Unless you have problems with your new assignment,” said the field marshal, “let’s further discuss your first mission.

“The girl you rescued was telekinetic. That means she could control certain aspects of the physical environment with her thoughts. It is a rare, legendary ability and thus far in history has been a thing of myth. Unconfirmed. A thing for fantasy tales for children. But, as I said, there is a small group here on Dakkaran that the girl reportedly came from, therefore she may not be alone in her abilities.

“Four generations ago, a group of gypsies from Ilso Mago settled here on Dakkaran. They kept largely to themselves, clearing and farming a small hilly area. The girl was a member of their youngest, fourth generation. We don’t know if her abilities were inherited from the original settlers or if there’s something in the land that cultivated it within her or she’s otherwise some sort of freak, but our intel shows she may not be unique among her people. There may be more telekinetic people among these Ilso Mago gypsies. Your task is to find them.

“To complicate matters, the hilly region they settled is in the southern Relik Region.”

Diego could no longer keep quiet. “That’s at least fifty clicks inside enemy territory!” he gasped.

Field Marshal Fisk nodded. “Fifty-two point six. You’re to have three weeks of additional training with your new squadmates, including a week of briefing.”

“I’ve a few questions,” said the Sarge.

“Yes?”

“First: what happened to the girl?”

Field Marshal Fisk sighed. “She’s dead.”

“What? How?”

The Field Marshal shook his head. “Classified.”

The Sarge knew then there was a chance the field marshal was lying under orders from some superior. But then, he may well be telling the truth. Sergeant Drake’s heart sank at the thought of the girl’s death. It took him a moment to ask his next question, “What about the Death Dealers? If they were after her once, as I had assumed, won’t they be after these other people, as well?”

The Field Marshal nodded. “They may.”

“Then why not let them do this work and send us out on recon or some other mission?”

“Because the Death Dealers are a separate branch of our military complex. Whoever gets those gypsies will be in the greatest favor with our political superiors and His Exalted Worship Overlord Hrakkuris. We are at war with Altea, but we are pressed as much by our own.”

This did not sit well with either the Sarge or Diego. They both shifted uncomfortably in their chairs.

“One last question,” said the Sarge, “Where are our other squadmates?”

* * * * *

The city was gray, dull and devoid of life. It had been abandoned long ago by its citizens, leaving it to the destructive forces of the Altean and Gregor armies in their endless war.

She went on the bounce. Rocket fire scrambled through the sky overhead, slamming into walls of buildings yet to be knocked down. The building’s seams cracked, huge hunks of concrete and plasteel fell from the sky, raining down around her. She bounced and bounced again, looking for her target, her squad somewhere behind her.

She pressed against a wall. The red and gold powered armor of an Altean soldier caught her eye as he crossed the street ahead of her. *Pop-pop-pop* went her rifle. All three shots hit, but the enemy soldier scurried away, his armor taking the brunt of damage.

She squatted, resting, breathing deep the recycled air filtered through the vents on her helmet. She eyed the broken cityscape. The bicep of her right arm, tattooed with a massive constrictor snake that started at her ankle, wrapped around her right thigh and ended on the back of her hand, flexed nervously. The tattoo even rounded up the right side of her neck, decorating her cheek in front of the ear. She was young, tan, toned and athletic with black hair and dark eyes that hungered for action.

Metallic footsteps approached from behind. She turned to find Spooks, her squadmate, running up behind her. He was quite a bit older, almost too old for service, and far darker skinned than she. His hair was already salt-and-peppering with age.

“How ya doin’?” he asked, crouching next to her.

“What the hell did they send you for?”

“Ya need help.”

“Not my com man, dammit. What I could really use is some fuckin’ heavy arty.”

“Ya got me, L-T. Sorry,” Spooks apologized. “They should be attacking soon.”

As soon as he finished his sentence, an incredible explosion erupted down the street to their left flank. Gunfire filled the air. The heat of lasers sizzled nearby.

“There they are,” he said.

“Let’s go,” she commended. They bounced.

Young Company attacked the enemy firebase full force and all from the front, attempting to breach the minefield, barbed wire, craters, and steel obstacles the Alteans had set in place there. Mechas whirred to life, Lancer miniguns firing into pillboxes. Plasma grenades were launched into trenches. The Gregor army concentrated all their efforts forward at the Altean main line of defense. The Altean Field Marshal inside the firebase ordered all soldiers forward except a small reserve in case of flanking attacks. The flank attacks came to the left, occupying the reserves.

“Go! Go! Go!” yelled Lieutenant Tracy Boa as she bounced. Corporal Spooks followed her.

They found a small section of the base unguarded on its right. They ignited their jetpacks and bounced over the field of obstacles and traps, coming to the wall. They bounced once more and landed inside the enemy base.

The guards there panicked, making them easy targets. Boa and Spooks lit them up with PLR gunfire as they ran for the cover. Lieutenant Boa slung her rifle, removed her right glove to show the constrictor tattoo there. Her muscles twitched. Two small spikes extended, one from her forefinger and one from her pinky to give the snake tattoo the appearance of having fangs. She twisted as she approached the enemy field marshal in the base's common area, swinging the fangs around in a brisk attack and sinking them into his neck. Quick poison leaked from the fangs into the flesh. The enemy field marshal struggled momentarily. His men screamed in horror as their commandant stiffened and fell to the ground.

The enemy soldiers opened fire. Spooks returned fire and ran manically with Lieutenant Boa, hoping for escape. They bounced over the wall, the enemy chasing, but they swung back around toward the main body of the Gregor forces and found safety in their numbers. The Gregors backed off their effort.

In the end, nearly three hundred soldiers were dead including the Altean Field Marshal. Without their commandant, the Alteans retreated. After months of fighting, the Gregors had won the abandoned city.

* * * * *

Thick, fiery plasma slapped against the helmet. Over Private Harn Pickles watched as the burning acid ate through the helmet before eating his L-T's face and skull, leaving behind a mass of bubbling, bleeding pus, gooey mess and flaming ugliness.

Now, with both his L-T and sarge dead, Harn found himself in charge of a bunch of battlefield virgins. He was a large, wide shouldered man that loved bar-fighting before he decided to make money at fighting by joining the military. He stood from his foxhole behind a tree, screaming a battlecry over his com-unit, "Kill! Drive 'em before us! Take this hill!"

The soldiers answered by following his charge up Tenba Hill.

Pulse Laser Rifles, otherwise known as PLRs, seared the air with white, hot light. Chaos reigned as Harn lead his squad in screaming rage, causing panic in the enemy soldiers not yet dug in, which weren't many. Powered armored soldiers bounced all over the hill. Jets *fa-shoomed* to life. The filters on Harn's helmet did little to quash the smells of blood, burning foliage and exploding incendiaries from getting to his nose. The smells served as pheromones for his bloodlust. Over Private Harn Pickles pressed his men on and soon found themselves joined by other squads.

Harn charged towards an enemy Dwarf Mecha, a bipedal machine three meters tall and piloted by a lone soldier. Harn pulled a plasma grenade from his hip pack. He ignited his jets – *fa-shoom!* – armed the grenade and dropped it onto the Dwarf Mecha. The grenade exploded above the pilot's cabin, splattering fiery acid to eat through the small mecha's thin shell.

Harn bounced again, found the hole made by the grenade and fired his PLR into it. Screams and blood poured from the mecha.

Harn reached into the machine and unhitched the latch on the pilot's cabin, opening it wide. He then unbelted the dead pilot and yanked him out. The plasma was slowly burning itself out. Harn climbed in, taking the enemy pilot's place.

The mecha carried a lone Lancer, a .50-caliber recoilless minigun, on the right side of its pod. Harn worked the Lancer with ease, turning its aim around so the mecha attacked its own army. Seeing the opportunity, the entire Gregor forces were ordered to charge behind Harn and his newly acquired toy.

Harn steered towards higher ground. The mecha stepped forward, taking out three pillboxes before mini-missiles took out one of the mecha's legs, immobilizing it. Harn remained inside the mecha, however, laughing with joy as he played with its gun, scattering the enemy up and over and eventually off Tenba Hill.

The offensive over, the Gregor forces took the hill.

* * * * *

The Sarge stood with Diego near the landing pad. Lieutenant Tracy Boa, Corporal Richter "Spooks" Mason and Over Private Harn Pickles unloaded their gear from the dropship. They approached him, introducing themselves. The Sarge and Diego saluted their new lieutenant. Field Marshal Fisk joined them and took the new soldiers' paper orders.

"Private Pickles?" Diego chuckled.

Familiar with the teasing, Harn shrugged his massive shoulders and looked down on Diego. "Yeah. It's a family name."

"I would hope so," jested Diego. "I'd hate to think you *chose* that name."

Lieutenant Boa looked over the still sprawling Beowulf Base. "I can't believe I'm here. What did we ever do to pull assignment on a backwater shithole like Dakkaran?" she asked Spooks.

Spooks shrugged.

"Do you even get to see any action here?" she asked the Sarge.

"Boy, I hope so!" Harn blurted.

"This is as much the frontlines as anywhere, L-T," said the Sarge.

Field Marshal Fisk nodded. "That it is. I'm certain I can find enough to occupy your time."

Nearby, a quaestor sergeant was directing some men to unload cargo from the same dropship Boa, Spook and Harn had arrived on.

"Sergeant," called Field Marshal Fisk. "Are those the new weapons?"

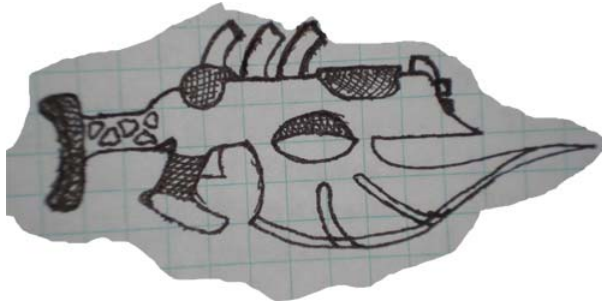
"And helmets, yessir."

"Let me examine them."

A couple men opened up one of the crates. Inside were six new rifles. They each had double barrels, over and under. Field Marshal Fisk pulled one out and examined it.

"This is the new PLR-3a. The over barrel fires any type of 10mm recoilless round. The under barrel fires laser."

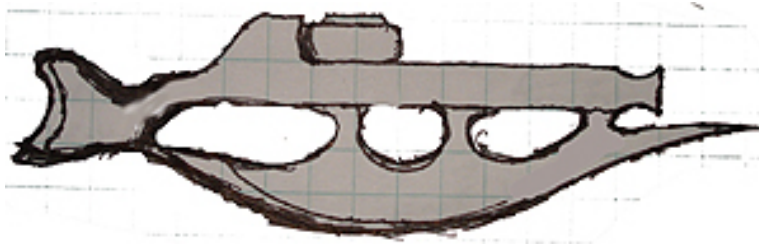
The Sarge took one and looked at it. It took three banana clips on top, one for laser fire and the other two for 10mm rounds. Extending from underneath was a large axe blade that the field marshal described as the 'Asgard Axe' for person-to-person combat, the tip of which extended out to a long point like a bayonet for stabbing purposes.



(Illustration of PLR-3a)

The men opened a second crate. Inside were five large weapons. Field Marshal Fisk took one out and eyed it. Harn, excited by the size of the gun, grabbed a second and looked it over with sheer delight as the quaestor read off its specs. “That’s the PLC-63k Pulse Laser Cannon. There are three barrels inside the housing, a design to help cool the weapon. The barrels fire lasershot sequentially in full auto mode, or can be switched to cannon mode and all three barrels fire simultaneously for maximum effective damage. All three barrels, however, cannot be fired in cannon mode more than a few times lest the unit overheats and potentially shorts-out at which point the on-board safety feature shuts the cannon down and renders it useless until it cools. It has a built-in halberd blade for close quarters combat, thus giving it its nickname as the ‘Bearded Cannon.’”

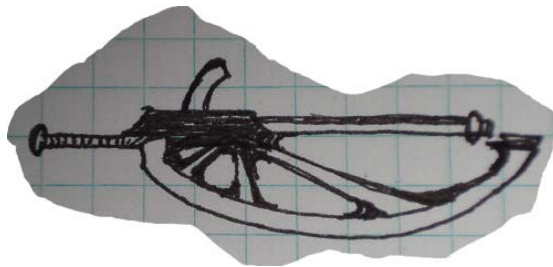
With wide eyes, Harn said, “I like this one.”



(Illustration of PLC-63k)

A third crate was opened. Inside were three odd pieces of equipment looking like swords.

“These are for field marshals only,” said the quaestor. “One is for you, sir.” He pulled one out and handed it to Field Marshal Fisk. It was an oddly shaped, rounded blade much like a kopesh, but above the blade, extending out, was a long barrel. “This is the PLPVK, sir,” the quaestor explained. “It takes a banana clip and fires lasershot. It’s also, as you can see, a handy sword.”



(Illustration of PLPVK)

Field Marshal Fisk nodded with delight.

The men opened a last crate. Inside were two dozen helmets. Fisk pulled one out and held it up for all to see. The helmet was plain, matte colored. It covered the whole

head and on its front, where a mouth and nose would be, were short tentacles making the piece of armor look like a squid. Fisk reached inside and hit an unseen button. A small computer installed in the helmet calculated its location and a tiger stripe jungle pattern appeared on its surface, perfect camouflage for a swampy world like Dakkaran.

“By the stars, that thing’s ugly,” Harn said.

Fisk laughed. “That’s the rub. If you saw this coming at you wouldn’t you be frightened?”

Harn nodded.

“That’s what we hope the Alteans will do. It was designed specifically for Dakkaran forces, modeled after some unknown cephalopod that lives in the deeper waters here.”

“It’s pretty scary,” Diego said, remembering his last mission.

Once more the field marshal reached inside the helmet and punched yet another unseen button. The tentacles flayed out, showing two sharp mandible claws hidden within. They worked back and forth as scissors. “The Gregor techs added this bit. You hit the button with your chin. The claws are supposed to be quite sharp. Sharp enough to be used as a weapon in those rare close-quarters scenarios.”

They looked on as Fisk hit the button a second time causing the tentacles to drop and hide the mandible claws once more.

“Sergeant, get your squad squared away and report to me in fifteen for briefing,” Fisk said.

“Yes, sir.”

Field Marshal Fisk walked off towards his office with a helmet and his PLPVK.

“Where can we sack?” Boa asked the Sarge. He pointed out where their quarters. Boa stormed off with Spooks following.

Harn shook his head. “I don’t know if I like that lady L-T, but I’m with her on wanting to see some action.”

“How long have you known her?” Diego asked.

“Just met her on the ship coming here. She’s kinda cold. She don’t rub me as reg army.”

“She’s not,” the Sarge said. “I had a look at her record before you got here. Her military occupational specialty is assassination. She’s highly trained.”

Diego grew nervous, shifting on his feet. “Why would we need an assassin?”

“I don’t like her even more!” said Harn

“Stow that shit, Pickles!” the Sarge commanded. He paused, chuckling. He looked at Diego. “How the hell am I supposed to get mad at someone named *Pickles*?”

Diego laughed.

“I’m too cute for you to stay angry with me, huh, Sarge?” Harn said.

They all shared a laugh.

“What’s your MOS?” Diego asked Harn.

“Heavy Weapons, but someone else in my last unit was already assigned to it when I got there. I got stuck with plain ol’ gun-totin’ grunt. I’m trained for Heavy, though.”

“What kind of Heavy have your done? Arty?” asked the Sarge.

“I’m trained in mecha, missiles, plasma, and light arty. I even did two weeks of long-range arty training.”

Diego nodded at Harn, “The man can do it all!”

“I like them big boom-booms,” Harn laughed.

“We need a Heavy,” said the Sarge. “I’ll see you get it.”

“Thanks, Sarge!”

“Do your job, Pickles,” the Sarge cracked a grin again. “Dammit, I’m just gonna call you Harn from now on. Let’s get through this first mission together. The squad will gel. Do your job and we’ll all make it through.”

“Count on me, Sarge!” Harn grinned.



Will the new unit be able to ‘gel’ as The Sarge hopes? Or will the conflict of personalities cause them to fall apart under the pressure of combat? Will they be able to find the gypsies they seek? Or will the Alteans beat them to it? Or are more Death Dealers in store for their future? Find out when The Sarge returns in Issue 12 of If – E – Zine™!

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