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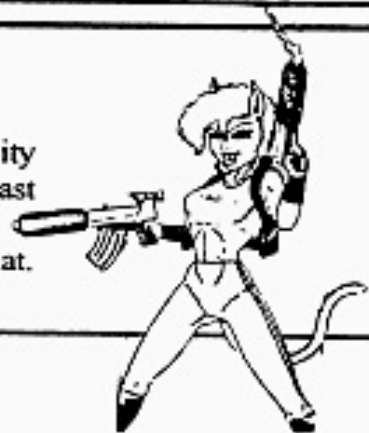
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Yarf! The Journal of Applied Anthropomorphics. Issue #35, April 1995. Published by *Yarf!*, P.O. Box 1299, Cupertino, CA 95015-1299. All art and stories © 1995 by the respective artist or author. All other material © 1995 by *Yarf!* No material may be reproduced without permission, except for reviews with proper credit. How is my driving? Dip in road. Speed enforced by aircraft. Watch for low-flying aircraft.

FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from you to us and from us to you.

This issue, we're going to reverse the usual order of things. What little we have to say will follow readers' letters of comment....

First off, a prodigal son returns to the fold: Pred Night — yes, "Pred" — of Glenwood, IA:

Whazzup? How are things in sunny California? Things are fairly peachy-keen here, despite the weather. Right now [February] it's pretty drab down here; no sunshine, but lots of rain. Blech! Definitely not an atmosphere conducive to general well-being! It does get you on the computer to type all those letters you've been procrastinating on, though.

Oh, didn't I tell you? Yeah, I finally gave in and purchased a computer! It's been mondo cool ever since! And, unfortunately, probably one of the reasons why I didn't resubscribe back in January ['94] when your little reminder came in the mail with my last issue (#28). Yes, friends, if ever you want to put a crimp in any extraneous spending—such as subscribing to *Yarf!*—go buy a computer. Not only do they cost an arm and a leg, but there is always something out there you just *have* to add to it. Like a 14.4k-baud modem, so I can call all those furry boards I've been hearing about. Or an Overdrive Processor, so I can play *DOOM* faster. Or whatever. Oh, sure, I *love* my computer. I just wish it weren't so bloody expensive. Fortunately, I've just about purchased all the upgrade options that I can pump into this baby. Anything else would merit a totally new computer. (God forbid!) By the way, just in case you were wondering, my computer is a Packard Bell 486DX4 75-MHz (Overdrive) with 8 Mb of RAM, a 170-Mb hard drive (must have more...losing space...), a double-speed CD-ROM, Sound Blaster 16 sound card, 14.4k-baud modem and lots and lots of software!

After paying for all that stuff, you'd think I could've saved enough to resubscribe to *Yarf!*, right? I thought so, too — then came another insidious little money gobbler called *Magic: The Gathering*. Oh, boy. The first month into that game, you would've thought that I was drugged. More cards! Gotta have more! Sheesh. Fortunately, the feeling wore off about \$1500 later. Yeah, I know. Stupid. I must have my head screwed on wrong. I hope all of you have avoided this addictive little game. I also developed a small craving for manga and anime somewhere along the way, but that's nothing compared to what I've spent on my computer and *Magic*.

Well, my computer doesn't really need anything new... except for new games, like *Dark Forces*. Its upgrade possibilities have pretty much run out. And round the beginning of 1995, *Magic* possibilities pretty much ran out as

well. 'Bout this time I started wondering what to do for an encore. After a cursory inspection of all my stuff (read: junk), I began to wonder where my *Yarfs* had wandered off to. Then I remembered. The first week I'd become interested in *Magic*, I'd taken a bunch of books and graphic novels and my beloved collection of *Yarfs* to a used bookstore. Yeah, I know. Stupid squared. So I went back and repurchased the whole load of them! Luckily (or unluckily, depending on your point of view), they were all still there, just a little bit dusty. (Achooooooo!) Yes, I know. I've been a baaaaaad boy. Selling off my fave 'zine for a few measly cards. But I've learned my lesson. (Besides, I was drugged, remember? One little paper cut and you're addicted. Truly.) Now I'd like to play catch-up. I *have* to find out what happens in *In Our Image* and "Learning to Fly", not to mention the latest *Robert and Katrina*, *Ace of Spades*, and *heck*, everything else! I managed to find the resubscription form you sent me back in January '94. It's old, I know, but with a little manipulation of the "rates" portion, it should be okay. You'll find it attached to a check somewhere in this letter. So, pu-leeceeeasse get me resubscribed pronto! I'll be real good from now on, promise!

P.S.: Don't forget to send a back issues form!

An encyclopedic missive from Robert Deighton of Hull, East Yorkshire:

It's been many moons since my last *Yarf!* fix, but my numbers 33 and 34 arrived today and as usual it's been worth the wait.

Monika Livingstone's cover is a dynamic departure from what we're used to, but is superb nonetheless. A realistic piece, with intensity to match the tone of the subject—and with sharp angularity of line, *à la* Eric Blumrich, which adds to its impact. (A quality lacking from many comics today — including 'superhero' ones, which as we all know, 'suck'.)

And *Ace of Spades* certainly isn't lacking in impact, as it builds to its (no doubt explosive) conclusion. From the start, Chris Grant has presented us with a well-thought-out future-war scenario — an action-packed and sometimes graphic series (a sort of SF *Platoon*), but wherever and whenever it occurs, war is hell; Aeryn Summers' inks and shading add to the atmosphere of this issue's episode. (Mr. Grant *does* have taste in additional artists, eh?) But I was surprised to see, amongst all the advanced Imperial and Centrality hardware, someone using a conventional shotgun. Or is this an antique that officer likes to use, which he (to quote from the film *Aliens*) 'likes to keep handy for "close encounters" '?

CATNIP OVERDRIVE © JASON GAFFNEY

RAYMOND, WHAT'S WITH ALL THIS VIOLENCE ON T.V.?

YOU'VE READ ALL THE THEORY, REINFORCEMENT THEORY AND SO FORTH.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?



WHAT'S IT DOING TO THE MINDS OF OUR YOUNG? WHAT IF THEY TRY TO COPY THE STUFF THEY SEE ON TELEVISION.

I'D THINK THERE'D BE WORSE THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT.



LIKE WHAT?

BRETT
BETT!



W
H
A
M

WELL, THEY DO SAY MOST ACCIDENTS HAPPEN IN THE HOME.

... AND THAT'S FOR PUTTING TOO MUCH STARCH IN MY BLOUSE.



[There are many different levels and types of technology existing side by side in the Empires universe, sometimes deliberately. Energy weapons are effective for out-and-out combat, but shotguns and other projectile weapons are cheap, rugged, easy to use and supply, and more than sufficiently effective for police use in a small, peaceful desert town. It is likely that Tebessa's police force quite purposely rejected purchasing energy weapons. — Ed.]

Jim Groat's con reports get funnier with each one that's printed. Heh, if his experiences related to us like this — and a few videos I've seen — are anything to go by, then this year's Worldcon in Glasgow should be fun and interesting for me. (It'll be my first con.) By the way, Mr. Groat, I've heard that White Castle may be branching out over here soon, so you might not miss your favorite burgers whilst visiting the U.K. then.

Messrs. Alves' and Pounds' *Ralph the Wonder Hamster* has become much more coherent in terms of layout and plot, compared with the first series. Whilst the previous strip clearly had an 'underground comix' look to it, the chaotic layout made it difficult to follow. But this shows the humorous storyline much better, whilst still being a touch weird. (The weirdness going a bit over the top may have been the reason why some couldn't understand the former.)

And *Nitrocoon* has improved greatly too, perhaps with the ancient Japanese element brought into it? (This is sure to make it popular.) An excellent science fantasy by Avi Melman, which I'll look forward to seeing more of. (Good work on subtitled *Ko Berserker Century II*, sir!)

No doubt Kjartan Arnórsson's "What to Do With the Body" is inspired by the late Bill Hicks and Denis Leary school of humour, i.e., 'Americans who do recognize the concept of irony.' But I bet there will be those who'll say 'He's watched *Reservoir Dogs* and *Natural Born Killers* too many times', and 'Does the name Jeffrey Dahmer ring any bells?' Well, his stuff — what I've seen of it — gets the thumb's up from me — I get a laugh out of it!

[The strip is indeed satirical, though he is quite serious about his comment that in the U.S., "Citizens who kill in self-defense are routinely put through hell by the legal system." In addition, they usually lose their jobs and are so stigmatized they often move from the area. — Ed.]

But I haven't giggled so much at a 'zine 'article' as I did with Kris Kreutzman's "A Story About Newts". (An amusing cover, too.) Amphibians incorporating an organic form of Semtex? Heh, I guess it's one way of 'blowing your mind' in a more direct way than licking cane toads, eh?

And more enjoyable text stories too, as befits *Yarf!*'s reputation for printing the very best of what the genre's brilliant talents can produce. Michael Payne has, if he'll excuse the pun, taken great pains to make Chelisse into a believable and three-dimensional character — shown in "Such a Burning Desire" and especially so in "Fit Panis Hominum". Nat Brogden's "Tenderloin" and "Animus"

would certainly be worthy as teleplays for *The Twilight Zone* or an episode of *X-Files* in the case of the former. Tim Susman is new to me, but his "Happily, Ever After" makes me hope he'll create more excellent stories like this for future issues. And I certainly was surprised to learn that Jeremy 'Wolf' Kidd is a writer, on top of being a distinctive artist — his "An Error in Spelling" having a new twist on the old saying 'be careful what you wish for, you may get it'. Outstanding art he's done too, not only for this story, but his other individual pieces too — the hardsuited feline "Hellheart" clearly *Bubblegum Crisis*-inspired. And I suggest Jeremy keeps his pick of the military mouse away from another Mr. Kidd of our acquaintance lest the latter's hormones explode!

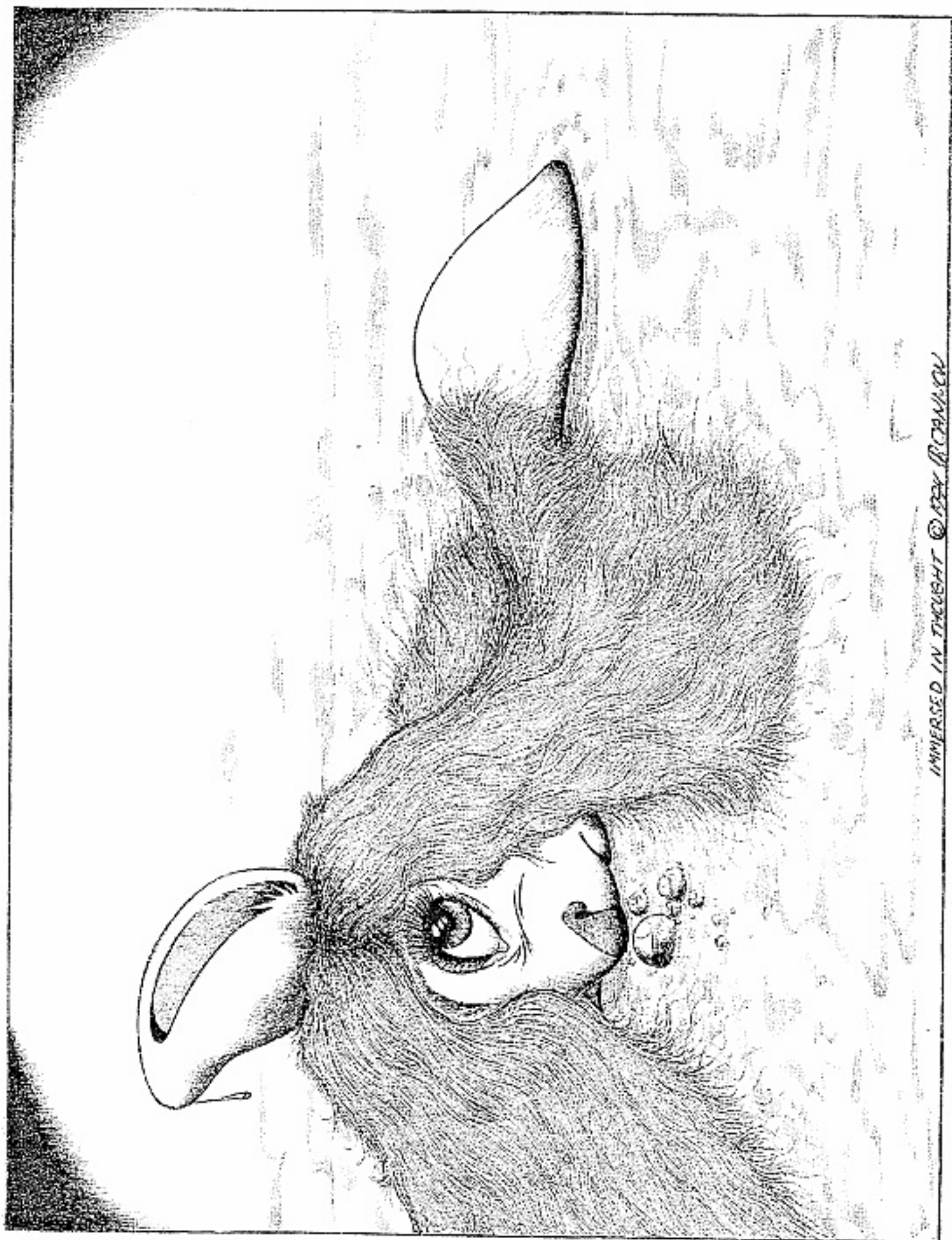
David Green's "TK I & I" has to be the most delightful story I've read in *Yarf!* to date — a nice combination of fantasy and 'slice of life'; my only criticism being that it was too short... unless he has more episodes planned? And such a wonderfully detailed, almost 'art nouveau'-ish illustration by Conrad Wong, whose art style has advanced by leaps and bounds in recent years — and he has a good eye for species detail, with Mishael the clouded leopard-aur (looking rather Terrie Smith-esque), and I'd very much like to see more of his work in future issues.

Quite a few interesting pieces of individual art too. That by Brian Harp is beginning to grow on me — his furry demons, and especially the more angelic "Mari and Tej" — so cute! Jordan Greywolf's works continue to impress me, particularly "Goldrush" — my kind of gutsy feline femme. Looking at Bernard Doove's "Ram-Bo", going by my knowledge of films — and switching to pedantic mode — I should point out that he's obviously based this image on Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Predator* — so shouldn't a more appropriate title be "Maj. Dutch Sheep-er"? And more predictably unpredictable art by Bill Fitts, Roy D. Pounds, Jack Cavanaugh, and Mario D'Anna — keep it up! Also, if exploding newts weren't enough, Dave Claerhout's "Nitro Bug" gags were highly amusing too. Phil Bolton's animé-like style appeals to me — "Phelidae" is a good example of that quality to his art, but that's not the only reason why I took an instant liking to his "Ægyptos" piece — it's the ancient Egyptian imagery that adds immeasurably to this. (Heh, I'd love to see one or two *StarGate*-related pics — how about one of 'Anubis' as a proper jackal 'morph, instead of just a human with an electro-mechanical 'helmet'?)

Well, an enjoyable couple issues indeed — as no doubt upcoming issues will be more so. To all artists, writers, the whole *Yarf!* staff and all comrades-in-fur out there — stay fit and furry!

Philip Smith is back at last...

Sorry I didn't have any comments for #32, but I just didn't have the spirit for it. All I'll say about it is that I liked Roz Gibson's illustrated interpretation of Billy Joel's "Allentown". It did a very good job of conveying the



IMMERSED IN THOUGHT © 1994 R. CANNON

meaning of the song by concentrating on one worker and how he was affected by the decline of Allentown's economy.

Now for #33:

Dave Claerhout: Is the Nitro-Bug going to be a running gag in *Yarf!*? Will we see one in *Nitrocoon*? (Sorry, I had to say it!)

Kris Kreutzman: The exploding newts story was bizarre and amusing. And I loved the illos. What would happen if an E-newt swallowed a Nitro Bug? (Yeah, I had to say that, too!)

Ralph the Wonder Hamster: I enjoyed seeking out all the jokes on the full-page view of the Spacer's Emporium and elsewhere. And now Sheila the Short is in on the action, too? Great!

Michael Payne: A very good, thought-provoking chapter, in which we see that Chelisse is all too human. Never thought I'd see a story in which a furry crosses herself in church.

Jim Groat: I can see you had a great time in San Diego. Thanks for sharing the experience with the rest of us.

Tim Susman: A good, poignant story on how nothing lasts forever, not even love. That was a very beautiful thing that Korlon did for old Trusty in his final moments.

Nat Brogden: Another abused furry female! And you do push the limits of credibility with her nightmare projection. But it's still a compelling story; a bit like *Equus*. As Walt Kelly once said, "Anyone poking around another's skull may lose his way and never come back."

That's all for now. Tara is people.

From Andrew Laverdiere of Bangore, ME comes this word:

...About the latest greatest book, #32, to arrive in my mailbox. *Nitrocoon*: I can't understand what is going on here. The story has me confused as to what the plot is. Is this just an action or comedy series? Is he saying that bear stopped right in mid-leap? Couldn't we have seen how all the bad guys were subdued? Are we supposed to assume that because NC and his pals are the good guys, that the bad guys are going to automatically be a bunch of bumbling idiots and be easily beaten? There should have been more development in the storyline and placement before it was released.

I thought it funny that Lorinda Lowerre would say she would rather have her kids read *Yarf!* than watch TV. Then I read "Owner" by Gerald Perkins. It's a story that keeps one involved with the characters and has some "rousing" moments, but would I want kids to read it? I don't think so.

Groat reports always make my day. I would *love* to see the doctored *He-Man* episodes.

"Puttin' on the Ritz" had me so involved I lost track of time and was late for class. All the SF and action that's needed for a dull day.

Kudos to Chris Grant, Mark Stanley, and Kris Kreutzman with the constantly great work.

Have fun, work hard, enjoy life, and read *Yarf!*

From Richard Thatcher of Russiaville, IN:

Hope you did well at Confurence. I was sorry that Monika could not be there.

I have finished reading the issues I picked up at the convention (#32-34).

Gerald Perkins' "Owner" was *excellent*. I like the story because it reminds us that the Helixers are really for the most part human. It is more than logical that a few of them — especially ones that lost friends on Killing Day — would want some kind of revenge on those Owners or Customers who escaped justice. Merry's suicide reminds us that not everyone came out okay.

Diamandia's honesty — "It's what we were made for, Wally" — was refreshing. I really do hope that we will see more stories of Walter Martin and company in the future.

Jim Groat's convention reports are as amusing as ever. I'm waiting to see his impressions of Confurence VI. Good luck with your new baby, Jim.

Thank you, Jeremy Kidd, for "An Error in Spelling". Nice double play on words, guy. I would like to see this story go on for a few more episodes.

In his letter, Gerald Perkins asked what the demoneess did for Jarith. Well, Jarith wanted Merry and sexual gratification. He got both, it would appear.

[According to Jeremy, the demoneess realized that Jarith wanted, first, Merry's love and affection, and second, for the demoneess to go away. — Ed.]

I know a couple of motorcycle people who swear that they have encountered a low-grade Nitro-Bug for real.

"Happily, Ever After" reminds me of Harry Chapin's song "Taxi".

"The Price of Admission": "No guts, no galaxy!" as the *BattleTech*™ folks say. Nice left jab, lady!

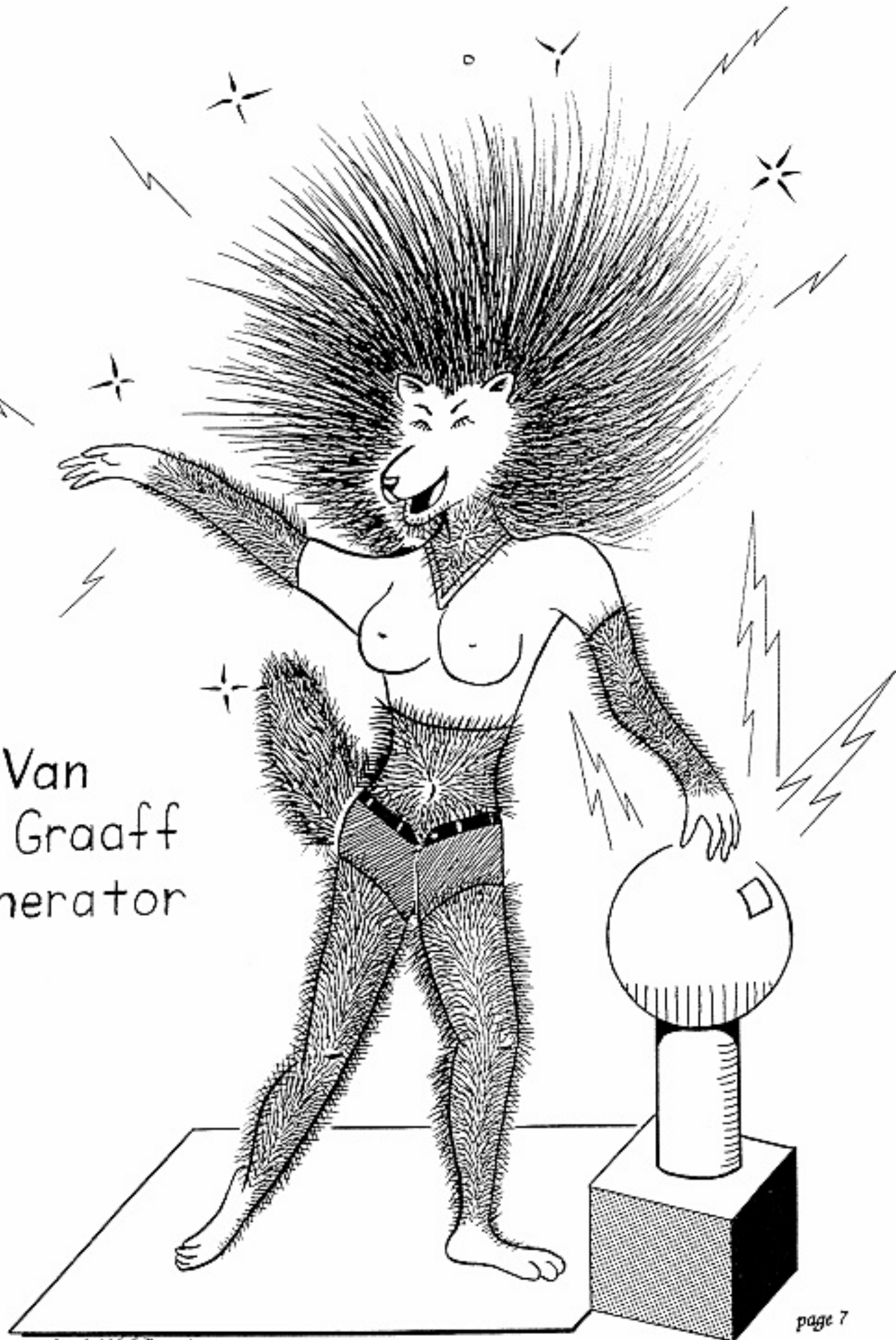
"Plastique Paradise and a C-4 Solution": Wish I could do that sometimes.

"Animus": Interesting story. I hope that Nat Brogden intends to write more of them.

Ace of Spades: Good reading as always. I'm pleased to see that Chris Grant and crew avoid the temptation to make combat look "clean". It seldom, if ever, is.

"My Chocolate!" That is what my sister says when she gets a hold of one or more Hershey bars.

Van
de Graaff
Generator



Good life, everyone.

A scholarly word from Nat Brogden:

There are two reasons why I'm hoping this letter gets printed. Firstly, I want to make extra sure that James Charles Lynn, the writer whose talent outshines mine by two hundred watts, gets this message. It was a royal bummer that you were unable to get to Confurence VI, for I so wanted to meet the man whose story "Learning to Fly" was the best tale *Yarf!* printed in 1994. (*In Our Image* doesn't really qualify, although it's roaring along like a maglev train, because it's not finished yet.) The story so impressed me that I set up a *Yarf!* subscription for my buddy Paul Kidd, another super writer, as you're probably aware, so that he could read that story. He liked it, too. My hat's off to you, James. Here's hoping that you make it to Confurence VII.

[Unfortunately, there's no guarantee that he will see this issue, either. As far as we can determine through our contacts in the community, Mr. Lynn has seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth. In fact, we implore anyone who might know his current whereabouts to relay that information to us. We would very much like to publish more of his work, and are attempting to arrange to make this possible. — Ed.]

The second reason why I'm writing to you guys is to mention some important info about the drug in "Tenderloin". The mixture, 0.5 cc Aceproamine with 11.5 cc Ketamine, really would work against the most determined fox-thug. When I was working on the story, I soon realized that, since drugs were going to be used against a nonhuman character, some research was required. Since my parents have in their care enough basset hounds to sink a freighter, they naturally have a vet they know and trust. I asked my mother to help out with the drug formula, told her who the villain was and how much he weighed, and she went to the vet.

Why not ask the vet myself? That's a good question. If you are a writer or some such, and need to know about drugs that can harm or kill a person, even if you say it's for an animal, be sure to ask a vet that knows and trusts you. I am not kidding — this is very important to remember. Animal drugs can be deadly poison for humans. Serial killers sometimes employ them against their victims. If you ask just any vet about such things, don't be surprised when Officer Friendly pays you a visit. Since I don't know any vets, and my mother does, she was the logical person to help me.

The vet was utterly confused when my mom told her that a one-hundred-eighty-pound fox was the reason for the knockout drug. The vet was eventually told about my story's need for realism, and a good laugh was had by all.

Well, that's all I can say at this point. Oh yes, there is a big, squiffy "Thank you" for Gerald Perkins, who was nice enough to tell me at the con what he thought of "Tenderloin" and "Animus".

And last, but most certainly not least, from the Groatmeister himself in Madison, WI:

Well hell... I'm a contributor for *Yarf!* for a number of years now and haven't written comments — until now! Ho ha! I'll only comment on the last two issues to keep it short and sweet.

"The Nitro-Bug": [Dave Claerhout] truly is a sick bastard. You pretty much enjoy the Zipatone sheets, don't you? "The Graduate" was something I'd pull on 500-1000-mile con runs. "Spot the Roadkill" was a fine way to avoid white-line fever.

Kris Kreutzman: I knew it! I knew it! Those damn French got you to create something about items that shouldn't be eaten! You enjoyed it over there because you got them to eat out of your hand thanks to your laptop!

"Floating Debris" III: Ah, Roy Pounds on Liquid Paper and graphite dust. I do enjoy Ralph.

Jim Groat: I seriously suggest you get rid of this bum! Really crappy art style and can't tell a joke to save his life. Probably hangs out with iguanas, too.

Jaaaaack Cavanaugh: Sometimes I wonder about you, Jack. Too much "It's a Small World" working for the Mouse Gestapo.

Jim Hayden: I've seen this at SCA events.

Phil Bolton: Nice and different, though the mural pattern blended with the cat; no line variation on the cat. I suggest using a brush or brush pen when inking body outlines.

Nitrocoon: Damn, Avi, you do get around to be so productive. The character Toyoshima is certainly a nice design. My only complaint is the overlarge animé eyes on Eriko.

"An Error in Spelling": Ah, yes, Jeremy, always at your finest. Something I didn't expect out of you.

Kjartan: You've clearly got too much time on your hands, thinking of all these things. Let's see you do something with all those wood ticks you drowned and saved that one time.

Cover, #34: Gee, can we tell Monika was in a pissed mood?

Jim Groat: Again, get rid of that horrid art. This guy couldn't draw to save his life. Not worth the spice in a fine 'zine such as *Yarf!*

Conrad Wong: Real nice artwork there, pal.

Mark Freid: Okay, good joke. Nicely different.

"Ram-Bo": Ugh... yeah.

Andrew Thompson: "New Recruit" was certainly different from you. Never did send that art in for the Red Shetland portfolio, y'bum.

"Slay Ride": Ha! Again I say, ha!



THE MODERN MALE

IT SHOULD BE ON THAT TABLE.

KATRINA, HAVE YOU SEEN THE REMOTE LIGHT CONTROLLER?

CREUTZMAN © 2004 ZS



I CAN'T FIND IT.

WHY DON'T YOU GET UP AND USE THE WALL SWITCH?



I DIDN'T SPEND A LOT OF MONEY SO I CAN TURN THE LIGHTS ON AND OFF FROM THE COMFORT OF MY COUCH JUST TO **NOT** DO IT!

HERE IT IS.



AND YOU, ROBERT, ARE JUST LAZY.

WELL, THERE IS THAT, TOO.



"Ralph": Roy Pounds on acid again!

"A Vixen's Pride": Nicely done.

Ace of Spades: Serious head wounds. Life is good.

Jordan Greywolf: More tits! More tits! Ho ha!

"Mending Her Wares": Something I really didn't expect out of you, David [Bliss]. Really eye-pleasing.

"People of Fur": I really see too much of a *Hepcats* wannabe here. Also, far too much "rubberstamp" faces used throughout the story. David [Peyton], I discussed with you in detail how to improve and avoid the wannabe Wagner look with this exact story back in '92. Obviously you didn't listen.

"Who the Hell Cares?" Who does? Fun.

"Roller Skates": Clearly my favorite piece this whole issue. I really enjoyed this one.

Li'l Billy Fitts: "My Chocolate!" Whatever you say, Bill.

And last, but not least, little Jordie Greywolf again: Tug is more like this...



I know the big man with the tiny face real well.

Whoa, this was fun. I gotta be careful. I might write as often as Gerald Perkins. Tooodles!

And now for something completely different... editorial commentary:

Now available from *Yarf!*'s Department of Other Neat Stuff is *An Anthropomorphic Bibliography* compiled by Fred Patten. Listing more than two hundred titles, this by nomeans comprehensive listing can be had for a mere \$5.00 US plus \$1.00 postage and handling from the usual address. In our humble opinion, it's worth it.



From the "Have You Seen Me?" department: As mentioned, we are leaving no stone unturned in our search for Mr. James Charles Lynn, who seems to have vanished without trace. Anyone who could assist us in this endeavor is strongly urged to *send us any information* available!

Deadlines (Honest...!)

Remember, the deadlines listed are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice — bearing that in mind, though, we would like to point out that we are going to be more rigorous about them in the future. (A good rule of thumb to remember is that deadlines for upcoming issues are the last day of every even-numbered month.) *Yarf!* is, after all, a hobby, not a professional publication — the staff has real lives that occasionally interfere. We *do* encourage people to do this at home...

#37: 30 June 1995

#39: 31 October 1995

#38: 31 August 1995

#40: 31 December 1995

Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten

Forest Wars, by Graham Diamond. Forest Hills, NY, Lion Press, January 1995, 416 pages, \$21.95; ISBN 0-9641740-4-9.

Diamond's first novel, the anthropomorphic thriller *The Haven* ("A Novel of Bloodcurdling Horror"), was published in 1977. Since then he has written fifteen more books, including some modern *Arabian Nights* sequels. These have mostly been paperback originals. Now Diamond has become a serious novelist with *Forest Wars*, a \$21.95 hardcover on high-quality paper, attractively and sturdily bound with a dignified dust jacket by Dionisios Fragias.

However, this is not exactly a new book. *Forest Wars* is a completely rewritten expansion of *The Haven*, which was only 347 pages.

It is not unusual for authors to want to improve their early writing, to retell their first plot ideas with the benefit of years of later literary experience. This allows their fans to get those early stories (and the author to continue to get royalties from them), without the embarrassment of keeping their adolescent, most amateurish writing in print.

So is *Forest Wars* a better version of *The Haven*? Again, not exactly. Diamond has turned what had been merely a forgettably bad novel into a veritable *Plan Nine from Outer Space* of 'morph fiction, a horror probably not in the sense that he intended.

Although *Forest Wars* is 69 pages longer than *The Haven*, the story has few significant new scenes. Instead, the writing has been padded with extra descriptions of pompous verbosity. For example, an old warrior merely named Rolf in the first version has become Crafty Old Rolf who always carries a mighty weapon, his club of spike. *Crafty Old Rolf, top sergeant of the 9th.; a wily ingenious soul with well over twenty years of active service behind him. (p. 8) First came Crafty Old Rolf, heaving his massive club of spike. [...] A club of spike could cleave a mongrel's innards into chopped liver with a single properly-aimed heave. (p. 53) Crafty Old Rolf kneeled beside the sleeping figure, his fearsome club of spike at his side. (p. 223)* This kind of writing easily fills pages.

In this tale of the far future, mankind has been reduced to only one nation on Earth, the Empire of Civilization. In the center is its magnificent capital city, The Haven. *The sages had recounted tales of this powerful city, but in his wildest imagination he had never conceived of anything as breathtaking as this. Massive, soaring bulwarks of solid stone, buttressed by parapets and promi-*

nent towers, each taller than the last, seemingly reaching into the clouds. Atop these fortifications were complexes of embrasures and casements, and castellated battlements. On either side of Great Gate the walls stretched almost as far as he could see. (p. 198) This city is surrounded by a large nation of parks and fields of happy farmers which stretches for nearly twenty leagues (p. 20) to its farthest border. (About sixty miles. Some empire.) Surrounding the Empire in all directions is the Forest, an endless, impenetrable thicket filled by savage animals of all sorts, but dominated by packs of ferocious, bloody-fanged killer dogs.

For as long as anyone can remember, the hordes of killer mongrels, in packs up to 2,000 strong, have poured from the fringes of the Forest every year to attack the Empire, which has been defended by the military might of The Haven. *It was known as the War Room of Central Command, General Headquarters, and it hummed with activity even in the small hours before dawn. GHQ staff went about their various assignments with quiet military efficiency. [...] Security at Central Command, CeCom as it was called, remained the top priority, and was followed by the most rigorous inspection. (p. 24)* Can't have those slaving mongrels sneaking in disguised as janitors, you know.

But mankind is not alone in defending the Empire. Humanity has become partners with the fierce talking birds: eagles, hawks, falcons, who have thrown in their lot with humanity for mutual protection against the dogs. *They will slaughter your species as they once did mine, Antonious the parrot says to Lord Nigel (p. 47).* Vandor, king of the hawks, tells the Council, *For countless years my species has relied heavily upon friendship and alliance with your Empire. Long ago, when we were cruelly chased from our homes within the wood, we learned we'd find safety within your boundaries. (p. 119)* Just how the maddened dogs chased the raptors from their nests is never explained.

Now a cruel Messiah has arisen among the dogs to unite them into an organized army 50,000 strong! Worse, he has formed an alliance with the hideous vampire bats. *These foul aerial monsters were not birds at all. Rather, they were a category of disease carrying, flying rodents. Bats. Nocturnal vampire bats. Their bite inflicted a poison so awful, so repugnant, that victims suffered an indescribable, agonizing torment until, fortunately, they died and found peace. (p. 141)* Rodents? Well, at least Diamond knows that bats aren't hairy giant bugs. Actually, he seems to have a thing about rodents. A warrior mongrel, disparaging the wolves, describes them as, *They're*

no better than rodents, eternally alert, slinking around with their noses sniffing. It's uncanny, I tell you. (p. 221)

Up to now, there has been no love lost between the dogs and the wolves, but they have remained in an uneasy peace. But his majesty, King Dinjar, scion of Perseus the Unifier, king of all wolves (p. 130), knows that if the dogs succeed in overrunning the Empire and slaughtering mankind, they will next turn upon the wolves and reduce them to slavery. So Dinjar proposes that the wolves move into the Empire and join the men and birds — a decision which throws all the dogs into a maddened frenzy. *The mongrel army barked so loudly, so cruelly, the earth shuddered beneath their paws.* (p. 156)

There are attention-grabbers throughout the book. *Bones cracked loudly as the already decimated body collided forcefully against the trunk of a tree.* (p. 224) Can you decimate a single body? *With vulture-like squawks the eagles hovered above him, circling, constantly circling while the hapless dog flayed his paws at the air.* (p. 4) Shouldn't that be "flailed," not "flayed"? *Without a word the hawk-king fluttered his wings. His lieutenants chirped commands to their subordinates.* (p. 73) Hawks chirping? An elite champagne ball in The Haven is attended by the primrose cream of Empire aristocracy. *Dowagers and matrons wore sublime billowing gowns of white and pastel satin, drenched in exotic eau-de-cologne.* (p. 55) That ballroom had better be well ventilated. *Caught by surprise, frightened Westland farmers had chosen to burn their fields rather than leave even a single grain of food for the advancing mongrel army.* (p. 75) Just picture those bloodthirsty carnivores stopping to harvest the grain and bake it into bread.

These are only some of the gems from the first half of the novel. The main action — gruesome battles, political treachery, the discovery of a new world, and more howlers (literally and figuratively) — are all in the second half! If you're the kind of geek who can't give a party without a TV showing an Ed Wood video in the background, you really need *Forest Wars* for your guests to read aloud at each other. Remember, it's the result of almost twenty years of writing expertise.

Dun Lady's Jess, by Doranna Durgin. Riverdale, NY, Baen Books, August 1994, 343 pages, \$4.99; ISBN 0-671-87617-1.

Camolen is a stereotypical medieval-looking magical world gearing up for a war between wizards. Carey is a courier, a rider who delivers important messages for the wizard Arlen. Dun Lady's Jess is Carey's favorite horse, a six-year-old mare who is exceptionally fast, spirited, and reliable.

When Carey is trapped by agents of a power-hungry sorceress, he triggers a last-ditch defensive spell that transports him and his horse to a different world; a place of theoretical safety. Unfortunately, one of the enemy agents is swept along with him. And one of the effects of the transition to the new world (ours) is that it turns their horses into humans.

There are two main characters: the horse — called both Lady and Jess, depending upon whether her equine or human personality is uppermost at the moment; and Jaime Cabot, the owner of The Dancing Equine Dressage Center in Marion, Ohio. Needless to say, it is Lady/Jess' story in which 'morph fans will be most interested. Yet



Jaine is the easier character with whom to identify, as an animal-loving woman who helps to educate the frightened horse/woman into developing her human personality.

The rules of magic are that the people from Camolen automatically think and speak English while they are in Ohio, but they otherwise know nothing about 20th-century Earth technology. The horse finds herself with a strange body, and a suddenly increased intelligence. She not only has to learn human speech, she has to learn to think of herself as a human rather than a horse.

In a very narrow sense, *Dun Lady's Jess* is not truly anthropomorphic. Lady/Jess is never a blend of horse and human, at least physically. She is either one or the other, all the way. The only blend is mental, at the beginning, when she is born with a blank adult human mind and a horse's memories. The outstanding facet of the novel is the believability with which Durgin describes a horse's normal thoughts, and then expands them into human terms. Lady's world was one of simplistic instincts, and of pride in understanding her "leader"'s instructions to her. Jess' world is much more complex and confusing, but also exciting as she suddenly realizes that she understands the meanings behind things that she had always observed but had never thought about. As her comprehension increases, her feelings about Carey also shift from a sort of herd loyalty to desire for a closer intimacy — while, at the same time, she feels a need for a more distinct identity. She is a person with a right to her own interests and feelings, rather than a cypher whose only goal is to do whatever her "friend" wants.

There are a half-dozen important human characters. Carey's main concern is to get back to Camolen to complete his urgent mission. He looks at first upon Lady's transformation as an embarrassment and as the temporary loss of his best horse, until they return home and she becomes a horse again. Carey's gradual awareness of Jess' developing human mind leads to correspondingly confused feelings of his own. Is she only an enchanted horse,

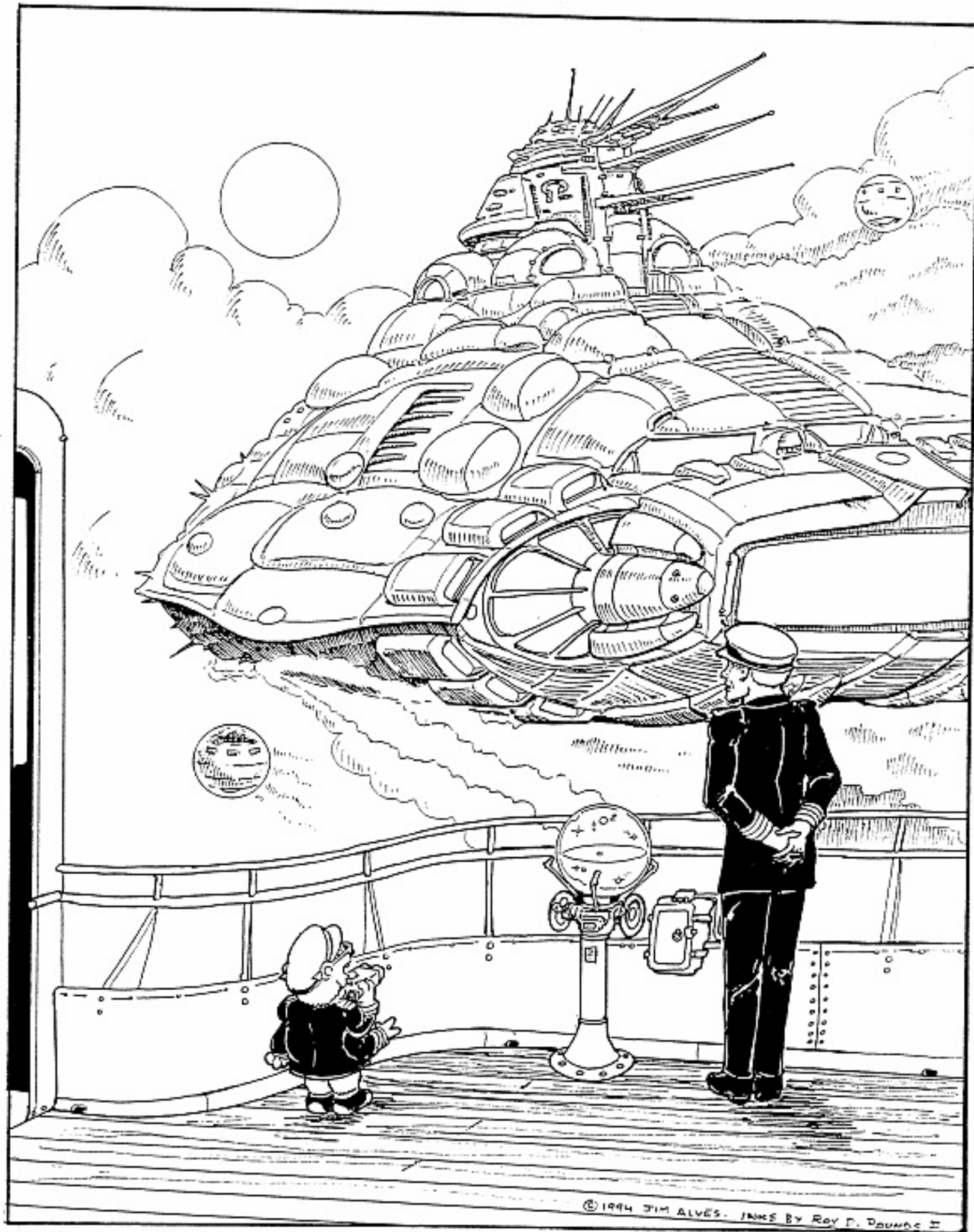
a magical mockery of a human; or something more? If she has truly become a person, what will happen to her intelligence and human personality if she reverts to a horse?

Most of the others are those who discover Jess and gradually become her friends. I will not describe them, or the story, in any detail because they are complex enough that it would turn into a very long description. The plot does contain some surprises which should not be given away.

There are a few groundrules that the reader must just shrug and accept as the laws of nature that make this romance work. We learn in the first chapter both that Arlen has to send messages by Pony Express, because messages transmitted magically may be intercepted magically; and that all the couriers before Corey have been waylaid by the enemy sorceress's hired assassins. In such a no-win situation, the former reason sounds like a weak excuse for why a wizard needs an old-fashioned courier. There is no reasonable (or even unreasonable) explanation as to why horses turn into humans, and back again, while humans moving between the worlds are unaffected. Durgin clearly put some effort into rationalizing why average Americans who find a naked woman who obviously thinks that she is a horse, would bring her home to educate her themselves, instead of taking her to the nearest police station or hospital. Unfortunately, it's not really convincing. Neither is the justification of why Camolen's good wizards must remain scattered all around the countryside, vulnerable to the enemy's concentrated attacks, instead of gathering together for mutual defense. Carey is skeptical, and so is the reader. If you will accept that there are reasons for these situations, however (and all 'morph fiction is dependent upon a pretty generous suspension of disbelief), the rest of the story is logical and intelligent. Durgin keeps the plot balanced evenly enough that it is impossible to guess whether Lady/Jess will finally remain a horse or a human, and whether that result will be happy or tragic. ☼

Freefall by Mark Stanley





© 1994 JIM ALVES. INKS BY ROY P. POUND II



EMPIRES

YOUR CREW IS ALREADY OUT. I'M AFRAID THIS BASTARD'S PISTOL IS THE ONLY WEAPON.



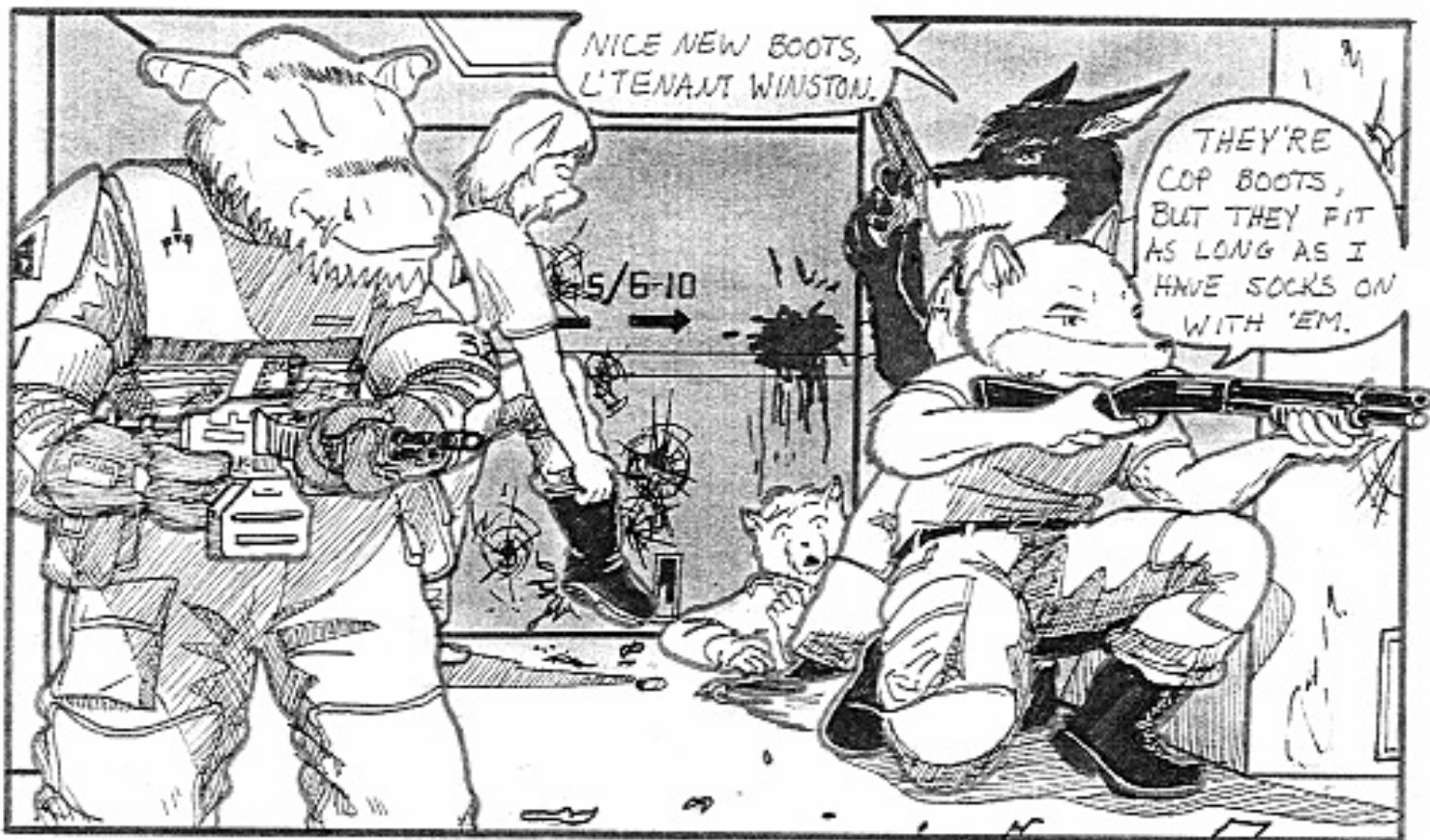
BULLET-CHUCKER, THERE'S SOME DEAD COPS IN THERE THAT'LL GIVE YOU MORE AMMO.



REEANNA.

I'M FINE SIR, JUST GETTING SOME BOOTS THAT'LL FIT.





NICE NEW BOOTS,
L'TENANT WINSTON.

THEY'RE
COP BOOTS,
BUT THEY FIT
AS LONG AS I
HAVE SOCKS ON
WITH 'EM.

APPARENTLY YOU WERE THE ONLY
PRISONERS. NOW--SECURE THE BUILDING.

OUTSIDE, MOSTLY,
IN VEHICLES, AND
THE FRONT OFFICE.

SAR'ENT CHENNAULT,
ANY OTHER THERMALS
IN HERE?



WHERE IS
THE REST
OF YOUR
TEAM, CORPORAL?



YOU'RE CLEAR. WE'RE BRINGING THE VEHICLES INTO THE GARAGE. OTOYOT MIGHT WANT TO BRING THE AMBULANCE IN AS WELL.

I MONITORED THAT. I'M COMING AROUND-- SOMEONE WANNA GIVE ME A HAND WITH NILE?



YEAH. ALVAREZ, SECURE FRONT OFFICE. YOU AND APATSIA GET SHRIKE DOWN TO THE AMBULANCE. HE'LL STAY THERE WHILE YOU GET NILE LOCKED UP.

YOU HAVE PRISONER?



YOU COULD SAY THAT.

ACTUALLY, SIR, THIS IS GOING TO TAKE SOME EXPLAINING... AHH... COULD I ASK SOME HELP FROM YOUR PERSONNEL?

LIKE WHAT?



SECURE THE FRONT OFFICE. ALVAREZ LOCKED IT, BUT IT WOULD BE GOOD TO HAVE SOMEONE IN THERE.

ALRIGHT... LET'S SET IT UP.



MEANWHILE...

WHO'S ON DISPATCH TONIGHT?

CHEVIER, WHY?



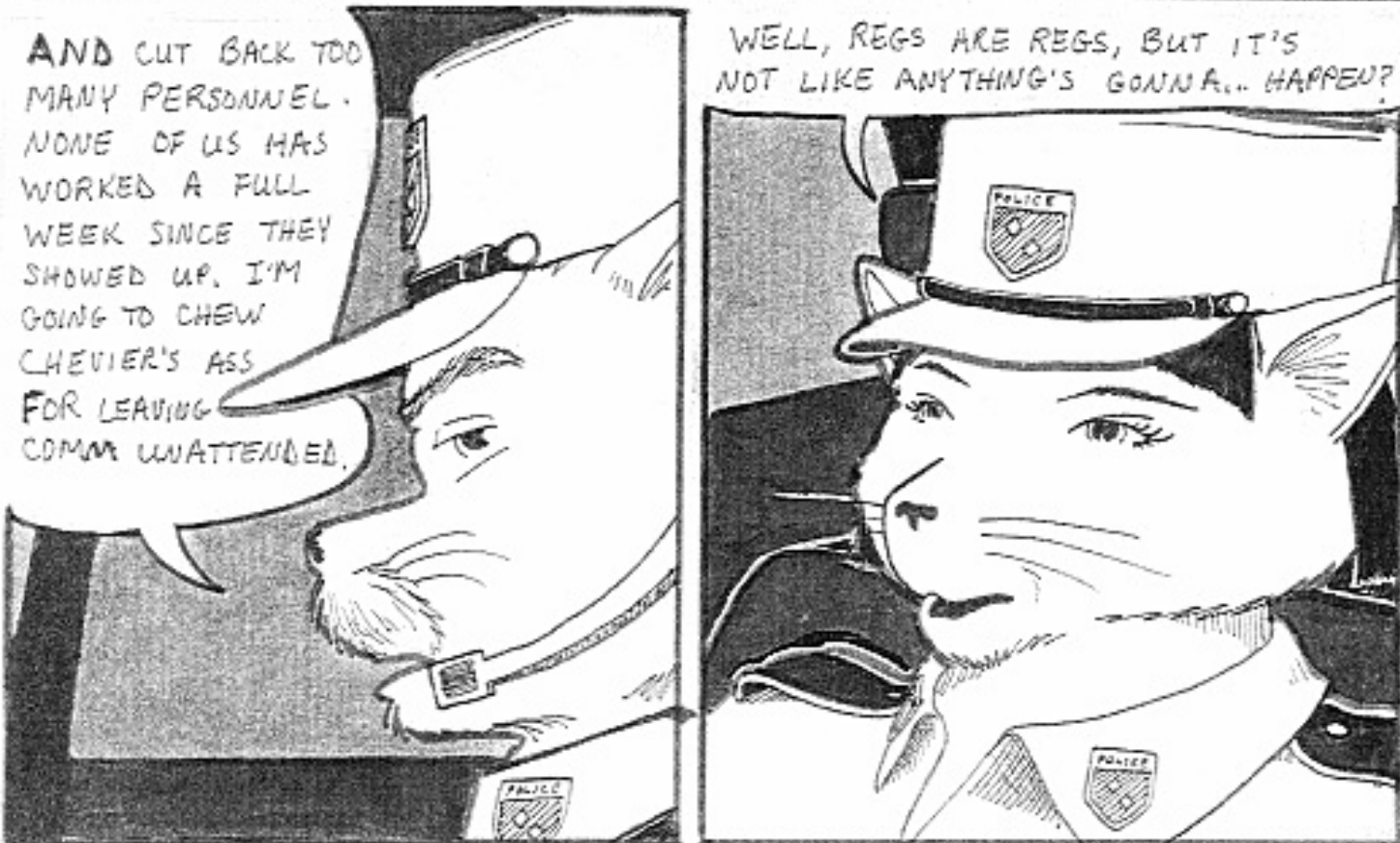
BASTARD ISN'T ANSWERING OUR CALL. HE KNOWS WE GO OFF SHIFT NOW.

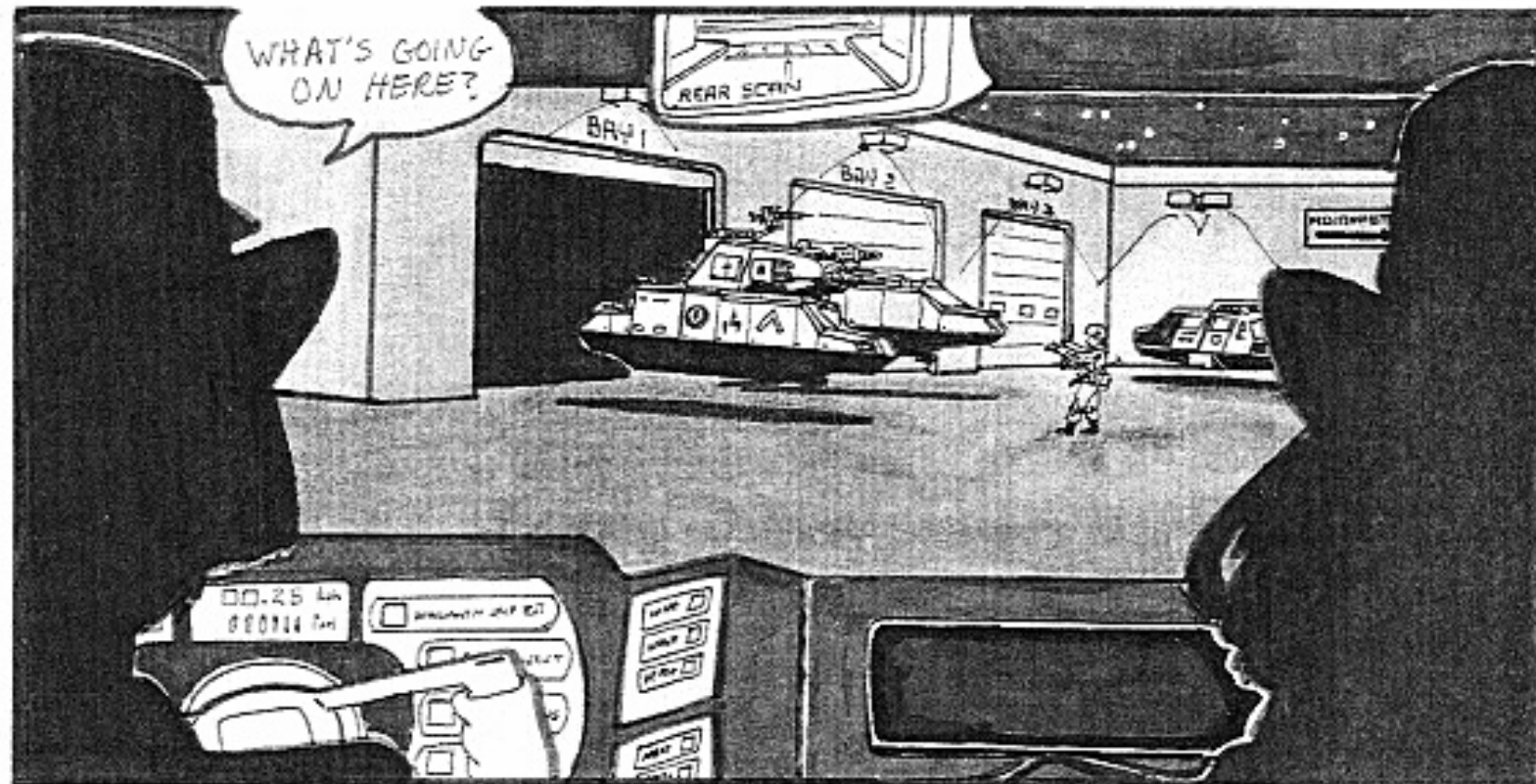
PROBLY IN THE SHITTER. THINGS'VE BEEN QUIET SINCE THE ARMY SHOWED UP.



AND CUT BACK TOO MANY PERSONNEL. NONE OF US HAS WORKED A FULL WEEK SINCE THEY SHOWED UP. I'M GOING TO CHEW CHEVIER'S ASS FOR LEAVING COMM UNATTENDED.

WELL, REGS ARE REGS, BUT IT'S NOT LIKE ANYTHING'S GONNA.. HAPPEN?





YOU REMEMBER
THE VOTE?
THE SECESSION?



I WASN'T
OLD ENOUGH
TO VOTE, BUT
I REMEMBER
IT. I WANTED
US TO BE
FREE.

SO DID I,
I CAST MY VOTE TO
SECEDE, BUT NOW THE
IMPERIAL ARMY'S BEEN
WINNING.



AND THEY'RE THE ONES
WE'RE GOING TO HAVE
TO LIVE WITH WHEN
THIS IS OVER.



I SUPPOSE SO... WHAT'S
THE FREQUENCY FOR
ARMY HEAD QUARTERS?



SO THAT'S THE STORY, SIR,
NOT MUCH OF A RESCUE.

GIVES BETTER
CHANCE THAN
WE HAD.

POLICE
ARMS ROOM
AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL
ONLY



ANYHOW, ALL DOORS ARE SECURE.
TURYA, KHASHIN, ADB AND
SHRIKE ARE WITH THE
VEHICLES.

OTOYAT AND
APATSIYA?



IN THE
AMBULANCE.

NILE'S IN A CELL NOW.
SHE'LL BE AWAKE SOON.

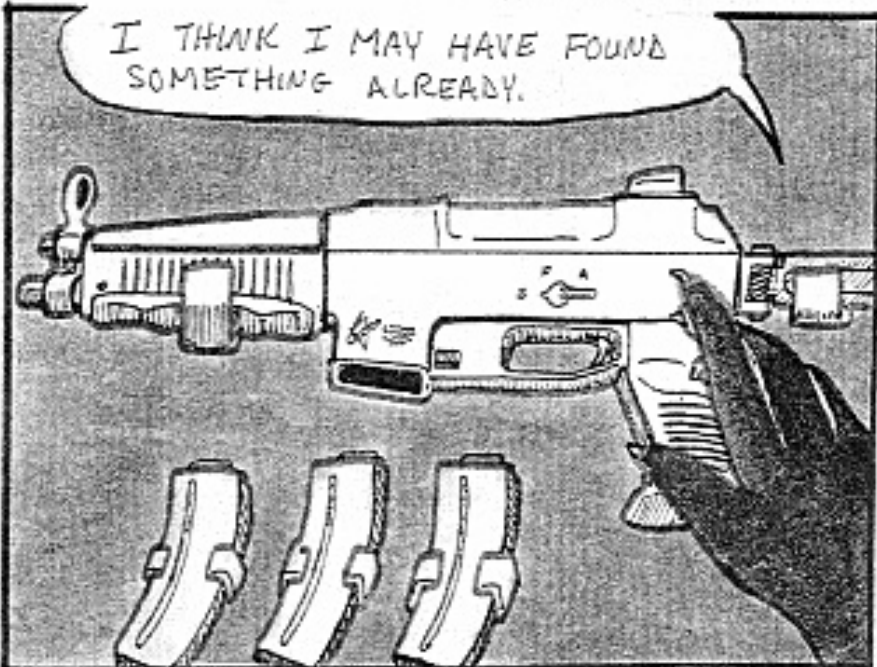
POLICE
ARMS ROOM
AUTHORIZED
PERSONNEL
ONLY



SIR, YOU MIGHT WANT TO GRAB
SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE
SUBSTANTIAL IN HERE.



I THINK I MAY HAVE FOUND
SOMETHING ALREADY.



WE'LL TAKE UP DEFENSIVE
POSITIONS. GET YOUR ENGINEERS
BUSY BOOBYTRAPPING THE HELL
OUT OF THIS PLACE. WHEN THE
SHIT HITS THE FAN, THEY'LL
BE ALL OVER US.



GAS MASKS,
SHOTGUNS,
RIOT GEAR...
USEFUL STUFF.
DELOSI!
LET'S START
DISTRIBUTING
THIS OUT.





THEY'RE WHERE?!

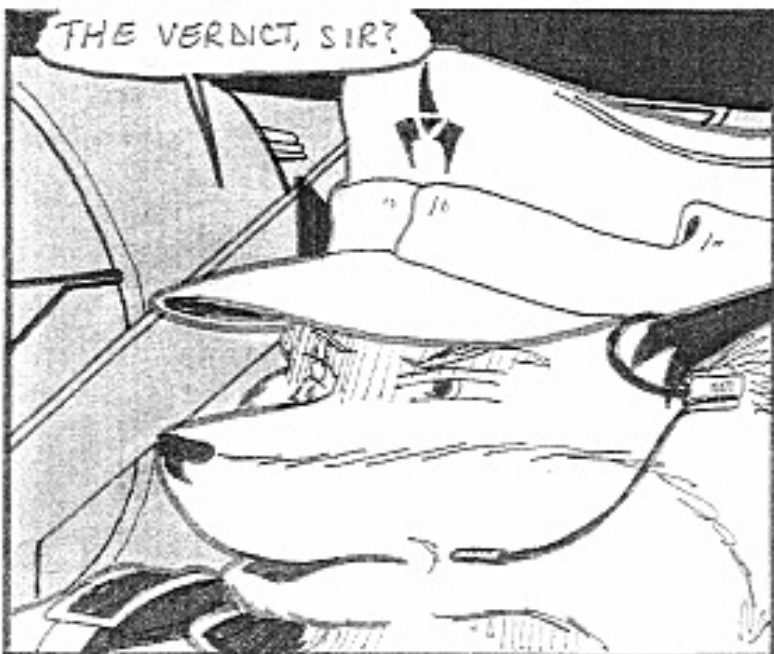
FULL ALERT. MILITARY COMMLINK ONLY. GET ME SOME COFFEE! MOVE!



YOU GOT THAT INFORMATION TOMAC?



YESSIR, ON YOUR SCREEN NOW, SIR.

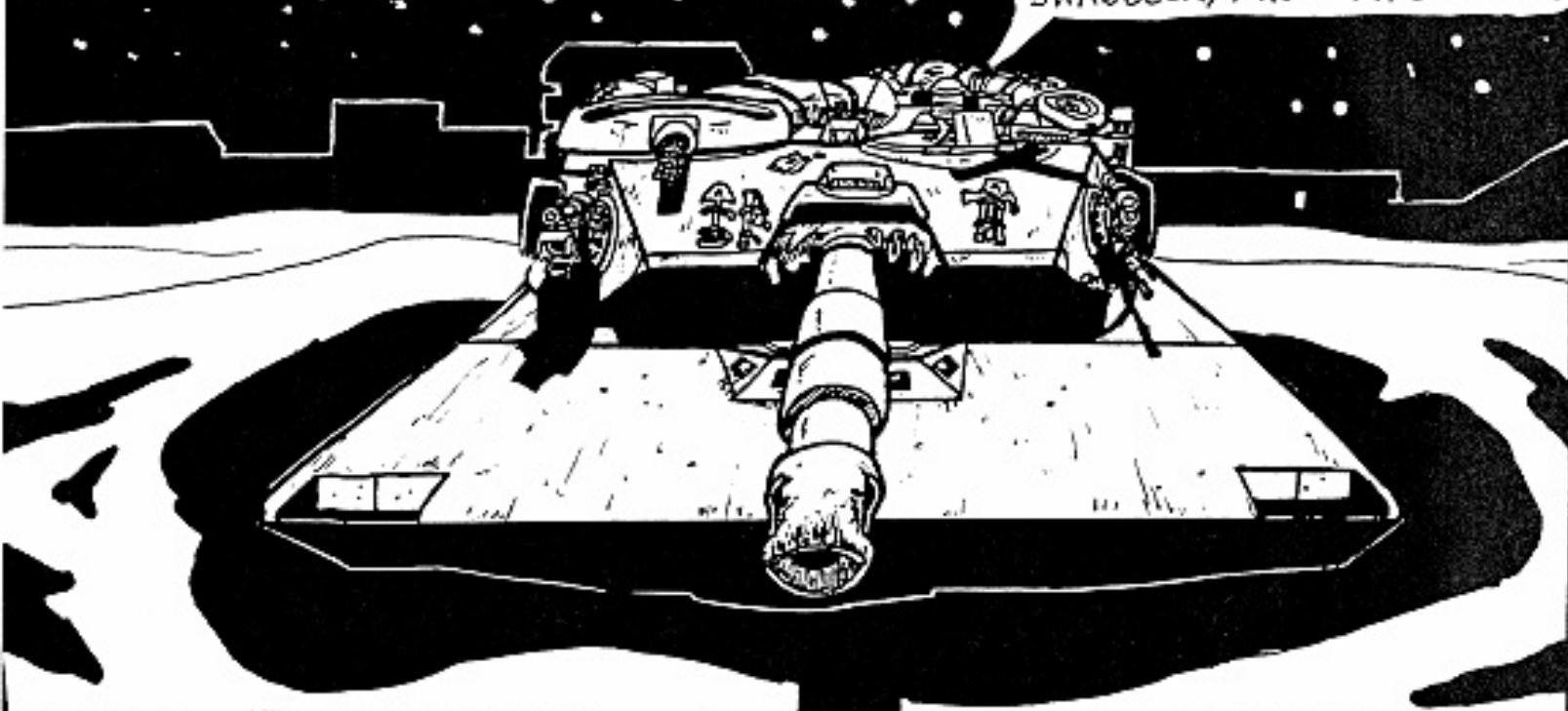


THE VERDICT, SIR?



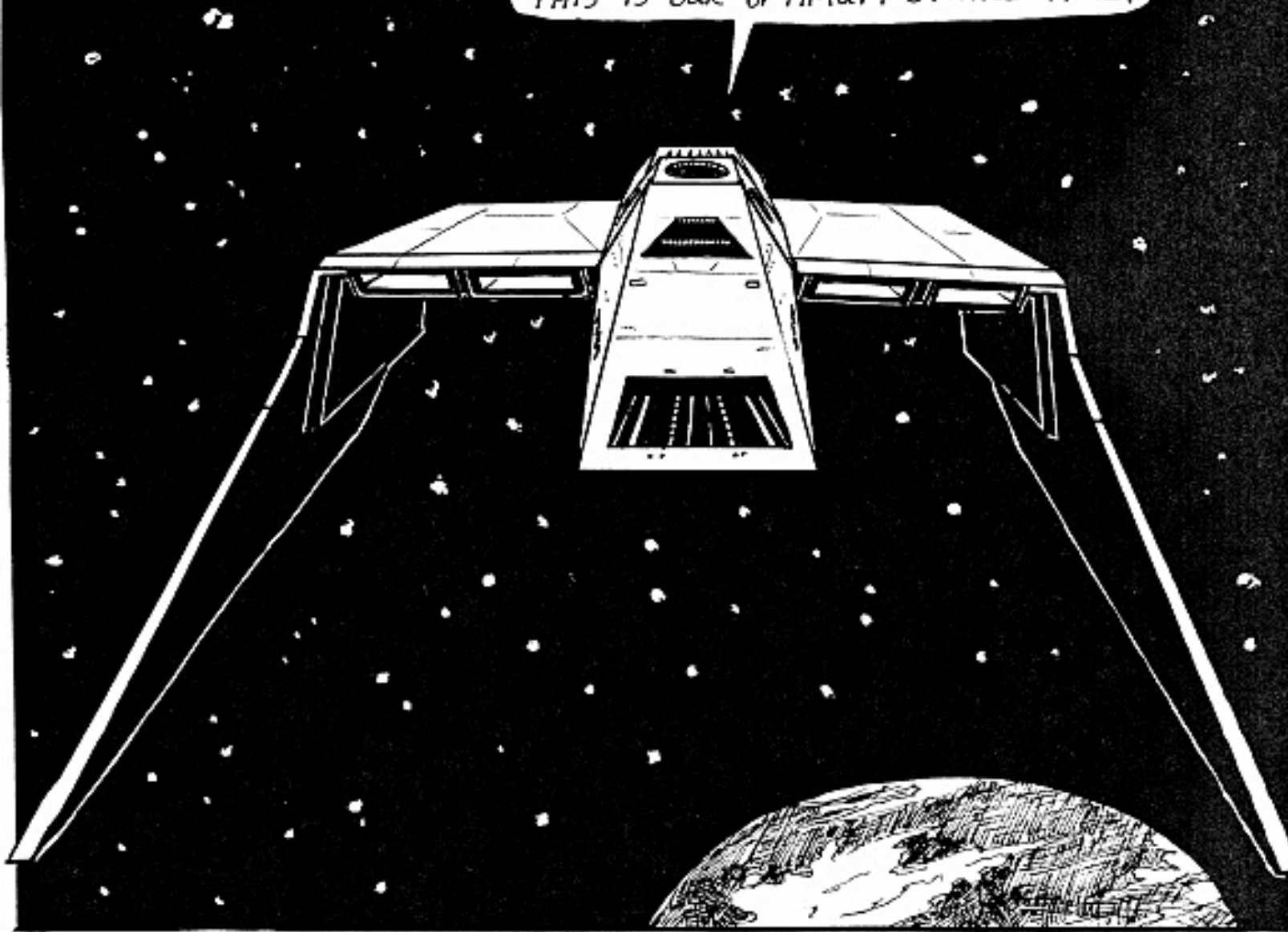
BAROMETRIC PRESSURE GOOD... WIND IN OUR FAVOR... RANGE AND RADIUS GOOD...

SHADDOCK, PREP FIRE NUKE.



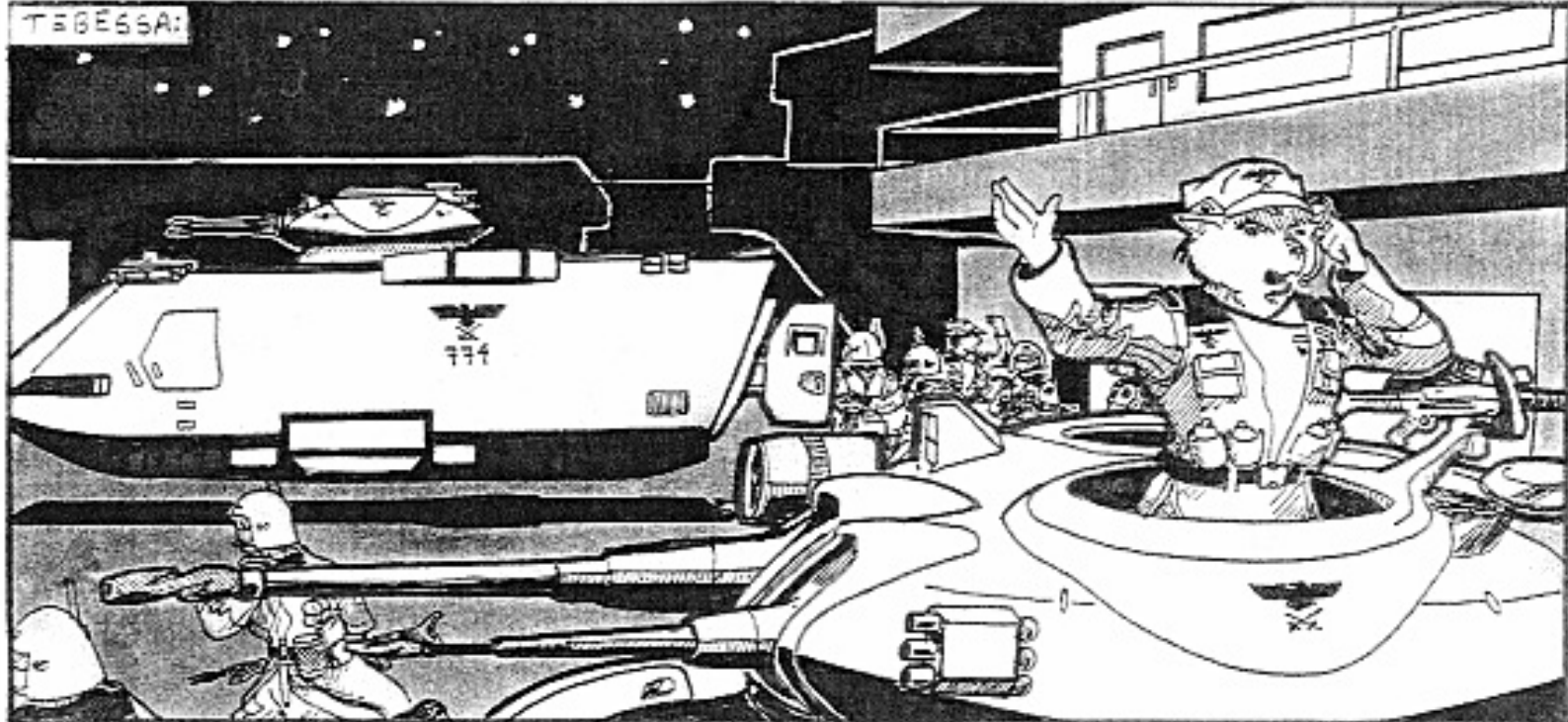
C GSV 371 MAGELLAN:

THIS IS OUR OPTIMUM STRIKE TIME.



FURTHER DELAY AT THIS POINT WILL ONLY FAVOR THE KONS. A FAST, DECISIVE STRIKE AT THE TARGET SITE IS NOW OUR GOAL. THE OPERATION WILL BE CARRIED OUT AS WE REHEARSED IT. ANY LAST MINUTE QUESTIONS?

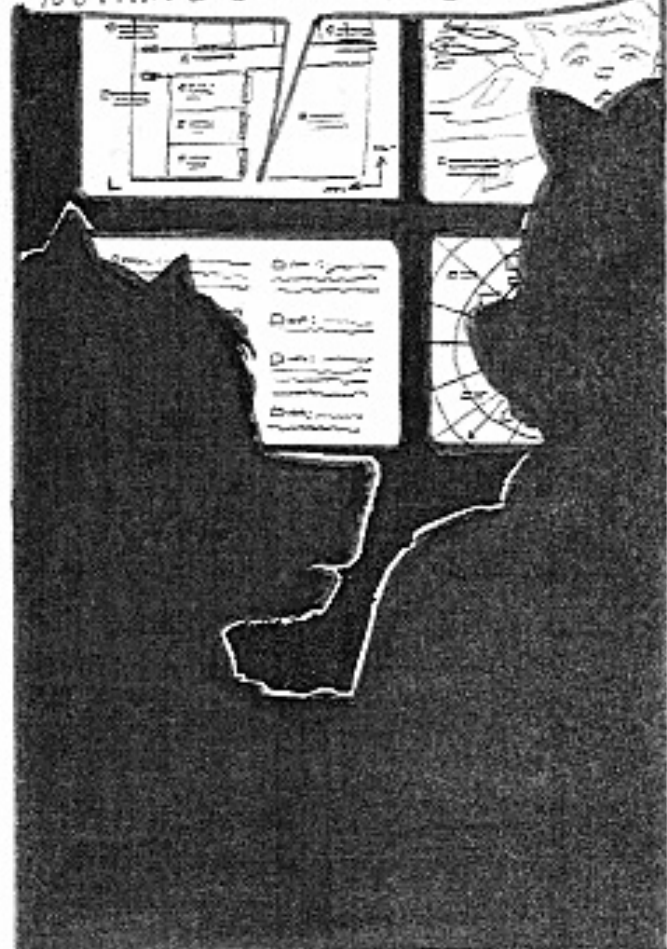




ALPEN!
SITUATION!

POLICE OFFICERS
OBSERVED ONE LIGHT
TANK AND ONE LIGHT
TROOP CARRIER ENTERING
THE STATION.

THERE'S BEEN NO CONTACT
WITH POLICE IN THE STATION,
EITHER ON GENERAL OR
PERSONAL COMM. CAPTAIN
SAVITCH WAS AWAKENED AND
IS HERE, BUT CHIEF SERGEANT
RADESCU SAYS THEY'VE OBSERVED
NOTHING UNUSUAL SO FAR.



RECALL ALL PLATOONS. HAVE INFANTRY SURROUND THE STATIONS WITH TANK SUPPORT. GET TRUCKS AND ARMORED CARS PATROLLING THE STREETS WITH POLICE. THIS COULD BE AN OVERALL INFILTRATION.



IF THESE ARE COMMANDOS, THEY'LL HIT HERE. MAKE SURE EVERYONE HAS COMBAT GEAR, INCLUDING YOU. AND GET ME SERGEANT THANE.



IT'S TIME FOR THE S.D. TO HONE SOME OTHER SKILLS.

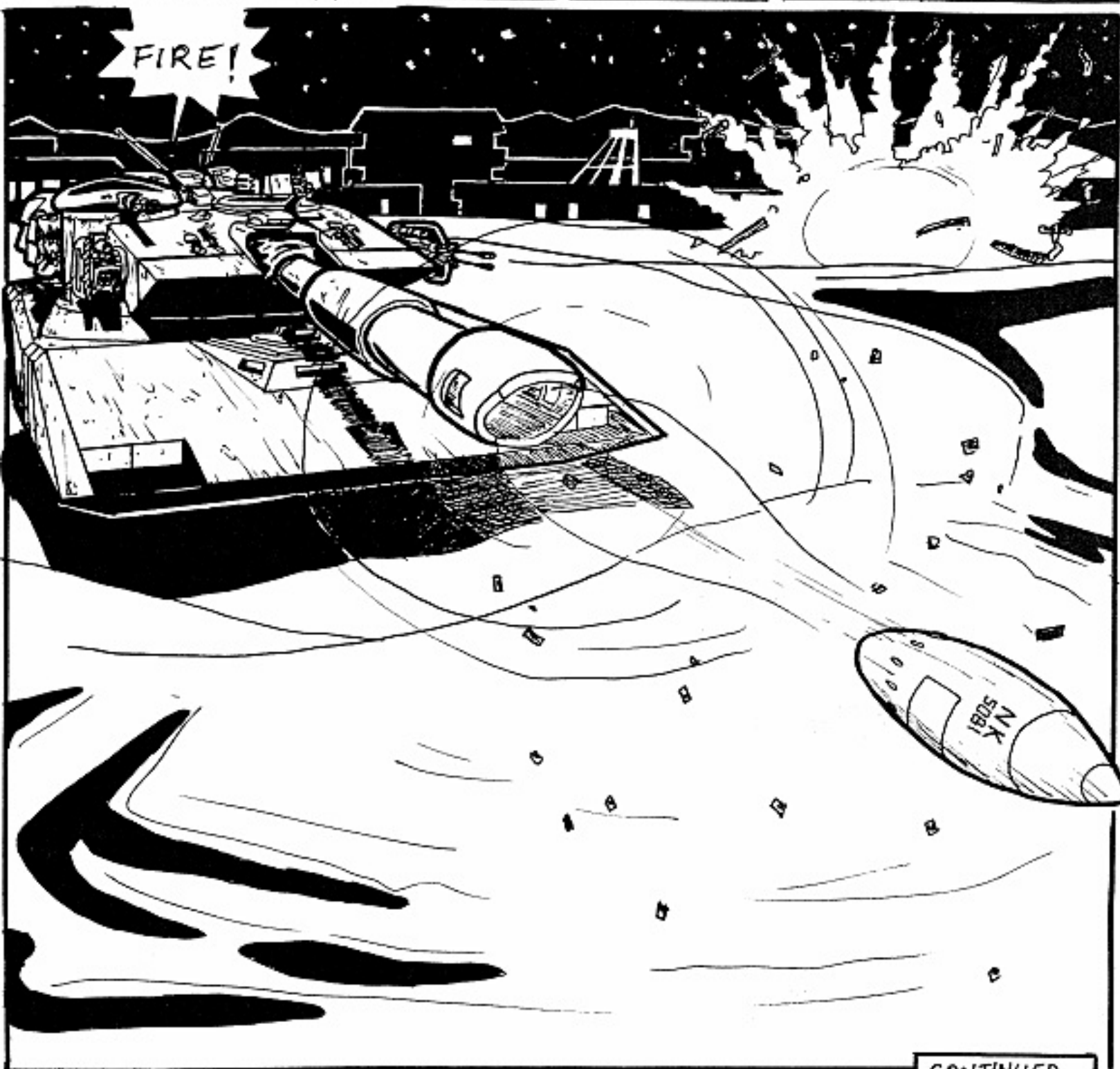


ACE OF SPADES

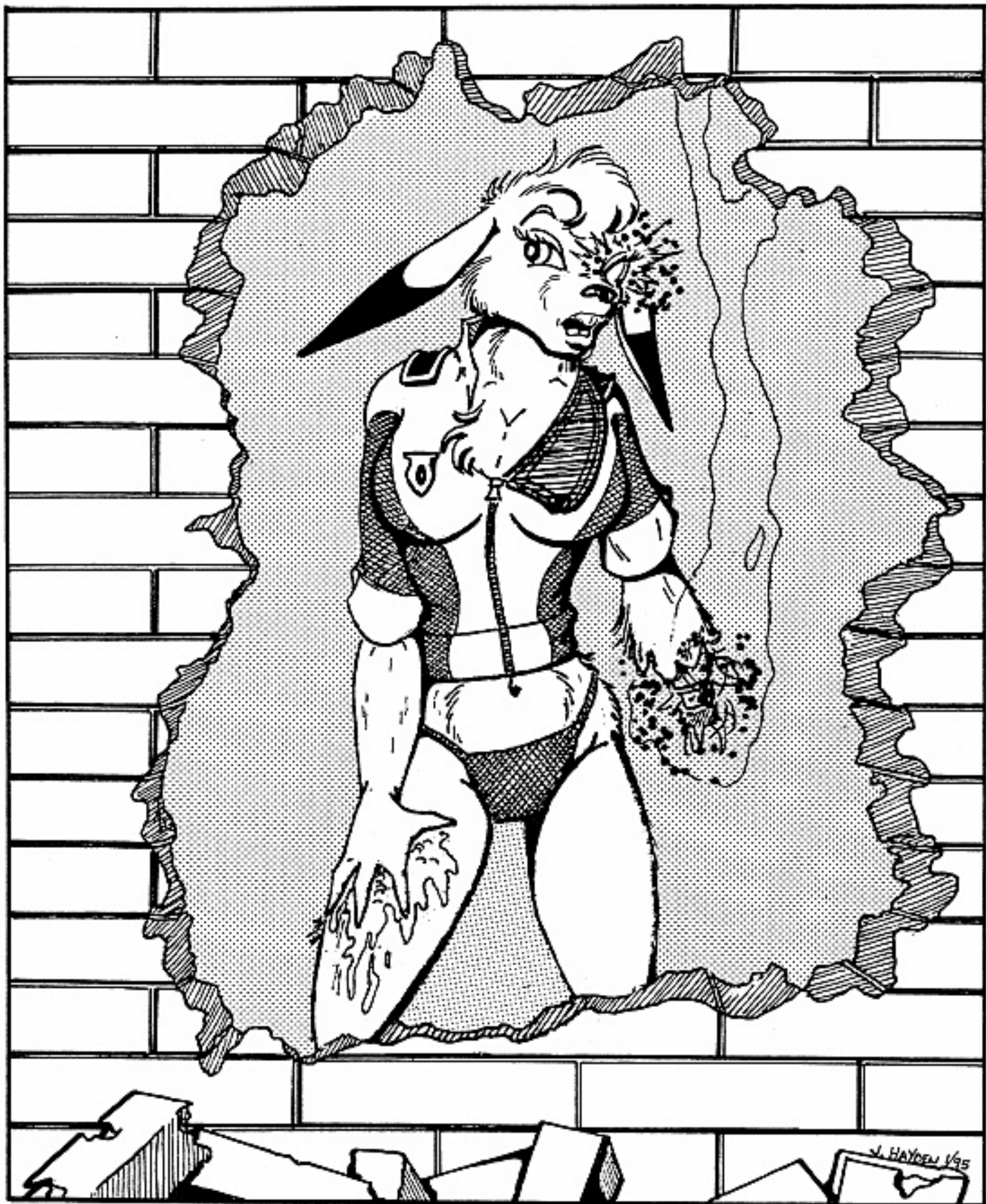
WE'RE READY TO GO. I JUST WANTED TO WARN YOU.



ALRIGHT CREW, THEY'RE READY TO DETONATE THE AMMO DUMP. AS SOON AS THEY DO, SHADDOCK, CORK OFF THAT NUKE ROUND INTO THE CENTER OF THAT ARTILLERY.



CONTINUED...





It had been a hot day, a hazy sunbeating down on the police in their black reactive fiber riot gear, shock batons tapping the clear shields with restrained agitation. There looked to be about thirty of them. Victor Davis had been there, just watching, off duty. So had Inspector Krillha, the token Recom of the department, but he was demonstrating, holding a picket sign that read, "We serve, we should be free." Krillha, like all first-generation Recoms, was ex-military. The uncharacteristically tall and muscular skunk Recom walked in the middle of the march, but stood at least a head above his fellows except for the wolves. The march was a rainbow of different fur colors, from the simple black and white of Krillha to the calico conglomerate of the coon-cats.

It was all so peaceful. Davis stood by a post-box, drinking a coffee much like he did now, with a wary nonchalance that gave him a "not there" look. The combination of his receding hairline and large chin gave him the look of an immovable automaton. Fellow officers said that even though he was short, if you drove a truck into him, he would just grunt and give you a ticket. That image came from his weight more than anything else. The years off the beat could be counted as rolls on his waist or stretch-marks across his hips, like rings on a tree. Sweat beaded across his broad forehead and his breathing was quietly labored as he watched the panting Recoms go by.

So peaceful... the rhythmic chanting of slogans, the constant flutter of footsteps. Then the counter-demonstrators arrived. The Recoms remained surprisingly calm as the human crowd shouted "Animals!" and other taunts. They were used to it. They knew a hostile reaction would only hurt their cause. A few younger Recoms were quieted by their elders.

And then, right under his slowly blinking gaze, all hell broke loose.

Smack in the middle of the human agitators, there was a fireburst of white smoke and glowing sparks. The explosion echoed off the labyrinth of buildings, rocking the flexi-plast storefronts as it skirled up into the hazy grey sky. Suddenly police ran through both crowds as fear burst from its primal hideaway and overthrew the rational.

The riot police bolted through the crowds, jointed shock-batons pole-axing everyone in their way. Davis stood in silent awe, his coffee spilling down the front of the blue metal post-box. Black uniforms swarmed through the Recoms, the assault of a disturbed hive. Davis saw it happen — a clubbed wolverine wearing a purple heart on his vest scabbled at a riot officer as his legs gave out from the electric shock. The shock had made him grit his teeth and flare his claws, raking through the riot suit and the officer's side like a tiller through fresh soil.

At the sight of blood, hands went to holsters. Davis' jaw dropped as he heard the first pop and zip of a service

pistol and the thump of the small fragmentation rocket as it knocked the wolverine to the concrete. It was a quiet, almost comical sound, but unique and chilling enough to make him shudder. It was the next half-dozen shots that made the day one of martyrdom.

Davis saw the big skunk Recom take the round as he tried to pull his fellows to the pavement. To Victor, it seemed like a dream or a VR game... he was just along for the ride. He ran through the human crowd as fast as he could, knocking members of the mob out

BY THOMAS PLUCK
PART ONE
EVENING

of his way as if he didn't even know they were there. Later he wondered why his chest was bruised.

Even Rrillha dropped like a felled tree when he took the AP round. It had hit his shoulder blade and fragmented, sending tiny pieces of shrapnel up through his neck and skull, leaving red pinholes in his fur. Victor flashed his badge to the riot police who began to surround him and heaved the big skunk into his lap. Rrillha's head hung onto his chest, tongue lolling as he shuddered silently.

Then it was over as quickly as it started, as the riot squad saw the badge on the Recom's shorts. Davis wasn't even thinking, just hugging the quiet form to his chest protectively. He hadn't even liked the furry — he just saw an officer go down...and that was what he told the committee when they asked him if he believed in the Recoms' cause.

People screamed and whimpered around him, but all he heard was his own labored breathing and Rrillha's mindless sputtering. The memory faded away, smoldering and intense. Three Recoms still sat in holding cells on suspicion of throwing the concussion grenade, which hadn't killed anybody, and one of the riot officers had been suspended pending a grand jury investigation. It was over now, but the incident had changed the Recoms' attitude; it had sharpened their claws a little.

So Davis sat in his hovering patrol car, fans humming quietly as he sipped his coffee and thought back on the recent past. The area had once been called Hell's Kitchen, then Clinton, and now was part of The Jungle because of the concentration of furies in the neighborhood. Only after the Massacre did it get any more violent than the rest of Manhattan. In fact, up until the Zoning, it was pretty gentrified.

Davis's presence was usually enough; the sleek white prowler had a simple intimidating look. He glanced at the VR screens that served as windows and kept the heat-scanner on, monitoring a fifty-foot radius. His thoughts wandered to Inspector Rrillha's brain-dead form at St. Clare's Hospital. The skunk had no family, so the vote was up to the Precinct to see if the plug was pulled and his organs sold for the PBA fund. Davis chuckled cynically and shook his head. The poor furry didn't have a chance. Victor thought for a moment what it would be like to have no parents, to be *made* and treated like a lab animal that was set free, with too many strings attached. Then of how Rrillha was treated at the station.

The guys at the Precinct called him "Stinky" to his face, even though he had perfect control of his tail. Davis remembered calling him "Stripes" once, but Rrillha preferred that to the other insulting nickname. Even though he could probably break the neck of any officer at the station, he bore all their taunts. He knew his grip on the job was tenuous at best.

Davis had nothing against the guy. He was a good cop, and had made several important busts and investigations. He had been urging the upstairs brass to fund a Recom Task Force in his precinct, hoping to make it an example for police forces nationwide. His latest case involved what seemed to be the first Recom serial killer; the species of the murderer was unknown, but his victims were all furies, found knifed to death in abandoned buildings or even their own homes — six in all. So far. Surprisingly, Rrillha seemed to have no leads. The culprit had made no mistakes.

Davis unwrapped one of the greasy cheeseburgers he had picked up at the KwikBite Shop while cruising downtown before work. He was about to take a lukewarm bite when the heat-scan picked up two small forms closing in from the left. He clicked on the image enhancer and a small window appeared on the front screen, showing two small furred forms huddled behind a pile of garbage.

"Kids," he grumbled. It was after 4 PM, and they were supposed to be at home or in a designated play area, not in this mostly abandoned quadrant.

He flicked on the high-beams and muttered into the megaphone feed, "Go home, kids. You know there's nothing to do here." He began eating the burger, and grumbled because the clueless cook had fried the onions instead of leaving them raw, the way he liked them. Again.

He flicked on the sound telescope and heard them giggling as they scampered closer, behind the rusted shell of a stripped automobile. Davis sighed and flicked on the neons. The bubble on the roof of the car strobed and burst into a swirling red and blue whirlpool.

Just in case, he took the Hardballer, a beanbag pistol, from under his seat. It would knock them to their furry little asses if they gave him any trouble. They looked unarmed to him and he wasn't taking any chances, but he wasn't going to plug a kid for tossing rocks.

He had nabbed the Hardballer off a young smartass in Bensonhurst who'd tried to mug him during a visit to a woman he'd stopped seeing years ago. As he checked the chamber, he heard something hit the car and splatter. When he looked up, the VR screen was blank. The second paint balloon hit the passenger side and slowly washed down, turning most of that window green.

The scanners showed the kids running past the car toward a crumbling prefab apartment complex. From the tails he saw waving on the heat-scan and the sound of their giggles, he guessed they were felines.

He stepped out of the car in time to see the calico kits scamper into the building with their awkward-looking, but quick, bipedal gait. Davis had grown up during the years the military had declassified the recombinant species, but he still wasn't used to the unnatural springiness of their toe-stepping legs.

Shutting the door of the prowler behind him, he jogged

off after them, quickly losing his breath. He kept very alert for any sign of ambush; his cool grey eyes darted about warily. If they didn't give him any trouble, he'd let them go with a scare or a warning. If they hadn't interrupted his lunch, he might have just taken the car to be washed.

He jogged to the door and scanned the hall before stepping in. Two sets of glimmering yellow eyes, one above the other, blinked at him from the darkened stairwell before the pair dashed up the stairs with a giggle.

"Coon cats," he muttered, trotting after the kits. They looked very young, maybe not even teens. Running up the stairs, Davis began to sweat; being built like a bull gave him very little endurance.

When he reached the first landing, he checked all the doorways, then the stairs. There, two yellow eyes gleamed back from the shadows cast by the dim light that seeped through the shattered windows. "Little shits," Victor panted, coming down the hallway.

He nearly fired when the giggling shadow threw the object at him before he realized what it was. The stale donut bounced off his shoulder. Crumbs of dried glaze marked his coat and dotted the rotten wood floor where the donut rolled to a stop at his feet.

"Why you little furball!" Davis growled, and rushed the laughing kits under a hail of donuts. When he reached tackling range, they sped up the creaking stairs, and he followed in a rage. Especially since chocolate glazed was his favorite.

He still had the sense to skip the broken stairs, watching his step as rage stole his breath from him. As he reached the top flight, he saw the two young Recoms in the weak light that filtered through the ragged holes in the roof. The two coon-kittens smiled and giggled down mockingly, throwing the last of the donuts at him as he ran up the stairs. Their long, thick calico fur seemed dappled with shimmering white spots....

He felt so light. A strangled gurgling came from somewhere, and the mocking smiles of the wildcats faded into a mixture of awe and horror. Davis' back arched like an angry cat's and a crushing pain burst across his chest, searing ripples across his nervous system.

The Hardballer went off, knocking a shower of sheet rock down from the ceiling. Victor's whole world shifted upward, tumbling and blurring, before it was blotted out by an inky onrush of blackness.

One

"...him to see a comforting face," said the somewhat effeminate, but undoubtedly male, voice that swirled along the rim of his consciousness.

Another voice, softly growling, joined the whirlpool of sound. "Scan shows little signs of shock." The voice had a

guttural tang to it. "Looks like a nice smooth slip."

The maelstrom of sound soon made him feel like he was in orbit around a conversation; when he reached the apogee, all the voices mixed into a slurring buzz.

He seemed farther away now. The voices were distant, but much clearer. "We can begin therapy in the next few days," the effeminate voice said. "Too bad he didn't have any close relatives."

"Doesn't have," a gravelly male voice interrupted.

The whirlpool slowly calmed, like a spinning coin finally coming to rest. Victor heard a lot of quiet breathing, but no one was speaking anymore.

He slowly became aware of his body, as if every muscle had been asleep but without the pins and needles, only numbness. A soft unrecognizable hum teased his memory.

"Victor?" asked the gravelly voice. It sounded a little familiar. He couldn't place it. He stirred slightly, and someone held his arm. The feeling was muffled by bandages, and he groaned with a sigh.

As he breathed deeply for the first time, his nose was flooded with distinctive scents. The thick scent of a fox, which always tickled the back of his throat; some human had doused himself with a pheromonal cologne. An underlying tinge of skunk scent wrinkled his nose, which had begun to feel cold.

He tried to avoid opening his eyes. He didn't want to see a roomful of cold physicians tending a network of tubes leading from him to a stack of bleak, sterile machines. His dry eyelids split open and he saw exactly that.

At the end of the bed, hands on the metal footboard, stood a grave-looking man of about forty years, skin weathered and tanned. Like Victor, he looked as if gravity worked overtime on him; his jaw hung open just a little and he slouched like a weary Atlas. His brown and silver hair was slicked back in the current style, and his long face had the texture of sandstone. He reminded Victor of an Easter Island monolith.

One on each side of him, there stood a thin hawk-nosed man in a lab coat and a slim fox Recom in a skirt, a long white jacket thrown over her shoulders. She wore the coat as a matter of profession, it seemed — most Recoms preferred to wear as little as possible, especially in hot weather. Fur was enough, even in the cool hospital room.

Victor blinked. "Yes?" The word was drawn out, and it felt like parts of his mouth didn't work. One word pulsed through his mind, a wash of cold. *Stroke*.

The big man at the foot of the bed, who owned the gravelly voice, smiled. "You made it." He walked up to Victor's side.

The hawkish man inserted a syringe into one of the tubes in the mass of plastic spaghetti that trailed from a hum-

ning machine to IVs on his wrists, neck, and elbows. Victor saw his black arm and winced, thinking he'd been bruised from head to toe.

"Victor. You had a heart attack. By the time the paramedics found you, you were nearly gone. Now you couldn't afford a transplant. You know how the hospitals are; they checked your BankCard right after they had you stabilized on the machines." The big man, whom Victor remembered seeing once in Captain Thompson's office, put a hand on his shoulder.

He looked down at himself and blinked. He seemed much bigger. He figured he would have wasted away or at least lost some weight in the hospital. His skin was black along his sides, pale in the middle....

"We paid to keep you out of the freezer in stasis, but a Kennedy bought the last heart at the hospital's organ bank that was your blood type... OA negative, pretty rare. Now there's still hope if you're patient...."

Victor pulled the sheets off of himself, careful not to tug any IVs. "I-I'm a skunk," he squeaked. His throat felt like he was wearing a tie three inches too tight. Trembling, he began to pant.

The hook-nosed doctor emptied the syringe into the IV while the vixen watched Victor curiously. Soon his shaking stopped as the sedative began to settle him.

The rough-voiced human put on his best comforting face, which wasn't much. "Victor, it's temporary. Mindslip. You've heard how it's used to wipe the minds of serial killers and such, to study their minds and brains separately. You remember how Nelson Walker bought a brain-dead teen and got slipped into the body to beat bone cancer. It made all the papers, and right after it, organ donation got regulated into a meat market."

He placed a hand on Victor's shoulder. Even his meaty paw was dwarfed by the form Victor now inhabited. He looked like a bodybuilder, and the lush fur made him seem even bigger.

"I want my body back!" He covered his eyes with black-furred hands and sobbed softly.

Two

Victor strained to lift the bar that hung over him. His chest felt like a furnace about to burst and his huge tail twitched and fluttered between his legs on the bench.

"Come on," Demetroulakos urged him, squatting beside the weight machine. His grey suit bulged at the inseam and his voice was as rough as ever.

Victor growled and forced the last rep of the set. He had locked his elbows, and rubbed them, panting as he sat up. Rrillha's body was still trim, but all his tone had been lost as he lay in a capsule wasting away. The therapy was supposed to put him back in shape as it let him get used to his new body.

"You're trying to kill me, Gavin," Victor panted. He looked over at the display, which read 325 pounds in red LCD.

Svarla, the lab-coated vixen, walked over, looked at Victor's diagnostic wristband, and *tsked*. "You're just not used to it. According to records, this is Rrillha's average workout, and we've worked you up to it." She sat lazily on a curl-machine's padded seat, and her tail wafted to the thinly carpeted floor.

Victor smirked and wanted to tell her to try lifting those bars. He looked at his arms and poked the muscles. The workouts did show a difference, and he was oddly satisfied to finally be in shape, even if he had to die to do it.

Gavin stood, slicked back his grey hair with a hand, and threw the skunk a towel. "Go shower and cool off."

"It's time for your first briefing," Svarla interrupted with her deeply trilling voice. That seemed odd to Victor; he didn't remember Rrillha ever feeling free enough to do that. She curled her tail around a bar of the machine.

Gavin nodded, and the two left him there to catch his breath. The shower was invigorating, even if wet fur weighted him down and looked awful when towel-dried... and he was too lazy to brush it all.

He made do by brushing the topknot of head-fur that always got in his eyes, and most of his facial fur. His tail looked frizzy, but it was too much trouble to pull around and brush properly.

He expected the briefing to be held in a cavernous dark room with men in dark suits seated at a huge oak table, but it was just Gavin and Svarla in a small sun-lit office near the top of the building. It had been a week or so — he'd lost count — since they woke him, and he had been outside to jog a couple times. The building was inhumanly sterile. Outside, the compound was smack in the middle of a large city, but the circle of trees and the tall iron fence beyond kept him from guessing where he was. The grass and trees, and even the occasional bird, were a treat for the city cop, but they gave him a runny nose. Rrillha had not been used to pollen in the air.

Victor sat in a leather chair, out of the sunbeam that cut through the room. Dust motes danced in the soft gold ray. Gavin sat behind a marble-topped desk that looked pretty bare for a government official's. There was only a small lamp, a stylish fountain pen, and a jar of midnight blue ink.

Svarla was sprawled out on the other chair, in a strange position so she didn't sit on her tail. She looked comfortable, though. Just then Victor realized how uncomfortable *he* felt, and the two watched him with a cruel pleasure as he shifted in his seat, then finally sat sideways in the armless chair like the vixen did.

Her muzzle parted in a pleasant gesture. "You look like

you were in a washing machine," she said, and laughed politely as Gavin smiled. "Don't you ever brush yourself?"

Victor felt the strangest thing. His ears burned as he blushed. Now why was he embarrassed? If he had gotten the same remark as a human, he would have given her the finger at least. He must have broadcast his feelings, because she softened her attack.

"I'll show you how to take care of yourself. You are like a newborn of sorts, no?" Something in her glance hinted of apology, but that was all.

"You two can go play house later," Gavin grinned. "This is more important." He flicked a switch under the desk and the ventilation kicked up. He took a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and an ashtray from a drawer and put them on his desk before lighting up. Even the building's purifiers couldn't cut the chemical tang off the city air, so a little smoke would hardly be noticed. His pupils shrank to pinpoints as he sucked pure nicotine.

"You might've figured out we didn't pay to have you mindslipped out of the goodness of our hearts." Gavin inhaled, and held his breath a surprisingly long time. Victor waited silently for him to continue, wondering what their purpose was. He began to realize how little reason people had for keeping him alive. Without any close friends or relatives, he wouldn't be missed....

Gavin exhaled finally, but didn't say anything.

"Who do you mean by 'we'?" Victor asked, and shifted in his chair.

Gavin looked at his cigarette. "The FBI. Recombinant Crimes Taskforce. We need you."

Victor frowned. "You've got to be kidding me. I don't even wanna know how much it cost to bring me back, but you could get a live cop a lot easier. What's the catch?"

"Victor, there are very few people in law professions who agree with the Recom cause. It's a bias we don't care for. They see Recoms as engineered killing machines, time bombs walking their streets."

"What makes you think I'm any different?" He was still being wary. He knew he was nothing special, or if he had outstanding qualities, they weren't good ones.

"Your psychological evaluations, over the years on the force, show it. As does your record. Which is another thing. Your attitude toward the high brass is what kept you a detective. They like a kiss-ass, and you're anything but. In fact, you should've filled Rrillha's shoes, which you're doing now, come to think of it." He smiled with big teeth like white tombstones.

Svarla hrmphed, but was otherwise silent.

Victor thought back. Yes, he was a good detective. Never really made the papers except for working in the X

Killer case — a killer so named for the multitude of X-slashed bodies that kept turning up in parks around the city, mostly joggers and street people.

He remembered it vividly, seeing the thin, unobtrusive man among the crowd, gawking over the yellow police lines, trying to get a peek at the body bag. He had seen him before. His whole mind had zoomed in on the man and the small piece of silver poking from his pants pocket, until he realized it was part of a straight razor — the thumb rest. It was almost funny how they caught the bastard, who liked to be there when police bagged his victims. That guy's ballsiness was talked about in the precinct for months.

"So what do you want me for?"

Gavin smirked. "You could at least try to sound grateful," he puffed the last of his cigarette away. "We need you to continue an investigation. You start where Rrillha left off. You can get at his files... past the retina-scan. He had a high access level thanks to his position with us, but only the computers know that. Don't try to pull rank with anyone. You're still a Recom, no matter what badge we give you."

Victor scratched at his chin. "Oh boy, I'm a secret agent man. So you want me to catch the Furry Killer?"

Svarla winced. "You're still a fat bald cop under that fur, you know that? I'm going to teach you to fit in among *Re-coms*. 'Furries' are what the press calls us. As far as anyone knows, you're Rrillha, recovered from coma."

Victor cringed mockingly. "Hey, I didn't know it was offensive. It's what we called him at the station." Actually, some cops called the killer "Trapper Bob."

"I know. That's why I'm training you. So you don't get your face clawed off." She cleaned a claw.

Victor had never felt any attraction toward Recoms. His eyes traced over Svarla's flat, lush-furred chest, and he was sure she knew. He knew that Recoms didn't have the preoccupation with breasts that he and other humans did. The complete *lack* of them mildly interested him.

He nodded. "I'll give it my best shot. It's my only chance to get back into my body, isn't it?"

Gavin grinned coldly and nodded, lighting another cigarette.

Svarla stood up wordlessly and gestured for Victor to follow. He stood and realized that his legs were closer to a human's than hers. While she had firm thighs like a human's, her shins and feet were digitigrade, furred a deep chocolate brown, unlike her sandy-orange arms, legs, and back, and her white throat and belly. Her face was flecked with silver guard hairs that offset the ruddier fur there.

Gavin stayed at his desk. "Don't get your tail caught in the door, *Rrillha*," he grinned. Victor remembered that

painful gaff and wincing, closing the door behind him especially carefully.

Three

Svarla liked being outside, so they sat in the shade of a young, leafy gnarled oak as she told him how to fit in. She had taken off her coat, and the soft wind ruffled her fur. The warm hazy sun was a bruised spot of yellow on a dead copper sky.

First they tackled connotations of words and slang. A Recom who wasn't very enamored of humans called them 'skins'. The older once-soldier types used a lot of military slang, but Recomms did not have their own language. A Recom might become enraged at the sight of a fur coat, no matter how rare they were, so they stayed away from Sutton Compound, the small quad on the East side with its own private police force.

It was nearly dusk by the time she finished body language. He had to be careful how he moved his tail, and he couldn't even control the damn thing yet. Even though his gaze was likened to staring down a double-barreled shotgun, he shouldn't stare or bare his teeth; and above all, don't stare at someone who's eating. There were a lot of instincts that weren't erased by genetic recombination — racial memories, she called them.

He had known about wolverines ever since he'd become a cop, but she told him anyway. Never provoke them. No matter how much bigger you are, they will never submit, and they won't back down. If the Recom stereotype of the "walking time-bomb" had any basis in fact, it was the bad-tempered mustelids. Their claws were not vestigial and adrenaline was like PCP to them. They were a pain in the ass to put down, Victor remembered. He recalled hosing down a drunk one back when he was a patrolman. His department, smack in the middle of the Jungle, finally resorted to stun-guns that were practically hyped-up cattle prods. Even though he felt strong enough to throw a wolverine across a room, he reminded himself not to get too cocky.

"What do Recomms do to show... desire?" He wanted to make her feel as uncomfortable as he had, squirming in that chair upstairs.

She chuckled, a throaty sound. "There are plenty of women along the Hudson that'll show you. No, you'll have money. Might want to try uptown between Fifth and Seventh..." She gave him a toothy grin. It was meant to anger him, he remembered. Recomms didn't smile. Only humans bared their fangs in merriment.

"Thanks," he glared.

"If you need to know for this investigation, I'll tell you." She stood up, brushed the grass off her legs. "Come on. Time to go inside."

He wasn't done training yet. Therapy moved from strength to agility — balance beams and reflex exercises

— to make sure he wasn't clumsy using muscles he never had before.

One day, when Svarla was checking how well his eyes focused, he asked her, "How do I spray?"

She merely moved the lenses from his eyes and said, "I don't know. I'm not a skunk."

At last the day had come. He was getting stir-crazy. It was time for his recovery to be announced to the press and for him to return to the department. He was back in Gavin's office, the fans running on high as the stone-faced man chain-smoked.

"How are you going to go about helping us, Victor? Have you really thought about it? There's been another murder while you were being slipped." He puffed away as Svarla idly groomed her forearm with her claws.

Victor thought a moment. "Pick up Rrillha's leads from his accounts and files. Search his apartment. Try to find his informants, his street people. Try to fit in back at the station."

"Good. Try to keep quiet. Remember, you're practically a martyred hero for the Recom movement, and that'll screw up your work at the station. Fake amnesia, that'll help with any friends you might bump into. I'm sure there'll be sympathy overflowing for you, but don't push it."

"I don't plan to." He cracked his knuckles. Odd, he'd never had that habit. He flexed the small muscles that extended and retracted his claws. "Do you want me to report on progress? Back here?"

Gavin nodded. "We'll be in touch. Svarla will get you your things and drop you off at the apartment. Tomorrow you're back on the force." He ground out a cigarette under his thumb in the tacky chrome ashtray on his desk.

His belongings amounted to a belt-clip badge, a bandolier with a Distinguished Service Cross and a Purple Heart pinned to it, a thin wallet with some debit and credit cards in it, and an open roll of violet candies. The candies were sweet and their scent tickled his nose.

Svarla led him to an underground parking lot, stopping at a simple dark sedan with tinted windows. When they neared, the engine hummed to life. It was a common model of automobile, and mist drifted out of the exhaust.

He opened the back door after he found out the passenger door was locked. As he was getting in, the vixen put a hand on his shoulder, and her claws pricked his skin. He turned to her.

"You have any questions, my phone number is in Rrillha's files." She let go.

"Thanks." He got in the car, sitting in the middle of the back seat. His tail curled up like a begging squirrel's, the end pressed up against the rear window.

"Take care, *Rrillha*." She bared her fangs, taunting him playfully.

"You too." He tried to mimic her expression, but felt silly, so he shut the door.

He only saw the back of the driver's head for the trip back to the City. The man had a government-issue short haircut, strong features, and a pair of aviator sunglasses on. He didn't talk and it looked like you could get paper-cuts from the ironed creases in his suit. He also had ears that made him look like a taxi with the doors open, but Victor decided not to tell him.

The skunk looked out the windows boredly and realized that the FBI building he had been cooped up in was the new one, built a few years ago in the Free City of Staten Island, which was happily no longer affiliated with the four remaining boroughs of New York City. After he left the island, he didn't see any trees.

The driver stopped at a tall grey apartment building surrounded by others exactly like it. It was at the top of SoHo, on Prince between Greene and Mercer. He got out and the sedan pulled hastily between two shuttle buses, turned right on a side street, and was gone.

The sidewalks weren't too crowded, and he only saw one other *Recom*, a young wolf who cut across the street. The rest of the people slouched toward home under the ugly grey-green sky. He was received without a word except for a grunt from a gang of teens who all had blue stripes dyed down the middle of their crewcuts and bar code badges stolen from execs pinned to their flak jackets. The badges were collected like baseball cards, and one kid had all the big ones: DuPont, J&J, IBM, GE, ITT. They stood by the front of his building and parted when he walked up the steps. He felt them giving him the finger to his back, but didn't turn.

His apartment was on the sixth floor and he tore yellow police tape off the doorjamb before entering. It had a thumbprint reader for a lock and the door popped inward like the secret panel of a crypt.

Despite the dust, it was a nice spacious apartment that probably cost a fortune. The furniture and decor were minimal — a long couch, some nature prints on the walls. The wall-mounted TV was mute, but spat forth a flicker of commercials into the silent room. A counter divided the parlor from the kitchen, which had a *faux* brick floor and utilitarian fixtures. He was afraid to open the refrigerator; after all this time some kind of sentient mold was likely to attack him with a pseudopod.

Through a door in the kitchen were a bedroom and bath. The large bed had a night-table at each side, one with a video reader and a stack of book disks, the other with a lamp and an alarm clock. Double-door closets flanked the bed.

He used the bathroom before giving the place a half-

decent cleaning. He opened the windows and turned up the volume on the TV. The apartment was quiet and the place had the air of death. The PC, oddly, was a portable, and fit in a briefcase with its common police accessories — a scanner-printer, cellular phone, and a remote digitizer, which looked like a small camera.

He was tired from making the place livable, so he laid on the couch and watched a public TV show about the Grand Canyon till he fell asleep.

Sleep was a dark swirling void, a whirlpool abyss behind his eyes, the center of it hypnotizing him as he contemplated it for what seemed an eternity.

The next morning he woke early, his muzzle and palms moist with sweat. The sun was just coming up, barely affecting the ashen sky. He sat the PC on his lap, turned it on, and put on the opaque visor with the built-in headphones.

A thin red line buzzed across his vision as the visor laser-scanned his retina for log-in. Colors burst, a million blooming fluorescent pinpricks, each with a tiny bud of darkness in the center, which then bloomed until a blind abyss enveloped him.

Then, windows of text flipped up against the blackness, like cards dealt on an ebony table. Some were doorways to catalogs, travel agents, banks, and the like; another window flashed entertainment, from ersatz vacations and vicarious adventures to a virtual reality brothel. He scanned the bank account balances, checked the news, and learned that he was to appear at a press conference held at the Jungle Precinct in a couple of hours. He figured he should look good, so he decided to scan the files later.

He tried to remember how *Rrillha* combed his head-fur, which looked messy no matter what he did with it. Being a skunk, he had a tousled mess of black and white fur between his ears. Slicked back, he looked too shiftily; parted, it looked ridiculous. He loosely combed it back and left a lock of bangs hanging neatly over his left eye. He thought he looked dashing, for a fur — *Recom*.

In the same drawer as the fur brush, there was a key-chain. It held a car key and a small squat key that looked like it fit a locker or a safety deposit box. *Rrillha* must have had a department issue vehicle; he hoped he'd be getting it back.

The only clothes *Rrillha* owned were shorts. Victor found a navy blue pair to put on, along with his badge and belt. He hit the street, looking for a shuttle. He brought the briefcase computer with him.

If there was any sun that day, it was hiding behind the colossal ziggurats of the housing complexes. Shuttle buses and the occasional sleek automobile jockeyed down the rutted, pockmarked pavement. Crowds shuffled down the sidewalks, some disappearing down littered stairwells to the subways below.

Victor picked up a shuttle with a drop-off a few blocks from the station, and strap-hanged it for the trip. He was the only Recom on the bus, and began to feel glances grazing him... eyes not making contact, but pointing his way now and then.

The ride was spine-jarring at best and gut-wrenching at its worst. The downtown side streets were neglected beyond repair, and the bus bottomed out regularly as the driver raced down them. Victor was used to the ride, never having owned a car. He grunted as the bus hurtled around a food cart that sat at the curb and watched the peds scatter back onto the sidewalks where they belonged.

The Fifty-Fourth New Precinct was a squat geometric rhomb jammed between a dull weathered warehouse and a tall, sterile apartment complex. After he stepped off the still rolling bus, he closed his eyes a moment; he fought with himself to relax, to force the queasiness away, to be empty, as he imagined Rrillha would be with partial amnesia. The entrance was cut into the building with odd, sharp angles, and he walked down the oblong tunnel to the lobby.

A couple were trying to argue with the desk sergeant.

"But I was mugged! You're telling me you won't even take a report?" The man held a corner of his jacket to his eye, where a swollen cut still bled. The woman beside him pinched her bloody nose and leaned her head back.

The desk sergeant sitting behind a thick plastic screen looked up from his coffee. He followed the skunk with his eyes as Victor walked to the back door with the Police Only sign above it. "Just be lucky you're alive. There's not much we can do. Do you know how many muggings there are every day?"

The back room was a sea of desks, uniforms, and noise. Telephones, beepers, and shouts all fought for ears. He scanned the room, trying hard to keep from talking to old friends... he was back in his world, but in a disguise that was torturously perfect.

He nearly waved to Kassie Obrycki, who was still chewing on her computer stylus, possibly wanting to be electrocuted, or Joe Bagaducci, who everyone called Joey Bags, but who he called Joey Bag O'Donuts. Joey was staring at his newsreader over a cup of coffee, having finished his donuts already.

"Hey, Stinky's back!" A rookie, a skinny spider of a man with a buzzed haircut, taunted him from across the room.

He waved back silently as he walked up the aisle to the Captain's office, amid hoots and shouts of sarcastic applause. It began pecking at him, even though it wasn't really *him* they were jeering. The sounds were like prodding fingers, making him cringe and tremble with anger... he stared into space, knowing that if he met the gaze of one of the taunters, he would explode. He could feel their eyes gouging him along.

He nearly jumped when a hand reached out in front of him as he walked by.

"Welcome back, Inspector." It was Bagaducci. His voice sounded like a croak sometimes. He didn't talk often. Dark, deep-set eyes looked up from under a mop of black hair. He wore a dingy grey sweater with a strand of yarn hanging from a ragged cuff and some old slacks. He wore black sneakers instead of department-issue shoes.

Rrillha's voice was higher than was expected for his size. "Thank you, Lieu," he said dryly, and walked back to Captain Thompson's office.

It was a stale cubicle, cramped with a plastic mock-lacquer desk and piles of computer cartridges stacked around the room, labeled in a steady hand. Thompson sat at his desk, round like a coiled boa constrictor in his chair, and about the same color Victor liked his coffee. He was squat and bald on top, as if life had ground him down into the pavement. He had a pager hooked on his ear, and he hummed into it boredly, on hold.

"Rrillha." Thompson was not easily surprised. His eyes were hard enough to take on a jaguar's stare.

Victor had been finding it hard to act out Rrillha's often submissive attitude. With Thompson it was easy. Every conversation was like a game of mercy you started out losing.

"Good morning, Captain." He nodded and stood before the desk.

The captain raised his index finger, gesturing for him to wait a minute as he started talking on the phone.

Victor pivoted on his heel, looking around the room while Thompson tried to wheedle some information from another precinct. The white floor, scuffed by the captain's black-soled shoes, was smooth against his feet. His claws made quiet clicking noises as he tapped his foot.

A rotating photo cube on the desk cycled through a slideshow of smiling grandkids. The walls were mostly bare, except for a display case that held a 52-state set of State Trooper shoulder patches and a pistol range target, with the bullseye raggedly removed and "25 yards, 10mm long" written in magic marker.

"No, I'm not trying to pull rank with you, Cy. But if you fax those over, not only will I let you see the evidence from the Jenkins case, but I'll give you two of my tickets to the Jets-Steelers game on the 25th. No, I'm not shitting you, I need those records. Thanks. I'll give you the tickets over lunch at Perry's in Maspeth. Seats are low, around the 45-yard line. You buy lunch." He hung up.

"Stubborn S.O.B., that Cy. Rrillha, good to have you back." He played with a pen.

"Good to be back, sir." He sat on the edge of one of the two chairs in front of the Captain's desk, his tail curling

over the back of it. The Captain's nose wrinkled.

"Now listen. I know the feds took care of you, checked you out, but you're doing desk jobs until I'm sure you're okay. They said you had light amnesia?"

"Yes, sir."

He grinned. "What's your name and badge number. No peeking."

He parted his muzzle and churred softly, the best light laugh a skunk could muster. "Rrillha Hoffman, Inspector #474." He trilled his R's involuntarily, which annoyed him, before he remembered how Rrillha sounded.

"What's a signal-13?"

"Officer in distress."

"Good. How many sugars do I take in my coffee?"

"Uh. I don't know, sir."

"I take it black. Get me a cup, then I have some reports you can review." He grinned again.

Victor closed his eyes a moment with a "heh" before heading for the coffee urn. Thompson was a ballbuster, but he was a good guy and a good cop, in Victor's mind.

He brought the Captain his coffee and zipped through the reports. He was a little anal-retentive about spelling, grammar and correct procedure, and left many notes for the patrol officers and the end of their reports. This kind of work bored him, so he got it over with quickly.

Sitting at his desk, he noticed that the "New Mail" light was flashing slowly on the handle of the briefcase, so he logged in to check it.

Svarla had sent him a dossier on himself.

Name: Rrillha Creche: Hoffman #28
DOB: release date 8/1/87 ID #: SKU-626-70
Physical description: Mephitis sapiens,
Generation 1.
Height: 5'11" Weight: 315 lbs.

Employment History: Marine Corps, Hoffman Project. Served in Skunk Anti-Terrorist Squads, 20 yrs., retired with pension.
Final ranking: Sergeant 1st Class.

Service: Operation Innocent Rescue, 2102; Operation Dune Hammer 2102-2103; Operation Oasis 2110-2111. Drill Sergeant 2111-2117. Security Guard, Macy's, 2117-2119. Police Officer, NYPD, 54th N. Precinct 2119-2122; promoted to Detective, 2122; promoted to Inspector, 2125.

That was all. It was helpful, but nowhere near as detailed as he'd hoped.... He was about to scan through Rrillha's personal files when Lieutenant Bagaducci walked up.

"Hey, Rrillha." He put his hand on the skunk's shoulder unexpectedly, making the fur bristle.

"Hello, Lieu."

"You hear about Vic Davis?"

"No. What happened? Transfer?"

"You could call it that. Heart attack, chasing two coon-cats. Kids, third generation Recoms. Never thought about his health, that guy."

Victor nodded the head he inhabited, feeling suddenly cold. "He should have watched his diet. Toobad, I liked him. When did it happen?"

"Three or four months ago. Yeah, he was a good cop. Hard-headed, but good. Anyhow, we got the two kids in holding. Parents can't afford counsel, and the public defenders are so backed up they could use MetaMucil. No bail, DA's prosecuting this like they pulled the trigger on him." He sat on the edge of Rrillha's desk.

"Jesus." *Shit*, Victor thought. Rrillha would never have said that. Recoms weren't accepted in any of the traditional religions. He wondered if Joey caught that. "Well, they shouldn't have run. What were they doing?"

"They tossed some paint balloons at his squad car. He should have known better, and called for an assist. They could have ambushed him in that complex. But I believe these kids. They called us on his pager after he passed out."

"I'll have to look at all the reports and talk to them. The Cap doesn't want me doing much for a while, but this is definitely my end." He looked at the clock. "I'd better go, I have that press conference in a half-hour."

Bagaducci walked back to his desk, and Victor sat alone and thought for a few long minutes before he left for the conference.

He had two escorts who walked to either side of him down the halls, keeping the press at bay. He dwarfed both of them, wiry young guys with crewcuts and fresh shaves. Their tones were snappy and forcibly gruff as they pushed back a crowd of reporters, some with micro-cams, some with pen-mikes thrust at Rrillha's face as he pushed through them to get to the door.

The podium was directly in front of the door, and flanked by two familiar faces. Jayesh Vierheilig, the Vice President of the Manhattan Division of Police, and "Dick-nose." That was Victor's nickname for the Chief of Internal Affairs, Richard Place, a tall bony man with a prominent bulb of a nose. It looked like it had been broken more than once without the benefit of reconstructive surgery. With the thinning hair slicked back, and a set of ice blue eyes, it gave him a hawk-like appearance that was tempered by his attitude.

He stepped up to the tree of thin black mikes, Vierheilig

stepping beside him. The crowd of journalists wasn't especially large, but the buzz of their chatter set him on edge. There was something about Vierheilig that Victor had never liked, something in his movements, in the beady eyes that made him look like a giant tan weasel with a moustache. He leaned over the mikes with a sinuous motion.

"If you'll all quiet down, we'll allow you to ask a few questions." He had picked up his German accent in his father's homeland, where he went to university; his mother he'd left in New Karachi, Pakistan, where she remained, only miles from the radioactive ruins of the old city. He began his career with RoninWorldWide Security in Berlin against the Greens, and did so well that, when he asked for a transfer to New York, he got it without a demotion.

The noise died down as microcams were aimed and reporters jockeyed for a good position in the small, crammed auditorium. Victor scanned over the crowd, spotting a group of five Recoms in the middle. Two wolves stood tall, with a distinct arrogance in the twitching of their tails and whiskers; a smaller rust-colored fox and a pair of coon-cats holding hands flanked them.

He sighed as he realized who the feline couple were, then swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth as he caught their scent over the normal sea of colognes and perfumes. His expression was one of sudden weariness as he looked out over the eager roomful of reporters.

He answered the questions as Vierheilig pointed out reporters, who then were allowed to speak. "You," he would say, his finger thin and brown as a stick-insect.

"You realize that you've been a martyr of the 'Recom Rights Movement' while you were in coma. How is that going to affect your political activity?"

Victor wasn't sure who asked, so he just talked into the microphones.

"Martyrs are dead. And I'm alive, aren't I?" Chuckles rippled across the room.

"Will you be returning to your old job? Can you function? How much did it cost the taxpayers to keep you plugged in all that time? I mean—"

"Dick-nose" Place interrupted. "He was kept alive like any beat cop would've been, by draining off the FOP's health fund."

The Veep from RoninWorldWide cut in. "I can assure the taxpayers of New York and our stockholders that not one penny was spent beyond the ambulance and emergency room service, which is clearly in the Public Contract."

Victor thought it over; the first was an outright lie, covered by Vierheilig's confusing true statement. The department knew that the Feds had taken care of him, once Ronin moved to have him unplugged.

Rrillha simply nodded.

The weasel in the silvery grey suit pointed to a woman with feathery blonde hair, who asked, "The *Voice* would like to know how you feel about the City's population being 9% furry, while we only have 412 furry police officers, less than a quarter percent. And you're the only one off the beat."

"And I'm sure they all do a very good job. I don't think statistics hold a lot of weight," he floundered. Vierheilig again passed over the group of Recoms, who Victor realized were becoming increasingly agitated, from their body language.

"Inspector Rrillha," one wolf growled, "Surely you've heard of the lamentable Davis case? We're here to speak on the boys' behalf, on how they're being prosecuted as if they attacked your fellow police officer, may he rest in peace. What are you going to do about this? It's your precinct—"

The room was suddenly awash with muttered chatter. Vierheilig was wrenched up with anger, shouting, "This conference will be held in an orderly manner. I didn't call on you—"

"I'll answer." *Be calm. Try to act like Rrillha. Play both sides of this, don't start a riot.*

"Mister..." he stared across the room, sharp eyes centering on the wolf's name tag. "Sturgas? I'm an inspector. I investigate. I'm not with the DA, the prosecutors, nobody. I can do my best, off-duty, to help you find the best counsel, but when I have this badge on" — he fingered the hologram clipped to his bandolier — "I have a duty to perform."

His superiors seemed satisfied, but he saw the Recoms' hackles rise noticeably, from across the room. The female coon-cat shrieked, "Don't tell me about duty! What about your duty to your people?"

The father held her back, snarling, "You cops reconditioned him! You turned him into a fragging puppet!"

"That's enough!" Place shouted into the mikes, making everyone in the room wince. "Men!" Four officers in black Kevlar body suits pushed their way into the room, a crescent closing in on the Recoms.

No. Don't kill them. Please. Fear shot up his back and down his tail, and he felt his ears flattening to his skull.

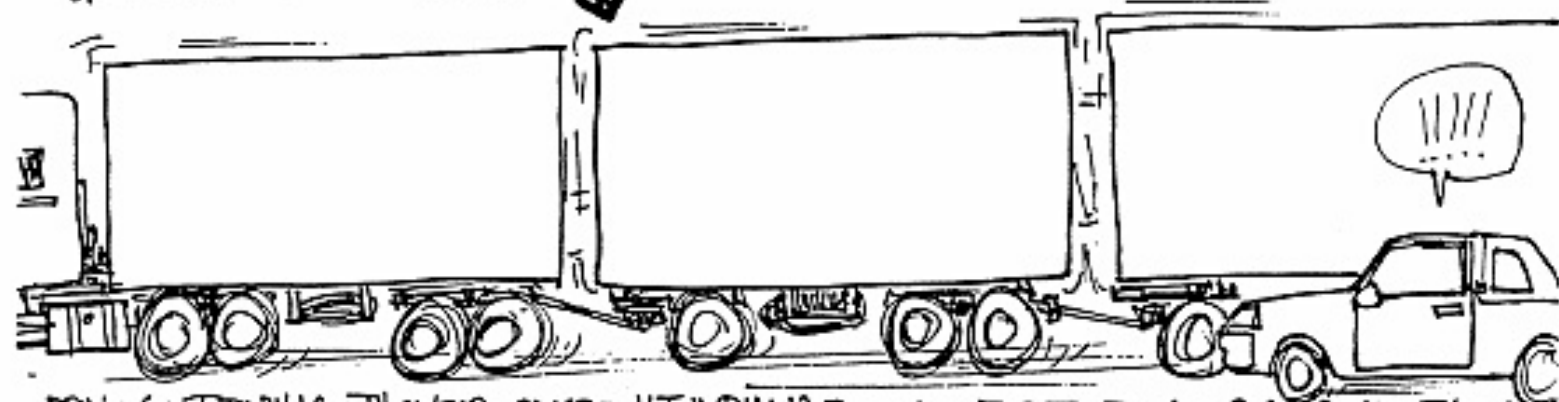
The fox quickly raised his hand and muttered, "We're not resisting...." as they were led out of the room, the reporters recoiling from the wolves' low snarls as they stalked out the door.

Rrillha's eyes locked with the feline mother's glaring yellow ones, her pupils like poised obsidian daggers. She hissed and spat as a black arm pulled her through the double doors.

(To be continued)

PHILLY FURTASICON

PHILADELPHIA PA. NOV. 18-20 1994



DRIVING OUT TO PHILLY THIS YEAR, ONCE I HIT INDIANA I ENCOUNTER TRI-TRAILER RIGS 180 FEET LONG.



FINALLY STOPPING IN STOCKTON PENNSYLVANIA TO CALL AND CHECK IN, I RECEIVE VERY BAD NEWS. MY DOG WAS KILLED JUST HOURS EARLIER. HIT BY A CAR JUST OUTSIDE THE HOUSE. HE SOMEHOW MANAGED TO SCALE A 6 FOOT FENCE. REBEKAH IS TOTALLY DEVESTATED.



NEWS OF HIS DEATH HITS ME HARD. THE DOG WAS EXTREMELY LOYAL AND DEPENDABLE. I DEARLY LOVED HIM. I LITERALLY JAT IN A LIGHT BAIN FOR OVER AN HOUR.



FINALLY ARRIVING IN PHILLY. I STOP AT DREXEL UNIVERSITY AND MEET MITCH MARCEL. TOTAL LACK OF SLEEP TOOK ITS TOLL ON ME.



HITTING GOLDBERG'S SURPLUS, I FIND AN UNISSUED BRITISH GANNET COAT FOR \$900. WITH MITCH'S CAPTAIN'S HAT I LOOKED LIKE CAPTAIN HADDOCK FROM TIN-TIN

TEN THOUSAND THUNDERBOLT TYPHOONS... DAMMIT TIN-TIN SNOWY SHIT ON NESTOR AGAIN!

POX!
VANDAL!

COMING BACK FROM A BOOK STORE I RUN INTO A PAN HANDLER BEGGING. I DEAL WITH HIM MY OWN WAY.
 GOTTA DOLLAR? HAVN'T EET INNA THREE DAYS MAN.



Really Hungry? THEN HERE-EAT!



SARDINES

I' AIN'T THAT HUNGRY!
 GOMMIE MONEY!



EAT THE FUCKIN' SARDINES OR I'LL STAND HERE AND TELL PEOPLE YOU'RE A FRAUD!

HIS SHOES ARE NICER THAN MINE. HE AIN'T HOMELESS



ACK-CHOKE GAB



\$1200 NIKIE AIR PUMPS

ON THURSDAY, MITCH + I VISIT THE NOTED MÜTTER MUSEUM

"THE BLOCKED COLON WAS 8 1/2 FEET LONG AND WEIGHED 245 LBS. THE PATIENT DIED SOON AFTERWARDS" SHEESH!



CONJOINED TWINS AT THE STU!!



LITERALLY A HULLER TUXO!

ALSO KNOWN AS "THE MUSEUM OF THE MAGABE" IT WAS PRETTY IMPRESSIVE

ENJOYING GOOD CIGARS AGAIN



PHILCON



INITIALLY I WAS ALL SET UP TO DEAL AT PHILCON. TIL BETWEEN PHILCON AND TRISH NY THINGS CHANGED (MUCH TO MY ANNOYANCE) I FOUND MYSELF DASHING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN THE TWO CONS AND LOSING A WHOLE DAYS SALES DUE TO SCREW UPS AT BOTH CONS. SALES WERE SHIT FOR ME TH 5 YEAR BECAUSE OF THIS. NEXT YEAR PHILCON!

FURSTICON



!UFF! GOTTA BE A BETTER WAY TO LEAVE A RAILROAD!
 !HUFF!

THE RED SHETLAND ANIMATED SHORTS FINALLY OUT!
ERIC SCHWARTZ DOES WELL.



HITTING K&B TOYS WITH DAVID EWELL AND MITCH
SCORING FORMER COMMUNIST GOODIES.



SUNDAY EVENING...



BURGERCON 3 HAD A RECORD BREAKING 32 ATTENDING. WE LOST
4 FOLK WHEN TWO CARS GOT LOST. WE MISS JIMMY CHIN DEARLY
AND PICKON JASEN JENSON AND GENESIS EVE COOK INSTEAD.

SEVERAL OF US DECIDE TO DO OUR ANNUAL
SILLY STRINGING. MARTIN DAMN NEAR
CLAWED HIS WAY THROUGH A WALL.

INSTEAD WE GAVE HOSE FANBOY PHILIP SMITH, HE
TOOK IT LIKE A PRO.



DAPHNE LAGE CAME OUT TO INVESTIGATE...



ONLY TO BE STRINGED!

HOSE DAPHNE!!!



SHE TOO TOOK IT LIKE A TRUE PRO.

OH WHAT A WORLD
WHAT A WORLD
MY HORRID BEAUTY
IS GONE!
Goooooh!!

40lbs
OF
SILLY
STRING



MAY BE A TAD TOO MUCH.
SHE ALSO SNORTED A
STRING BALL

GOOD SPIT
MAN!



AND I RODE BACK TO
NEW YORK.

LATER THAT NIGHT MITCH, I AND MATT HENRY TRY OUT
A SIGNAL FLARE I HAD DISCOVERED. WE
BOP IT OFF NEAR AN OLD FACTORY.
THE FLARE WORKED AS ADVERTIZED



OH MY!!!

YESSSS!!!



SEEING "STAR TREK - GENERATIONS", WE ARE
JUBILANT OVER A CERTAIN SCENE

I FINALLY LEAVE
AROUND 1 PM
AND DRIVE
STRAIGHT
THROUGH TO
MADISON. I
ARRIVE AT
6 AM DEAD
TIRED TO A
STRANGELY
QUIET HOUSE.
I'D FORGOTTEN
FOR A MOMENT
ABOUT MAX'S
DEATH.



Igolde

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CDW
Lynx
5/14/94



SUCH A BURNING DESIRE

PART TWO

BY MICHAEL PAYNE

The air seemed solid in Chelisse's nose, all smoke and ash; she peered out from behind the boulder and blinked at the girl — seven, maybe eight years old; Chelisse could never tell with humans — in her circle of little burning things. "Come on," the girl said again. "They say we hafta get started."

Several of the things shifted on their stubby legs, the fire wavering over them in patterns, wrinkles pulsating across their round, featureless bodies, and Chelisse felt a tingle comb through her fur. They were looking at her, she realized with a start, somehow or other.

Looking at her with some intelligence, too. Terrific.

The girl crossed her arms. "Well? Are you coming?"

Chelisse stood up. "Uhh, yeah, sure. Be right down." All the things had scuttled around now to, well, not to face her, but to point in her direction. Down the embankment she slid, the creatures' fires reflecting off the stream water and dancing over the rock walls of the canyon. They scurried aside to let her into the circle, then closed the ring again as she settled next to the girl.

"You're not very pretty," the girl said suddenly, pulling Chelisse's gaze over to her, dark-haired and thin. "Our maid Tessa's a ferret, too, but she's a lot prettier'n you. I didn't think they made anthrops who weren't pretty."

Well, at least these things weren't controlling the kid completely. Chelisse fished out her best smile. "Some of us manage to sneak through. Besides, I'm a weasel, not a ferret. My name's Chelisse; what's yours?"

"I'm Ronnie." The girl shrugged. "It's really Rhonda, but only my mom calls me that and only when she's mad." The girl sighed. "I'll bet she's really mad now — I've never run away from home for this long before."

Chelisse's fur prickled. The missing person case Lorenz had shown her this morning: that had been for a girl named Rhonda. "You're Ronnie McTeague?"

The girl blinked. "How did you know?"

"I'm an EMS agent. Your parents are very worried about you: they asked us to go out and look for you."

Ronnie's eyes got wide. "An EMS agent? Really? Those are my favorite stories on V 'cause they're always doing something exciting, rescuing people and everything." She stopped. "You didn't come to rescue me, did you?"

"No, but, well, I know the guy who's in charge of trying to rescue you. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if I —"

"No!" Ronnie crossed her arms. "I don't need rescuing! These guys are teaching me a lotta important stuff, and I hafta stay till they're done!"

A wave of heat, and Chelisse saw several of the creatures shift, their black claws flexing. "Guys? You mean..." She raised a paw and pointed to the flaming things.

Ronnie nodded. "I know they're kinda scary, but, well, they're aliens." Her pale eyes suddenly lost their focus, and her pupils exploded out like ink dropped on paper. "Okay, but you guys know what I mean. You're aliens even if this is your planet. Yes, you are. Because... oh, never mind." Her pupils contracted back to normal, and she shrugged. "Some things they just don't understand."

Chelisse could feel sweat in her whiskers. "You mean they're native to Marches? They... they live here?"

"Native?" Ronnie cocked her head, looked over at the circle. "You hear that, guys? You're natives!" The fires riffled along the creatures' bodies, and when Ronnie turned back, her eyes were almost solid black in their light. "They like that. You're good with words, Chelisse."

"Uhh, thanks." Chelisse tried to get her thoughts in order. "But, Ronnie, we've been on Marches for over a hundred and fifty years, and no one's ever, I mean, these guys have never... how could they have stayed hidden for so long?"

Ronnie blinked at her. "Well, they're aliens. They say they live underground most of the time, down in the rocks."

"So they talk to you? I mean, I don't hear anything from them."

"Yeah, well, that's why they need me. They say I'm a Kindler, and they needed me to get you 'cause you're a Kindler, too, only you're a different kind." She shrugged. "Or something... they're aliens, so they talk all weird."

A Kindler? Chelisse pulled at her whiskers. That was her official title — T.K., Technical Kindler — but it was more a joke than anything else, just a way of saying it was her job to keep things running without anyone noticing her. But how would they know that? "What do they mean by Kindler? Do you know? Have they told you?"

"Yeah, but..." Ronnie's mouth went sideways. "It'd be so much easier if they could just talk to you!" The black expanded over her eyes, and she nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Her pupils closed back down. "They say I've gotta tell you 'cause that's my job, but I'm not too good with words."

Chelisse fought the urge to grab the kid and shake her. "Look, they wouldn't want you if you couldn't do it, right?"

"I guess." A drop trickled down her cheek. "But, I mean, these guys've told me all this stuff, showed me all these pictures, and I don't even know where to start, and —"

"It's okay, it's okay." Chelisse put a paw on her arm. "Just start... start with you. When did you first hear them?"

Ronnie wiped a sleeve over her eyes. "Well, it was maybe about a month ago. It was because of all the fires."

"Fires? You mean the ski resorts?" Chelisse tried not to tighten her grip. "Did they do that?"

"Well..." The girl blinked and looked away. "No. See, I'm the one who burned the resorts down."

Chelisse pulled her paw back. "You?"

"Yeah." Ronnie tapped her head. "See, I can think fire. But my mom always said I was making up stories when I told her about it, so whenever the fire in my head got so big I had to let it out, I'd unplug the electrostat outback, and when Tessa dumped the garbage in, I'd think some fire into it. It burned just as well, and no one ever knew." A little smile tugged at Ronnie's face, then disappeared again.

"But on my birthday last month, the fire in my head, it just... just got too big." Her eyes showed pale in the firelight, almost no pupil at all. "We were up here at our cabin and I couldn't keep the fire in and I knew the ski lodges wouldn't have anybody in 'em 'cause there hasn't been any snow yet, so I..." Her voice trailed off, and the black spread over her eyes, her smile coming back. "Yeah. See, that's when these guys found me. And they said they could help me if I would help them."

"Help them?" Chelisse forced her fur to settle. Every time Ronnie's eyes went black like that, it was all Chelisse could do not to leap back. "Help them how?"

Ronnie was still smiling, her voice like someone in a dream. "Help them destroy the world, of course."

Chelisse stared. "Destroy the —"

Ronnie's eyes snapped back to pale. "That's just what they call it — I know that's not what they mean." She blinked at Chelisse. "I mean, this is their planet! They can't just blow it up or whatever! They don't have any spaceships to go anywhere else in!"

"Yeah, well, there you go." Chelisse put her smile on again. "They must mean something by it that we don't understand. Like you said: they're aliens."

Ronnie nodded, and Chelisse settled back on her haunch-

es. This kid was her only link to these fiery things, so keeping her calm was a number-one priority. Damn it all, where was Lorenz when she needed him? "Do they, uhh, have a name, Ronnie? I mean, something they call themselves? Calling them 'these guys' all the time, it's not very dignified."

The girl laughed a little. "Well, they sort of make a click-gargle in my head when they talk about themselves, so I just call 'em Fireballs." She grinned. "But that's not too dignified, either."

"Suits 'em, though." Chelisse nodded. "And they just told you they'd help you with the fire in your head if you'd help them destroy the world, whatever they mean by that?"

"Well, sort of..." The black swelled over Ronnie's eyes. "I had just burned down the sixth ski lodge, and I was going home through the woods when I heard... well, I didn't really hear anything. It's like..." Her eyes went pale, and she stopped, pushed at a pebble in the dirt. "Like they use things already in my head, just move 'em around." She looked up again, her eyes solid black. "It's really weird."

You're telling me, Chelisse almost said, but decided it might not be the best thing under the circumstances. "And then what happened?" she asked instead.

"They asked me to come here, and they were sitting right like this, waiting for me." Firelight gleamed in the pits of her eyes. "They showed me where to press in my head to keep the fire low and where to press to make it come back up again. They said I had to be their Fire Kindler, and that I had to attract their Water Kindler to them so they could start to destroy the world." The black shrank away, and she blinked. "You're the Water Kindler, see, and you have to stop them or something. That's how it always is, they say."

"Always? You mean they've destroyed the world before?"

Ronnie blinked. "Hey. Yeah. They keep saying that this's how they always do it, and since the world's still here, they must not really destroy it!" She clapped her hands, then sprang forward and wrapped her arms around Chelisse. "We don't have to blow everybody up!"

"Uhh, yeah." Chelisse pushed with her elbows till Ronnie's grip let up a little. "We still have to figure out what they really want, though, don't we?"

Ronnie sat back, the smile broad across her flat, human face. "Well, the rest is easy. I was just so scared about —"

"The rest, Ronnie?"

"Yeah. See, the Fire Kindler — that's me — has to set the world on fire while the Water Kindler — that's you — has to stop it from burning." Blackness filled her eyes again. "When the Fire Kindler wins, the world is de-

stroyed for the next generation to rebuild." Ronnie blinked, her pupils shrinking. "That's what they say, anyway. I don't know what they —"

"Next generation?" Chelisse tapped her snout. "Maybe this is all about, uhh, about how they make babies."

"Babies?" Ronnie stared, then looked over at the creatures. "Hey... hey, it's..." She turned back, her eyes black. "It's all these little guys like them, only... only they can't make their own fire for a while. And if the Fire Kindler doesn't keep the little guys burning till they pick it up on their own..." Her brow wrinkled, her gaze intent on things Chelisse couldn't see. "They turn into rocks or something. And all the guys are crying when that happens, and they hafta wait a long time till they can make more..." The black slowly receded, and she focused on Chelisse. "It is babies." She stopped. "I mean, I guess..."

Again, Chelisse had to stop herself from grabbing the kid. "Well, can you ask them if that's what it's about?"

"I have!" Ronnie waved her arms. "And they tell me this whole long, weird story that doesn't have any words! It just sort of happens in my head, and it's like a thousand years long, and they tell it to me so fast, I don't know what —"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." Chelisse caught the girl's hands between her paws. "I know it's hard — I mean, it took, what, fifteen years before we could even say hello to the Glist? Aliens aren't easy to talk to."

Ronnie sniffed, her lips pressed tightly together, and nodded. "I'm sorry, too," she said after a moment.

"We'll take it slowly." Chelisse puffed out a breath, let Ronnie's hands go. "Let's just say this 'destroying the world,' Fire Kindlers and Water Kindlers and all that, it's part of their reproductive cycle. But then, I mean, why us? If they keep saying this is the way they've always done it, why involve you and me? Humans and an-throps didn't even get here till about a hundred and fifty years ago. Who did they use as Kindlers before that?"

"Other Fireballs, of course, but there's so few —" She stopped, her eyes wide and black. "So few of them," she whispered. "Oh, Chelisse... an earthquake. And a landslide, right here. A whole lotta people got crushed and the nursery collapsed and the metal was all disappearing so all the babies turned to rock and —"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Chelisse sat forward. "Metal?"

Ronnie was still staring off into the distance. "There's a metal they use to keep the babies burning if something happens to the Fire Kindler. But it was all... all gone..."

"The miners." Chelisse sat forward. "Ronnie, can you tell me what happened up here forty-four years ago?"

"Forty-four years?" Ronnie blinked, her pupils shrinking back, wiped a sleeve over her face.

"That's when the earthquake hit that blocked the pass." Chelisse took the girl's hand. "Can you tell me, Ronnie?"

Ronnie sniffed, rubbed her nose. "It's kinda hard to make their pictures work in my head — they don't have eyes, y'know." She bit her upper lip. "But I think the earthquake hit before the Fireballs burned down the miners' camp."

A chill iced through Chelisse's fur. "They what?"

"Yeah. Or maybe the miners found the Fireballs and blew up their mountain first." She shook her head. "All three things happened, but I'm not sure what the order was."

Chelisse forced a breath. "The Fireballs... attacked the miners' camp?"

Ronnie nodded. "Some of 'em figured out who was taking the metal and decided to stop it." Her brow wrinkled. "But I can't tell if the earthquake happened before the attacks, or if they attacked the miners first, or even if it was the earthquake that killed the babies or the explosives the miners planted." She waved a hand. "Everything's all muddled."

"I'll say," Chelisse muttered. Had the Fireballs burned the camp, the miners retaliating by blowing up the mountain and blaming the resulting landslide on the earthquake? Or had the Fireballs thought the miners triggered the earthquake and then attacked the camp for vengeance? Or, if the earthquake had somehow revealed the existence of the Fireballs, maybe the mining company had blown them up to avoid the red tape of indiginous lifeform reports. Or maybe...

Chelisse shook her head. She could go on like this all night. "Look, Ronnie, I know it's hard, but can't you get anything clearer from the pictures?"

The girl closed her eyes, the brows knotted, then sighed and opened them again. "They're not sure. All they know is that all the babies died, and so did a lotta Fireballs."

"Yeah." Chelisse looked around the ring — a dozen or so flaming creatures. "How many more are there?"

"I don't know... some, I guess. They're down in the rocks. These guys are just in charge of getting the Kindlers."

"Right. And they picked us 'cause there's too few Fireballs to choose from?"

"Yeah."

Something didn't smell right. "But, Ronnie, why would they trust us in something so delicate as, uhh, making babies? I mean, we're aliens to them and, hell, we're the ones who screwed it up so bad the last time, aren't we?"

Ronnie shrugged. "I guess it's because the Kindlers have to try to kill each other, so they don't wanna —" She stopped then, her eyes wide.

Chelisse guessed her eyes were pretty wide, too. "They what?" she got out after a moment.

The pupils filled her eyes. "Mostly, the Fire Kindler kills the Water Kindler, and the babies get born no problem. But if the Water Kindler's real tough, they end up killing each other. That's what happened the last time, so they needed all that metal to keep the babies burning. Sometimes even, the Water Kindler kills the Fire Kindler, and then no babies get born." Ronnie blinked, no color left in her eyes. "But I don't wanna kill you, Chelisse."

"Likewise." Chelisse swallowed. The girl's eyes were not returning to normal. "What can we do, Ronnie?"

Ronnie shrugged slowly, the firelight flickering in the black of her eyes. "You wanna kill the babies." The girl raised a hand, and Chelisse felt the heat increase in the air around her. "I can't let you do that."

"Ronnie!" Chelisse leaped, and pain lashed across her back, the smoke and ash in the air suddenly overwhelmed by the stench of singed fur. Forcing herself to focus on the jump, she curled into a ball and smacked squarely into the girl's chest; she heard the breath explode from Ronnie's mouth, felt her topple at the force of the blow. Chelisse kept herself rolling, the dirt cool against the fiery pain along her back, then spun up and around to face Ronnie.

She was lying on her back, gasping for air, the Fireballs unmoving in their circle. "Snap out of it, Ronnie!" Chelisse forced through gritted teeth. "You know I don't want their babies dead! Think for a minute!"

The girl rolled onto her stomach, raised her head, and Chelisse saw nothing but darkness in her eyes. The air again thickened with warmth, and Chelisse threw herself backwards, clearing the ring of fiery creatures, her ears intent on the sound of the stream flowing past.

Pain crackled over her stomach, boiled at her insides, and Chelisse couldn't keep from crying out. Then the trickle she was aiming for became a rush, and wet coolness closed over her, wrapped itself around the jags at her back and middle; she lashed out with her paws, dug at the rocks in the stream bed, held herself stationary against the current, her chest tight, and waited till she felt the water seep through her fur all the way to her skin. It wouldn't buy her more than a few seconds, but, well, it was better than nothing.

With a shove, she pushed off from the rocks, grabbed at the bank, and hauled herself out, forced her eyes to stay open against the water dripping from her brows. Ronnie was on her feet now, the air shimmering around her like a desert horizon, the Fireballs doing some sort of little dance, first balancing on one pair of legs, then on the other. They stopped almost immediately, though, the girl's black eyes widening. "Ronnie!" Chelisse managed to pant out, but the tendons on Ronnie's neck bunched, the air against Chelisse's fur again growing warmer.

Damn! Chelisse dug at the dirt, threw herself forward, leaped over the ring of Fireballs, and dove straight at the girl. Singed fur filled her nostrils, but this time she aimed for Ronnie's head, lashed out with front and back paws, felt a sickeningly solid contact, then spun away, rolled to her paws and turned to see Ronnie collapse in a heap, her eyes closed.

She rushed to the girl's side, pressed her head against her chest, felt the shallow rise and fall, heard the muffled but steady thump-thump-thump, let a breath escape. "You're gonnabe all right, Ronnie," she muttered. "God, I hope."

Ronnie twitched then under Chelisse's paws, and Chelisse started back. The girl's lips drew open, and a guttural voice came out. "No. Not all right. All die."

The fur prickled along Chelisse's neck. This couldn't be Ronnie. Chelisse knew how long it took humans to recover from her double kick to the head. She stared back at the Fireballs. "It's you," she whispered. "You can talk to me."

"No," the voice from Ronnie's mouth said. "We make the words, but the Fire Kindler talks them, dead as she is."

"She's not dead!" Chelisse grabbed for Ronnie's chest, felt her heart still beating.

"She is," the voice insisted. "For the Water Kindler has defeated her, and as such she is dead. The world is not destroyed. We are to die out."

"No!" Chelisse looked from the Fireballs to Ronnie and back again, her mind racing. "The...the last time, the Kindlers killed each other, right?"

"True," wheezed the voice.

"Well, then, y'see?" Chelisse spread her paws. "It's a tie this time, too! She defeated me, and I defeated her!"

The only sound for a moment was the rushing of the stream and the crackling of the creatures' fires, then Ronnie's jaw moved again. "How so?" the voice asked.

"Just look." Chelisse patted Ronnie's chest. "You agree that I defeated her, right?"

"True."

Chelisse raised a claw. "But she has also defeated me. She... as I spoke with her earlier, she... she made me care for her. I can't kill her the way I'm supposed to any more than she could kill me. And since neither one of us can do what we're supposed to do here, it's a draw. See? That... that makes sense, doesn't it?"

Silence fell over the place once more, Chelisse blinking against the rumbling pain through her middle, like someone had grabbed her by the back and stomach and torn the fur out by the roots: just thinking about it made spots swirl before her eyes. She forced them aside, felt Ronnie twitch again beneath her paws, heard the voice

say, "Yes. If you are both now incapable of performing as you should, the contest is over. Babies shall be born without a world destroyed, although..." The voice trailed off.

"What?" Chelisse tried to keep her claws from digging into Ronnie's chest. "Although what?"

"Although," the voice went on, "we have not enough of the fire metal to keep the babies burning. They will be born only to die."

"But... but you've still got Ronnie!" Chelisse couldn't keep from shouting. "She can still be your Fire Kindler even if we did defeat each other, can't she?"

The creatures stirred in their circle, the fire dancing in waves over their bodies, before Ronnie's jaw moved again: "Defeat has always meant death before. We shall see." Flames lashed down from between their legs, the air heating like a blast furnace around Chelisse, and the Fireballs began sinking into the dirt. Chelisse blinked the tears from her eyes, saw the creatures settle below the surface, then their tunnels collapsed over them, and the black of night crashed in.

Chelisse sat holding Ronnie and panting, waiting for her eyes to get used to the sudden darkness. Where was Lorenz? As soon as he'd lost radio contact, she knew he'd be on the horn to Civil Air Command trying to round up a 'copter crew. It wasn't that late. How long did it take to get a simple —

Ronnie again twitched under her paws, a groan coming to Chelisse's ears. She blinked in the darkness. "Ronnie?"

"Ohh, my head," came the girl's normal voice. "I... I... I can't see!"

"Shh, it's okay, Ronnie, it's okay." Chelisse stroked the girl's hair. "The Fireballs have gone underground, so it's just night. Lie still — I hadta kick you pretty hard."

Ronnie stopped struggling. "Chelisse?" she asked.


"Yeah." Chelisse could feel her paws shaking, pain and relief flooding over her. "Yeah, just —" She stopped then as another sound reached her ears: the flut-flut-flut of a helicopter approaching. "Yeah," she said again. "We're gonna be all right."

"But... but the Fireballs... they —" Ronnie's voice cut off, and Chelisse heard her sigh. "Oh, Chelisse, they just said... some of 'em are already starting to have their babies, and I... I getta watch 'em! Getta make 'em burn!"

Chelisse smiled, the 'copter getting louder and louder till a searchlight snapped on in the darkness above, its beam running over the top of the landslide, finding the trail, moving down it, and suddenly bathing her in brilliance. She managed to raise an arm and gave the paw signs for "medical team needed quickly but not urgently."

Something clicked overhead, and Lorenz's voice came

down. "Roger that, EMS 7. I'll have them lower me at the top of the slide and be at your position in a moment, love: ambulances are on their way to Bonhar's Rounding, so just hold on."

Chelisse cradled Ronnie's head in her lap and let herself sag against the girl's shoulder. "No hurry, love," she muttered. "No hurry at all. Everything's gonna be just fine." 





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"Robin"

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BUS
MTA
LINE 423



"DRIP, DRIP, DROP..."

Jeffrey J. [signature] '94

AND FUNDED BY THE CHURBE FOUNDATION



DEAR VIEWERS... IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR WE ASK YOU TO HELP US OUT.



WE AT PUBLIC BROADCASTING ARE DETERMINED TO SHOW YOU QUALITY SHOWS. BUT THOSE SHOWS COST MONEY AND DONATIONS ARE DOWN FROM LAST YEAR.

SO WE'RE GOING TO TRY A LITTLE SOMETHING DIFFERENT THIS YEAR THIS IS FLUFFY THE DUCKING-



ISN'T HE CUTE?! FLUFFY IS GOING TO HELP US RAISE FUNDS FOR KEEPING QUALITY SHOWS PLAYING, LIKE MASTERPIECE THEATER.

NOTICE THERES TWO NUMBERS ON THE BOTTOM OF YOUR SCREEN



THE NUMBER ON YOUR LEFT, MY RIGHT IS NO, THE NUMBER ON THE RIGHT, MY LEFT IS YES. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

HERES HOW FLUFFY WILL HELP US.



WE'RE PUTTING FLUFFY IN THIS BLENDER

DIAL 827-3311 AND PLEDGE. FLUFFY WON'T BE BLENDED INTO DUCK MALT



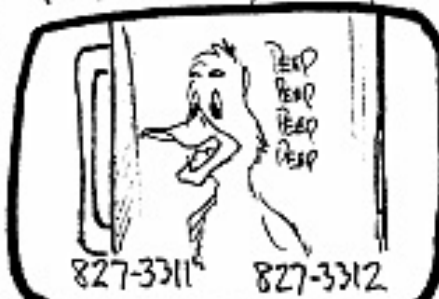
DIAL 827-3312 AND FLUFFY GOES FOR THE BIG SPIN.

AT THE END OF OUR TWO HOUR PERIOD THE MONEY RAISED MOST WILL



DECIDE FLUFFY'S FATE. REMEMBER IT'S ALL UP TO YOU TO DECIDE WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO FLUFFY.

NOW!! PHONES ARE LIGHTING UP. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR



GENEROUS RESPONSE, SO FAR DONATIONS ARE ABOUT EQUAL. 827-3311 WILL SAVE FLUFFY 827-3312 WILL PUREE HIM.

YOU'RE BUYING THIS GRAP?



HEY! I HAPPEN TO LIKE 'NOVA' THE DUCK SPINS WITH MY VOTE!

Roz Gibson here. So you think it's a lot of fun being a "same" furry artist - - fame, fortune and all that crap. Well, you're right. (except for the fortune part). It does have it's perks. Other artists will treat you like a real person instead of like shit they scrape off the bottom of their shoe. But since I'm not one to dwell on the positive side of things, I'm giving you the down side of fandom, my own ode to fans - -

Fanboys I Have Known And Loathed

THE MISANTHROPIC
VERSION



Thanks to Melody Rondeau for use of the title

I want to use Jack Salem in my story. I have this great idea where he dresses up as a woman and becomes a baby sitter and then kills and eats the kids and goes to his day job at corn dog on a stick where he interacts with my characters then



What HE wants me to say - - -

My god, I NEVER would have thought of that ideal



You can write Jack so much better than me -- I want you to take over scripting the story for me right now !!

What I want to say - -

Go on, I don't give a shit. It's not like anyone's gonna actually READ it



What really happens - -

I'll think about it ...



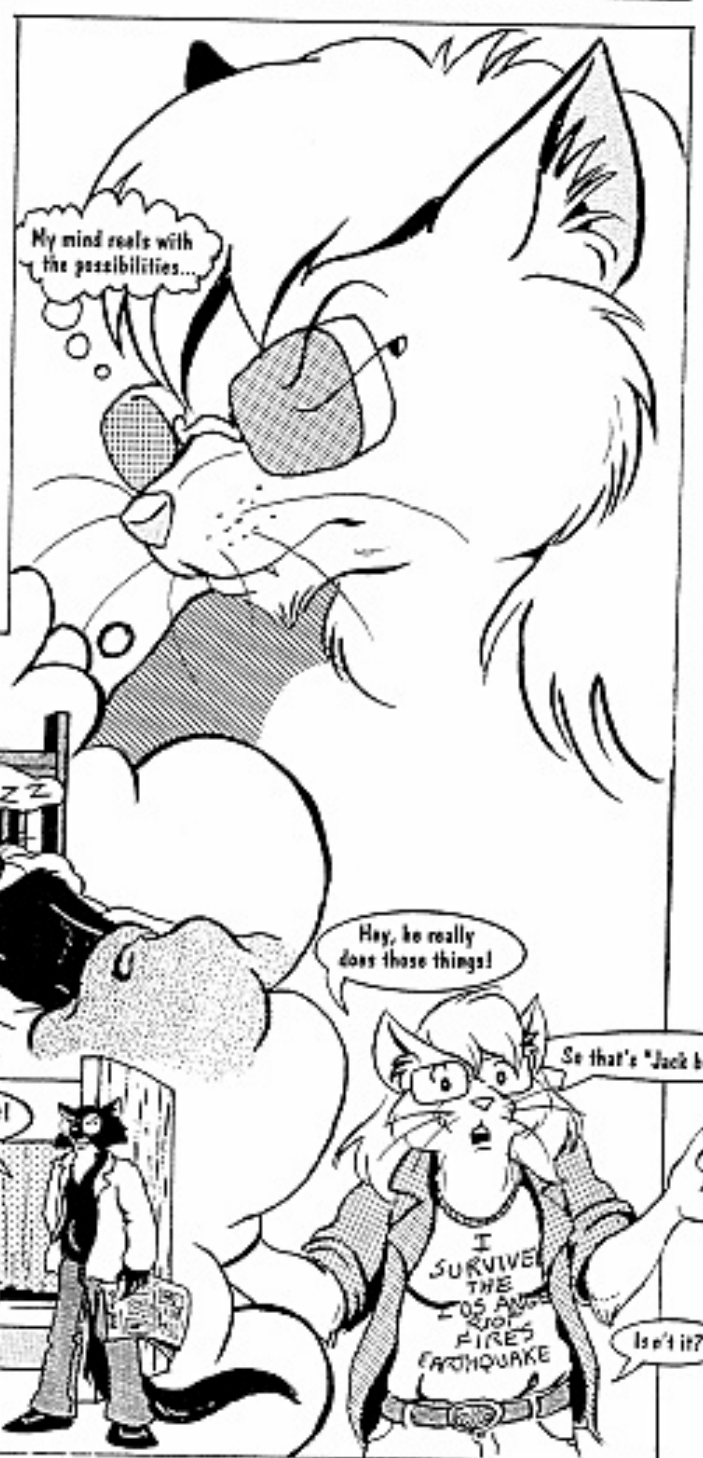
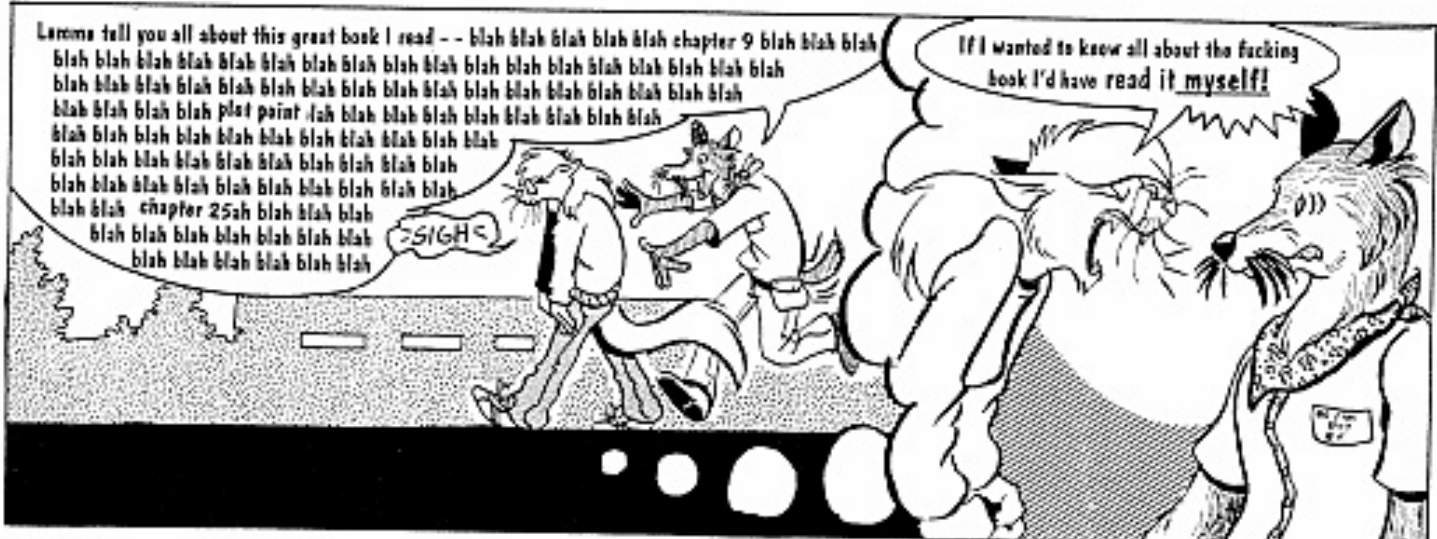
And this is just the beginning ...



Let me tell you about this terrific idea I have for a comic - -
blah blah blah and the sequel blah blah blah
blah blah blah blah chapter 9 blah
blah blah blah chapter 38
lah blah blah blah blah blah
wh blah blah blah blah
h blah blah blah
a blah blah blah
ah blah blah bl
blah blah blah bla
blah blah blah
blah blah blah
blah blah blah
ad museum
blah







Brigit...

is a 5'0" rabbit on her way to stardom in WebFed. Originally built-to-order as a porn star/sex slave, she ran away from her owners and after a year or two on a privateer finally got her big break in Evergreen's entertainment industry. A lone rabbit on a world of foxes, she's shaping up as a future star in the Mae West/Marilyn Monroe/Jayne Mansfield tradition.

Brigit has appeared in the stories *Evening of the Lepus*, *Fox, Rabbit, Action!*, and *Unfit to be Tied*, all three of which have appeared in *Yarf!*

Art Prints of this Luscious Lapine...

Profile of a Glamorbunny is a posed glamor shot in the old Hollywood tradition; Brigit is dressed in her oldest formal outfit, the lavender evening wear she took with her when she ran away. Brigit's autograph was penned by Melody Rondeau of San Jose.

Matted Laserprint, limited edition of 16 (about 10 left), \$15 US.

Boudoirbunny is a posed boudoir shot, probably for a publicity still. If she were actually lounging at home, her robe would be about ankle-length and her cigarette (which is a fictional substance, not tobacco or pot) would be in a "short" (12") plastic holder instead of the 24" "Lavender Blowgun".

Matted Photoprint, \$25 US.

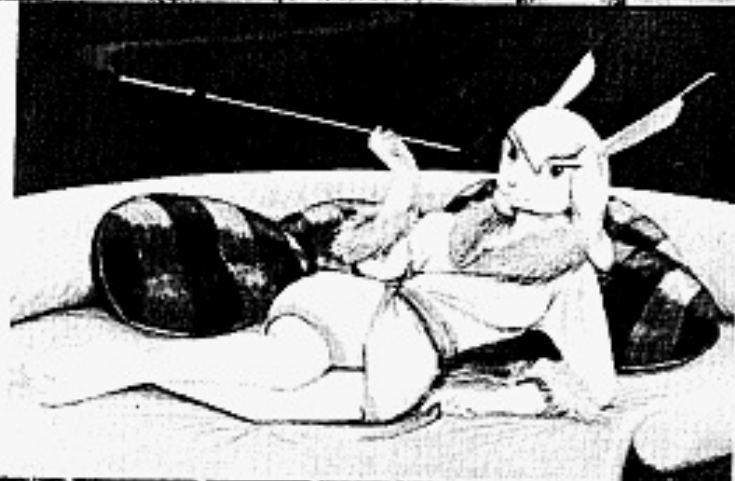
Snow Dressed in Fire is a scene from her demo video in *Fox, Rabbit, Action!* Before her "big break" at Tazral Studios, she worked the "klesch circuit", lip-synching torch songs for vulpine nightclub audiences. This was not as dangerous or sleazy as it sounds; the audiences understood she was just part of the background scenery — "look but don't touch".

Matted Photoprint, \$20.

All prints are matted to 11x14". Include \$5 P&H per order. Make checks (US dollars only) payable to Kenneth Pick.

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Jimmy Wayne '95
YEAR OF THE PIG!

YARF!

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