

Vol1No3

# PLANETARY STORIES

**The Return of Space Opera**

**+ Worlds Saved**

**+ Galaxies Smashed**

**+ Time Travel**

**New  
Feature**

**Pulp  
Fiction**



W

**+ Bring Your Sense of Wonder**

**+ Leave your Sense of Nihilism at the Door**

# PLANETARY STORIES

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PLANETARY STORIES is published by Shelby Vick, with much help from Lloyd McDaniel and other friends.

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# EDITORIAL

**Wha-a-at? Issue number 3? THREE??? Just shows you that ANYthing is possible!**

**Now, we're still stumbling about, finding our way, searching for Our Look, I guess you could say. Last ish, we ran a novel -- and, that is the last one! I learned a lot in doing it, but the formatting was murder! (Actually, I think I could do it again with much less trouble, having Learned Something from doing it. But, on the other hand, I don't want to test my luck! Might have other novels, but they will be run as serials!)**

**BUT --**

**I NEED FEEDBACK!**

**Got lots of letters on Issue Number One, but few on Number Two. How else am I going to tell which direction to go? With this issue, it is MORE important, as this is an experimental one; I'm trying a more fannish slant, including not only fan fiction where the author uses a parody of sf to make his point (as in Fine Print) but also fa-a-an fiction, where fannishness itself is the driving force (as in The Mighty Mimeo.) And a piece that is more from the old Doc Savage pulps than sf, in Wilfred of London. In fact, Wilfred is the beginning of a new Feature: Pulp Fiction!**

**SO --**

**Let us know what you think. Should Planetary Stories continue in this direction? Should we have more fan fiction? Fa-a-an fiction? Pulp fiction?**

+ + +

**It's amazing how little I know about putting this stuff together. I mean, I have been using a computer for a long, l-o-n-g time. Way back when MetLife first put computers in our offices, I found out how to fiddle with their computer presentations to make them show what I wanted prospects to see. Also, I wrote and wrote and wrote, learned to play games, got online, did email, even, recently, learned to do online publishing (with a minimal understanding of html!) and prepare PDFs to attach to email.**

**BUT--**

**I know next to nothing about computers! Kinda like what they say about our brain, that we only use 10% of it; I might (if you stretch things a bit) have a vague knowledge of 10% of my computer's capability! Like, I made a big effort getting together the first fanzine PDF -- and it**

## ***I NEED YOUR HELP!***

The following story was originally a book; a book I started in 1983! Why has it taken so long? Partly becos I kept making changes, adding and subtracting characters, scenes, and so forth. Partly becos I'm a natural-born procrastinator! The following version resulted by me trying to cut it down to 5,000 words to meet submission requirements. The attempt failed, as it's over 6,000 words. . . . But, as to your help: I'm trying to decide if it's worth finishing up. Not to submit it for publication, but to serialize in Planetary Stories! So, as they say, "Name your own poison!" If enuf express interest, I'll get back to it.

(Incidentally, in the book the bomb is set off somewhere else.)

# **THE SPECTRE OF SPACE**

**Shelby Vick**

**Irrational fear chilled Jeffrey Sheffield, nearly paralyzing him. Only automatic settings kept his spacesuit visor from clouding up. It's not fair! his mind screamed. No! That decades-old war couldn't reach forward in time to take his son from him. No!**

**There, tumbling through empty space, cold sunlight glinted off an ancient war rocket -- on collision course with his son Zack and moving at a greater speed.**

**With an effort, Sheffield forced himself to calm down and his mind considered the situation dispassionately. Struggling for calm, he ordered, "Zack, blast now." He forced himself not to shout; it wouldn't add to his insistence, and it would hurt his ears; you just don't shout when wearing a space helmet.**

**"What? I mean --"**

**"Blast, damn it! Now!!!" Sheffield barked -- the state of his ears suddenly of no importance to him. There was a spurt of**

flame and Zachary angled away. Would it be enough? Jeffrey Sheffield wished he hadn't programmed his son's controls to be limited to a one second spurt -- at the time he'd done it, it had seemed a good idea, so the boy wouldn't go too far in a single burst, before he was used to spacesuit maneuvering. But now . . . .

The short blast had moved Zack so that he saw the metal monster closing in on him. "Dad!" he exclaimed.

"Blast again!" Sheffield ordered.

Even as he shouted at his son, a part of his brain was remonstrating with himself: Why had he tried this? Why had he agreed to let his son leave the safety of Earth for this element that was so foreign to the boy?

The dead hulk of the rocket came between Jeffrey and his son.

What had happened? Did he move in time? "Zack!"

"I . . . I'm all right, Dad," came the wavering metallic response. "It missed me."

With relief, Sheffield spotted his son. The final one-second boost had shot Zack off at an angle, out of the path of the orbiting rocket and almost parallel with the blue orb of Earth below him. Not as good as straight toward his father would have been, but it got him out of the way of the rocket and reduced his downward momentum.

"Below" and "downward" were relative terms, but most Clusterites used them. Except for the science slobs, Sheffield thought. Thank goodness Spacelab's orbit brought it by the Cluster only once every ninety days. The few scientists permanently stationed in various Cluster hospitals were bad enough. They insisted on precise mathematical terms, usually couched in esoteric phraseology.

None of this mattered to the average Cluster citizen; Earth was "down there," the moon was "up there" and that was that. Simple, really.

The Freedom Cluster was a belt that had grown to several hundred miles long as the years had gone by, a belt that circled the Earth on an orbit that was occasionally corrected as the years rolled on.

Sheffield shifted his direction, calculating speed and trajectory without conscious effort, but with reflexive response developed after years in space.

Years in space. Enough years to make space his home.

Twelve years ago, that would have seemed incredible to him. Twelve years ago, his first space truck was strictly a stopgap measure, something to simultaneously earn him a living and get him away from Earth and the heartache of his wife's death. As soon as he made enough to pay off the stockholders who had financed his truck -- buying back the stock, in other words -- and accumulated a stash, he'd intended to sell his rig and go back to Earth, where he belonged.

Sure.

But, contrary to plan, the pain in his heart never went away. There was some part of him which overrode his usual pragmatism and refused to let him 'move on.'

He hadn't found involuntary tears on his cheeks in over a year but, though Elyse was rarely in his dreams any more and he could write a poem about her with only a lump in his throat, it was still never really far from him.

It was with him now, in his realization that he had to save their son. He glanced down at the softly glowing spot on his faceplate and found, to his dismay, that his fuel was even lower than he had thought. With a metal-gloved digit he fingered a

recessed palm switch, cutting power. His acceleration should be great enough to intercept Zack's trajectory.

"Zack! Can you see the truck?"

" . . . Yes, now I do."

"Use your suitcuff computer. Aim for the ship and blast." If their paths didn't intersect, at least Zack would be coming closer.

Why had he let this happen?

Within himself, he was raging, because he knew why it had happened -- that wideband radio bulletin had distracted him. Those damned Splinters! What are they up to now? According to the bulletin, some of them had glued two steel beams across each other, making a six-foot letter "X," and spun it at the new manufacturing satellite being built by Asteroid Tug Corp. The steel cross had torn into a half-finished dome causing close to \$1 million worth of damage.

Why?

Sheffield knew the answer to that: The corporation was a new one, and they were bringing new workers Up from Earth. Earthworms, the Splinters called them. They thought the Cluster was for Space Citizens only -- not only thought it, were extreme about it. Of course, it wasn't an unusual feeling -- if Zack wasn't his son, and hadn't visited him before, Sheffield would have had trouble getting the Committee to agree to his bringing him Up.

Nonetheless, he felt bitter as he remembered how the bulletin had distracted him, caused him to take his eyes off his son -- for what might have been a full minute. Unfortunately, it had been the full minute when the antique war-rocket showed up.

Jeffrey saw the flash of a blast. Holding his breath, he watched until he could ascertain the angle and direction of his son's approach. He gave out a sigh of relief -- Zack was moving straight in his direction. Using his compressed air jets, the older Sheffield started the slow procedure of changing his own direction so that he was also pointed back at his truck. With his chin he nudged out his helmet's brim mirror so he could look up and spot Zack coming up "below" him.

Now that the crisis was over, Sheffield condemned himself for losing his head; there hadn't been a real problem, he was able to talk Zack through the danger.

Jeffrey Sheffield was a space-trucker, normally a quiet, introspective man. Not entirely a loner, because he always had customers to deal with, but he was always more at ease in his truck. Involvement was not his aim, nor was gossip or criticism. As long as he was let alone, he left others alone. This was one of the benefits, to him, of living in Freedom Cluster -- there was minimal government, almost no control of what people did; as long as their actions did not adversely affect others, a person was left alone.

The "truck" sat like a large spider with its legs embracing one end of the long, tubular "trailer" usually referred to as a box. There was only one small airlock on the truck; Sheffield sent Zack through first and then, after Zack had cycled out, Jeffrey entered. The truck cab was small; there were two acceleration chairs with a space behind them to put on a space suit on or take it off. Zack's suit was not properly stored; Sheffield started to reprimand his son, then relented and compromised by purposefully taking the suit out of the locker and putting it away correctly -- slowly and methodically -- while Zack watched.

"Sorry, Dad," Zack said quietly as Sheffield came to the engineer's chair and strapped himself in. He wasn't sure whether Zack was apologizing for the suit or the entire incident, but it didn't matter. "Okay," he said. "Now I'll call the Scars."

A voice from his comm panel said: "Scar Ratface. What's up?"

Ratface, Sheffield thought to himself with mild amusement. Scars often chose names that sounded tough, which was understandable -- but they were all not much more than kids. This one's voice sounded like he was fifteen or sixteen years

old; barely into majority for a spaceman. In the Jewish religion a boy could say, "Today I am a man!" when he turned thirteen; it was fifteen for a spaceman -- but a Citizen who was fifteen could vote and have a say in how things were run.

Not all Scars were in their majority; a few were as young as twelve. They were all part of a rebellious group who, over the years, had cut the locator chips out of their arms. The scar from the cut gave them their name.

There was no picture of Scar Ratface on Sheffield's screen. The suits of the Scars were marvels of engineering, but adding a camera and a viewscreen had proven impractical.

"There's an old war rocket orbiting 'below,'" Sheffield informed him. He gave an estimate of its location, speed and heading. "I thought you'd want to know about it."

"Damaged?" Ratface asked. There was eagerness in his voice; there was far more salvage value in an undamaged rocket. Maybe Ratface was far enough ahead to have a chance to intercept the derelict.

"Not noticeably so," Jeffrey said.

There was a pause. The Scars had their own internet; any others with their sets on would have been following the call. The one to answer was always far down in the pecking order. Someone else would be giving Ratface orders. They must have told him something disappointing because, with a flat voice, he gave a reply of, "Noted," and switched off. Now several would show up wit their 'shooters', rocket engines with a control handle and not much more. Using those, they would guide the rocket to a safe orbit and examine it. After determining value, they would put it up for sale.

Jeffrey Sheffield looked at his now silent comm panel and shook his head in mild amusement. Then he noticed something. "Messages," he told Zack. "What's going on? Several of them," he added, and let the list scroll by. "Maybe they're just wanting me to hurry up. . . .Except for Dr. Ricco."

"Isn't Dr. Ricco the Administrator at Oldtown Hospital?" Zack asked.

Sheffield nodded, puzzled. Why, he wondered, was the administrator of the oldest hospital in space and the satellite that was the key to the forming of the Cluster, calling him? His schedule wouldn't bring him back to Oldtown for a couple of days. Certainly Administrator Ricco would know that.

"Could we call Dr. Ricco first?" Zack asked with curiosity.

"Not 'till we get this rig rolling," Sheffield said. He put a stern look on his face. "And after the call, you and I need to have a talk."

Zack's angular young face showed shame and apprehension. "Yessir," he murmured, ducking his head. I got it coming, Dad, he thought, and I can't let you know how scared I was.

Sheffield flicked a few toggle switches and the rocket atop the truck vibrated to life. A second later, auxiliary rockets on the cargo box kicked in. Both Sheffield's were pressed back against their seats as the rig moved forward. After a few more seconds of acceleration, Jeffrey made some minor corrections until his on-board computer showed the course readings were right, then killed the rockets. They were moving in the right direction; no need to waste fuel by pushing harder.

He called Ricco next. "Doctor Ricco," he said, as the man's round face appeared.

The hospital administrator beamed when he saw Jeffrey Sheffield. "Good of you to call, Captain Sheffield," he said. Before he could become a trucker, Sheffield had been required to earn his captaincy. Ricco was the only one to use that title. It could be he used it because the trucker was one of the few to refer to Ricco as "Doctor". "Have you heard what Asteroid Tugs is up to?" Ricco asked.

"Asteroid Tugs?" Sheffield asked. "I just heard about their sabotage, but that's it. What do you mean?"

"They've been offering free trucking! They say it's to show they're part of Freedom Cluster!"

"What?" Sheffield exclaimed. "That would put me out of business!"

"Well, I just wanted you to know that we're not interested in their offer," Ricco assured him.

"You've done a fine job for us. They're a bunch of outsiders. I don't believe this 'free service' bunk they're handing out."

"Free so long as they have no competition, I'd guess," the trucker agreed.

"That's it; that's it exactly!" the administrator acknowledged. "I like you, Captain Sheffield; I hope you know that. You are an intelligent man, and a man of honor. Listen, when you make your next drop here, I want you to stop by and see me. I have a little coffee -- real coffee -- I've been saving. I'll brew a four-cup pot. Can I count on you?"

Sheffield licked his lips. The one thing they not been able to grow in space -- no one could, and many had tried it -- was good coffee beans. Coffee plants liked high altitudes, but outer space seemed too high. Maybe it was the lack of proper gravity. "I can almost remember what it tastes like," he said. "I just rescheduled my deliveries. You couldn't keep me away!"

All the calls were similar; Asteroid Tugs had contacted MacGregor's Farm, that provided hydroponic produce and catfish, K C Tait's factory that made ball bearings superior to anything on Earth, Jerri's Fiber Center, and others that made spacesuits and nanotech stuff, and on and on and had been rebuffed by all. The Clusterites stuck together. Sheffield was even offered a free meal at the caf, and free drinks at the bar when he returned the call of Mattie-Four-Box.

'Freedom' is a misnomer, thought Sheffield. Even tho we're almost independent. They needed things from Earth, too; salt, metals, and fruit, for example. Their leverage was the quality and price of their materials plus the fact that their space hospitals could do life-saving things not possible on Earth. That leverage was enough to keep them out of any governmental control.

Sighing, Sheffield leaned back as he switched off the last call. "Now," he said to Zack, "It's time we had our talk." He explained to a subdued son the importance of caution in space; he said he would like to have the boy join him, for life, but he had to know he could be relied on.

There was silence, and then Zack said, reluctantly, "I didn't want to let you know I'm afraid of space," he admitted, in misery. "It's like a gigantic ocean, Dad, and we're schools of fish swimming in it. --No, not fish; they're native to the ocean. Maybe seals . . . or beavers! That's it, we're like beavers, who actually build their homes under water." Letting it out calmed him a little. "Whatever we are, I'm afraid of dying here -- but I want to be with you, Dad; I don't want to disappoint you. . . . And, scary or not, space is fascinating."

Chuckling, Sheffield said, "Son, it's fear that keeps us alive! If you're not afraid, you don't belong here!"

He glanced sideways at his son. "I'll drop you off at Mattie-Four-Box, park the cargo temporarily at home, then go see Ricco. It's a little off my schedule, but I want to see what he's got on his mind."

"He is very important," Zack agreed. "But . . . Dad . . ."

The trucker turned back to his controls. "Something bothering you?" he asked.

Indeed, something was bothering him. Mattie-Four-Box got its name because it was made from four cargo boxes riding at the top of a big plus-sign made out of passage tubes, that met at the center airlock. At Mattie's, his father would match speed with the airlock, letting Zack drop down in his suit. It was just a simple short drop, but . . .

**Zack wasn't looking forward to that. But, he abruptly decided, he would do it. He had to overcome his fear. "No," he said. "Just. . .drop me off."**

**+ + + +**

**Fredric Ricco's office was in the outer rim of the Wheel, the original satellite sent up as the base for the first Space Hospital. The Wheel's spin simulated a minor amount of gravity -- enough so there was the feeling of "up" and "down".**

**The administrator's office wasn't large; the "floor" was ten feet wide by sixteen long. When Sheffield entered the room, the first thing to impress him was the aroma of the promised coffee. A silver carafe and two delicate china cups sat on a tray on Ricco's desk. No sugar or cream; inhabitants of Freedom didn't want to dilute the taste of authentic coffee.**

**"As promised," the administrator said, rising. He poured each of them a cup, handed one to the trucker, then sat back down. They sipped the rare beverage in pleasurable silence.**

**While enjoying the beverage, Sheffield's eyes were drawn to something prominently displayed on the wall behind the administrator's desk. It was a large picture, four feet by six feet, depicting the Wheel as it first looked. It was not a hologram, but a special combination of fresnell lenses gave it some depth and made it appear to be constantly revolving.**

**Noting Sheffield's attention, Ricco said, "What do you think of my picture?"**

**The trucker smiled. "It's good. Brings some of the past back to life." Reaching forward, he carefully returned his empty cup to the tray. He felt slightly awed to be in this room, impressed by the man who had invited him and the position Dr. Ricco held.**

**Ricco leaned back, tenting his fingertips. "Freedom Cluster is full of history, Captain Sheffield," he said, dreamily. "While this hospital is the oldest station, there are many other important milestones here; the second hospital specialized, and was even more successful, financially. Mattie-Four-Box was the first successful attempt at bringing food and beverages to the Cluster Apartments, when it became impractical for stations to include enough habitat space for employees. The rebellious Scars have served a very important function. The MacGregor farm was another specialization that was needed, and worked out quite well. Mr. MacGregor took it over from his father; Miz MacGregor took it over from her husband. No doubt her daughter Jan will take it over from her."**

**All very interesting, but why am I here? Sheffield wondered. He appreciated the opportunity to be in Ricco's office, but his curiosity was burning. I'm not here for a history lesson, that's for sure.**

**"You may be wondering," the administrator said in an abrupt shift, eyes narrowing and lips tight, "why I haven't mentioned the reprehensible behavior of the Splinters. It isn't that I hadn't heard; I just wanted to ignore it. I could go on for hours about such violence, but I wanted this to be an enjoyable meeting."**

**"I can appreciate that," Sheffield said, nodding. "The twisted depths of the human soul are magnified by mob psychology -- and that seems to be what drives the Splinters -- mob psychology."**

**"Very well put, Captain," Ricco agreed. "I couldn't--"**

**The intercom buzzed. "Dr. Ricco?" came a feminine voice. The two words expressed tension.**

**"Yes, Miss Brina? What's wrong?"**

**"It's back, Dr. Ricco. The space spect "**

**That was all Sheffield heard; Ricco had hastily switched off the audio.**

"I'll be right out," Dr. Ricco said, standing as he spoke. He gave the trucker a quick and anxious glance of apology, then was around his desk and out the door. Sheffield had an idea of what was behind the excitement, but decided to wait for the director's return, just to be safe. He leaned back and looked at the large picture on the wall behind Ricco's desk. It was at least four feet square, and showed the Oldtown Hospital satellite. By the use of fresnel lenses, the satellite seemed to move when the viewer moved.

Sheffield was still admiring the picture when the door opened and Dr Ricco came back into his office. "Interesting picture, isn't it?" he asked.

Sheffield nodded. "It's missing something, though," he said, thinking of the excitement that had caused the doctor to dash outside. "The space spectre should show up now and then."

Dr Charles Ricco sat down, as Sheffield said that. He looked at the trucker and said, "I feared you caught on," he said.

Sheffield shrugged. "I don't carry tales, Dr Ricco," he said.

The doctor nodded. He studied the trucker a moment, then said, "Do you want to know about the space spectre, captain?" He leaned back.

Sheffield, calm-faced, nodded. "Tell me more," he said.

Dr Ricco took another sip from his coffee, and once more stared into the past. "The Space Hospital that was our original name, only changed when other hospitals opened up in the Cluster had something in common with Rob Taylor's place. That is, Rob opened a factory to make things out of carbon nanotubes but his main purpose was to keep making cable for the space elevator. The two men responsible for the hospital being here today had a second purpose but they kept it secret!"

Sheffield nodded. "They wanted to create a man who could live in space."

The director's eyebrows raised. "You've heard? But I thought "

The trucker shook his head. "Educated guess. I was thinking about the space spectre when you went to talk to your receptionist. I had heard rumors about its occasional appearances, and entertained a lot of possibilities."

Ricco sighed and relaxed. "Space Hospital," he began, "was the first satellite in the Belt. I said, 'Space Hospital'; that was our name until other hospitals joined the Belt. Anyway," he went on, "it had something in common with Taylor's satellite; Taylor was a manufacturing business, but its long-term goal was to become a Space Elevator.

"Space Hospital's ulterior purpose was to create a Spaceman! A being, as you said, who could live in space." He took a slow sip of coffee, still looking back in time.

"Isaiah Harmon and E R Witgenstein were the force behind Space Hospital. The two of them were perfect to bring about a hospital in space Witgenstein was a supremely successful and wealthy businessman, and Harmon was one of the best publicists there ever was. With E R's backing, Isaiah formed a corporation and started a very influential campaign to sell the stock.

"The government took an interest, too. This was before the war, so the government had more capital. Soon, the Space Hospital was a reality!

"The only ones to know about the other purpose were the two originators, and a Dr Fontaine and his staff. They started using many different combinations of living cells, with nanobots. To keep it short, their efforts were successful, but only once. Even tho they kept precise records, they never again could get it right. In their last month, just before Dr Fontaine died, they found what might have been the cause for success. During the first week of the mix that became Alpha, there was much solar

**flare activity."**

**"Alpha, I would guess, is the space spectre," Sheffield said.**

**The doctor nodded. "Not very original, but it needed a name. Anyway, they decided the solar activity caused the success with Alpha. But, as I said, that was when Dr Fontaine died. A stupid traffic accident on his first visit to Earth in years!" Ricco shook his head at the ironic tragedy of it all. "Anyway, the money funding the project was running low, so I decided to shut it down. I sent the other members of the staff home, and that was the end of it."**

**"That isn't all there is to it." It wasn't a question, it was a statement . . . and an intense invitation for the administrator to continue.**

**Dr. Ricco smiled ruefully. "I might come to regret the acuity you possess, Captain. Yes, you're correct. I couldn't stop until I succeeded. On the fifth trip outside, I spotted him -- and he spotted me, as well." Sheffield didn't insert himself into the pause; it was obvious Dr. Ricco was trying to gather his thoughts.**

**"He saw me, and was curious," the hospital administrator at last continued. "He came up to me, moving through space as easily as a swimmer might move through water. I have no idea how he did it," he said quickly, noting Sheffield's question before it was spoken. "Magnetism? Some kind of gravity control? I have no idea, and there was nothing in any of the records about Alpha that would indicate an answer. All I know is, he came up to me. He signed 'Hello', and I signed back to him. He had learned the spacer's signing we all use, when flares or something else interfere with our radio.**

**Doctor?**

**I am a doctor, but not Doctor Fontaine.**

**You from home?**

**Yes, I work there.**

**Not see you. But home has many holes. Not see everybody through them.**

**Do you want to come inside?**

**Nicer out here.**

**Don't you get lonely?**

**Why? Home right here. Sun there. What else?**

**"I stayed with Alpha an hour or more. There was no fear in him, no hostility. I had thought I would be afraid of him; it was his territory, he had the advantage of me in ability to exist out there with no spacesuit, he was superior to me in strength, and . . . well, I expected to be afraid, but I wasn't. He was like a retarded child, but at ease, unconcerned. Friendly!"**

**"When I went to the airlock to return, he waved goodbye and said, In forty-two minutes, big feed, then went away. There was no plea for me to stay, no question as to when I might return. It was as if we were two strangers who met in a distant city, discovered we were both from the same town, chatted a while, and then went our separate ways.**

**"I never went back out. But there was something interesting; later, a solar flare disrupted things."**

**"It was forty-two minutes, as Alpha had predicted," Sheffield guessed.**

**"Exactly."**

**There was silence while the trucker absorbed the narrative. At last, Sheffield gazed at the picture behind Ricco's desk. "Would be a nice touch if, now and then, the spaceman could drift by," he said, smiling.**

**Dr. Ricco returned his smile. "Considered that myself," he said. "But the artist who did that is long dead, and no one seems to know the technology, these days." He stood up and held a hand out to the trucker. Rising, Sheffield shook the hospital administrator's hand. "I'm glad you came by, Captain Sheffield. Not only because of my original intentions, but also because I found it therapeutic to tell someone about our . . . phenomenon." His smile faded. "But Alpha is still there, and we have no solution. The space spectre is an albatross I fear we'll have to wear forever." His door swung open with no warning. A stocky, middled-aged man stood there, anxiety on his face. "Bomb!" he said, excitedly.**

**"What?" Ricco's eyes were round. "Sutek, calm down!" The doctor looked at Sheffield. "Captain, this is Jay Sutek, my chief of security.**

**"I know Sheffield," Sutek said, straightening and taking a deep breath. He looked at the doctor. "Broadband radio said a bomb has been set at the hospital. Claimed to be the Splinters, but I don't believe it!"**

**"Computer generated, like ths others?" Ricco asked.**

**Sutek nodded. "Yeah. Can't prove anything. But it wasn't the Splinters!" he insisted, fiercely. He looked at Sheffield, then Ricco. Making a decision, he said, "I'm a Splinter. This ain't our style, nor was that sabotage!"**

**Ricco didn't looked surprised. "I thought you were a Splinter," he admitted.**

**Sutek stared at his superior. "Why didn't you fire me?"**

**"Because you are a good man," the doctor said, calmly.**

**"So are the other Splinters," Sutek replied. Then he took a deep breath. "But what are we going to do? They said the bomb would go off " he looked at his watch " at 1500. That's only a little off of half an hour!"**

**Sheffield surprised himself by saying, "Then we'd better find it!" Then he looked at Ricco. "I mean," he added, hesitantly, "that isn't time to evacuate everybody, is it?"**

**He was amazed to observe that Ricco was smiling at him. "Well-spoken, Captain," the doctor said, approvingly. "But we can," Ricco added, "make it look like we're evacuating," He pushed the intercom button. "Miss Brina," he said, "you are dismissed for the day. Pass word on to all but Medical; go home."**

**The response was, "It's the bomb, isn't it?"**

**"Seems like everyone listens to the radio," he said. "Yes, it's the bomb. Go home."**

**"Are you "**

**"I'm not leaving," he interrupted. "But you and the others are! We have to make it look like total evacuation."**

**", , ,Oh." Her acceptance was reluctant, but understanding.**

**When Ricco turned back, Sheffield said, "I'll send my rig away. Set it on Mattie-Four-Box's signal." Pulling the small control panel out of his pocket, he did so, and then said, "Now we've got to find that bomb!"**

"I'm with you," Sutek said. "But how? Where do we look?"

"They aren't after destruction," Sheffield said. "I'll bet they're going to use an energy weapon. Kill everybody, but destroy little. Let's go to the center of this satellite."

"Elevator tube'll take us straight there!" Sutek said.

"Let's go," Jeffrey Sheffield said, getting his space suit from the rack by the door. Sutek was already wearing his suit. At the door, Sheffield stopped and turned to Ricco. "I don't think we should radio each other. The bomber could pick it up." He paused, then added, "If we find the bomb, I'll say 'Alpha'."

Ricco chuckled. "If you don't find it, no point in saying anything."

In the elevator, Sutek said, calmly, "You realize we're going to die. There's lots of places the bomb could be hid."

"I'm not planning on dying," the truck driver said, determination in his voice. Then he looked at Sutek and smiled. "Besides," he added, "I'm counting on help from . . . someone else."

"Your son?"

The elevator stopped. "No," Sheffield said. "Just. . .don't be alarmed if you see something else moving around."

"Alpha!" Sutek exclaimed. "That's what you meant. You expect our space ghost to save us?" There was humor in his voice, but a touch of relief, as well. Did Sutek understand?

"You know the story?" Sheffield asked. "Then you know Alpha seems able to detect energy before it reaches us."

"Figured it was some paranormal ability, faster than light," Sutek nodded. "No one really understands Alpha."

"Whatever it is," the trucker said, "it's more than just 'faster-than-light'. Alpha predicted the solar flare sooner than that. Our space spectre seems to have some. . .instinct. . .probably connected with its need for energy. Besides," Sheffield finished, just before snapping his space helmet in place, "we have enough time, if we get busy!"

In fifteen minutes, they hadn't found the bomb but they found Alpha.

Alpha looked like a man in a heavily-padded spacesuit, including the large head which was shaped like a fat cone. The creature moved slowly toward a cluster of beams ahead of Sheffield, who had separated from Sutek so they could double their search area.

Then Alpha slowed and stopped, interest attracted by a joint in the beams.

It just. . .floated . . . there.

Another motion, slightly to the right, caught the trucker's attention. Sutek!

"Wait!" Sheffield signaled.

There was a response he hadn't expected. "I wait," Alpha signaled.

Sheffield knew Alpha understood the signals, but he hadn't thought the space spectre would have seen it; he thought the creature's attention was on the beams. But so much the better!

**"We need to delay the explosion," he signaled, then amended, "We need to delay the release of energy. We are friends of Dr Ricco's," he added.**

**"Not for fourteen minutes," Alpha responded.**

**"It is a . . . bad thing," Sheffield said. "Would kill everybody on the station. . .on your home," he explained.**

**"Alpha eat it all," the spectre said.**

**"Some energy could. . .get away from you," the trucker objected.**

**"Alpha have big. . .stomach," was the answer. "Very little energy will escape Alpha." Somehow there was a feeling of satisfaction in the message.**

**A new plan was blooming in Sheffield's mind. "Bad man put it there. Could have killed many, including Dr Ricco. Will you help us catch him?"**

**"Alpha help." "Wait a minute!" Sutek signaled. "That explosion "**

**Jeffrey Sheffield turned on his radio. "Alpha will take care of it," he said, then turned the radio off. Dr Ricco would understand. Then he signaled Sutek. "Alpha has some way of absorbing the energy," he said. "I think we are safe. Then we can trap the man who set it!"**

**"You think he'll come back?"**

**"He'll want the remains of the bomb. I'm sure we could trace it back to him."**

**"Yes!" Sutek said. "When he comes back, Alpha will get him!"**

**"Alpha get," the space creature agreed.**

**The time in between was filled with planning and instructions.**

**Then Alpha reached into the space between the beams and pulled out something not much bigger than a lunchbox. Pulled it out and bent over, wrapping himself around it.**

**The explosion was barely a fizzle.**

**The trucker delved into the pockets of his spacesuit and brought out an electronic flare and set it off. "Hopefully, to simulate the bomb blast our bad guy will be waiting for," he had explained earlier. After setting off the flare, he joined Sutek and Alpha behind the cluster of beams. Ahead of them was the likely opening taken by the bomber.**

**They waited.**

**After ten minutes, there was motion. Sutek put his space helmet against Sheffield's. "It's a shooter!" he said. "Surely this wasn't work of the Scars."**

**"No," the trucker replied. "This one is yellow; the Scars use red."**

**"Hey! Asteroid Tugs uses yellow!"**

**"I'm sure others do, too," Sheffield replied. "Still, that would be interesting. Wait; he's parking the shooter and coming this**

way."

Alpha had put the spent bomb back where it had been. The approaching bomber expected and saw nothing as he came over. Then the trucker signaled Alpha to catch the man.

Thinking everyone dead, the bomber was startled when Alpha drifted out from behind the beams. "What the hell " came over their radio, then a scream as Alphas arms encircled him.

Sheffield and Sutek came out to join Alpha. "Ned Legrange," Sutek said. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"Legrange, you're kinda far away from your security duties at Asteroid Tugs," Sheffield said, smiling.

"What. . .what's going on here?" the man said, struggling. "What is this thing?"

"You can now tell everyone that the Space Spectre is no myth," the trucker said. "After you come with us to see Dr Ricco."

"Why should I do that?" Legrange said, still trying to get out of Alpha's grip.

"Because you're going to explain to him why you were trying to kill him along with everyone else in the hospital."

"I ain't gonna "

"Let's go, Sutek," Sheffield said, turning. "We'll tell the doctor that Alpha found another toy to play with."

"Wait!" Legrange exclaimed. "You can't just leave me with this. . .this thing."

"You'll hurt Alpha's feelings," Sheffield cautioned. "But, since you don't want to go with us, that's all we can do."

"I'll go, I'll go!" he said. "Get me away from. . .Alpha."

Sheffield signaled, and the spectre released Legrange. "Get the bomb," the trucker told Legrange.

Without a pause, the man went to the beam and removed the bomb from where Alpha had returned it, then followed Sutek and Sheffield to the elevator tube.

+ + +

"So Asteroid Tugs is behind everything, the hospital administrator asked, "including self- inflicted damage?"

"Ain't talking," Legrange muttered. "You got nothing on me!"

"Except for bombing the hospital," Sheffield reminded him.

"Can't prove that!" Legrange said.

"Let's see," Sheffield said, rubbing his chin. "Sutek and I both saw you go right to the bomb remains. Kinda curious that you knew where it was."

"Well. . . well, I. . . ." He swallowed. "You can't. . .you don't "

The trucker started for the door. "We'll just ask Alpha," he said.

"There's no doubt of your guilt," Dr Ricco said, leaning back in his chair. "Alpha might want you to stick around so you can make another bomb. The Space Spectre found it quite tasty. Might even object if you tried to leave!"

Legrance slumped down in his chair. "Okay. Okay!" he said. "Put me in jail."

"That's the problem," Ricco said. "We don't have one! The Cluster doesn't even have a set of laws, other than Do Unto Others."

"You mean. . .I can go?"

"You can go," Sheffield said. "We'll even call Asteroid Tugs and let them know you're on your way."

Legrance's expression froze. "You. . .you can't do that!"

"Because they'll know you failed?" the administrator said, smiling. "Actually," he continued, "I can't think of a more appropriate punishment. And you have to go back," he added. "That's where everything you have would be, isn't it?"

+ + +

Sheffield could just use the controls to get his truck back from Mattie-Four-Box's, but that would have defeated his secondary purpose in using Mattie's signal. He called, and got Zack.

"Dad! I was worried!" Zack said. "What took so long?"

"It's an. . .interesting story," the trucker said. "The truck is on Mattie-Four-Box's signal. Get it and pick me up and I'll tell you all about it."

Zack paused, then said, "Dad you'll let me drive the truck?"

"It mostly drives itself," Sheffield said. "Call me back when you're in the seat and I'll get you started." He felt that Zack's hesitation was more his reluctance to go into space than fear of controlling the truck, but they both evaded open talk about that fear. The important thing was that Zack made it to the truck.

In ten minutes, Zack called him back. "Dad thanks for your confidence! I'm in the seat. What now?" + + +

A month later, Ricco called Sheffield. "Captain, I have some interesting news," he said.

"Yes?" the trucker said, puzzled.

"We now know Alpha's sex. I think it was because of the bomb. She's pregnant."

[HOME](http://www.planetarystories.com/spectre.htm)

wasn't hard at all! That is, once I found out what I was doing. . . . And it often happens that someone will be trying to tell me how to do something, and they start with: "All you have to do is. . . ." and that's as far as I can follow!

## **YOU CAN WIN A SPECIAL PRIZE!**

**(I'll think of something!)** Look at the box over the story, "Spectre of Space". That is the end result of over four hours of work! First thing I did was make the box in WordPerfect. The box was the key to the whole thing; I wanted a heavy box around it and couldn't do it in Front Page Express. (Now watch -- half of you know an easy way to do it in FPX that I wasn't aware of! Like I said above. . . .) ANYway, after doing that I scanned it and, in Photoshop, put color to it to blend with the pulp background I use. That's when the fun began! The way Photoshop works, you touch a wand to the area you want to color, then use the paint bucket to dump in the selected color. Great for big areas, but then there was the text! Enclosed letters (o, p, q, d, even m and n and don't forget a, and there's the enclosed portion of e, and on and on) showed up nice and white! I started using the wand on the enclosed letters (zoomed in close, so I was only working on a short portion of two lines) and then the paint bucket. . . but that was taking too long, with all the repetition. So I started Painting the colors in. (Again, there are probably lots of you saying, "But why didn't you--?" Pass them tips in!)

Then, after well over a couple of hours (could have been three hours or more; I wasn't keeping score) I came up with the approach I should have taken first! In much under an hour, I was thru. The prize is for whoever can tell me how I did it! The clues are all there. (For that matter, most of you probably have already figured it out!)

[HOME](#)

## FINE PRINT

by L. Baehne

*"Thruout history, this has been good advice: 'Always read the fine print!'" -- Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Vol 1 No 2*

"Are they here?" cried Antonio from the hissing airlock hatch. "Did my space monkeys arrive?"

Antonio's mother, Mrs. Quidachay, clapped shut the mailbox lid, frowned and shook her head, "No dear, I'm afraid not. Nothing in todays mail but," she sighed, "the monthly rocketplane insurance bill and . . . oh, look, 'we could already be billionaires'." Ed McMahon's bespectacled face beamed from the recycled plastic envelope held in her delicate hand. She didn't realize McMahon clones were still manufactured. Well, whatdaya know?

"Aww, I never get nothin'!" Antonio's shoulders slumped as he stomped back into the roomy family dome. He threw himself onto the rail-couch, crossed his thin arms in disgust and stuck out a big bottom lip.

Mrs. Quidachay closed the airlock as she entered the living room. A synthesized feminine voice emitting from a wall speaker informed her: "Airlock is now secure." The flashing safety light ceased its amber warning.

"I'm sure your monkeys will show up soon, sweetheart," she said, "After all, you only sent away for them three months ago. You know how long it takes shipments to arrive from the outer rim."

"That's what you said last mail cycle," he complained. His lip protruded even farther.

"I know dear, I'm sorry. Give it another week, okay?" After a moment's thought, a sly smile creased her face. In a conspiratorial whisper, she said, "Hey, what do you say to a batch of dune-bug cookies?" She leaned over him and lifted the bill of his Terran Tigers ball cap. Two little brown eyes peered up at her through a frond of sable hair, "With Luna chips?" she suggested.

A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, "Oh . . . okay." He leapt from the couch and shot passed her, "I'll race ya!" He giggled and ran into the kitchen, "C'mon, mom, hurry!"

"Alright, alright, I'm coming," she laughed, too, as she ran after him into the kitchen. The twain disappeared round a stainless steel corner.

Mr. Quidachay picked up the well-thumbed copy of Space Adventures magazine that lay casually

discarded on the floor of the family rocketplane. He shook his shaggy head, and with a crooked grin said, "They still publish this rag?" He paged through the publication while silently mouthing the titles of stories which featured serial characters with implausible handles like: Cosmic Ray Rawlins, or Admiral Nova's Blue Brackian Brigade. The black and white illustrations that accompanied the stories were just as unpolished and quickly drawn as he remembered from his own youthful encounter with the popular boys magazine. The cover brandished its requisite muscle bound hero in garish primary colors, garbed in a too-tight super suit and propelled by dual rocket packs strapped haphazardly to his back. Predictably, a scantily clad damsel lay cradled in the bulging arms of her new found space-beau; her dreamy-eyed gaze a testament to her unabashed admiration for the timely, cleft-chinned hero. Mr. Quidachay chuckled and continued turning the roughened pages. How little some things change.

The last two pages of the magazine were reserved for quirky ads and goofy sounding inventions that only young boys could express enthusiasm for. Mr. Quidachay was fairly certain that girls of a similar age were a bit more sophisticated in this respect. They were less inclined to part with a month's allowance for a mere pair of x-ray glasses whose only discernable function seemed to be the hampering of one's eyesight while making its wearer appear an insomniac caffeine addict. He should know, he had sorely missed his own allowance after one such lapse in commercial judgment. Flipping to the last page his eye was immediately drawn to the hastily and brightly circled advertisement announcing:

### **SPACE MONKEYS, NEW AND IMPROVED!**

Yes, now you too can enjoy the unique experience of ACME's new and improved species of space monkey. Just add water and watch them grow.

Name 'em, tame 'em, sing 'em a song, they'll chirp and chitter all the day long.

Our secret labs have worked night and day to perfect this amazing product for your entertainment pleasure. They'll provide you with hours of pure and wholesome fun. Parents, do you know where your children are? Well, with ACME's new and improved space monkeys you will!

For the modest price of 489, 000 space-pesos, you too can try out our latest innovation in genetic engineering. See details for more information.\*

Send space-pesos to: ACME Products, 2001 Odyssey Way, New Sri Lanka, Rama IV

Before he knew it the automated pilot chimed loudly: "Five-hundred meters to destination."

Mr. Quidachay looked up from the magazine to take in the scene unfolding below the rocketplane. The domestic domes were so numerous that from his current altitude the vista greatly resembled

old fashioned bubble wrap as hemisphere after hemisphere dotted the gray, featureless landscape. The atmosphere above the residential areas shimmered its rainbow effects, bringing to mind oil and water dancing and writhing on a liquid surface. He tossed the worn magazine on the passengers seat and strapped himself in for the landing. His ring-watch read 1745 hours. Just in time for the Terran Tigers game. He smiled to himself in anticipation and lay his head back against the seat rest. A flashing red strobe beckoned his attention, the autopilot announced: "Landing gear deployed."

"It's here, it's here!" Antonio called as he ripped open the packaging of the modest shipping container. The airlock hissed shut behind him with a resonant ssshhh. He discarded the plasti-cover wrapping on the floor and ran into the living room to proudly display his long awaited mail order. The corner of an instruction manual sheepishly peered over the top edge of the container as Antonio pulled off the lid. He reached in and gingerly lifted free a slim, violet plexi-tube from its protective foam bedding. Holding the container carelessly in one hand, the manual tumbled from the box and lazily fluttered to the carpet finally coming to rest beneath the rail-couch.

"What do you have there, son?"

"It's my space monkeys, Pop, new from Rama IV!" His excitement was nigh uncontainable and rather contagious, for Mr. Quidachay's curiosity prompted him to set down the file over which he was poring and lift his bulky frame from the gravi-chair to inspect Antonio's new acquisition.

The tube, about nine inches in length and three quarters of an inch in diameter, contained a slightly smoky liquid barely visible through the colored plexi-tube. Antonio was rewarded with a watery sloshing sound as the youth tipped the sample end over end. After several moments of vigorously agitating the vial, he complained, "Aw, there ain't no monkeys that I can see."

"Give it awhile, 'Tonio, these things take time." Mr. Quidachay reached for the vial and read the label:

**SPACE MONKEY EXTRACT: POUR CONTENTS INTO LARGE CONTAINER; ADD WATER.**

"Ah-ha," understanding dawned. His eyes panned the immediate rooms and abruptly collided with the kitchen cupboards, "Wait here," he said. After the riotous din from the kitchen died down and the boy pulled his hands away from his ears, Mr. Quidachay returned to the living room panting. He had in tow a plexi-glass mixing bowl that Mrs. Quidachay often used for stirring cake batter and cookie dough, "We won't tell your mother about this," Mr. Quidachay winked. Antonio giggled as he unstopped the violet plexi-vial.

Two standard hours had elapsed since an excited Antonio placed the bowl of water with monkey extract atop his bureau before the long rectangle of his bedroom window. The sun's festive rays

warmed the bureau's top and most of his room with swaying shafts of luminous golden light rendering the room's oft-used heater unnecessary on this day.

After staring at the bowl with chin propped in hand for the better part of that time, he became restless and so distracted himself with an aging Space Ranger Joe action figure. Twenty minutes later, after Space Ranger Joe had subdued the ring-leaders of a particularly nasty planetary rebellion and quelled the rampant flames of revolution, Antonio's grumbling stomach reminded him that little boys required sustenance even if action figures didn't. He tossed Ranger Joe on the bureau next to the bowl and bolted from the room to announce loudly, "Mom, I'm hungry!"

The ball-cap-wearing boy nosily slurped the remnants of a purple drink from a squat, square glass and like a saloon patron, slammed the now-empty container on the table top, which was sprinkled liberally with sandwich crumbs. With a satisfied, "Ahhh" and a healthy burp he was again off to his room. He burst through the door and dived under his bed in search of a board game which Mrs. Quidachay had talked him into playing. Uni-skates, Thacket-balls and dirty socks galore flew from beneath the bed, smacked the wall with many sonorous thunks and lay piled on the floor as Antonio searched in vain for the mislaid game. He withdrew finally from the dark recess with dust bunnies clinging to his tousled hair, but was otherwise empty handed. It was at this time that he noticed the bird-like chirping assailing his keen little ears. He looked around him but saw nothing obvious that should be emitting such a curious sound.

With hands on slender hips and puzzled expression upon his face he stood for a moment in confusion. Then, like a spotlight flooding a darkened attic, he yelled to no one in particular, "MY SPACE MONKEYS!" He spun on his heel and stood there in shock at the sight that greeted him, too stunned to move.

The bowl in which the extract had been dumped overflowed its rim with a bubbling, pearl-colored fuzzy substance that crept over the entire surface of the bureau and completely enveloped Space Ranger Joe. Each individual monkey divided itself from its hairy brethren with a resounding pop and rolled about like a gelatinous jelly bean, chirping and twittering without a care in the world. Five tiny protuberances began to sprout from each of the diminutive creatures even as the boy looked on. They were growing!

After his initial shock receded, a goofy smile replaced the apprehension on Antonio's visage as he slowly approached the misty, effervescent concoction rolling--and some jumping now--off the edge of the bureau and onto the gray carpeted floor. "Jumpin' Jupiter!" was about all he could muster. The chirping grew in volume as the mass of fizzing bubbly things increased and spread over the floor, covering even more space. A sinking sensation suddenly lurched in his stomach as he cast frantically about looking for something, anything to contain the growing horde. A nervous chuckle escaped young Antonio, for the encroaching and rapidly swelling monkeys didn't seem to be slowing down.

It quickly covered his purple dinosaur and other toys that had been dropped randomly about the carpet and began to rise like expanding yeast as their numbers rapidly multiplied. Before he knew it, the things had risen to the level of his bed and Antonio was to his knees in harmoniously tweeting space monkeys. With some effort and a swish, swish he waded through the pooling creatures toward the bedroom door and pulled it open with a hearty tug. He fell unceremoniously into the hallway followed by a wet gush of foaming monkeys. He slipped twice attempting to gain his feet, but finally he managed to pull the door closed behind him. He stood there panting heavily, both hands gripping the doorknob, one foot propped against the wall for leverage. Panic seized him when, to his horror, the pearly fuzzy stuff began oozing under the door and into the hallway, "Oh no!"

Mrs. Quidachay heard the commotion down the hallway and inquired, "My goodness, 'Tonio, what's going on over there?"

He froze like a nebula deer caught in a rocketplane's headlights, "Uh . . . nothing, mom! Just, um . . . playing with my space monkeys." As an afterthought he added, "Heh, heh."

As if this weren't bad enough, after a short spell the bedroom door began groaning under the weight of the rapidly expanding monkeys and soon developed an outward bow that was becoming exceedingly convex by the moment. The chirp and chitter of the critters was so loud now that Mrs. Quidachay stepped away from her daily holo-disc workout and into the hall. Antonio suddenly released the door handle and sprinted down the hallway toward an unsuspecting Mrs. Quidachay, his unkempt hair corkscrewing in all directions, "Run for your life!" he yelled.

A sudden squeak of surprise issued from Mrs. Quidachay as she stood aghast and gaping at the bubbling, cheeping, bouncing stuff flowing under the boy's bedroom door. She spat, "Oh my word, what did you do?" Antonio, however, was spared an explanation because at just that moment she got her answer. The bedroom door exploded outward and splintered against the far wall. A torrent of foaming, gibbering space monkeys crashed into said wall and with a thundering rush, cascaded down the hallway sweeping both Antonio and Mrs. Quidachay into the living room, arms and legs flailing wildly. "Antonio. . . ! " gulp, snort, "Wait until your father . . . !" sputter, gasp. . . .

"Five-hundred meters to destination," chimed the auto-pilot.

The lodge meeting went overtime tonight and Mr. Quidachay was arriving home later than was his wont. He rubbed his full belly as its prodigious distention stretched his shirt tighter than usual. The hearty meal served up tonight by his fraternity brothers was the stuff of which legends are made: roasted space-bat au gratin (depilated, of course), asteroidal yams with just a hint of brother Stympson's famous Lenari sauce, lunar lamb teriyaki on a lush bed of henner sprouts. And to wash it down: two tall glasses of contraband Titan Beer--of the dark variety, naturally. The Cuban cigars imported from Terra by brother Hennessey was the icing on the proverbial

cake. Now that was a meal.

On his descending approach to the domicile landing pad he was a bit surprised to see so many people milling in the streets at this hour. "Hm, that's curious," he observed. The setting sun made distinct the red hued lights from countless atmosphere suits, bobbing like so much flotsam and jetsam upon a sea of humanity as people wandered aimlessly about the narrow city streets. He could even make out the tiny jets of carbon dioxide escaping from the exhaust in their helmets, regular wisps of gaseous columns squirting into the atmosphere to dissipate on the current like ink from an octopus.

"Landing gear deployed."

Two small atmosphere-suited figures stood at the extreme edge of the family landing pad. To Mr. Quidachay, it looked as though they were in the midst of an argument, "Well, isn't that odd?" The taller of the two was pointing toward the family dome and sweeping its other arm in frantic, animated gestures. The smaller seemed merely to gaze intently at its booted feet, punctuated occasionally by a craning of the neck toward the flooded, fractured dome--"Whoa, the dome!" he sputtered, "What in the world?" For it was only then that Mr. Quidachay saw clearly the pearly pink froth gushing from the broken dome like a waterfall. Closer scrutiny informed him that the unnamed substance had inundated at least three city blocks in every direction.

A web of spidery fractures lent an opaque appearance to the damaged structure. As one traced the webs from their fine, narrow cracks to their wider and larger fissures, the eye came to rest inevitably on the gaping hole through which tons of pink squirming foam issued like a burst dam. Luckily the landing pad was situated on the dome's east side in front of the airlock, whereas the gusher spewed from the south. The two people below, therefore, appeared relatively unscathed. Though one of them is soon going to wish they had drowned.

The rocketplane hovered above the flooded city at a safe distance where the exhausted Quidachay's could observe emergency services personnel herding angry and hostile citizens behind the recently erected cordons. "Look at the chaos down there," commented Mr. Quidachay, "it's the kind of devastation one might expect a natural disaster to leave in its wake. And you're going to tell me that space monkeys did that?"

"I'm sorry, Pop." Antonio said, sniffing loudly, his eyes still puffy from crying, "I didn't know this would happen. Really I didn't." His chin and bottom lip were aquiver, a fresh bout of weeping waiting in the wings. He hung his head and walked to the rear of the cabin where he fell into one of the oversized seats.

Mrs. Quidachay finally managed to wriggle her way out of the encumbering atmosphere suit which now lay on the passenger side floor in a crumpled heap. She leaned back and rested her sore neck, her hands falling lazily to her sides. She heard the crinkle of paper and looked down. A

magazine peered cautiously from the tight crevice between the two front seats. Its title clearly legible: Space Adventures. She pulled it out and dropped it on the floor atop the atmosphere suit where its back cover fluttered open to expose the last page of the magazine. A brightly circled advertisement caught her eye: SPACE MONKEYS, NEW AND IMPROVED. She leaned forward and scanned the ad. She was about to close it when she noted the caveat emptor:

**\*Warning: Keep product in dark isolated space. Do not expose to direct sunlight, as ultra-violet light adversely affects growth rate of artificially enhanced space monkeys. May cause birth defects if handled by pregnant women and or stunt the growth of young children. Keep pets and clothing away from space monkeys--especially platform shoes, polyester suits and wide-brimmed hats. Under no circumstances should owner place space monkeys in the vicinity of mirrored disco balls!**

**Should a member of your household begin to glow in the dark or accidentally ingest product, seek medical attention immediately!**

**Use water sparingly--recommended dose: seven drops. ACME products will not be held liable for misuse or abuse of its products.**

**For further information call: 908-000-5674-39 extension # 2001 (to file a lawsuit: extension # 2012).**

She handed the ratty magazine to Mr. Quidachay who read where her slender finger indicated. His visibly reddening features suggested an aneurysm lay moments away. With white-knuckled hands, he calmly placed the magazine on the brightly lit dashboard, smoothed out his shirt, turned toward the back of the cabin and yelled, "'TONIO!" A please-calm-yourself look from Mrs. Quidachay suggested that he take a more controlled approach. Through clenched teeth he said, "Get-over-here-right-now!"

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# NADIR OF THE PURPLE SAGE

By Gerald W. Page

*"Altho her lady space captain's uniform makes it obviouse she is not a boy, Captain Shiver practices the motto, 'Be Prepared'!" -- Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Vol 3 No 2*

The four riders reined in their robonags on a hill overlooking the settlement of Dismal Creek. It was a small community, rather nondescript, the sort of place that might have been overlooked by almost anyone. Captain Shivers leaned forward, resting her forearm on the pommel of her saddle. "From up here it looks almost peaceful, Grabby."

"Waal, Cap'n, it might look peaceable," the old space marshal said, popping a chaw of synthetic tobac into his cheek with a tentacle, while pushing back the ragged brim of his old hat with another and scratching himself with a third one. "But by doggies, I gotta tell ya, that's one bad place. Why, I might be the toughest, fastest, hard-shootineast ten-tentacled shootin' machine on the face of this here galaxy, but I weren't one bit happy about ridin' in thar all by myself. It's plumb full of outlaws, that's what it is. Tarnation, the last time I was down there, I seen Plaid Bart."

Urgus, the pudgy young spacekid gazed at the old marshal with bulging eyes. "Golly gee, Unca Grabby! Is Plaid Bart a notorious outlaw?"

"Well now, young 'un, they just don't come no notoriouser than Plaid Bart. Why, that varmint weren't no less than a kilt person."

In the back of the group, Nadir McGuirk, the tall greenfeathered mutant who served as first officer aboard Captain Shivers' spaceship The Starsnipe, threw up a wing in disgust. "Grabby, there's not no such thing as a kilt person. That would be like a shirt person or an underwear person. Persons gotta be vegetable, animal or mineral, not apparel. So even if he was called Plaid Bart, he wasn't any kilt person."

Grabby made six different rude gestures at McGuirk without looking back at him and said, "By doggies, I know a kilt person when I see one and that's what Plaid Bart was. Leastwise after Bat Dursten shot him sixteen times in just his gizzard alone, that's what he was." He spat a load of tobac juice at a nearby cactus, which tried unsuccessfully but valiantly to jump aside, and added, "T'warn't no two ways about that."

Captain Shivers straightened up in her saddle. "That's enough of this clever repartee, boys. Can I trust the two of you to stay out of trouble while Urgus and I ride into town?"

"Urgus!" McGuirk said. "You're taking Urgus again? How come that little twerp gets to go into town while I gotta stay up here on the hill with Old Whisker Face."

"Urgus will blend in better down there than you will," Shivers said.

"She's dern tootin' right about that one," said Grabby. "Why, you're a bird-beaked green-feathered freak that smokes a smelly cigar. And I'm a famous and galaxy-feared space marshal. Them 'outlaws down there would be sure to spot the two of us. Besides, if Cap'n Shivers gets into trouble, Urgus can come tell us and we can ride down there and I can rescue her while you makes a fool of yourself. Right, cap'n?"

"Ah, gee," said Urgus. ""Does that mean I won't get to shoot any outlaws, again?"

"Don't listen to these two," said the captain, arranging her white stetson at a jaunty angle on top of her blonde head. "Your job will be important enough. You'll be my back-up." She spurred her robonag, which started off down the hill toward the town below.

"Your back-up!" said Urgus. "Oh, boy." His robonag started off after the captain, then stopped. Urgus picked himself up and climbed back into the saddle.

Captain Shivers waited for him to catch up. While she waited, she called back to McGuirk. "You and Grabby go ahead and set up camp. It'll be almost dark when we get back."

Looking at Captain Shivers as she rode down that slope toward Dismal Creek, it was obvious she would blend in better than either McGuirk or Grabby. She still wore a version of her familiar Earle K. Bergey design lady space captain's uniform, but it was modified in the standard ways that spelled out 'frontier.' She had added buckskin fringe to the hem of her hipwisps and wore a ten-gallon hat and red bandana. Not to mention the crossed gunbelts for her D-guns.

Urgus was having trouble keeping up with her - he had been having trouble since they set out on this trip because his short legs made it difficult for him to reach the stirrups. But he managed to pull up alongside her as they approached the town. "Golly gee, Captain ma'am," he said, pushing back the brim of his white two-gallon hat. "Dismal Creek sure looks frontiersie."

"This planet is hundreds of lightyears from the regular spacelanes, Urgus. There's no law or decency here but what we bring with us."

"You mean the D-guns in your holsters, right Captain Shivers ma'am?"

Captain Shivers reined in her robonag before answering. "I mean our determination and courage, Urgus. And the D-guns." She leaned forward and pointed. "There's the sheriff's office."

She was indicating a small wooden building between a general store and a saloon. In front of it hung a sign that said 'Jail' and there were bars on the windows. There were people milling about in front of the office.

She started down the hill again at a leisurely pace that offered no problems to Urgus. They rode in silence until they reached the bottom of the hill and turned toward the town's main street.

"Golly gee!" Urgus said, nervously. "Those hombres standing around in front of the sheriff's office sure look mean. Especially that big one."

"Looks like just another bison person to me," Captain Shivers said. But she eyed him with appreciative suspicion.

"But he looks like a tough bison person."

**"Maybe so," said the captain. "But he puts his chaps on one hoof at a time, just like you."**

**They were riding slowly down the dirt street and Captain Shivers seemed utterly unconcerned with anything. The crowd in front of the sheriff's office parted as they approached. Captain Shivers ignored them when she reached the hitching rail, and reined in the robonag.**

**As Captain Shivers dismounted, the bison person hitched up his gunbelt and lifted up his right upper lip in a bovine sneer. "Waal, looky here. By the cut of yore clothes, little lady, yore either a she-woman space captain or else the new kootch dancer at the Last Gulp Saloon."**

**Shivers gave him a disdainful glance as she reached the ground. She said, "You're wrong about one thing, bison man. I'm no lady. So keep your hooves to yourself."**

**"Oooo, don't she sound right spunky, boys?"**

**Someone in the crowd said, "Reminds me of the school marm."**

**The "boys" standing nearby laughed. To Urgus there seemed a slight edge of nervousness to the sound but it didn't reassure him. The bison man stepped in Captain Shivers' way.**

**The bison man towered over Captain Shivers, despite her above average height for a human woman. With the sort of deadly quiet that would have impressed most beings and encouraged them to back off, she said, "You're standing in my way."**

**The bison being said, "Am I, now! Waal, little lady, this here's a free planet and as sure as my name's Buffalo Will, I got the right to stand anywheres I wants to." He chuckled. "Unless, of course, ya wants to move me out of your way or something. And I don't think you can do that," he added smugly.**

**"Don't count on it," said the space captain.**

**"Well, danged if you don't sound tough as my Aunt Edna's biscuits."**

**The crowd laughed and someone toward the back said, "You tell 'er, Will."**

**"Listen here, little lady," he said, pressing forward. "Why don't you just go back up the trail you just came down on? The sheriff's a busy man. He don't want to be bothered just now."**

**"Cow breath," said Shivers, dangerously. "You really need to get out of my way."**

**Buffalo Will glanced back at the cowcritters behind him. "She's sure startin' to sound tough, ain't she boys?" Then, to her and in a more sinister tone he said, "Sure as my name's Buffalo Will, I don't think they's room enough in these parts for the both of us. So if you don't want to draw one of them purty little guns of yorn, ya better get out of town."**

**"Most times," said Captain Shivers, "I'm a peaceable woman. But tell you what. Since I'm no lady, there's no real reason you can't draw first, is there?"**

**If that surprised Buffalo Will, he covered it with a loud laugh. The crowd, however, backed off toward safer regions. Buffalo Will said, grimly, "Yore startin' to sound right spunky there, like a schoolmarm with a couple of rowdy farmboys in the back of the classroom. I'd be a mite more careful if I was you. Real careful."**

**Urgus saw Buffalo William's hooves starting toward his holsters. He shouted, "Look out, Cap'n Shivers ma'am!"**

**The bison person's guns seemed to leap from the holsters and an evil laugh issued from his lips. But Captain Shiver's D-guns moved more quickly and as their deadly zap was heard in the streets of Dismal Creek, Buffalo Will's expression turned to one of surprise. His guns fired futilely into the ground and he pitched forward.**

**Someone in the crowd said, "Sufferin' sagebrush! She got him! She done outdrew Buffalo Will!"**

**There was no other sound for a moment. Captain Shivers stood there, guns ready. "It was his call. All the way," she said, eyeing the bystanders. After a moment she decided the crowd was too cowed to make a move against her so she holstered the guns and moved on toward the door. Her spurs jingled, her heavy boot heels sounded on the wooden boardwalk. "Come on, Urgus," she said. "We've got business with the sheriff."**

Captain Shivers opened the door to the sheriff's office and stepped in, followed by Urgus. The man seated behind the desk was young, with rugged good looks and immediately gave the impression of an easy-going manner. But she saw something in his eyes that was not easy-going and knew the sheriff of Dismal Creek could be a formidable foe.

"That was quite a display, out there," he said calmly, not getting out of his chair.

"Are you the sheriff?"

"I sure am. The name's Dursten. Bat Dursten. And who might you be?"

"I'm Captain Veronica Shivers of the space freighter Starsnipe. This is one of my crew, Urgus."

"Captain Shivers, huh? I've heard about you. A friend of that space marshals, aren't you? Grabby Haze? I had a feeling that was who you were. I know why you're here, then."

""Probably," she said, handing him a piece of paper. "But let's make it official. I brought authorization."

Dursten reached across his desk. "Let me see." He studied the paper a moment, then said, "According to this, I'm supposed to turn it over to you, all right. You sure you're up to the job?"

"Why, she's the toughest, ablest space captain in the universe," Urgus said.

"I bet she is," said Dursten, with a slight smile that seemed almost grim. The chair creaked as he rose to his feet. His spurs jingled as he walked to the back of the room where a battered safe stood.

"That thing looks older than the planet," said Shivers.

"It's pretty old, all right," Dursten agreed, bending down and reaching for the combination lock on the safe's door. "But it does the job. Let's see if I remember the numbers. Yeah, I think I do."

**He turned the lock. "There."**

**The heavy door of the safe swung open and Dursten removed a small steel box. He took it over to his desk, set it down and flipped open the lid, which wasn't locked. "Take a look at that."**

**He lifted the stone out of the box and held it up to the light that streamed in through the small barred window in his office. He said, "The emerald of Zim. I never saw anything else like it. It's the size of your fist, too, captain."**

**"Look how it shines," said Urgus, his eyes wide with amazement.**

**Dursten set it down on his desk. "Three weeks ago a stranger came to town. Tried to use the emerald to stake a card game but his luck ran out in a game of draw - if you know what I mean. I was the guy that outdrew him. This has been in my safe waiting for you or the marshal ever since."**

**"How many attempts to steal it?"**

**"Not even one."**

**"Now that's interesting," Shivers said. "Very interesting."**

**"You think so?"**

**"You're not saying you don't, are you? There was an attempt to kill me out there on the street just now, before I ever got the emerald in my hand." She smiled grimly.**

**"Add that to the fact that no one tried to steal the thing and what do you get?"**

**"Are you saying someone's as interested in you as in that emerald?"**

**The sound Dursten made was halfway between a snort and a laugh. "Don't you think that's a little on the conceited side?"**

**"Maybe."**

**Dursten grinned and shook his head. "Well, there's sure no maybe about one thing. You haven't seen your last gunfight."**

**"You want to write out a receipt for me to sign?"**

**"Got one all ready. How you planning on carrying that thing? Not a lot of room for pockets in that outfit of yours."**

**"There is too!" Urgus said. "That's an Earle K. Bergey designed lady space captain's uniform, the most efficient uniform ever created by human beings."**

**"Urgus is right," Captain Shivers said. "As far back as the middle of the twentieth century, visionaries like Earle K. Bergey, Frank Kelly Freas and Montague Ashley realized that women, because of their superior physiques could move around freely in the vacuum of space wearing nothing more than brass bra, boots, hipwisps and a fishbowl helmet, while men would always be cursed with bulky spacesuits. Just because I've added some buckskin fringe to the skirt doesn't mean this outfit can't do the job."**

**"Oh, I can see it can do the job all right," said the sheriff. "I Just can't see where you're going to stash anything as big as the Emerald of Zim."**

**"Right here in this pouch on the belt," she said.**

**"Damnation! I never even noticed that."**

**"Of course not," Shivers said meaningfully, as she put the diamond away. "Thanks for your help, Sheriff Dursten. Urgus, we'd better be going."**

**"Yes ma'am."**

**"Nice meeting you captain," Dursten said. "Don't forget I'm here. If you need my help, just let me know."**

**"I'll keep that in mind," she said, and left.**

**Bat Dursten rose from the desk, went to the window and stood watching his two visitors ride off. Then another door opened behind him and he heard someone enter the room. He didn't look around. Captain Cruiser, the notorious pirate queen, said in that syrupy drawl of hers, "I swear, Bat, but those eyes of yours are going to roll right out on the floor if you don't get away from that window and push them back in their sockets."**

**"I was just watching your arch rival ride off, darling."**

**"I can tell what you were watching. And I don't mind, really I don't. After all, she probably is the second most beautiful woman in the universe. Isn't that so, Rat?"**

**Dursten laughed and turned toward the space pirate. "She's sure in the top two, all right. Do I detect some jealousy there?"**

**"Jealousy?" Cruiser purred in her syrupy accent. "And me all decked out in the local version of the Earle K. Bergey lady space pirate's uniform? All black and skimpy? I hope you like the touches of dance hall girl chic I added."**

**"Oh, I like them," he said, taking her in his arms. "I like them lot."**

**"Then kiss me. We both know you want to."**

**After the kiss he said, "You're a nice piece of work, Betty. But I still think you're crazy."**

**"Flatterer."**

**"I mean it. That woman's dangerous. Did you see how she took care of Buffalo Will?"**

**"Some gunslinger he was," she said, almost snarling. "He had hooves instead of hands, darling."**

**"He was fast. I've never seen a bison person so fast," said Dursten.**

**"You worry too much, Bat. I know what I'm doing. My way you'll be in the clear when the emerald gets stolen again. After all, you could have arranged for its theft any old time while it was in your safe, couldn't you? You'll never even be suspected. Besides, there's more dangerous adversaries out there than sweet Veronica Shivers."**

**"In that case, you're going to need some help."**

**Now it was Cruiser's turn to laugh, a light tinkling sound like the breaking of very brittle glass. "You mean you? You've already helped me. You did prepare that little**

**surprise for Captain Shivers out by the water hole, didn't you?"**

**"Oh, it's prepared all right. But damn it, Cruiser, that isn't what I mean and you know it."**

**"Then maybe you should say just what you do mean."**

**He was starting to get angry. Try as he did to control it he couldn't keep it entirely out of his voice. "Don't play games with me, sweetheart. I know how they talk about me all over the Galaxy. Well, I won't put up with that much longer. Yeah, sure, I might be stuck here on this backwater planet - for now - shooting it out with owlhoot vermin and, yeah, I've punched robocows and fought my share of prairie pup people. But that don't mean I don't have my pride. Especially it don't mean Vat not as good a spaceman as anyone else."**

**"How very emotional," she said calmly. "Tell you what. I'll give some thought to how useful you can be." She was at the back door, now. She cast a demure look back at his. "Wait by the phone, won't you?"**

**She smiled, waved, opened the door and slipped out.**

#### **4**

**Grabby Haze stirred the campfire with a stick, while he filled a coffee pot, greased the skillet to fry the bacon in and played a complicated game of eat's cradle with his other tentacles. McGuirk lay nearby, his back propped against a tree stump.**

**"By doggies, this reminds me of the time I took on a whole passel of outlaws out in the badlands," Grabby said, breathlessly. "They was the orneriest cusses anybody ever laid eyes on. One of 'em -"**

**"What reminds you?" asked McGuirk.**

**"Huh?" said Grabby.**

**""You said something reminded you of that story. The story sounds like crapola, so I thought it might be-more interesting if you talked about what reminded you."**

**"Don't matter what reminded me!" Grabby snapped. "I'm going to tell it anyways. Waal, it seems –"**

**McGuirk sat up. "What's that?"**

**Grabby pointed three of his tentacles on the ground, while flipping flapjacks into the air from a skillet (not the one the bacon was now frying in). "You blame whippersnapper! Why don't you stop a-interrupting me and let me get on with this here feather-raising yarn, like I'm a-going to anyways?"**

**"No," McGuirk said. "I really heard something."**

**"Waal, it shore weren't me."**

**"I could swear I heard something out there in the beckjarbing night. Probably Urgus and the Captain coming back."**

**Grabby peered out into the blackness. "Must've been Urgus. You'd never hear Cap'n Shivers until she wanted you to."**

**McGuirk looked around,-scowling. "Boy, it sure is dark. I can't see any –"**

**His sentence was cut short with a loud bonking sound. For a moment the tall mutant stared into the night with cross-eyed stupefaction. Then he toppled over and lay on the ground next to the tomahawk that had just hit him.**

**Grabby stared at him a moment and then said, "Now that's better, much better. You jist lie there while I finishes my yarn - "**

**At which point another tomahawk made another loud bonking sound, this time against Grabby's skull.**

**He decided to postpone the story, just before he hit the ground.**

## **5**

**McGuirk groaned and-said, "What a headache!"**

**"Well, what'd ya expect, ya mutated varmint?" snarled Grabby. "You'd think you'd**

never been bonked on the gourd by a tomahawk before. Course ya got a headache. Durn fool can't figure out nothin'. Now, where was I before we was so rudely interrupted? Oh, yeah. Seems like - "

"I got a better question," growled McGuirk. "Where are we?"

"Near's I can tell, we're tied up in an abandoned mine."

"How'd we get here?"

"Consarn it, McGuirk you'd think you weren't the least bit interested in hearing my bodacious yarn."

"If the story's that flabdarbin good, I'd just as soon save it for my old age."

"You would?" Grabby said, amazed. "Actually that makes sense. I'm not that used to you making sense, McGuirk."

McGuirk strained against his bonds and after a moment decided it was hopeless.

"You never did answer my question. How'd we get here?"

"If'n ya ask me," Grabby said, "It's them flying saucer doohickeys."

"Am I still groggy from being hit on the head?" McGuirk asked. "It sounded to me as if you said 'Flying saucers!'" Grabby yelled. "Them's the cause of all our troubles, ya yellow beaked rapscaillon. Why, on most nights I can look out my cabin window and see dozens of the things zooming about in the sky, and if you ask me they're all from outer space." Confidentially he added, "Most of them lands close by, too."

"Grabby, you live next door to the spaceport. Of course they land nearby."

"Why you disbelieving whippersnapper. You think you got all the answers, don't ya?"

"I'm not a whippersnapper," McGuirk said. "I'm a pure-blooded mutant. But enough of this nonsense.. We ought to be thinking about getting out of here."

"It ain't going to be easy," said Grabby. "'Whoever tied us up and tossed us again this here mine wall must have consulted Asimov's Guide to Extra-Terrestrial

**Restraint, cause we're tied up tighter'n all get out, which we can't do less we can get untied, of course. Why, they got me tied up art deco style, with my tentacles knotted together and threaded through one another. I think they read up on the chapter on the parrot people of Psittis V to figure out how to tie you up."**

**"Zakkakkies," swore McGuirk. "Nothing makes me madder than being mistaken for a parrot person." ,**

**"Wall, fortunately, a thing like that cain't happen very often," Grabby said.**

**"Don't you count on it," McGuirk snarled. "Just last month I was kidnaped by a giant space pirate from Thruxlam II. The narbing fool made me ride around on his shoulder for a week." He blinked, "Hey,what' s that?"**

**"By doggies, I do believe that giant boulder near the front of the mine moved."**

**"That's no boulder,ff McGuirk said. "Jumping zapcrawlies."**

**"Jehosophat!" yelled Grabby. "Don't mention no zapcrawlies to me. I purely hates and despises them varmints. Why, way back in '72, I recollect as how –“**

**McGuirk squirmed closer to Grabby so he could speak in an excited near whisper. "Forget about zapcrawlies.**

**We've got bigger problems. Do you realize who's got us?"**

**'They didn't rightly innerduce themselves. Big somethings, ain't they?"**

**"They're the Bronto sisters," McGuirk said in a near panic. 'We've been caught by the most dangeropus jewel thieves in the seven galaxies!"**

**The large thing Grabby had earlier mistaken for a boulder walked up and peered at the captives. She looked something like a brontosaurus. She had a red wig that hung in ringlets almost to the back of her neck and she wore a demure grey dress with a white lace collar. She peered at them through pince nor glasses.**

**"Land sakes," she said. "I do believe you've come too. May I offer you a nice cup of pepper root tea?"**

**Grabby whispered to McGuik, "For a big dinnysore looking something that's even**

**uglier than you are, she sure has good manners, don't she?"**

**"Wait'll you meet her sister."**

**Grabby laughed. 'Sister! Two of them all dressed up in old maid dresses with lace collars, offering us pepper root tea, why, we'll escape from these two in no time.'**

**There was a sharp sound from the back of the mine that either had to be a stick of dynamite going off - or the crack of a whip.**

**From out of the darkness an unpleasant voice snarled, 'Don't give them any pepper root tea, Emily. It's remotely possible they might like it.'**

**A second figure, as big as the one called Emily, stepped out of the shadows.**

**McGuirk said, 'Does that look like any old-maid outfit to you?'**

**Grabby gulped loudly. "Thunderation I don't think I ever seen a brontysaur in a corset and spiked collar before."**

**"Besides," she said, coming closer, "they'd no doubt prefer my special gatorade to your silly tea".**

**"And just what's so special spout your gatorade?" snarled McGuirk.**

**The bronto-lady in the corset and collar snapped her whip again and said, "I squeeze it myself.,**

**'Oh, don't pay her any mind," Emily said sweetly. "That's just my sister Charlotte. That whip don't mean a thing. she's very softhearted person. She can barely bring herself to torture a person into the second month."**

**'But I promise a doozy of a first month," said Charlotte.**

**"Hey," said McGuirk, with some urgency to his tons of voice. "Why not let's all be adult about this? You just ask whatever question you care to, and I'll give it some serious thought, then spill my little guts out."**

**Charlotte laughed. It was a grating, unpleasant laugh. "Excellent. That's exactly the way I like to start these little sessions. By spilling somebody's little guts out."**

**6**

**"Golly gee, Captain Shivers," said Urgus. "There's not a sign of whoever carried off Once First Officer Nadir McGuirk and Marshal Grabby."**

**Captain Shivers was down on one knee studying the ground by the light of two of the planet's four moons. "They covered their trail pretty well, all right. The campfire's still warm, though. They can't have been gone long."**

**Urgus scratched his head. "Golly gee, Captain Shivers, ma'am, whyever would anyone want to kidnap two swell guys like Unca first officer Nadir McGuirk, sir, and Marshal Grabby? You don't think it has anything to do with that emerald, do you?"**

**"More than likely," said Captain Shivers, getting to her feet.**

**"But I thought the thief who stole it was dead."**

**"He is," said Shivers. "He lost a gambling argument at the Last Gulp Saloon last month. But a lot of people saw the jewel roll out of his pocket when he hit the floor - according to the sheriff. The sheriff said that was why he put the thing in his safe and called Grabby."**

**"Then it could be any one of them," said Urgus.**

**Captain Shivers shook her head. "Possibly, but I don't think so. The Emerald of Zim was originally stolen by Aspirin Eddie Ziplat~ch about six years ago. There've been rumors that he double-crossed his partners."**

**"He sounds like a bad man."**

**"Stupid, too. His partners were Emily and Charlotte Bronto. Remember them?"**

**"Do I?" Behind his thick glasses, Urgus's eyes grew large with astonishment.**

**"They're the most notorious jewel thieves in the entire Galaxy! You don't think they have our buddies, do you?"**

**“Could be.” Suddenly her head snapped around. “What's that sound?”**

**“What sound?”**

**Captain Shivers shoved him to one side and leaped out of the way. There was a high zapping sound and a beam of light cut through the night. Captain Shivers' D-gun spat bright rings of colored light, red, blue, groan and yellow. In the darkness just outside the camp, someone yelled.**

**“Sounds like you hit 'am,' Orque shouted.**

**“This way,” Captain Shivers said, darting in the direction of the yelp.**

**“Golly yippee ti-yi!” Urgus cried. “Ride ‘em, space girl, or, captain woman, ma'am.”**

**“Well, well, well,” Captain Shivers said.**

**On the ground Captain Cruiser glared up at Shivers. Behind her gritted teeth she made low sounds that might have been either angry snarls or moans. “Whoever was with her got away,” Urgus said.**

**“You shot me, you do-gooding low-life, you,” snarled Captain Cruiser.**

**“Cut your whining,” Shivers said. “My D-gun was on low-intensity. Your gunhand's a little numb, that's all. It'll wear off in a few minutes. Now get up. Leave the gun on the ground, Betty. I'll pick it up myself.” She bent down to pick the weapon up. She took her eyes off Cruiser just long enough to glance at the gun. “Fancy that, a paralaser. You wanted me alive for some reason.”**

**“Ya-hool” yelled Urgus. “I'll go got the other one!” Shivers heard the hooves of his robonag taking off.**

**She called his name. “It's just her riderless robonag running off,” she said. But it was too late.**

**“He doesn't hear you,” Cruiser said.**

**The sounds of his galloping robonag grew fainter. She sighed. “He'll be back,” EM**

said. 'Now turn around so I can tie your hands.'

"What?"

"And make it snappy. The numbness will wear off very quickly."

Slowly, with a pronounced demonstration of reluctance, Cruiser did as she was ordered. "You don't think I'm here all by myself,. do you?"

"If you brought that stupid crew of yours with you, they've never been quieter. There. Is that tight enough?"

"It's cutting off the circulation in my wrists."

"I'll cut off more than that," Captain Shivers said pointedly, "if you've hurt McGuirk and Grabby."

"Speaking of things that can't keep quiet," said Cruiser. "And what do you mean? Have they disappeared? I don't have them. Not this time."

"If not you, who?"

Cruiser smiled. "Well, now, I'll bet that one has you worried. You're remembering who Aspirin Eddie's partners were, aren't you?"

Shivers frowned. 'Are you telling me the Bronto sisters are already on this planet?"

"There's no way I would know. Emily and Charlotte are such poor losers. After that little contretemps out past the Horsehead Nebula, they haven't had a nice thing to say about me. Or to me, either."

"So who does?' Shivers was thoughtful a moment, then said, "If they have McGuirk or Grabby, I don't have any time to waste."

Cruiser smirked. \*You could save a lot of time just by letting me go instead of taking me to the sheriff and all."

"I'm not about to let you get away, Betty."

"Oooh! Does that mean you're going to turn me over to the sheriff, Ronnie?"

**"I don't think I trust Bat Dursten much more than I do you," Captain Shivers said. "I'm not completely satisfied about the hand he's playing in this little game."**

**"My goodness, you just don't know who to trust, do you?"**

**"I know better than to trust you, that's for sure. It would explain a lot if you and Dursten were in this together. It would explain why Dursten passed up the chance to steal the emerald in the first place."**

**"Just so he could meet you? Honestly, Veronica, you're so full of yourself."**

**"It wasn't Bat. It was you, wasn't it? Grabby's telegram told him I was coming. He told you. Your personal hatred of my crew and me would be reason enough for you to wait and use the emerald as bait. The only thing wrong with that is the trap you set for me. It's pretty clumsy. I--"**

**The paralaser beam stabbed out of the darkness from behind Shivers, catching her square in the middle of the back. She collapsed suddenly, with barely a moan.**

**Cruiser looked down at her, and feigned wide-eyed surprise. "Why, my goodness," she said. "It looks just like you've been paralysed and can't move or talk. I guess the tables have been turned, haven't they?" She smiled deeply and for a moment it seemed she might laugh. But instead she called loudly, 'Get out here, Bat and untie me. Now!'"**

**Bat Dursten, holstering his paralaser, strode into the camp. "Just hold your robonags, sweetheart."**

**"Untie me. And be quick about it."**

**Dursten bent down by Captain Shivers to make sure she wasn't just pretending to be out. 'I better take care of her, first.'**

**'She's paralyzed.'**

**"She's dangerous, even if she is paralyzed. You wouldn't want me to take chances would you, sweetheart?"**

**"No, of course not. You're right. Tie her hands tightly. But do be quick about it."**

**Dursten finished the job and stood up.**

**"Untie me now, so we can get her out to that little surprise I had you rig up for her," Cruiser said.**

**On the ground, Shivers moaned.**

**"She's coming around," Cruiser said. "Untie me, quickly, so we can get her out - I -"**

**"I don't think so," Dursten said. He bent down and helped Shivers stand up.**

**"Bat," Cruiser said, menacingly.**

**But Dursten only laughed. "You see," he said. "I've been thinking about my future with you, Betty dear. And you know what I decided? I decided to fix up two surprises at the water hole."**

## **7**

**The thundering hoofs of the robonag beat a hard rhythm across the hardscabble ground and Urgus could not refrain from a refrain. "Yippee-yi-yi-gee!" he yelled, waving his two-gallon hat in the air. "Whoopee-ti-yi-gee!" He never saw the tree limb. All of a sudden it caught him low amidships whooshing the air out of his gullet. His joyful cry became an astonished "Yippee-yo! Yippee-oof!" and there he was, hanging doubled over high off the trail, sans robonag, sans sensibilities, sans comprehension of anything except the sudden absense of air in his lungs. After a moment the ringing in his ears subsided and he suspected he was still alive. He could hear the clatter of the robonag's hooves pounding into the distance. He thought, "Oh, Cap'n Shivers is going to be so mad at me!" and then he heard, "Are okay?"**

**He looked around. He tried to ask, 'Who's that?' but all he could manage was "Ooosh coot?" A shadowy figured moved toward him.**

**He blinked and gasped and tried to speak but again only rasping sounds came forth. He pushed himself up as beat he could on the treelimb and tried again. "Who's that?"**

**"'Tis Princess Smiling Eyes," the shadowy figure said.**

**Oh golly! The figure had feathers in her hair and she carried a bow and arrow. Urgus almost fell from the treelimb but caught himself in time. The figure stopped just in front of him and peered at him out of the darkness.**

**Urgus said, 'I warn you. You better not kill me or you'll be sorry.'**

**It didn't sound convincing even to him.**

**"Oh, poor baby," said Princess Smiling Eyes.**

## **8**

**Charlotte lifted up the metal bar and examined it lovingly. The end of it glowed bright red. "Every culture," she said in a school-marmish way, "offers it's own little morsel of inspiration, don't you think, Emily?"**

**"Oh, quite so," said Emily, rocking in her chair and knitting.**

**Charlotte chuckled in a way that was not school-marmish at all and waved the iron around - though not so lustily that the air might cool it any. "Many people might regard a branding iron as primitive. How narrow minded of them. To me, the old ways are the best ways. There is a certain timeless artistry to them. Especially a good, white hot running iron."**

**"When in Rome," said Emily.**

**"That branding iron's not white hot yet. It's only red," McGuirk said.**

**"Then maybe it won't hurt as much," said Emily, brightly. "Are you sure about the pepper root tea, Mr. McGuirk?"**

**"Emily," said Charlotte. "That is not how one treats those one is about to torture."**

**"Oh, dear," said Emily, so upset she almost dropped a stitch. "Sometimes I think I'll**

never really understand proper etiquette."

"Dagnabbit!" snarled Grabby. "All this jabbering puts me to mind why I never hitched up with no she-male. Dadblasted talking about this, that and the other thing and never getting down to the real business at hand, that's what's wrong with the whole female race."

Charlotte held the branding iron up in the air and smiled grimly. "There's something to what you say, old-timer.

Why don't you roll over for us and we'll get this show on the road."

"What?" said Grabby, suddenly seized with indignation. "Why, I ain't told you about how I warned that idjit George Armstrong Custer not to go traipsing off to the Little Big Horn. I knew they was Injuns all over the place!"

"The Battle of the Little Big Horn," said Charlotte, "was 1,131 years ago."

"That's for dang sure," said Grabby with gusto. "It's a long-gg-g story."

At that point, McGuirk sat up. "I know a shorter one," he said. "I know where the Emerald of Zim is."

Charlotte glared at his. "What?"

"I said," McGuirk started.

"I heard what you said!" snarled Charlotte. There was considerable menace in her voice. "If you're just saying it to get out of being branded. . . ."

"Would I do a thing like that?" McGuirk said. "I mean what I say. I really know where the glaggin thing is. That's why I'm on this flurpin planet. I'm the recovered jewelry inspector. We're working for the insurance company."

"This had better not be a trick," said Charlotte, carefully putting the branding iron back in the fire. "I really love the smell of roast turkey."

"Do I look like a guy who'd tell lies?" McGuirk growled. He continued quickly before they could think about it: "A guy named Aspirin Eddie got himself killed in

saloon brawl with a gambler who happened to be both the sheriff and faster than him with a gun. As Aspirin Eddie hit the floor, what do you think should fall out of his pocket?"

"A lucky rabbits foot?' Emily suggested.

"No," said McGuirk. 'The Emerald of Zim.'

"My goodness!" said Emily dropping her knitting.

"This has a ring of repetition to it, but finish your story anyway, McGuirk," said Charlotte. "I don't have any goodness."

"I said it was a short story. There's not much more to tell. The whole town was there and they all saw the emerald. The sheriff has it in safe keeping and wants us to verify it's the Emerald of Zim so he can collect the reward and we can take it back where it belongs."

"Is that so?" said Charlotte, meditatively. "Well, it does answer all my questions - except one. What does Captain Cruiser have to do with it all?"

'Captain Cruiser!' said McGuirk. "Why bring her up? We arrested her last month for performing piracy off Stipgarth XXIII. She confessed and they sentenced her to life plus four thousand years in the Black Hole of Calcutta."

"Well," said Charlotte, "you should have hung around a bit longer. She won her appeal. Turns out the constitution of Stipgarth XXIII forbids self-incrimination and her confession was therefore ruled inadmissible. We understand she came this way."

"She's not a very nice lady," said Emily. "Why, I had her over once for some nice pepper root tea and she drank it out of a saucer."

"Sure it wasn't milk?" inquired Grabby.

"Sister," Emily said, most distraught, "I hate to suggest such a thing, but their story sounds like the truth."

"Yes," said Charlotte, her face breaking into an ugly grin. "And am I glad that's out of the way. Now that we know what we're after we can torture these two and not

have to worry about any interruptions."

"That reminds me of a story," said Grabby.

"Oh, wow," said McGuirk, excitedly. "I haven't heard a good story in I don't know how long a time. Hope it's a long one!"

9

Captain Shivers strained against the ropes that held her to the post, but to no avail. Dursten said, "You're wasting your strength. If there's one thing old Bat Dursten can do, it's put up a post you can't pull down."

The post was on the marge of a water hole. It was close to sunrise and the sky was already colored with light just above the hills to the east.

Despite the fact that they were deep in the desert, the water hole was surrounded with lush vegetation, bushes, small trees and flowers with brightly colored blossoms. Cruiser, who was tied to a pole next to Shivers, strained against her own ropes, and while Dursten didn't say so, Shivers suspected that pole was set in the ground just as strongly as her own.

"This is the big surprise Cruiser had planned for you, Captain Shivers. She had me come out here day before yesterday and put these posts up."

"Bat, you idiot," Cruiser snarled. "I only told you to put up one post."

"Save it," Shivers said. "I suspect Bat's been planning to double cross you for some time."

Dursten leaned on the handle of a shovel that had been lying on the ground near the posts. "She's one smart lady, Cruiser. No wonder you've never beaten her. Though I prefer to think of it as providing a surprise for two ladies, not just one."

For the moment, Shivers stopped trying to escape. She wasn't making any progress, anyway. She said, "You keep talking about surprises."

"Oh, yeah," Dursten said. "Cruiser knows all about it but you haven't been filled in,

have you?" He glanced down at the shovel as if noticing it for the first time. He picked it up, swung it over his head and throw it far into the bushes. "Don't want anyone cutting herself free on the edge of a blame shovel, now, do we?" Then he said, 'Well, let's see, this pond you're tied up beside is a water hole. I trust you have an eye for all the plants and flowers that grow around here. Some of them are quite exotic. I particularly call your attention to the four or five big ones over there with all the bones piled up around them.'

"I noticed them all right," Shivers said grimly.

"Yeah," Dursten said, just as grimly. "Maybe you don't know much about the local flora. These are harpoon plants. Notice the big sacs beneath the blooms? Those are where they digest their prey. The plants are dormant while they're digesting their meals but once that's done they start searching for more prey. They detect their prey by body heat, in case you're wondering. And the body heat usually shows up in earnest around here about sunup."

"You're right, Bat, darling," said Cruiser. "I know all about this little old death trap. So why don't you just let me go and you can stay here and explain it to Veronica - "

Dursten ignored her. "As I was saying, when those lovely looking little blooms spot a potential meal, they fire four or five strong barbed needles attached to the plant by a thin, tough vine. The barbs are poisoned."

"Bat, I already know all this," said Cruiser.

He glared at her. "They impale their prey, the poison paralyzes' it and the vines reel the whole thing back over to the plant which then feasts. That's why they grow so near a water hole. There's plenty of prey. But there's not so many of the plants that they kill everything that comes by. Why, there's stretches of several hours time when the things are quiet, so the animals continue to water here. They don't have much choice, this is a desert, you know."

"They have the concession, right?" said Shivers.

"That's it. They seldom get a meal the size of a human being. They'll be plumb thrilled, providing they can get you away from the post. And they'll waste a few dozen barbs on the two of you trying to do that, if need be."

**"Bat," crooned Cruiser, sweetly. "Bat, dearest, you can't plan on leaving little old me here with Shivers for all those awful plants to murder, now, can you?"**

**Just as sweetly, Dursten said, "Can't I, sweetheart?"**

**"Bat, we can't let our love end like this. I admit I've not been paying you quite the attention you deserve. And in the future, especially now that I know you're so forceful and manly, I'll just be ever so sure to fawn over you no less than twenty four hours a day, depending on the rotation of whatever planet we're on, of course. So now that you've made your point –"**

**"Forget it sweetheart."**

**In a sudden burst of anger, Cruiser yelled, 'Dursten, don't you dare leave me tied up like this!'"**

**"You know, this is all working out real well, isn't it?" Dursten said, smiling. "Are you aware the Bronto sisters are on this planet trying to find out what we're up to?"**

**"Those two?" Shivers said.**

**"My guess is they're the ones who have your compadres. Since your pals don't know anything, they ought to occupy the sisters a good long while. After a few days, I guess someone might notice the sheriff has disappeared and come searching and find you two. Or what's left. Maybe the Brontos will get the blame."**

**"Of course by that time, you'll have ambled on over to the spaceport and bought yourself a ticket off this ball of dirt," said Shivers.**

**"That's right. By the time they figure I might have been mixed up in all this, I'll be safely out of reach. And I'll have this with me."**

**He reached into the pocket of his vest and pulled out the Emerald of Zim, which he balanced nicely on his palm so she could see.**

**"Is that what this is all about, Bat honey?" Cruiser said. "Why, you can have that little old emerald if you want it. And you can have me, too! Isn't that wonderful? All I really want is revenge against Captain Shivers and that idiot crew of hers. That -"**

and a real man like you to look after me.”

“Knock it off,” said Dursten with feeling. "This is all your own doing. You had your chance to join up with me but like all those other haughty space-going snobs you figured yourself just too good for old Bat Dursten. While you're standing here waiting for one of them plants to wake up, I want you to think about that." He was silent for a moment, then said, more gently, 'As for you Shivers, you don't have to stay here. Cruiser's no friend of yours. Just offer me the same deal she did and I'll be glad to take you with me.”

In a shocked tone, Cruiser yelled, -Dursten you traitor!"

"What about it, Shivers. I don't want to leave you here to die."

"Well, I do," shouted Cruiser. "Especially the leave part. Cut me loose now, Bat!"

"Don't expect me to cooperate with your criminal schemes," said Shivers.

"Hell," said Dursten with disgust. 'You're no different from the others, are you? Then you can just stay here and die. What's it to me?" He held the emerald up to the light. "Well, I don't need either one of you. I got enough wealth and power to last a lifetime, right here in the palm of my hand.”

"Bat darling, I just love your sense of humor,” said Cruiser. "But since you've made your point, why don't you come over here and loosen these terrible ropes from around my quivering young body and take me to some nice, elegant resort planet where we can celebrate your incredible cleverness and leadership with champagne –“

"Into which," Dursten said, “you will have slipped some suitably exotic poison."

"Now, Bat," said Cruiser urgently, "It's almost sunup. Those plants will be waking up soon. Bat - "

But Dursten turned around and walked away.

"Bat? Bat!" cried Cruiser. "Bat Dursten you lousy frozzlegrackin snarwacklell. . . .”

**“I'll second that,” added Shivers.**

**10**

**At about that time on a nearby hill, Emily was saying, "Really my dear, we ought to make an effort to kidnap less tiresome people next time."**

**Charlotte growled. "If that ten legged space marshal thinks of anything more boring than that last story, I'll record it and use it instead of a branding iron the next time I have a guest over for torture."**

**She slumped her shoulders and sat down on a nearby rock. "All these delays in getting the torture started depress me. And it's tiresome. It was all I could do to stuff them into burlap bags so we could take a break." She stared off over the crest of the hill. "What's going on down there by the water hole?"**

**Emily craned her neck to see, then fluttered her hands in astonishment. “Why, that scoundrel has tied those two nice young ladies to stakes. Doesn't he realize if he leaves them like that they'll be impaled by those horrid harpoon plants once the sun comes up?"**

**"I suspect he does."**

**"It's disgusting," said Emily. "Can you believe he could even think of such a thing?"**

**"Frankly, no. He must have stolen the idea."**

**Emily scowled thoughtfully for a moment then nodded her head in agreement. "Undoubtedly from that terrible Captain Cruiser person. Charlotte, I think we should have words with that scoundrel right now."**

**"Just because he's trying to kill those two space captains?"**

**"Good heavens, no," said Emily. “We should have words with him because he just stuffed the Emerald of Zim into his vest pocket.”**

**11**

Not too many yards back from where the Bronto Sisters sat chatting with each other stood a wagon on the sides of which were emblazoned in bright circus letters, 'Prudence and Patience Peako's Purely Powerful Potions of Prime Potency Traveling Museum of the Macabre and Medicine Show.' Inside the boxed sides of the wagon, one of two overstuffed burlap bags flopped around into a more comfortable position.

"Thunderation!" said Grabby. "That's for sure better. I just knew there had to be a mattress somewhere in this thing

"Grabby?"

"I ain't been comfortable since they sewed me into this blame feedbag. Reminds me of the time I was thrown into life imprisonment in the Bastille. Waal, there we was, stacked six deep in the dungeons -

"Grabby," came the muffled voice again. "They forgot to take away your Bowie knife when they put you in that sack."

"That you, McGuirk? How in tarnation can you possibly know that?"

"It's easy. I'm the mattress you're so comfortable on. Why not use that knife to cut us out of these bags? Only be careful how you draw the flaghoofin thing, will ya?"

"Careful! Why, ya goldarn city slicker! You're too dablasted soft. And namby-pamby, to boot. I'll have you know I got no intention whatever of cuttin' you any, so just shut up about it."

"Thanks," said McGuirk. "Yee-owwwwwwchl"

## 12

On the crest of yet another nearby bill, Princess Smiling Eyes peered through a telescope at the water hole. "Oooooo," she said grimly. "I know those two. They are called Emily and Charlotte Bronto and they have their own pictures on the wall of the post office. I have never thought they made good wall paper."

"Goshonentlies!" said Urgus.

**"To make things worse, it is very small wall paper not even so large as to cover even so small a portion of the wall as a bulleting board. Are they the evil ones you are pursuing my hero? If so say the word and my warriors shall attack and kill them quickly so that you and I may retire to my teepee for traditional pre-nuptial hanky-panky ceremony of my tribe."**

**"Golly gee, shucks ma'am," said Urgus. "You're making me blush."**

**"How cute it is when you do that too," the princess said joyfully, handing Urgus the telescope. "I will give the order to kill those two now."**

**Urgus aimed the telescope at the water.hole. "Goshonentlies, we better be careful. They're bronto people from Xiisthlap III. Their whole body is covered with a tough shell-like hide that's almost impossible to damage. Their only vulnerable spot is the very top of their heads. I'll just bet you that all that hair they've got is just wigs hiding armor plating!"**

**"Oooo, my hero, you are so smart as you are handsome." She grabbed Urgus and began tickling him.**

**"Now you stop that," Urgus cried. "No, no, not that. The other."**

**'Oh, Urgus, you are insatiable like the love-starved tumbleweed!'"**

**"I'm sure that means something, too," said Urgus. He cleared his throat. "We better get back to business.' He picked up the telescope again. "Golly gee whillickers, I wonder what it is that could bring those two all the way out to this remote water hole?"**

**"Something seems to be happening down at the water hole, my hero. Perhaps if you aimed the telescope that way you could figure it all out. You are so smart and all, you know."**

**"Shucks, ma'am,' said Urgus, shifting the telescope so he could see the water hole. "Gosh all golly, let's see now It's that sheriff person from town! But what's he - uh-oh!"**

**"What do you see you oh so handsome devil you?"**

**"Oh, jeeperoonies!" Urgus said. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the lens of the telescope and looked again just to make sure he saw what he thought he saw. 'That's bad. If there's one thing Captain Shivers hates, it's being tied up in the same death trap with Captain Cruiser. They just can't get along. We're going to have to rescue her.**

**The smiling eyes of the princess flashed with fury. "This woman is something to you?" she said heatedly. "I will be jealous! We will attack now and rescue her immediately so that I can order her torn apart by wild robohorses!"**

**"No, no, no, no, golly no!" Urgus said anxiously. 'Why, Captain Shivers and I are just good buddies. She's part of the crew on my spaceship the Starsnipe, the best little starship in the whole wide universe. And she's the greatest starship captain of all time. We just gotta save her."**

**The smiling eyes scowled. "If you can assure me there has been no ceremony of hanky-panky between you and this Captain Shivers being, I will not only sews her life, but I will let her continue to live and even regard her as my sister.'**

**"Hanky panky?" shouted Urgus, almost in panic at the idea. "Me and Captain Cruiser? My goodness no! I'd have to breathe in a paper sack for two months!"**

**Princess Smiling Eyes scrambled to her feet, all business now. "Then we must hurry. There in no time to lose! Within moments the harpoon plants awake from their torpor and loose their poison arrows on those helpless damsels. Come Urgus, come my hero. To the robonags at once! We must ride like the wind, the very wind, to save them."**

**She leaped to the back of her robo pony and Urgus leaped in the saddle of his own mount. "Hi yo Stainless," he cried. "Away!"**

## 13

**Dursten's robonag was tethered at the top of the rise. He walked slowly up the hill, not pushing himself at all, his right hand in his vest pocket, fondling the Emerald of Zia. Sun-up was still several minutes away.**

**Cruiser shouted, "DAMN you, Bat. After all I did for you. Just you wait till I get free**

from this post.”

"You aren't going to get loose this time, sweetheart," Dursten said over his shoulder. "Not in time, at least."

"But you're throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime! I don't offer this body to just anyone!"

"Since when?" said Shivers. "But it doesn't matter. Save your breath, Betty. He's too bent on revenge to make any deal now."

"I can't believe it," said Cruiser. "He's passing up the chance to have the Emerald of Zim and me both."

Shivers laughed. "And how long would that last?"

"It would be the happiest five minutes of his life."

- "Yeah, and that's how he figures it too." Shivers tested the ropes again and, not for the first time, concluded that whatever sort of man Dursten was, he could tie knots as well as he could put up posts. She said, "Well, we can't count on anyone getting us out of this but ourselves."

"I've tried to work myself loose," Cruiser said. "I don't think I can do it before the sun comes up."

"Me neither," Shivers said. "But fortunately, I came prepared."

"Prepared? Hey, wait a minute. Is that your big secret, Veronica? Is that why you always get out of the death traps I leave you in?"

"This is no place for shop talk," said Shivers. She was straining with her bound hands to find something that was hidden under the buckskin fringe of her hipwispis. "Ah!" she said, at last. "Got it!"

She held up a small object. Cruiser saw it and her eyes widened with astonishment. "I should have known!" she said. "You have a knife hidden on you. A small look back with a 440 stainless steel blade and a knurled thumb knob for easy one-handed

opening."

Shivers slicked open the blade. "Just regulation escape-artist stuff. But it's a good thing the local tradition calls for the added fringe. You can't conceal anything this big in the standard lady space captain's uniform."

By this time Dursten was at the top of the hill approaching the robonag. But before he could climb into the saddle, there was a sudden sharp zapping sound and a series of colored photonic rings flashed like hornets out of the darkness behind him. Rings of red, yellow, blue and orange light glittered and grew like smoke rings and slammed into the side of the robonag, which jumped like it was shot - which, of course, it was. There was a cloud of sparks, loud buzzing and then an explosion and the astonished Bat Dursten was knocked backwards to the ground. The emerald of Zim flew from his hand and rolled down the slope.

"That was a wonderful shot, Charlotte," came an all-too-familiar voice. Something bulky dressed in corset and dog collar and boots with thirteen-inch heels, stalked over, peered at the fallen sheriff and laughed. A second, more lady-like bulky figure stood on the crest of the hill silhouetted by the dawn sky.

The sun was starting to rise.

"Oh, look," said Emily. 'No dropped the emerald."

"Pick it up, sister," said Charlotte, 'While I take a look at these two."

She came down the hill stuffing her D-gun back into its holster. "Ah ha! Emily! Come down here and look who we've found. It's that dangerous Captain Shivers."

"Oh, dear," said Emily. She bent over and scooped up the emerald in her dinosaur-lady hand.

Charlotte stopped at the bottom of the hill and favored Shivers with a gloating look. "She was the fiend who killed our sweet cousin Lard-Snout, as I recall. Did it with her regulation Swiss Army Ball-peen Hammer."

"Now, Charlotte," said Emily, coming down the hill and handing the emerald to Charlotte. "As I recall, it turned out that she was innocent and it was actually that fiendish Humpty-Dumptian Elmer whoosis that killed him with a sling shot. Only,

actually, now I think of it, Lard-Snout wasn't killed at all. He murdered his twin sister Josephine so people would think he was dead. He intended to wipe out his whole family as I recall, us included."

"I know," Charlotte said, handing the jewel back to Emily. "But Lard-Snout framed Captain Shivers for the murder, so it amounts to the same thing. Besides, Lard-Snout's in jail clear across the galaxy from here. We can't very well get revenge on him at the moment, can we?"

Emily tucked the jewel into hex purse. "There's just no arguing with logic like that, I suppose," she said. "Of course if we just leave them here the plants will kill them in a few minutes, won't they?"

"We could amuse ourselves till then," Charlotte said. "After all, those fool plants can't hurt us, can they? Let's start with Bat, but don't let's forget about these two. Would you be a dear and go get my branding irons out of the wagon, dear?"

"Branding irons?" Captain Cruiser said.

"I'll be right back," Emily said. "And I'll bring the electric kettle so we can have some nice pepper root tea while we're torturing these nice people."

"That would be nice, dear," said Charlotte.

"I hate pepper root tea," growled Cruiser.

"How wonderful!" said Charlotte, with much sweetness. "We'll let you drink yours straight from the kettle."

## 14

In the wagon, Grabby climbed out of his gunnysack and jabbed the air with his Bowie knife. "Jehosophat! Puts me to mind of when I helped that thar perfessor feller out on that plateau in South America. What was his name, now?"

"Challenger," McGuirk said.

His voice was muffled by the burlap sack he was still in, and Grabby had trouble

**understanding him. "What?"**

**"I said, Challenger. Now get me out of here, Grabby."**

**"Oh, yeah. Plumb near forgot."**

**"And watch it with that - yeeecowch!"**

**"Watch it with what?" Grabby asked, widening the hole he had cut into the sack.**

**"Never mind, now," McGuirk grouched, rubbing his tail feathers.**

**"What's going on anyway?"**

**"Well, seems like to me we jest excaped them two gunnysacks, is what it seems like to me."**

**"I know that part. I - Hush, something's coming."**

**They could hear thunderous footsteps outside the wagon, and Emily's voice as she said, "Now, where did we put those branding irons."**

**"It's Emily," McGuirk whispered. "Distract her while I hide."**

**"While you hides!" said Grabby. "Why not while I hide?" But it was too late. McGuirk was nowhere to be seen. But unfortunately Emily was because at that point she stuck her head into the wagon. Grabby said, "Oh, howdy ma'am. Did I ever tell you about the time I suggested to Calamity Jane that she was in sorrowful need of a face lift?"**

**Emily's eyes widened with shock. "You aren't supposed to be out of your burlap bag! Now you got tight back in this instant or I shall have to tell Charlotte you're not behaving."**

**At that point, her wig flew off and she gave a yelp and reached for her head. But not in time, Just before she could cover the vulnerable spot on her skull, the whole wagon was filled with a resoundingly satisfying bonk and Emily slumped forward.**

**"There, that'll show ya, ya dag-blasted pepper root tea addict," said Grabby.**

**"Pretty good teamwork, there, Grabby," said McGuirk, climbing into the wagon over Emily's unconscious form. "I lift her wig, you bean her on her soft spot. Where's you get that baseball bat?"**

**"Well, now, that's quite a story," said Grabby. 'Seems like back in 1939, Babe Ruth and me was -"**

**"Give me the short version," McGuirk said.**

**"Found .the danged thing over in that corner there."**

**McGuirk poked cautiously at Emily, who was now snoring grandly. "Boy, look at her. She sure looks upset."**

**Grabby squinted at her. "She looks terrible upset. Terrible unconscious, too. Fact is, she's one of the most terrible looking somethings I ever did see."**

**"Leastwise, she's out."**

**Grabby nodded. "Reminds me of the time I was in the ring with John L. Sullivan. Waal, I clobbered him nine good uppercuts all at the same time. And thunderation! He musta flowed thirty yards. Waal - "**

**"No time for that now, Grabby," McGuirk said. "We need to hurry if we're going to save Captain Shivers. And don't you be afraid. I'll be watching your back faithfully."**

**"Well, why didn't say so sooner!" Grabby said. He hopped out of the wagon onto the seat in front, waving his baseball bat in the air. He jumped down to the ground. "Let's ride," he shouted; and then, even louder as he stormed down the hillside, he yelled, "Why you dadblamed dino-sorry critter, I'm a-gonna tighten up that corset of yorn until the whalebones come out of yore ears! I'm agonna pulverize your lizard-like looks until you yell 'uncle' in fourteen different languages, and they better be languages I speak, of which they ain't none but one of them!"**

**McGuirk swung his legs over the side of the wagon and dropped to the ground, faithfully watching the back of the decapus who was speeding down the hill. McGuirk followed at a leisurely pace.**

**McGuirk, no slouch himself at colorful, if incomprehensible invective was absolutely**

amazed at the inventiveness of Grabby Haze as he called out an unending chain of insults. That is perhaps why McGuirk did not hear the pounding hooves of the robonags of the Prairie Pup People until the first of them was streaking up his feathered spine.

## 15

"What's all that racket?" Charlotte groused. She turned around and saw Grabby coming down the hill. "Emily can't do anything right," she said. And as soon as she made the remark, the sounds of warhoops and galloping robonags reached them. Somewhere, just over the rise of the hill a familiar voice yelled "Yippee Yo Gee!"

Captain Shivers moved swiftly, taking advantage of Charlotte's wavering attention, bringing the open knife up between her hands and deftly slicing the ropes between her wrists. It was but a moment's work to slice the other ropes holding her to the post. As they dropped away, she saw the Prairie Pup People's robonags reach McGuirk.

"McGuirk, you idiot!" she shouted.

Charlotte whirled around, her face even more purple than usual with fury. "How did you get free?" she demanded.

It was a mistake. She should have just drawn her D-gun. But she hesitated a fatal moment until she had snarled the sentence before snatching the weapon from its holster. And in that moment Grabby came up behind her and leaped high into the air, bringing the bat down hard on top of Charlotte's reinforced hairpiece.

The loud ringing bong that resulted was like the clanging of all the bells of the Cathedral of Notre Dame at once. Or the mating cry of the Aldebaran Sneblek. Charlotte, a look that mixed dazed confusion with grim malice on her ugly face, sank to her knees. Grabby leaped on her back, wrapping three tentacles around her neck. With two others he tugged at the hairpiece with its manhole cover sized armored plate. As soon as it was off, he brought the bat down again.

There was no cathedral-bell like sound this time, but a loud thud with a bit of a mushy undertone. Charlotte's beady red eyes crossed and she slumped forward. Grabby jumped clear as Charlotte fell into the edge of the pool.

Shivers glanced up the hill in time to see Bat Dursten clamber to his feet. The Prairie Pup People were bearing down on him. He turned and ran down the hill as quickly as he could but Urgus came up behind him and leaped off his robonag. He grabbed hold of both of the sheriff's ears and batdogged him to the ground, yelling "Golly-yippee-ki-oh!"

And a beautiful young Prairie Pup Maiden came up beside Urgus and crooned, "Ooooooh, my hero!"

"Way to go Urgus!" shouted Captain Shivers. Then to Grabby, "Better hit Charlotte again. But hurry it up. Those plants are moving. Everybody out of here now!"

Her words had a galvanizing effect on everyone. Grabby dropped his bat and took off. Urgus tried to pick up his Bat but it was too heavy. Three of the Prairie Pup braves came up and helped him load the unconscious owlhoot onto a robonag.

Charlotte was too heavy to move; Captain Shivers didn't even try. With her natural armor it was unlikely Charlotte would be hurt anyway. But just to be safe, Shivers replaced the fallen Brontoperson's armored wig.

"What about me?" Cruiser said. "Aren't you going to cut me loose?" ,

Shivers turned. "I knew I'd almost forgotten something."

"You can't leave me here like this."

Shivers glanced around and saw one of the harpoon plants stirring. "There's no time! That thing's getting ready to fire right now."

"It's aiming right at me!" Cruiser yelped.

Captain Shivers snatched up the baseball bat Grabby had dropped. The harpoon plant fired.

She swung the bat and caught the needle a solid blow that would have been a home run in Tellurian Stadium.

**When the second plant fired, Captain Shivers showed bunt. The needle fell harmless to the ground. It would take a while for the plants to rewind and fire those needles again. But each plant had several needles and there were more than just the two of them.**

**As Captain Shivers batted away the third needle, she heard someone run up behind her. "McGuirk! What are you doing here?"**

**"You called me, didn't you? While that robonag was running over me?"**

**"I called you an idiot."**

**"Yes um. What should I do for you?"**

**"Cut Cruiser loose."**

**"You sure?" McGuirk asked. "I've never seen her look so peaceful before."**

**"You cut me free this instant, you blasted clone of a feather duster," Cruiser yelled.**

**"Hurry it up," Shivers said. "You don't have to untie her hands. Just cut her loose from the pole and get her out of here as quickly as possible."**

**"Yes'um."**

**"And move it, McGuirk."**

**"I'm hurrying as fast as I can," McGuirk said. "What's the excitement all about?"**

**"Harpoon plants!" said Shivers, blasting a stand-up double into the middle of the water hole.**

**"Harpoon plants! Why do they call them that?"**

**"You don't know?-**

**"Nope."**

**"Just get her out of here," said Captain Shivers, swinging again. "I'll tell you about**

the harpoon plants later.” Actually, she could hardly wait.

## 16

The smiling eyes of Princess Smiling Eyes were clouding up.

“I do not understand. You must leave me?” she said, her voice quivering with barely contained emotion.

“Golly shucks, ma'am," Urgus said staunchly. "A spacekid's gotta do what a spacekid's gotta do.”

It was just a few hours after the rescue of Captain Shivers and Captain Cruiser from the deathtrap by the water hole. Dursten and the Bronto Sisters had boon turned in to the local authorities. And aboard the Starsnipe, still docked at the spaceport near Grabby Haze's headquarters, Urgus was valiantly trying to say goodbye to the Princess.

"Goshoroonies, Princess! Duty calls. Cap'n Cruiser is wanted on half a hundred planets. Bat and the Bronto sisters will stand trial right here but we have to deliver Cruiser to the Galactic Authorities. Why, Once First Officer Nadir McGuirk sir and Marshal Grabby are stowing her in the brig right now so we can take off."

The princess regarded him with a suspicious glare. "Are you sure, My Hero? You are not involved with anyone else, are you?"

Urgus shook his head furiously. “Heck no, princess! Golly gee, I know Stainless was just about the best robonag a kid could ever hope for but the days when a kid and his horse would ride off into the sunset together are gone and dead with. Uh. dead and gone with."

The hatch opened and McGuirk and Grabby came into the wardroom. The hatch to the forward command center opened and Shivers stuck her head out. "McGuirk! Did you and Grabby get Betty nicely secured?"

“Sure did ma'am," McGuirk answered.

Shivers came into the room and leaned against the doorframe, arms folded across her chest. She smiled wickedly. "I bet she's just furious, too. We'll have to keep a close eye on her during the trip home."

"Waal," said Grabby, "don't expect her to be too much trouble, Cap'n. Fortunately for all concerned, McGuirk and I found a burlap bag just her size in the Bronto Sister's wagon."

Princess Smiling Eyes was gazing with rapt sadness into the eyes of Urgus. "I shall miss you, my Urgus, though still I do not understand."

"Goshonentlies, Princess Smiling Eyes," Urgus said sadly, "it's just --"

"Oh, I cannot help myself any longer," the Prairie Pup princess said, with great feeling. She threw her arms around the neck of the startled spacekid and kissed him loudly on the lips.

Urgus blushed the same shade of red as the bandana worn around his neck. His two-gallon cowboy hat fell off his head and onto the deck of the ship.

"Hey, watch it there, you two," said McGuirk.

The Princess looked almost as embarrassed as Urgus. "I - I forget myself!"

"Why," the tall mutant continued, "you'll have my little buddy blushing like --"

"Golly gee, Unca First Officer Nadir McGuirk air," said Urgus, a very odd tone in his voice. "You better stay out - "

McGuirk gave a loud guffaw. "Old Urgus doesn't like that mushy stuff, Miss Princess. And by the way, Urgus, don't call me Uncle

The loud smacking wise - and the smack that caused it - took McGuirk completely by surprise. He clutched his stomach, bending over at the same time. The perpetual stogie shot from his beak and landed perfectly in an ashtray across the room. For a moment McGuirk just stood there, his bloodshot eyes bugging, gasping for the air which seemed suddenly to have abandoned him. Then he moaned and fell over.

**The Princess rushed to Urgus her face contorted with alarm. "My Urgus!" she cried. "You could hurt your hand like that!"**

**"Don't worry," Urgus said. "His stomach's softer than it looks. Now then, Princess. You were saying -?"**

**"Jehosophat!" said Grabby. "Then two yunkers reminds me of the time I was in Italy. Seem these two Rye-talian families was just a-feuding fit to bust their britches. Waal, they was these two younguns name of Romeo and Juliet and they come to me for advice. Seems - "**

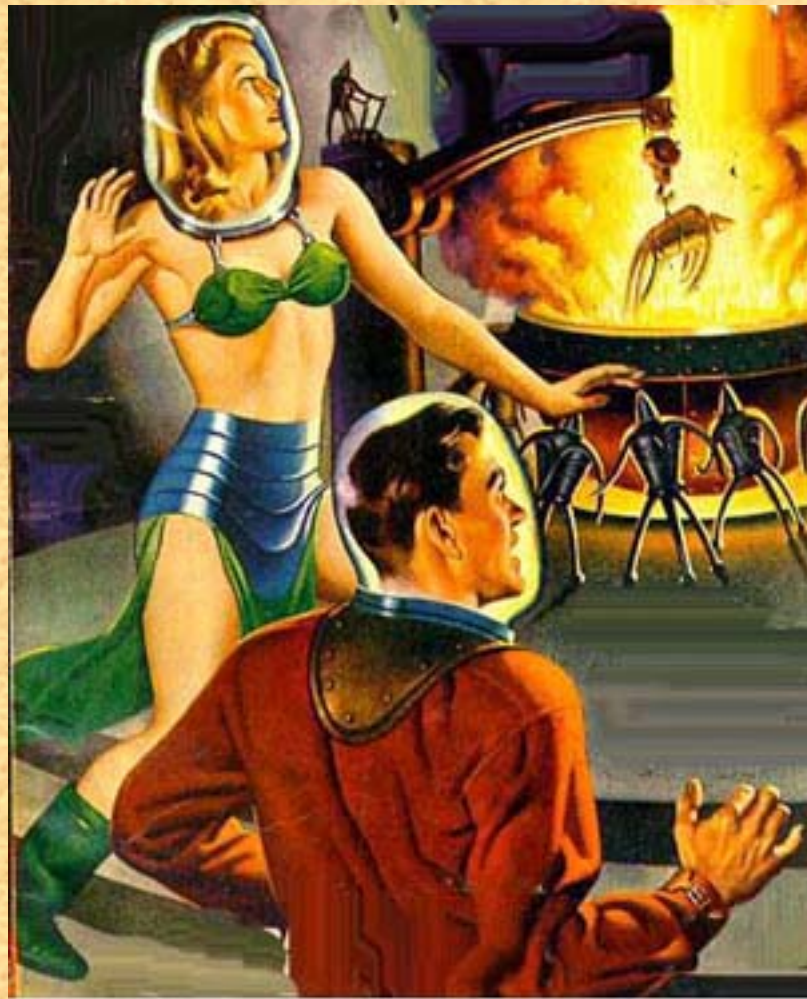
**McGuirk somehow found enough breath to say, "Will you knock it off with the story telling, Grabby? And help me to my feet. That kid packs a wallop!"**

**Captain Shivers was still near the door to the command center, laughing furiously. But she managed to get the words out. "Just stay there a while, McGuirk. This is one of my favorite stories. Grabby? Why don't you tell us the long version."**

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# **GREAT UNSUNG HEROES OF THE SPACE AGE: EARLE K. BERGEY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LADY SPACE CAPTAIN'S UNIFORM**

**By Gerald W. Page and Jerry Burge**



Notice how, thanks to Bergey's genius, the lady space captain's apparel isn't as encumbering as the man's space outfit.

**As every Thirtieth Century school child knows, the Earle K. Bergey design lady space captain's uniform is the most important contribution to space travel of the Twentieth Century. Second in importance only to the development of the space flyer (to which Mr. Bergey also contributed important designs) the uniform allows intrepid space adventuresses such as Captain Veronica Shivers to fearlessly venture into almost any environment the universe can throw at them.**

**Born in Philadelphia, on the Planet Earth at the very beginning of his century (8 August 1901), Mr. Bergey studied at that city's Academy of Fine Arts from 1921 to 1926. His first job was for a newspaper, the Philadelphia Ledger, but he soon joined the staff of a well-known pulp magazine publisher, Fiction House. His skill at drawing good looking women earned him a niche as a contributor to the so-called girly pulps where his glamorous cover paintings appeared on such titles as Pep and Breezy.**

It was in 1935 that Mr. Bergey married. At about this same time he took a job with the Saturday Evening Post. But his association with the livelier and more challenging pulp industry did not end then. He moved to Bucks County, Pa., and opened a studio in New York. Toward the end of the Thirties, Mr. Bergey began a long and famous association with Ned Pines' Standard Magazines, better known as the Thrilling pulps for the slogan "A Thrilling Magazine" on the covers of their publications, and for their trademark use of the word "Thrilling" in many of their titles, such as Thrilling Adventure, Thrilling Detective Stories, Thrilling Western and, of course, the science fiction magazine Thrilling Wonder Stories.

At Standard, Bergey joined with the likes of Rudolph Belarski, Rudolph Zirn, H.W. Wesso, Howard V. Brown and Eugene Franzden to produce a wide and varied range of colorful magazine covers. As versatile as he was skilled, Mr. Bergey worked on a number of pulp genres for Standard, including love, sports and detective magazines.

At the time Mr. Bergey began his career with Standard, Howard V. Brown was their main science fiction illustrator. Brown, famous among science-fiction aficionados for his work on Astounding Stories under the editorship of F. Orlin Tremaine (where, among other notable achievements, he seems to have invented the Bug Eyed Monster), did most of the covers for Thrilling Wonder Stories through the thirties (that magazine was a retitling of Wonder Stories after Standard purchased it from Hugo Gernsback in 1936), as well as many of the initial issues of Standard's equally famous Startling Stories. (Mr. Brown should not be confused with the similarly named Howard Browne, who was an editor at another magazine publishing house, Ziff-Davis, running Amazing Stories and Fantastic in the early Fifties.)

In 1939, Standard began a weird fiction magazine called Strange Stories. Designed to compete with the legendary fantasy and horror magazine, Weird Tales, where H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard got their starts. Strange Stories carried thirteen stories in every issue. it also folded after publishing just thirteen issues. But each one of those issues boasted a cover by Earle K. Bergey. It was his introduction to the fantasy field.

In 1940, Howard V. Brown stopped doing covers for Standard's SF pulps and Bergey stepped into his shoes, painting covers for the company's Captain Future, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Startling Stories and Fantastic Story Quarterly, over the next dozen or so years. It was in his work for these magazines that Mr. Bergey began demonstrating the scientific superiority of the Earle K. Bergey Design Lady Space Captain's uniform.

The reader needs to remember that at this time the height of space exploration was represented by the Gera V-2 rocket, which at that time was being perverted to the uses of war. No terrestrial human would ever walk on so insignificant an object as Earth's moon for another quarter of a century! Many ignorant savages of the middle twentieth century still clung to the superstition that travel to other planets was impossible.

Bergey, along with a handful of other far-sighted artists, began creating illustrations depicting the heroines of space stories undergoing adventures in the rigorous environment of outer space, while dressed in nothing more than brass bra, hipwisp and boots. Often times he eschewed even the glassite fishbowl space helmet that would enable them to breathe. And while they were dressed thus, the human and alien characters in these drawings (and often the aliens) were frequently shown clad in thick space armor and helmets.

A scientifically conservative element, not willing to admit the obvious superiority of the female physiology, began vociferously complaining about these covers (the deep entrenchment of superstition is perhaps nowhere better demonstrated as in the fact that this ridicule actually extended into the more scientifically enlightened period of the early Twenty-first Century!), but Bergey continued his scientific speculation undaunted. And in doing so, he foreshadowed the later work of anthropologists such as Montague Summers who would not begin to argue female physical supremacy until two decades later.



Now, in the glorious year 3005 A.D., women travel the far reaches of the universe, dressed only in Bergey's familiar and classic costume, proving their physical prowess in the day-to-day routine of space conquest, and the prescience of Bergey's work is known throughout the Seven Galaxies!

In the late Forties, Pines moved into other publishing fields, including the burgeoning paperback book arena with Popular Library. Bergey began doing covers for them, showcasing his skills in a number of genres. While he continued to work for the Standard pulps, in 1950 he began working elsewhere in the science fiction field, as well. Covers by him appeared in Future Science Fiction, edited by Robert A.W. Lowndes, The Avon Fantasy Reader, Avon Science Fiction Reader both edited by Donald A. Wollheim, as well as Science Fiction Adventures and Space Science Fiction, edited by Lester del Rey. Mr. Bergey died in 1952 while visiting a doctor's office.

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*Here is something we have been missing. We have had pastiches, parodies, recreations, and so on. Here, however, we introduce a well-known category: Faaanfiction! This uses sf combined with fannish icons -- such as, in this case, the mimeograph machine!*

A Binary Bar Tale:

## THE MIGHTY MIMEO

Ahrvid Engholm

"We had a blackout today," Niels said. "It took us an hour and a half to get all the computers running again."

"Do your computers usually run around?" I tried. (No laughs. "Your jokes gives us blackouts," someone grumbled.)

"This would never happen with a good old mimeograph," Alan said.

"You should get backup power," Jonathan said. "Try a windmill generator in front of a politician's mouth."

Now I heard a few laughs. (\*Sigh!\*)

We were sitting there in Foo's Bar, as we always did every Tuesday evening. When we gathered there after work, we knew there was a good chance Alan would give us one of his incredible tales. Nobody knew exactly what Alan's job was. If he worked at all - he was in constant money shortage - it must have with computers or at least technology to do. His stories usually dealt with hi-tech or far-out science. They would fit any science-fiction magazine, but astoundingly Alan always claimed them to be 100% true. Nobody had ever, even once, been able to prove that Alan was lying.

Our host and the owner Foo was a strange character. He had Chinese, German, French as well as Greek blood in his veins, which made it possible for him to adapt the menu according to the latest whims of the city's gourmet columnists.

I had always wondered where Foo got his guests, since his joint was very difficult to find. You had to locate the little alley, which wasn't on most city maps and easy to miss if you looked in the wrong direction for a split second. The misleading street signs and the eternal road job the city council had dug in an illogical corner didn't make things easier.

This month Foo had Greek food on the menu, and you could find Foo's Bar by following the smell of garlic. Often it was virtually the only way to find it.

"Wait. What do you mean?" Tommy asked and took a sip from his big glass of milk (or "cow beer" as he called it).

"What's a 'mimeograph'?"

"It's a duplicator, a sort of printing machine," Jonathan said. "I and Ted used one for the school's paper many years ago."

("Ted's late as usual," someone noted. "He's got a new car," I said. "He must of course take it apart and reassemble it first.")

"But you, Alan," said Henry and adjusted his hearing aid, "you're of course an expert on mimeographs?"

"I am," I said. "I used them for years for my fanzine."

"You mean the one you do with so small type," Lenny said, "that a microfiche edition would improve its readability?"

"Did someone say 'Microsoft'?" Jonathan inquired.

"Gentlemen, please, I want to keep my appetite."

"We all agree Microsoft Windows is a disaster," Niels said. "But I think Alan was starting to say something..."

"Speaking of disasters," Alan said. "My glass is empty..."

Foo understood the hint, and brought him a pint of foaming beer at the same moment as Ted came rushing in.

"Sorry I'm late, guys," he said as he tried to catch his breath. "You see, there's a very interesting detail in my new car. One of the cylinders has..."

As a matter of fact I am an expert on mimeographs (Alan said). As a kid I actually built a small mimeo from empty cans of condensed milk, bicycle parts and my aunt's silk stocking. It worked, but my aunt left me out of her will.

A mimeograph or a duplicator or a stencil machine has two cylinders, sometimes only one, with some sort of cloth wrapped around. Ink is forced through the cloth and a waxed sheet of paper, a so called stencil. When you turn the crank blank sheets are pressed to the lower cylinder and thus you get a print corresponding to the areas where the stencil has been penetrated by ink.

There are some variations, like electro stencilling - using a stone-age scanner - or spirit duplicators. (No Foo, I have enough. Later!) But basically this is what a mimeograph does. Early in the 19th early flatbed machines were used, but mimeographing became much faster in 1873 when the great Thomas Alva Edison introduced the cylinder and the crank. I'm not sure the lightbulb was his greatest contribution to mankind. The mimeo was the only practical alternative for fast duplication in small and medium print runs for a hundred years, before Xeroxes and computers and lasers came around. They were fairly cheap, easy to operate, reliable - and didn't need electricity. You could use electricity to run them, but it wasn't required. I remember my old trustworthy Rex Rotary D490, which had an electric motor but I always cranked the handle manually because...well, personally I think electricity bills should be paid yearly and it is indeed annoying and unexpected when they turn up quarterly.

Anyway. In my younger years - not that I'm all that old, naturally - I did a lot of duplicating. I really got dirt under my fingernails and learned all the tricks of the trade. I did my little fan magazines where I published my own terrible science-fiction stories and all that. (No, I don't do science fiction any more. I told you that!) Now we have computers and lasers, and I never thought I'd find use for my mimeo skills. But a couple of years ago I was out sailing in the Pacific, in a small yacht I had borrowed from my friend JJ (the space crazy millionaire I think I told you about before).

My GPS navigation system was broken and I sailed after my pocket calendar world map. I wasn't really worried. I had plenty of food and water and had made a makeshift sextant from some paperclips, a ballpoint pen and pieces from a pair of binoculars. I had a sound basic plan: to sail in

the generally right direction and sooner or later I'd hit the coast of South America. Or possibly North America, depending on which page of the pocket calendar map I was on - I was almost sure I was in the south Pacific. Anyway, the coast of the Americas should be really hard to miss. After a few days I saw some birds and a few hours later the contours of a volcanic island. Not that I really needed to, but maybe they had some GPS spare parts, so I decided to make a landing. At least they'd be able to tell me I wasn't in the Indian Ocean. It doesn't hurt to be 100% certain, you know.

I think the island was called the Republic of Western Roneo, or something like that, ruled by a slightly fat but very friendly little king. A few thousand people lived in the capital Gestetner (I think it was an old German colony, from the time of the Kaiser) from fishing, coconuts and exports of bird shit. Apparently there is a great demand for bird shit on the world market - don't ask me why. They seldom got visitors so I was brought to the king.

Over an informal dinner - very informal - he told me about the republic. They weren't very rich, but everyone had what they needed, the climate was healthy and they even had a small TV station that aired programs every Friday night. Star Trek was very popular. They had a local Mr Sulu fan club, even, which published a mimeographed Mr Sulu fan magazine.

"In other words," I said, "the islanders lived long and prospered!"

"Your pathetic imitations of jokes drive me nuts!" Henry said. "Coconuts..."

"Strange that you didn't meet any Greenpeace ships," Lenny said. "They breed down there in the south Pacific, I'm told. I've heard they mate with French destroyers, and before you know it another little Greenpeace dinghy is brought into the world. If it is fed by a TV camera shortly after birth it will eventually grow up to another proud ship."

"Gestetner," Jonathan said. "Could be an old British colony. The mimeo manufacturer Gestetner is a British firm. What a name for a capital, by the way."

"Well, I'm not sure of all the details," Alan said. "There seems to be some typos in my pocket calendar - remind me to sue the publisher! - and the king gave me plenty of the local coconut booze. It would have been very unpolite to say no. I did my outmost to be polite. Politeness and empty glasses don't mix..."

Foo knew his duty.

I had to stay on the island a couple of weeks (Alan said). The king said the next supply ship certainly would have the rare but vital spare part for my GPS, ie my Global Positioning System receiver. In fact, the ship would have all sizes of batteries, so I didn't have to worry a bit. The ship would also take a load of shit back.

To show my appreciation for their hospitality, and the coconut booze, I agreed to take a look at the island's power plant. Some days it didn't work, and the king mentioned rumours of a revolution if it didn't work next Friday when mr Sulu was supposed to...well, probably encounter something that wasn't life as we knew it.

All electricity the island needed came from a small brick building. I don't know the output, though it was probably not enough to support a medium-sized IBM mainframe installation - but the islanders didn't use too much power. Air conditioning was for instance unknown there.

The head engineer was a strange figure. He insisted on calling himself Scottie, while he crawled on the floor and said "Sorry, I'm doing my best, but I can't give you more power!" with a Scottish-

Polynesian accent. In the control room - and over-sized closet - a man in a pyjamas with an upside-down "V" on the chest sat in a swivel chair talking solemnly to himself.

I went to work. I know a little bit about diesels and so on, and after a couple of hours I had solved the island's energy crisis. I also noted they had a major wiring problem in a very critical spot, and I pointed it out. It was very close to becoming a short circuit, and if they weren't careful the wiring could burn and the plant would be out for weeks.

The man in the pyjamas said something about eternal gratitude from the Federation, and that Scottie was already at work adjusting the dilithium crystals (the wiring).

Life on the island wasn't only coconut booze and trekkies. Some of the local girls we're very friendly and... I won't go into details in front of this decent family audience, but let me say that my thoughts were only partly on sextants.

The streets were empty during the TV evening. I was invited to the Mr Sulu fan club, where the king was president, and we watched the small TV set together when it happened. Mr Spock had just pointed out the benefits of logic when we heard machine gun fire!

There were hardly any guns on the island, and definitely no machine guns. The local police had handguns in a locker, but the entire police force - both of them - sat in our room.

It wasn't a revolution. It was an invasion. For some reason a group of foreign mercenaries were very interested in bird shit. At the precise moment when all islanders watched TV they landed on the shore, and took all strategic points in the capital in a matter of minutes. You don't need more than a dozen well-armed soldiers to take over a small, virtually unarmed republic.

We couldn't do anything. We didn't even get to see how the Star Trek episode ended, before it was interrupted by a news broadcast.

A guy in sunglasses declared that there had been a revolution. He spoke English with Italian accent (Mafia, I thought) and read a lot of political mumbo-jumbo from a piece of paper. From now on all money from the bird shit export would go to the provisional revolutionary government, which promised prosperity for the people from a new progressive agricultural program (involving growing hemp and poppy). By the way, all media was now seized by "the people".

It took the new regime only a day to establish their new revolutionary society. They took over the local newspaper, the small TV station, put guards around the power station, put the king in house arrest, confiscated all private radio transmitters, took over the small telephone network, introduced a new "protection tax," and so on. TV and the paper was full of proclamations about new laws and rules.

But they made two mistakes. They replaced Star Trek with Dallas. And they didn't do anything about the Mr Sulu fan club mimeograph.

"Why didn't the people use their phasers!" I said.

"You stun me with your parody of humor!" Niels said.

"Why didn't any of the great powers, America or France or someone, do anything?" Ted asked.

"They didn't know about it," Alan said. "It happened so fast and they took all radio transmitters."

"The supply ship, then? Wasn't it due shortly?" Jonathan wondered.

"It doesn't take much of theatrical talent to fool them," Alan said. "Shore leaves cancelled due to some technicality. They deliver their stuff, load their cargo, get stamps in their papers and sail off. By the way, the contents of my glass must have sailed off..."

**"Foo! Beer!" Tommy said. "But not the cow type."**

**No, it was to be shown that the pen is mightier than the sword (Alan said). To cancel Star Trek was a major blunder! It made the islanders furious, and they declared they were ready to do anything - whatever it took - to get rid of those "Klingon invaders" (as they called them).**

**We started an underground liberation movement and a well-informed opposition paper - with the help of the mimeograph. Luckily we had a huge stocks of paper and ink and more volunteers for our liberation movement than we could use.**

**It was a matter of informing the public of the true nature of the "Klingons". To make the people see through the "revolution" mumbo-jumbo and expose them as Mafioso interested only in growing drugs and stealing. The invaders, of course, fed the people with an avalanche of bullshit as they had total media control. It took a few days to establish routines and distribution for our underground mimeoed paper, but those who got to read it became very enthusiastic for our cause. Only the total media control of the "Klingons" kept their regime afloat.**

**I suddenly remembered that little glitch in the power station. I had a talk with Scottie, and together we made up the plans for getting into the station - once inside we could knock it out in a second. We formed a "landing party" and put our plan into action. A couple of the local girls had no problems distracting the guards while we sneaked in through a window on the other side of the brick building. A piece of cake.**

**The islanders were used to not having electricity now and then. They managed. But the "Klingons" couldn't manage. No TV propaganda! The printing press of their newspaper stood still. Their internal administration collapsed. They probably had a couple of PCs brought with them, that couldn't run now. All telephones were knocked out. They couldn't charge the batteries of their walkie talkies.**

**But the liberation movement became very active, suddenly. We cranked the mimeograph around the clock. Our opposition paper reached almost everyone. We made posters to put up in every street corner. Our message was very simple, but effective, as in one poster:**

**"To the crew of this island:  
Help us kick out the Klingon Mafia!  
We will give freedom and prosperity to all Federation  
citizens!  
And Star Trek on TV - twice a week!  
Death to Dallas!"**

**(I knew that my local sf bookshop had all episodes on VCR tapes. JJ could perhaps help us with details.)**

**The events following could be easily summarized. Nothing worked for the invaders. They had guns, true, but what can a dozen people with guns do to control thousands and thousands of determined - and very angry! - people? They can start shooting people, but that's not good for business. Who will work on the planned hemp plantations if everyone is dead? They can force ten people at a time to work, but the next night the field will go up in flames. They can't be everywhere. Who will collect their bird shit? Who will collect coconuts for them? Sell them stuff in the stores? (The stores suddenly became very empty, I can tell you.) Who will cook their food or**

**brew their coconut booze? Collect their taxes?**

**And everywhere, wherever they went, they had to constantly look behind their backs so that an angry islander wouldn't sneak up and bang a big coconut on their heads. When they slept, in total darkness without any electric lights, they had to listen for footsteps outside the windows - if they could sleep at all.**

**They tried to seize our mimeograph, but we had already moved it into the jungle outside the capital. I sometimes helped cranking the mimeo. It is very good for your arm muscles and the girls will adore your biceps.**

**Their jeeps would often get sweet coconut milk in the gas tanks - which is not healthy at all for a normal engine, I assure you. They were simple gangsters with no technical skills, so they hadn't the slightest clue on how to fix the power plant either.**

**One day, they found they'd had enough. The "Klingons" boarded their boats and left. A French destroyer picked them up a couple of days later. Believing they were from Greenpeace, they gave the gangsters really tough treatment. (They were more polite when they found it was just the Mafia.)**

**The king was of course reinstated. I managed to get a message through to JJ, who airlifted new episodes of Star Trek to the island. We kept our promises. (But we were new to politics and weren't aware of the special meaning of political campaign promises.)**

**Life didn't exactly go back to normal. It became better than before. The liberation struggle had changed the people. It brought them together and gave them strength. They knew that if they worked together and worked hard they could achieve things. The last I heard they had doubled their bird shit export and the new wealth has been used to build a new hospital, a new power plant, a school and a national Mr Sulu Museum.**

**This museum has a special wing for the freedom struggle. And in the main hall, behind glass, and with two honorary guards keeping constant watch - is the old mimeograph.**

**Myself, well, I was awarded the Royal Gold Medal of the Republic's Holy Coconut from the king himself.**

**"There's one thing I can't understand," Jonathan said. "A republic - with a king?"**

**"Well, they liked their king," Alan said. "But someone had read that a republic is better, so why not have the best of both worlds. Why bother about technical details?"**

**"How did you get home, Alan," I asked. "Did you use the transporter room? (Ha, ha)"**

**"With the vital pa...a battery for my GPS I had no problems," Alan said. "I had more problems making them let me leave. By the way, you must understand that Star Trek is just a fantasy. There is no such thing as a transporter..."**

**"Do you really think we'll buy your story?" Ted said. "No one can seriously believe there is a small Pacific island republic ruled by a slightly fat king, where everyone are trekkies! Let me tell you about Santa Claus..."**

**"You may believe whatever you want," Alan said dryly. "I can only tell you what has happened to me, exactly the way it happened. But I brought something. Where did I put it now?"**

**Alan searched his pockets, and soon produced a shiny object attached to a colourful silk band.**

**"This is the coconut gold medal," he said. "Unfortunately, this mark of distinction didn't come with any money. So if you, as I know you will - reluctantly, but still - could take care of my bill I believe I must be on my way."**

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***"In ancient history, there were times when the Bad Guy was really the Good Guy" --  
Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Vol 1 No 1***

# **SMOKESCREEN**

**by Rick Brooks**

**The tabloids had a field day.**

**The Vigilante Kid had gunned down Big Charlie, alleged head of the local prostitution and white slavery racket, as well as both his body guards. The masked figure in black then dived into a dark grey or black or deep blue station wagon. Or car or pick-up truck.**

**Three police cars were on their tail. Their vehicle ducked into an alley. And didn't come out.**

**Later Sergeant George Sanders, ex-Military Police, stood at attention in front of Police Commissioner Boardman and Police Chief Rinehart.**

**"Suddenly there's this cloud of smoke ahead of it. The vehicle drives into it without slowing down and disappears at once. I hit my brakes. Smoke that thick, I don't want to speed into.**

**"Then the stuff fades. Vehicle not in sight. Car 55 pulls into the other end of the alley. Vehicle couldn't have gone out without Joe and Frank seeing him.**

**"Checked the walls along the alley and the buildings beside it. No place the vehicle could have gone."**

**"Why didn't anybody get the license number?"**

**"I don't know. I had a bit of trouble seeing it. Looked blurry. I thought Sam would get it."**

**"Damn it, George. The Mayor is getting the heat on the Vigilante Kid and his driver,**

**Smokescreen, as the papers call the two of them. And that heat gets passed to us."**

**The Commissioner made the word "papers" sound like a cuss word.**

**He shook his head. "Nobody got the license number, not even any of the witnesses. None of the witnesses noticed it before the shootings. They can't even say if it was a car or a pick-up truck."**

**He pounded on the table. "What the hell is going on here?"**

**"I wish I knew, Sir."**

**"The tabloids," Commissioner Boardman bit off the words as though they tasted bad. "The tabloids say that Smokescreen has the power to cloud men's minds. Like that Cranston fellow on those old radio shows."**

**"We never have gotten a good description of him," Police Chief Rinehart said. "People agree the Kid is about five feet tall and slender. Has a high-pitched voice as if it hasn't changed yet. But no description of Smokescreen. Or too many."**

**Commissioner Boardman snarled. "Poppycock! It's been dark each time. He's been lucky. We'll get a good look at him sooner or later. But we don't have the time. We've got to do something now!"**

**Chief Rinehart shrugged. "What more can we do, Commissioner?" He spread his hands. "We've got more cops on the streets. None of the stoolies know anything despite what we're offering. We've investigated all the places Smokecreen has disappeared as well as everybody who lives nearby."**

**Chief Rinehart looked his boss in the eye. "All we can do is wait for them to make a mistake. And they don't seem to have made any yet."**

**Commissioner Boardman stared back. "I hear that some of the boys don't want the Kid caught. So far, he's wiped out sewer rats like Big Charlie and Little Lewey, the Piranha Brothers, and Slippery Sal. So they figure, no loss."**

**Chief Rinehart stood up. "Commissioner, all my boys are going to do their job."**

**Commissioner Boardman stood up. "For all our sakes, I hope so. Now I've got to go to City Hall, and do what damage control I can."**

**He turned as he reached the door. "For God's sake, get the Kid and Smokescreen. Or we may all be out our jobs."**

**On his way down the hall, Commissioner Boardman walked past a workman dressed in grey coveralls. The Commissioner gave the man an incurious glance and went on his way.**

**The workman blinked behind wire-rimmed glasses. He was used to such treatment. Other officers wandered by as he worked on wiring behind an opened panel.**

**None paid much attention to the man working there or asked him what he was doing. He worked slowly and carefully, checking out his work.**

**Then he replaced his tools in their box. He closed and locked the panel and moved down to the next one in the hall.**

**He carefully pulled three more wires through the batch already there and made his way down the hall.**

**The workman was down in the basement toiling away over his lunch hour. He paused twice to eat a candy bar. A Payday and a Zero. He didn't like chocolate-covered candy bars.**

**Finally he closed up his tool box at five and strolled out of the police station. He passed by Chief Rinehart, heading up the hall with a worried look on his face.**

**Chief Rinehart didn't even glance at the workman.**

**The workman walked about three and one half blocks to a parking lot. He presented his ticket to the attendant and paid with exact change.**

**He walked over to a dark grey station wagon, a small J2000 Pontiac. He put his tool box in the back. He got in and drove off.**

**He drove slowly and carefully. Other drivers tended to overlook him.**

**Several blocks away, the workman took a shortcut down an alley.**

**No one saw the station wagon slowly drive into a cloud of smoke and vanish.**

**Cecilia Roush paced up and down the subway platform. She ran her hand through her short black hair. She looked more like a boy with her slight figure.**

**She was the only one on the platform. Which was hardly odd as the subway tracks were covered with crushed stone. About fifty feet on either side of her, the subway tunnel ended in a blank wall.**

**Cecilia glanced at her wrist watch still another time. She sighed and walked into what had once been a long narrow storage room.**

**One end was filled with computer equipment. Harold Farmer didn't notice her approach. He had eyes for nothing but his computer screen.**

**Cecilia glanced at her watch. In about two hours, she'd bring his supper down. She knew Harold would nibble on junk food all day if he didn't have something decent to eat.**

**She put a hand on Harold's shoulder. Gradually he switched his gaze to her. Light reflected off thick glasses as he turned his head.**

**"Cecilia?"**

**"Anything, yet?"**

**"Plenty." He gestured at the confusing screen. "I can read everything on the police computers."**

**"Everything?"**

**"Well, I haven't hacked my way into some of the accounts. But I soon will." Harold turned his head and was instantly absorbed in his computer display.**

**Cecilia shook her head. She might as well be invisible. This must be how poor Gareth felt all the time.**

**She walked back out onto the subway platform and began pacing again.**

**Cecilia had been back and forth about a dozen more times when a cloud of smoke obscured one end of the tunnel.**

**Out of it came a charcoal grey station wagon. It slowed to stop in front of her and Gareth Hunt Morganstern unfolded himself from behind the wheel.**

**At just over six feet, he was nearly a foot taller than she was.**

**Faded blue eyes looked down into her hazel eyes. His eyes widened a bit when she didn't look away. Gareth still wasn't used to someone that really saw him.**

**Then he noticed the look on her face. He gestured toward what had been a waiting room. Cecilia turned and Gareth put an arm around her, just below her small breasts. They walked into what had been a subway waiting room.**

**A fantastically ornate glass chandelier hung from the center of a high domed ceiling. It was in good shape, but most of the faded furniture wasn't.**

**They sat down on a sturdy sofa covered by a navy blue blanket.**

**"Gareth. I wish you wouldn't take such risks."**

**"Oh. And who shot it out with Big Charlie and his two body guards?"**

**"That was different. I'm a poor target and I got the drop on them. I was wearing my Kevlar undies, too. You walked to the lion's den. And spent most of the day there."**

**"Sorry. I had to be sure my work was okay. Got it so Harold can tap their computer without being traced here."**

**He twirled a lock of his sandy brown hair around his forefinger. "I didn't**

**find it easy to wait while you dodged bullets either."**

**Cecilia looked down at the tile floor. "This isn't a good life for you."**

**"Better than when even my own folks had trouble remembering who I was. Now I've got you."**

**Cecilia blushed. "After that crook gunned Dad down from behind and Mom couldn't keep on without him, I had to do something."**

**"I know. Sooner or later, we'll clean out all those rats."**

**"There will always be more."**

**"After the Kid blows away most of them, the rest will leave town."**

**Cecilia sighed. "I hope so. But somehow I can't believe it will ever happen."**

**They sat together in silence.**

**Chief Rinehart's face was flushed and he tried to hang on to his temper. He resisted the impulse to hammer on his desk.**

**"You traced the hacker to WHERE?!"**

**"We doubled checked it three times, Chief. He's got to be sneaking in and using your computer."**

**I don't give a hoot. Even that damn Smokescreen couldn't slip in and use my computer while I'm sitting here."**

**"But each time we checked it, we got the same answer. And our monitoring software has always been right before. Sgt. Ritter admitted to playing Spacewars. Lt. Wickham didn't admit to downloading porn, but he sure was. Jonesie.."**

**"Damn it, I know. I may not use my computer that much. But nobody else does!"**

**"We'll check it again, Chief."**

**"Check it a dozen times. It's gotta be a trick. If Smokescreen can manipulate my computer without my seeing it while I'm sitting here, we might as well all quit and turn over the city to him."**

**After the technician shut the door behind him, Chief Rinehart stared at his computer screen. It looked the same. But if he couldn't see Smokescreen, maybe he couldn't see what Smokescreen was doing on his computer either.**

**He sagged in his chair. Suddenly he sat up, a look of horror on his face. "How am I going to explain this to the Commissioner?"**

**-END-**

**[HOME](#)**



flung around his neck to keep out New York's chilly winter. Little did the guard suspect Glendin wore the scarf to cover a hideous neck wound, as much as for keeping out the cold.

Glendin noticed the guard only spun four digits; an internal call. The guard spoke in a low tone and received instructions. He directed Glendin to an elevator that would bring him to Room 710. As per procedure, the guard escorted him to the bank of elevators.

"There must be some misunderstanding," Glendin protested. "Everyone knows Wylie occupies the 86<sup>th</sup> floor of this skyscraper."

"You want Wylie, that's the way," assured the guard.

"If this is some trick to be rid of me, I'll..." threatened Glendin.

"...have my job, I know," filled in the guard.

Oh, well, let's see this through. No good to muck about with hirelings, realized Glendin. The door slid closed behind Glendin.

"Everyone wants to see Doc Wylie," sighed the guard. "Nobody comes to see me."

Going up seven floors, the first person Glendin met was an attractive young lady directing visitors. The strawberry blonde was obviously in charge. Her nameplate claimed: SADIE BERLINGER. That was somehow familiar. She was attended by a group of thuggish-looking men, although their manners and clothing were above reproach.

Here on this floor, it seemed to him that people from every walk of life were waiting. Some are turned away; others are given slips of paper. Glendin was asked to fill out a form. He was sure *that* was because he had mentioned his profession of botanist. Glendin was not unknown in his field. Glendin jumped when his name was called a few minutes later. He reported to the girl.

"*Doctor* Glendin, I see. You're English," she announced. "First name?"

"Wilfred Glendin, of Kent," he noted. "I've come a long way to hire Doc Wylie."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," Miss Berlinger shook her pretty blonde head.

"Mistaken?"

"Doc Wylie can't be hired."

"Cannot *be* hired?"

"He'll take your case *if* it merits his time."

"If...? But I thought he was a detective, a scientific one."

"He isn't a 'detective,'" Miss Berlinger clarified. "If you want a scientific detective, I can refer you to Craig Kennerly. Doc Wylie travels the world, righting wrongs."

"Money is no object. I have money," stressed Glendin. "If that is what he requires."

Miss Berlinger smiled, "Doc doesn't work for money."

"But," Glendin sputtered, "How does he bloody live? Pardon my language."

"He's wealthy. Doc holds numerous patents that have added to both his wealth

*and fame."*

"I see," muttered Glendin. "Look, I was attacked by a beast man in Tibet. Surely this is the kind of thing that *must* interest Wylie."

"Beast man? Doc had a case like that once," considered Miss Berlinger, closing one eye.

"Did he, then?" Glendin's own eyes lit up, "Surely Wylie will take mine."

"It turned out to be a fake werewolf," concluded Miss Berlinger.

"My good woman, this was *no* fake," insisted Glendin.

"I'm sure you believe that. If you tell me your problem in more detail, perhaps we can make an informed decision. Can you tell me what made seek out Doc Wylie's help?"

"You see, I was just settling into a meal at a Chinese restaurant when I read a profile of Wylie. Isn't there an outside chance I could see him right away?"

"Stone walls surround him. But I think Jacques Le Grandon can help."

"Ah, one of Wylie's five assistants?"

"Dr. Le Grandon is an occult investigator, attached to the Parisian police. He is in New York on special assignment."

Glendin knew what *that* really meant. His superiors couldn't bear to have this Le Grandon under foot. Academia had taught him that much.

Miss Berlinger looked around, "He's studying our police methods."

"Is this Le Grandon trustworthy?" probed Glendin. Now he knew her. She was the famous "girl detective" all grown up.

"Many years ago, Le Grandon was paid a great deal of money to tutor Doc," she continued.

"Well, if Wylie vouches for him, all right. When can I see him?" Glendon looked around eagerly.

"The Hudson Tubes will take you to him in Harrisonville, New Jersey."

"New Jersey?"

Miss Berlinger reached for a map the greater New York City area.

Jacques Le Grandon, a small Frenchman at some mid-point between his sixties or seventies with needle-like mustaches, received Glendin in his study. The house was owned by his absent associate Dr. Emmanuel Trowbridge, currently making his rounds.

"You see, I was attacked by a beast man while in Tibet."

"Tibet, eh? Miss Berlinger she says as much. Still they have the tradition of the goat."

"Beg pardon?"

"A local someone he dresses up like the goat, blame is assigned him. Him he is driven into the wilderness," Le Grandon waved a hand.

"Driving away the village's failings? I see. That has some bearing on my situation?"

"Maybes, but the source of your amusing English expression 'scapegoat,' at any rates. It is said, this person in the olden days used to, how you say,

transform *into* a goat. The Tibetan, you see, is not the strangers to animal people.”

“Well, a man-like beast anyway.”

“The elusive yeti you allude to, hah? I myselfs have had such an episode with Beneckendorff’s beast man.”

“Thing is, I feel that a man I encountered there, a Dr. Lorenz and also a Japanese named Dr. Yogami with some connection to the University of Carpathia had something to do with the attack..”

“Slandorous charges, *mon ami*. I will look them up. Many friends old Le Grandon have on the policeses,” he patted his own chest.

“Good. There is something else. I have also been shot,” confessed Glendin.

“Shot? It must be the long time ago, *mon ami*. You are the very photo of health.”

“Recently, and it was at close range.”

“Perhaps it was the blank that makes the sound and the fury, no?”

“I assure you it was a regular lead bullet. My wound healed. I have the scar.”

“Better you let me examine thats,” he indicated the way into his examining room. “This she happened in Tibet, too?”

The pair reconvened in that room, Le Grandon guiding his patient by the elbow.

“No, in London,” Glendin opened his shirt, waistcoat and doffed the undershirt.

“I see. And who has done this shots to you?”

“My fiancé did it. I seem to have become, er, much hairier than I was before. She quit me.”

“This extra hairiness is no reasons for your *paramour* to make with the bang-bangs,” Dr. Le Grandon bent to look at the proffered scar. But there was no scar. Glendin caught sight of his neck in a mirror. He was shocked to find there was no neck wound either. They had healed.

“Suddenly, you look the ashen, *mon ami*,” said Le Grandon. “Perhaps you imagined these.”

“Doctor, my neck still had a horrendous scar just this morning. It was the reason I wore the scarf.”

“*Sacre bleu*,” exclaimed Le Grandon.

An hour later, Le Grandon came back to Glendin in the sitting room.

“I have done much the researches,” reported Le Grandon. “Lorenz him is a fellow botanist.”

“That I knew. I realize now he must have seen me as a rival in finding the *Mariposa Lumina Lupis*,” Glendin put down the cup of jasmine tea housekeeper Nola had prepared. They had returned to the examination room.

“It could be. This plant, you say, she blooms only under the light of the moon? *Zut alors!*”

“Never mind that, doctor, if you please. What do we do, about me?”

“Now we seek these fellows you mention out. There are some the shady things

at the University of Carpathia. I have finds they study this pseudo-science of alchemy.”

“I have never heard of it.”

“No? Just as wells. These alchemists, they try to make the gold from lead.”

“Oh, yes, that silly stuff.”

“Not only thats, but also to make the artificial man.”

“I say.”

“And more: they searches the oil of life, the Elixir Vitae.”

“Whatever is *that*?”

“It grants the long life and cures all ills. This includes the wounds, such as yours.”

“Rather! But I haven’t taken any Elixir Vital, or whatever it is.”

“Do you not understand my plain American? Elixir *Vitae*! You see, them Nazis look into the alchemy. Manufacture the gold to finance their hellish schemes. Perhaps they stumble upon this *lebenwasser*, the Elixir Vitae, too.”

“But there were no Nazis,” protested Glendin.

“Perhaps, but this Yogami is the Japanese. Or perhaps not the full Japanese, eh? He has the some dealing with the shady group called the Black Dragon Gang. Of course, Japan is the ally of Germany.”

“Good reasoning and cracking work.”

“Thanks go to your own countrymen: Maurice Klaw and Sir Dennis Nayland Jones. I make the big-distance calls. This Black Dragon Gang has looked into this alchemy also.”

“I see.”

“So, you afraid you are becomings the beast man on the murder spree, eh? Run all amok.”

“Well, yes.”

“And you seek the release from this curse?”

“No, now I find it very appealing. I didn’t know I could heal like this.”

“*Appealing? Mon Dieu!* You finds that...!”

This revelation was interrupted by the appearance of Nola.

“Imbecile,” Le Grandon admonished. “You should nots be entering the examine room when I consult the patient!”

“I’m sorry, doctor,” sobbed the housekeeper. “I couldn’t stop them.”

“Them? Who is this *them*? Show me *the* them!”

No need. A group of men pushed their way in. Le Grandon counted four heads. Nasty looking Lugars pointed at Le Grandon and Glendin. Although the men had a military bearing about them, they were dressed like an assortment of typical Harrisonville types. They would not be out of place in uniforms. The last man in had wild gray hair and an air of evil about him.

“Dr. Maboose,” choked out Le Grandon, in surprise.

“The same,” admitted the apparent leader. He bowed and clicked his heels,

“How flattering that you recognize me.”

“Indeed, I have recognize. You are the wanted the dead or alive. But how can

you still be such the young?"

"Ach, thank you, *Herr Doktor*, for the compliment. But the state of my health is not important. Not yet," Maboose nodded to Glendin. "This one's is, however." Glendin rose.

"Be seated, Glendin."

One of the other newcomers shoved him back onto the examining table.

"I demands to know the meanings of this outrage!" shouted Le Grandon.

"You do? *Here* is the meaning," Maboose stated. He smacked the Frenchman with his black-gloved hand. Le Grandon stumbled backward and fell. Glendin and Nola sprang forward, the latter screaming "Doctor!" Both were restrained by their captors.

"Is *that* sufficient explanation?" asked Maboose cloyingly. He approached the Frenchman, bent and helped him up. Shakily, Le Grandon regained his feet. He knew salvation was as close as his cane. One of the toughs, however, blocked the umbrella stand he kept it in.

"It is decidedly not," Le Grandon's foot snapped out, catching Dr. Maboose on the point of the chin. Hands reached out to Le Grandon. Maboose stumbled back a few inches but retained his footing. The blow should have been a knockout. Maboose shook it off and nodded to the man closest Nola. That man gently tapped a Lugar against her temple.

"*La savate*? We'll have no more of that, Le Grandon."

"What is it you want, fiend?" Le Grandon wondered how Maboose could shrug off his best kick.

"Very little. Just an autopsy of this man," he indicated Glendin.

"You make with the joke, yes? He is the alive and well."

"Not for very long. I would also like his blood. All of it," added Maboose.

Just then that the voice of the house owner, Dr. Trowbridge sang out: "Nola? Jacques? You've left the front door open."

"Wilhelm!" hissed Maboose. "You said no one else was here..."

Suddenly there was a yelp. Nola's heel had scraped along the shin of her captor as the girl untangled herself. Le Grandon dived for his cane. The girl broke away, calling "Dr. Trowbridge, in here!"

"*Stop her!*" commanded Maboose. Three men grabbed for the housekeeper.

Maboose turned back to Le Grandon. He was met by the smack of the Frenchman's cane. Le Grandon ran to join the others.

Glendin passed Le Grandon. Ahead, he could hear Trowbridge and saw Nola's back. The three men were splitting up. Glendin caught the last one. With a bestial snarl, he snapped the German's neck. It was the one who had manhandled him. Another one turned back, forgetting Nola. He drew his Lugar and fired. Glendin was knocked down by the impact.

Le Grandon snapped out another of his kicks at the German, fast, before the gun could be swung up. This one had the desired effect. The German collapsed in a heap. Well, I have not lost the old touch, noted Le Grandon, to himself, with satisfaction.

Up ahead, Nola ran into the room where Trowbridge was. The door slammed. The third German struck the door repeatedly, attempting to break it down. Nothing happened. He stepped back and pulled out his gun, sights on the lock. Suddenly the door swung open and Nola appeared with a Webley revolver. Trowbridge could be heard yelling "Nola, don't!"

The German retreated as the girl opened fire. The gun was awkward in her hand. The German leveled his Luger at her. Le Grandon appeared, sword cane now unsheathed. The Frenchman caught German and ran him through. He then turned to Glendin who was getting shakily to his feet. Blood covered his abdomen. Nola pointed her gun at the pair but lowered it when she saw friends. She took off meaning to shoot the invaders.

"Nola, come back!" called the Frenchman. He turned to Glendin, "Do not stir, excitable boy."

"No, I'm fine. What about Maboose?"

"I do not understand it. He has thrown in with them Nazis. My information is he sits upon the devil doctor's Cabal of Seven, sworn enemy of each others."

"I meant: is he finished?"

"Ah, *oui*. I have taken care of him."

"Ran him through?"

"No, I crack my sword cane over the head but a good one. When him wakes, we get answers."

"Won't do, doctor..."

"No. It will not," boomed Maboose, from behind them. "Your smart Englishman has put it together."

Maboose clamped his hand around the sword cane and wrenched it from Le Grandon's grip. He pivoted and stuck it deep into the heart of Wilfred Glendin who fell to the floor with a groan.

"*That* is how to kill one of us, Frenchman, through the heart." He snapped the sword cane over his knee and turned to Le Grandon. "*You* I kill with my bare hands!"

He clamped the Frenchman's throat and squeezed.

"You the brilliant man," Le Grandon choked out. "Why you stand with them Nazis?"

"The Cabal of Seven is wrong. My country will win this war. I intend to be on the right side. But I will no longer have the Chinese doctor's potion to keep me young."

"So, it is the real. You seek to synthesize anew from this victim of the yeti bite?"

"Not yeti. What bit this pitiful one was a reject of the doctor's experiments with the elixir."

"Too strong, he makes it? Results in beast men," reasoned Le Grandon.

Maboose nodded, "I have been trailing the botanist. The Nazis can make an army of *ubermensch* with his blood. I will receive a dose for bringing in it in."

At that moment that Nola re-appeared with Trowbridge's Webley. "Duck, Dr. Jacques, oh, *please* duck!"

Maboose turned to her and saw her aiming at his heart. She opened fire on Maboose as he

**dived through a window.**

**When she turned, she was startled to see Wilfred stumble out the door.**

**The End**

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# FROM THE VIBRATING ETHER



**Dear Luna:**

**WOW! (As Jason Burnett said in your last issue.) Talk about The Good Ole Days -- you brought back the Lensmen! A tragedy, yes -- but we can't always have happy endings. Lee Gold did a great job recreating that major series!**

**Got a chuckle out of Shelby's Shrlndhu, too! (Did I spell it right???)**

**--Jack Whitted**

**I'm disappointed; the WOW! wasn't for me! (Yeah, yeah; I'm joking.) And you used one too many Hs; it's Shrlndu. But, who's counting? You liked it and told us so; that's what's important!**

**More letters! (Not surprising; the counter says there have been over 550 hits so far on our new ish!)**

**This from a wise and intelligent newcomer:**

**Just saw mention of you in a newsgroup, so thought I'd give you a try. I was pleased! Really smashing cover, and the Lensmen story was a great takeoff on E E Smith's great series. Is a sequel possible? Also, there is a kids TV program called Power Rangers that is plagiarized from (strike that!) inspired by the Lensmen.**

**The shrIndu story was enjoyable, too. Any more of those?**

**I'll be looking for more of Planetary Stories!**

**Cyrus Mackin**

**I could hug you, Cyrus! Thanks for the kind (but true!) words. As for a sequel -- that's up to Lee Gold.**

**Lee?**

**ShelVy tells me he is working on several other stories in the 'Trouble' series. If he finishes one, we'll run it! (Surprise, surprise!)**

**Here's another volunteer and, again, from a newsgroup!**

**I didn't see any publication date at your website Planetary Stories and was wondering the date of the last story published. Well, we DO have 2005 on our Contents page! But, no joke, we don't have a schedule; just 'as available' -- meaning, when we have enuf to fill an issue!**

**I was hoping I could submit a sci-fi that spoofs the ads found in comic books and the pulp mags of old. You know the ones I'm talking about! Yeah, that 98 pound weakling, and all that!**

**If you're interested, I found your site through the Yahoo e-group StartlingStoriesClub and wanted to write a story about the pulps for Planetary Stories. If nothing else, this submission and the constructive criticism it may receive will help me improve my writing.**

**Lorenzo M Baehne**

**Glad you wrote! And the story is "Fine Print" -- you pipple give him a read and a write, okay?**

**And now, from England, by way of fictionmags.com:**

**Ian Covell**

**ah, lovely... humour, affection, satire, some jokes, and an obvious knowledge of pulp ("Ping the Percyless" indeed, tut tut).**

**I am amazed someone didn't get the Earle K Bergey jokes!!**

**I look forward to reading all of these at leisure!!**

**The above very kind remarks were, shortly, followed by the following:**

**In re the Smith-parody.. considering the number of times the "real" story had to be hidden, it might be that all of it could be rethought to prove that (of course) none of the Kinnison, er, kin, were ever harmed at all...**

**...well, okay... it was an extremely clever idea to mix the Skylark and Lensman universes and have DuQuesne (\*) be a suitable match for the worst of the worst -- and it even tries to replicate the approach, prose, and characters of the original.**

**But it inverts everything Doc Smith stood for and wanted to write, and I loathe its later developments. There is a sequel to CHILDREN OF THE LENS (I planned it) but this isn't it, and I can only read it as an attack on Smith's creation rather than a homage to it.**

**I see it was written in 1967 which is why I didn't comment first time, presumably many people have read it, so my own comments seemed quite superfluous..**

**[\*I always thought this was pronounced "Du-kwesne" until someone noted the resemblance Killer Kane / DuQuesner, when it all dropped into focus]**

**Ian**

# LINKS FOR YOU

**VERY** unlike a pulp magazine! We're including links to places you might find handy, starting with business links for Ross Chamberlain and Clif Jackson.

## [ROSS](#)

Ross, as you can see, is a great fanartist. His website shows many other examples.

## [CLIF](#)

Clif, as well as being a fanartist, also makes and sells a great line of personalized clocks!

... And, of course, there's the link everyone should have

## [GOOGLE](#)

... And, equally necessary

## [EFANZINES](#)

A great site, full of both old and new fanzines -- AND Planetary Stories!.

Yeah, might as well include my own, too.

## [ShelVy](#)

If you are one of those rare few who don't know about it, there is also

## [TRUFEN](#)

which is loaded with news about fandom.

**I added a counter. It was free. Below is a link to it:**

**[COUNTER](#)**

**Are you a fan of Zenna Henderson and The People? If so, here is a topnotch website.**

**[THE PEOPLE](#)**

**Here's a link for lovers of pulp mags in general. Lotsa good stuff at:**

**[PULPGEN.COM](#)**

**[EDMOND HAMILTON](#)**

**The above site, part of pulpgen.com, pays homage to Edmond Hamilton, one of the greatest sf authors. .**

**Here's a link to another sf/fantasy/horror magazine you'll want to follow:**

**[SCREAMING DREAMS](#)**

**[HOME](#)**

**[HOME](#)**

# WRITE!

**It's writing that keeps Planetary Stories going – writing stories and, sometimes, the even more important writing of letters of comment.**

## **STORIES –**

**As you can tell, we use both serious and flippant material. We want it to help us revive the feeling of the old pulp mags; new ideas that fit the profile, and parodies that make fun of them. We'll look at whatever you send. Send it to [shelvy@planetarystories.com](mailto:shelvy@planetarystories.com). [Meaning, email all material](#). Thanx.**

## **LETTERS –**

**Since we charge nothing for Planetary Stories, the only pay we receive is your letters of comment. Don't force a compliment! What we really want is an honest evaluation of what you have read. We take derision as well as compliments. We take suggestions. We like having stories taken apart and commented on.**

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