

Issue Six

\$4.00

YARF!

THE • JOURNAL • OF • APPLIED • ANTHROPOMORPHICS



"More Cat Toys"

Monika Livingston

Price List - 1990

Black & White Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Pencils</u>		
One Character	\$10	\$20
Two Characters	\$15	\$20
<u>Inked</u>		
One Character	\$25	\$35
Two Characters	\$30	\$40

(Larger sizes available, price quotes on request.)

Color Character Drawings

	<u>9 x 12</u>	<u>11 x 14</u>
<u>Inked, then colored in</u>		
One or Two Characters	\$45	\$55

Full Color Paintings

<u>On illustration board</u>	
9 x 12 to 11 x 14	\$75 & up
12 x 15 to 20 x 30	\$100 & up

(Book & game covers, price quotes on request)

Matting

For drawings & paintings

Up to 11 x 14	\$5 - 10
Up to 20 x 30	\$10 - 25



Name Tags

Small (2 x 3) or large (3 x 4)

Color \$15 - 45

Logos

Business & stationary

Copyright included \$75 - 200

Air-Brushed T-Shirts & Sweat Shirts

	<u>One Side</u>	<u>Two Sides</u>
<u>T-shirts</u>		
Full Image	\$35 - 45	\$45 - 55
With lettering	add: \$5 - 15	\$10 - 25
Full image on one side, lettering only on other		\$40 - 55
<u>Sweat shirts</u>		
Full Image	\$40 - 50	\$50 - 60
With lettering	add: \$5 - 15	\$10 - 25
Full image on one side, lettering only on other		\$55 - 70

(Price quotes for other wearable items on request)

NOTES

1. T shirts are American made, 50/50 blend. 100% cotton shirts are available on special request.
2. Romantic images are ok, but X-rated erotica is not accepted.
3. Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery, however, time needed for completion may vary depending upon schedule.
4. A deposit of at least 50% is required before any project is started. Balance due upon completion.
5. Mail orders are accepted: add \$3.00 for shipping & handling.

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Subscriptions

YARF! is sold on a per issue rather than a calendar basis.

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Make checks payable to "YARF!"

Please see the "Flaming Hairballs" column for news of future price changes.

Send all subscriptions and inquiries to:

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Cupertino, CA 95015-1200

Messages: (415) 433-5457

Coming up Next Issue

"A Gift of Fire" continues
Double-sized installment of
"Empires"

More "Buffalo Wings"
...and lots of other good stuff

YARF! The Journal of Applied Anthropomorphics. Issue Nr.6, August 1990. Published by YARF! P.O. Box 1200, Cupertino, CA 95015-1200. All art and stories © 1990 by the respective artist or author. All other material © 1990 by YARF! No material may be reproduced without permission except for reviews with proper credit. Prosecutors will be violated. If redness, itching, or swelling persists, discontinue use. Use only in a well-ventilated area. Insured by Smith and Wesson. What does YARF stand for, anyway?

Flaming Hairballs

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

This is the Big One.

Nearly twice normal size, packed full of goodies, and just in time for the San Diego Comic Con... amazing how a plan seems to come together. We're printing this issue a little bit early this time around so we can have a flagship for the Comic Con... hopefully, the Con will bring us more of our most precious resources: subscribers, and contributors.

Thanks are due to the folks who have worked so hard to have their material ready early. As you all know, we only run the best that we get, and this time around we had a wealth of high quality work. We'd especially like to welcome John Nunnemacher to our pages... his Buffalo Wings comic will join Empires as a regular feature in our magazine.

Speaking of Empires... what IS this, in this issue? Chris Grant is working on a double-sized installment which cannot be broken up, as well as an Empires tie-in for Mythagoras (see the ad opposite the back cover... then order a copy!). Its sheer size has kept it from making this issue. Much as we'd like to have it now, we think that it is well worth the wait for the quality of story and art we've come to expect from Chris and his co-conspirators. In the mean time, Chris has taken this opportunity to provide some background information on the Empires universe.

Another topic... it has come to our attention that there are still people who are misinformed about what YARF! is all about. It is quite exasperating to explain for the hundredth time, "no, YARF! is not a porno-zine" or "no, YARF! is not a military-zine"... particularly to folks who really should know better by now. People seem to want to pigeon-hole our little 'zine. Sorry, just 'taint so.

Once more, then, it is time to re-state our editorial policy.

YARF! is intended to be a mainstream, broad-based magazine, and therefore does not accept sexually explicit material. There is a place for everything, including the ultra-sexy stuff, but YARF! ain't it (and, as you have seen, that does not necessarily mean ours is a bland, "vanilla" magazine). Also, we must ensure that what we print breaks no laws (copyright, libel, etc.). This has not yet been a problem, and we want to keep it that way.

We do not print all of the material we receive. Our choices are made upon the quality of writing, artistic talent, or humor of a piece... also, our editorial license allows us to do just that. Edit. We want to work with artists and writers on pieces that show potential, and do our best to help our

contributors do THEIR best. It is our policy to run the finest material that we receive.

Contributors whose material we use receive free copies of the issue in which their work appears, in addition to any subscription issues they normally would receive.

Advertising is handled on a case-by-case basis; in general, any ads which appear in YARF! must bear directly upon our intended audience - the funny-animals fan. Write or call if you need more information on this subject.

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Money. Everyone's least favorite subject. You may have noticed that this issue is more costly than previous issues (subscribers are not affected by this)... makes sense, it's significantly bigger. However, due to our increasing costs, soon we will be forced to raise our general price. Therefore, as of November 1 (issue 9), our 8-issue subscription rate will be \$32.00, and our per-issue price will be \$4.00. Existing subscriptions will be honored at the current rate until they expire... back issues of #1 through #8 will cost their cover price. Life in the Big City...

Lastly, we would like to encourage you to write us with your comments. Starting with issue #7, we will be printing excerpts from letters of comment (legalese: letters of comment become the property of YARF!, and may be printed either in their entirety or in edited form...). Also, we will pass on all specific comments to the artist or author in question. Our contributors thrive on feedback, and would love to hear what you think of their work.

We've kept you from the Good Stuff long enough... onwards! ☺

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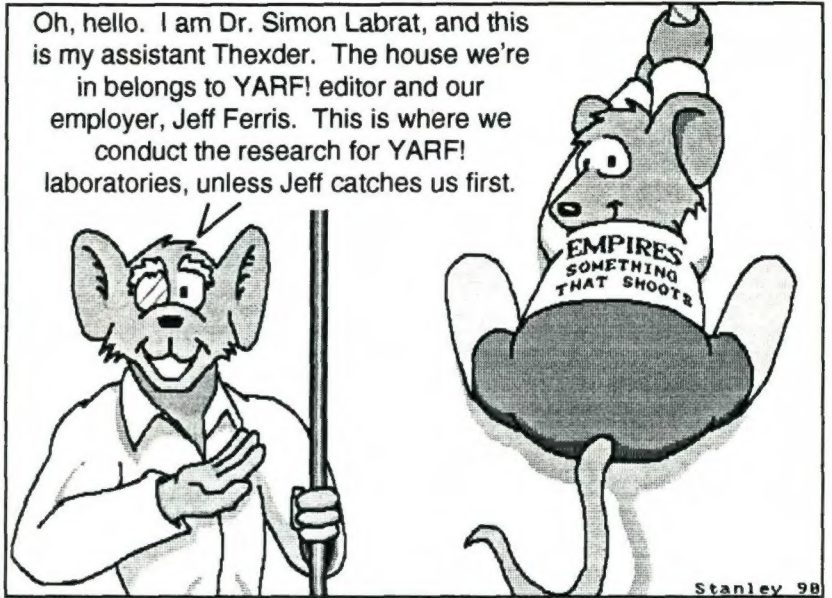
DEADLINES... DEADLINES... DEADLINES...

Can't let an issue go by without nagging about deadlines. This is no exception... here they are, cast in stone (unless you are running slightly over... in which case, contact us and we'll work something out):

- Issue 7, September 8, 1990
- Issue 8, October 20, 1990
- Issue 9 (first \$4.00 issue), December 1, 1990
- Issue 10, January 12, 1991
- Issue 11, February 23, 1991
- Issue 12, April 6, 1991

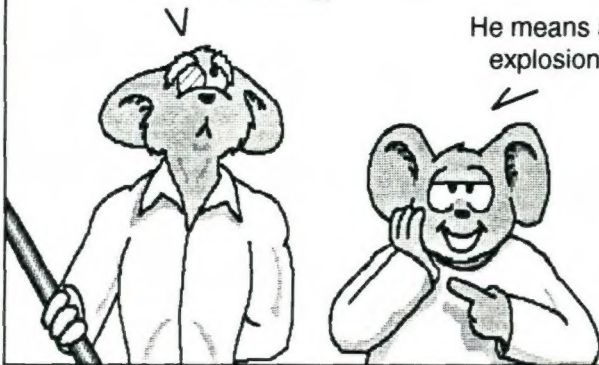


Oh, hello. I am Dr. Simon Labrat, and this is my assistant Thexder. The house we're in belongs to YARF! editor and our employer, Jeff Ferris. This is where we conduct the research for YARF! laboratories, unless Jeff catches us first.



Unfortunately, the experiment we had planned for today, "How to make anti-matter in your microwave oven", will have to be postponed. There was a slight technical difficulty, resulting in, uhmm, an uncontrolled release of energy.

He means an explosion.



It was relatively small!

Jeff's microwave is now orbiting Neptune!



But Jeff has assured us that he understands that accidents like this happen, and that we are completely forgiven. He even invited us over to the remains of his house for dinner.



Patten's Pontifications

Book Review: The Redwall Trilogy

Reviewed by Fred Patten

The Redwall Trilogy, by Brian Jacques. Illustrated by Gary Chalk.

Redwall. New York, Philomel Books, March 1987, 351 pages, \$15.95; ISBN 0-399-21424-0. New York, Avon Books, March 1990, 351 pages, \$4.50; ISBN 0-380-70827-2.

Mossflower. New York, Philomel Books, September 1988, 431 pages, \$16.95; ISBN 0-399-21549-2.

Mattimeo. New York, Philomel Books, May 1990, 448 pages, \$16.95; ISBN 0-399-21549-2.

The Redwall novels teeter between a juvenile and adult readership. The original British editions are published by Hutchinson Children's books, Ltd., but the U.S. paperback edition by Avon Books is packaged as an adult literary fantasy "in the glorious tradition of WaterShip Down". The final novel has just appeared in hardcover, and the first has just been reissued in an "inexpensive" mass-market edition.

The trilogy is actually closer to an anthropomorphized version of Tolkien. Jacques' world does not have magic, but his animal characters wear clothing, build their own houses and castles, and fight with their own sword and crossbows. Like Tolkien's Hobbits, Jacques' protagonists are peaceful British yeomen (mice, moles, squirrels, rabbits, badgers) whose community is menaced by an army of carnivorous conquerors (weasels, rats, stoats, foxes) led by a truly evil commander. The woodland community must train itself to fight for its survival. One

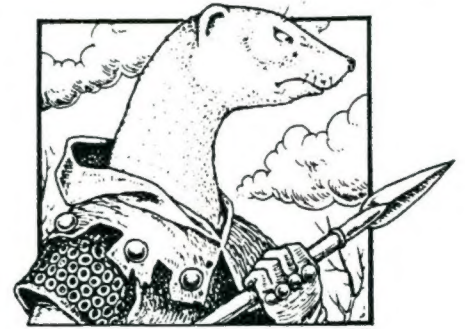


among them stands out as a warrior, and he must go on a dangerous quest while his mates try to hold the invaders back until he can return with aid.

Redwall is the story of the castle-like monastery of that name, an abbey in the forested land of Mossflower. Matthias is a young mouse in training to enter its Order of healers and scholars. However, he is more fascinated by the legend of Martin the Warrior, the brave mouse who drove away Mossflower's enemies generations ago. When Mossflower is invaded anew by the hordes of Cluny the Scourge, a rat who combines the attributes of Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, Matthias proves to have the skills of leadership to rally a resistance against them. But Matthias is convinced that he must obtain Martin's long-missing sword before he can be a true warrior, so he leaves on a quest to find it, while his friends grimly defend Redwall Abbey during the increasingly desperate siege.

Mossflower is Martin's story. It is basically Redwall with the details reversed. Martin is a young Northern barbarian mouse who wanders into Mossflower, an animal commu-

nity that had been conquered by a generation earlier by the wildcat Verdauga and his mustelid ruffians. Verdauga has just been succeeded by his sadistic daughter Tsarina, who is so murderous that she provokes the sullen Mosslanders into open revolt. Where Redwall was about the peaceful animals escaping into the woods and forming a Robin hood-style peasant army to besiege the villains in their dark castle of Kotir, but the peasants fare badly against Tsarina's trained fighters, so Martin and two companions leave on a quest to find the legendary badger warrior, Boar the Fighter, and enlist his aid.



Again the novel splits into two parallel stories, that of the heroic questers and that of the woodland animals battling to save themselves and their home.

Mattimeo features three parallel stories. Slagar the Cruel, a fox injured in the battles of Redwall, returns about a dozen mouse-years later for revenge. He kidnaps the community's children, including Matthias' son Mattimeo, and takes them to be sold into slavery to the rats of the underground kingdom of Malkariss. Matthias leads a rescue party after the slavers. It has barely left Redwall when the abbey is attacked by an army of crows, magpies, and rooks led by General Ironbeak. The novel shifts back and forth between the hardship of young Mattimeo and his playmates as they are dragged towards the evil rats' kingdom; the adventures of Matthias and his warriors as they race to overtake the slave caravan; and the battles inside Redwall as its woodland defenders are forced down floor by floor into the cellars.

The three Redwall novels bring to mind another comparison; the classical theatrical animated cartoon series such as the Road Runner and the Coyote, or Tom and Jerry. The first one is delightful, but watching three or more at the same time makes it overly obvious to what extent they are



similar to each other. All three novels have the same types of characters who react in the same ways. All three involve an ancient prophecy that must be unriddled. All three have stylistic repetitions

that, taken together, seem too unimaginative. Jacques' novels were originally published a year or more apart, but now they are all available together. you will probably enjoy any one of them, but it may be a mistake to read all three too loosely together.

Book Review: It's Raining Cats and Dogs... and Other Beastly Expressions

Reviewed by Fred Patten

It's Raining Cats and Dogs... and Other Beastly Expressions, by Christine Ammer. Illustrated by Cathy Bobak. New York, Paragon House, October 1988, 247 pages. Hardcover \$19.95; ISBN 1-55778-057-9. Trade paperback \$9.95; ISBN 1-55778-086-2.

The title tells it like it is. The Preface defines it further: "The nearly 1,000 terms in this book are arranged into nine general animal categories: cats, dogs, domestic fowl, farm animals, wild animals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, insects, and marine animals. They are roughly alphabetical within these categories, but the reader is advised to consult the complete index at the back of the book."

This is a brisk and chatty dictionary of animal-related expressions in modern English, such as "blind as a bat". Cats and dogs are popular enough to merit chapters of their own. Other animals are clumped into broader categories. For some animals, such as the horse, there are three or four pages filled with phrases. For others, such as the ostrich, there is only a single term.

The general format for each entry is to begin with a literary quotation which alludes to the animal (e.g., "Paulina her first husband made a stag." Thomas Pecke, *Parnassi Puerium* (1659)); to define the origin of the animal's name (from Latin, Old English, or whatever); to briefly describe the animal's characteristics; and finally to cite the catchphrases, with an attempt to establish their origins or at least the period to which their earliest usages have been traced. Ammer also includes some negative information; for example, she reveals that the term "crazy as a loon" does

not derive from that waterbird's maniacal-sounding cry, but the other way about. The bird was called the diver until the early 17th century, when people began to use the name loon because it sounded like a lunatic laughing. Phrases cited go back as far as the Old Testament and Aesop's fables (which Ammer dates to 579 B.C.), and are as recent as current sports slang and comic-strip references.

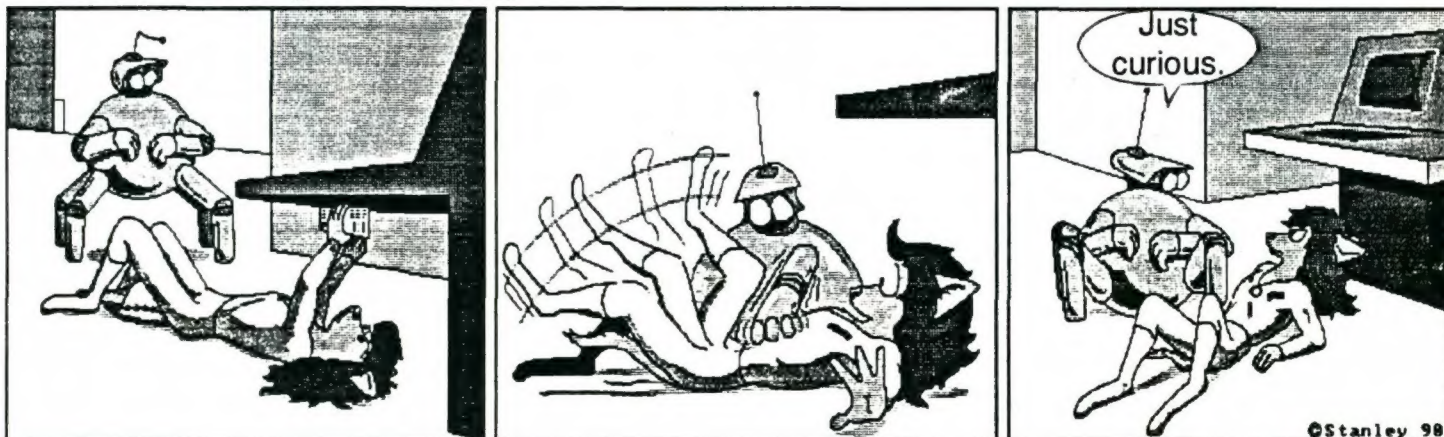
The book is designated by its publisher as "humor/reference", indicating that it is equally appropriate for pleasuringly browsing and for serious etymological study.

There is a good index, making it easy to locate each term. In addition to the expressions and definitions themselves, there is interesting information on the evolution of animal names (e.g., *hound* was the general English word for all dogs until about 1050 A.D., then *dog* replaced it and *hound* came to mean specifically a dog used for hunting), and on the invention or creation of items with animal-related names such as *hot dog* and *hobby-horses*. There are even references to Warner Brothers's "Bugs Bunny" and to Al Capp's "Skonk Works"—which call attention to the only omission that I noted; there is no mention of "a Mickey Mouse affair" as a term of disparagement. (There is also no mention of E. C. Segar's Eugene the Jeep, which popularly was the inspiration for the name of the U. S. military's well-known General Purpose vehicle, but that could be justified on the grounds that the book does not include references to fantastic or mythological animals at all.

It's Raining Cats and Dogs... is very comprehensive in its coverage. Ammer is a professional lexicographer with numerous dictionaries and similar educational books to her credit. The original edition came out in October 1988, but it is still available in bookshops. Now there is also a popular paperback edition, in Dell/Laurel's "The Intrepid Linguist Library" series, which is priced more conveniently for a fan's personal bookshelf. Note, however, that the Laurel edition does not contain the humorous cartoon illustrations of the Paragon House edition. ☹

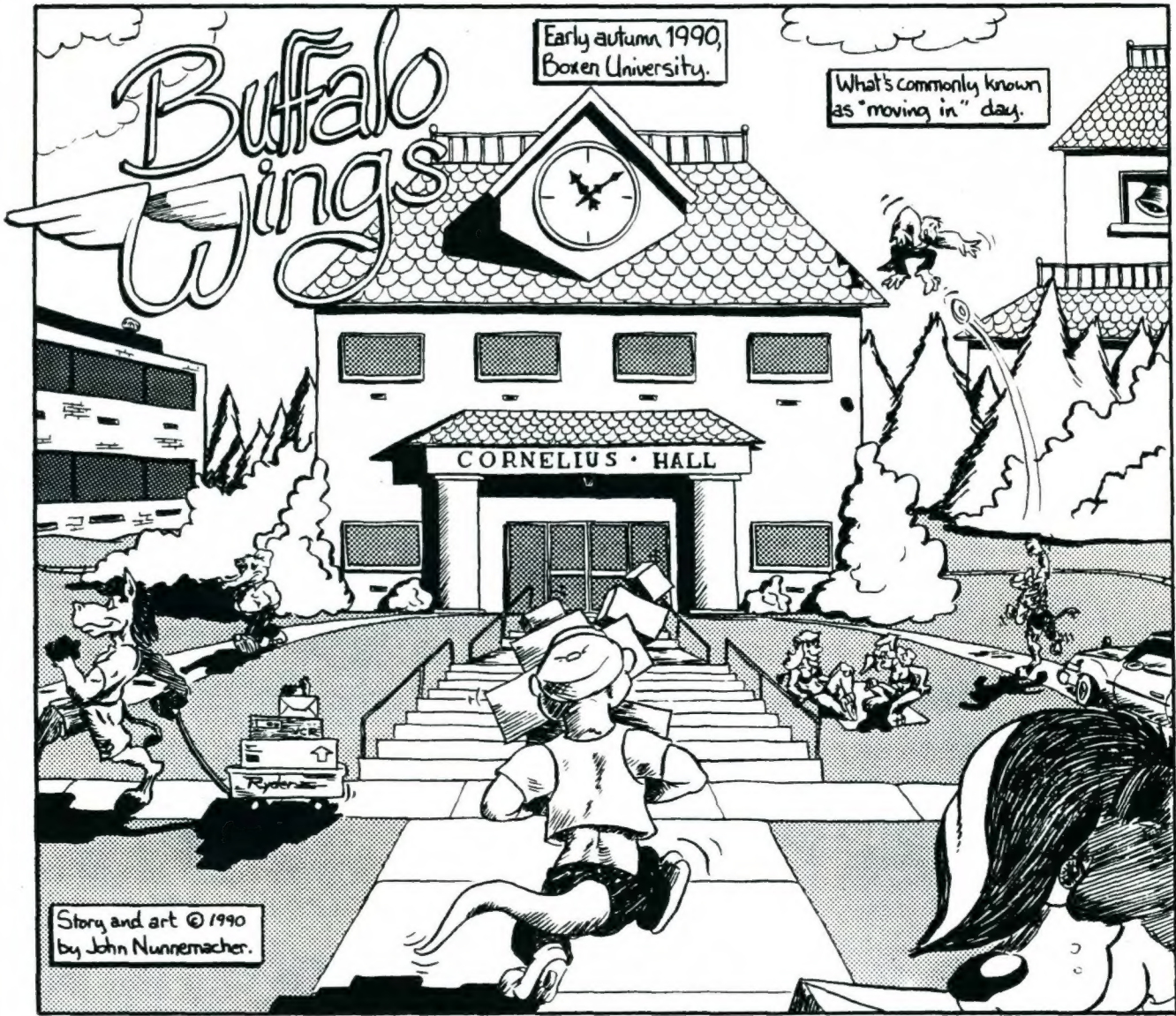
Editor's note: In issue 5, in Mr. Patten's column, we misidentified George Orwell's Animal Farm as Animal House. Oops. We would like to apologize to Mr. Patten... sorry, Fred. -ed.

Freefall by Mark Stanley





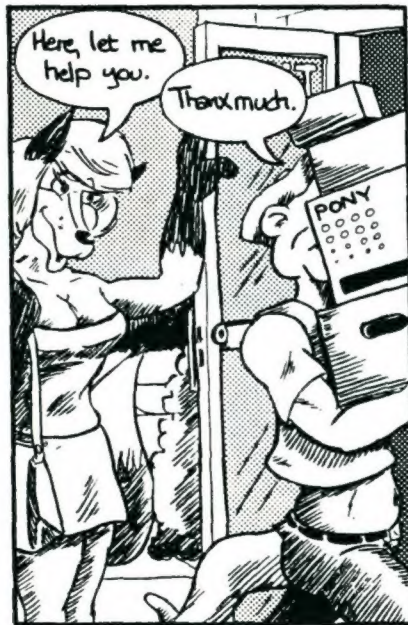
..FOR KIRSTEN...&



Story and art © 1990
by John Nunnemacher.



Son of a —



Here, let me help you.

Thank much.

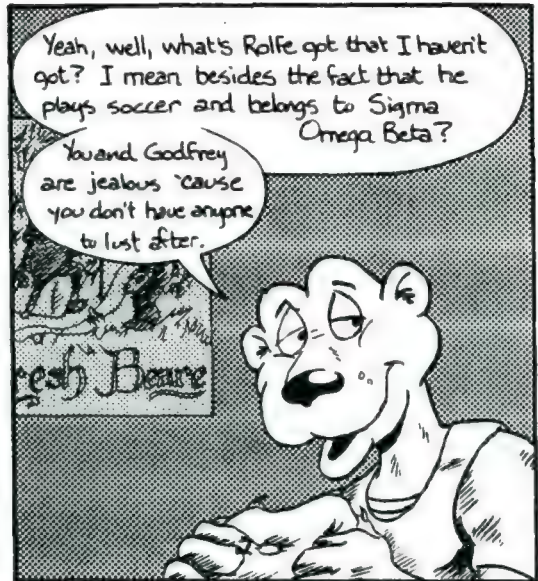


Felicia!!





Oh, cool your jets, Stuart. She turned you down last year. She's going out with that Rolfe.



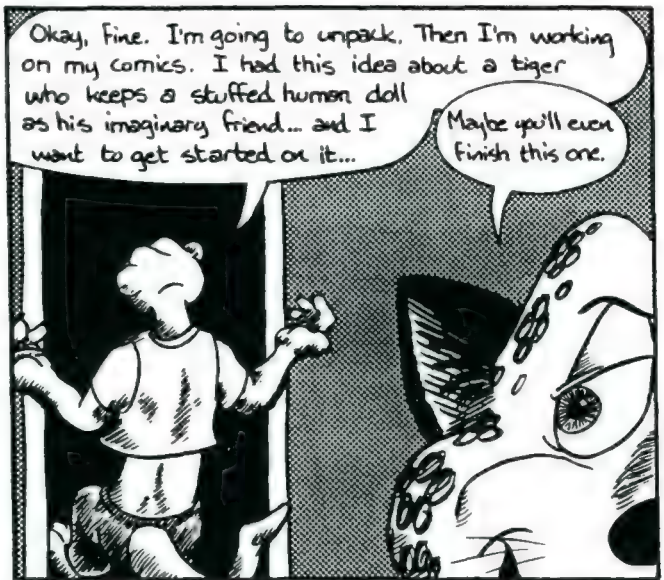
Yeah, well, what's Rolfe got that I haven't got? I mean besides the fact that he plays soccer and belongs to Sigma Omega Beta?

You and Godfrey are jealous 'cause you don't have anyone to lust after.



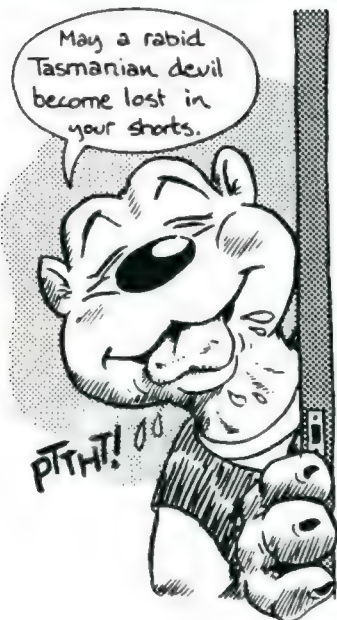
No, Bill and I are just capable of controlling our hormones. And Cliff's too heartbroken to lust right now.

Watch it, featherhead.

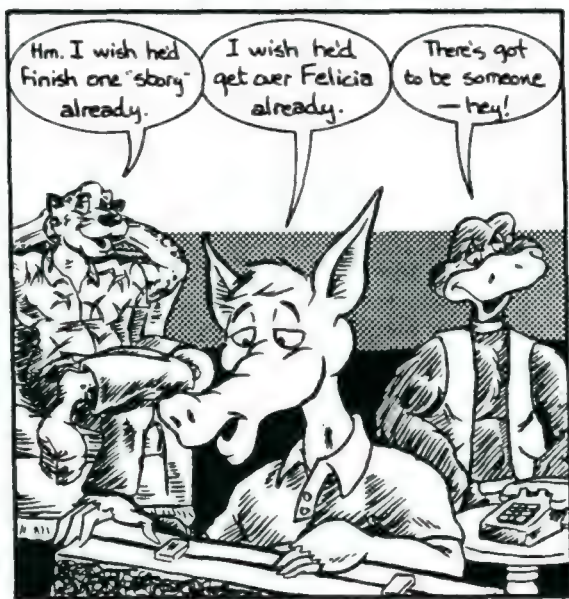


Okay, fine. I'm going to unpack. Then I'm working on my comics. I had this idea about a tiger who keeps a stuffed human doll as his imaginary friend... and I want to get started on it...

Maybe you'll even finish this one.



May a rabid Tasmanian devil become lost in your shorts.



Hm. I wish he'd finish one "story" already.

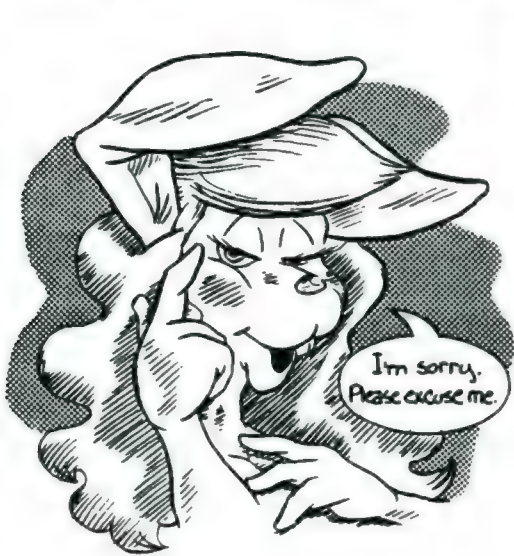
I wish he'd get over Felicia already.

There's got to be someone - hey!

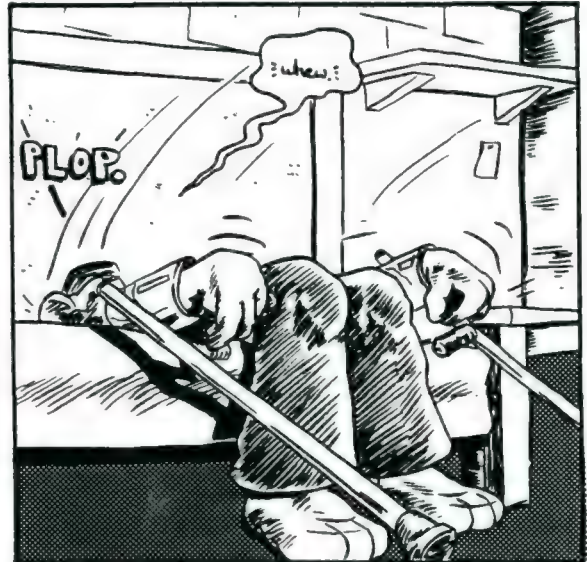


Hello, Sarah?



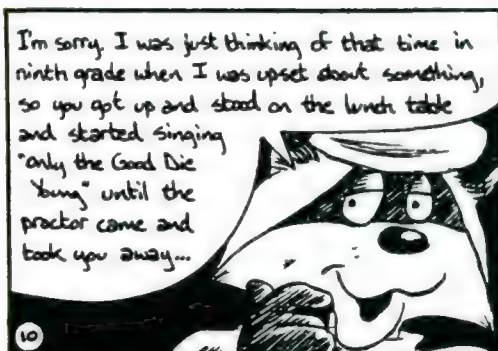














Much later that night...

Well, well, look who returns at last.

Just back from dinner and a movie. If I hadn't had so much fun, I'd have flattened your beak right now.



Well, it's nice you had a good time. Pull up a chair.

There's soda in the fridge and a Sylvester Stallion movie in the VCR. It doesn't get much better than this.



Here's hoping for one hell of a year ahead of us.

Amen.

Cheers.

CLINK

And that's it, folks... for now!

Fin



A GIFT OF FIRE, A GIFT OF BLOOD

PART TWO

by Watts Martin
Illustrated by Zjonni

*'What might have been and what been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.'*

—T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

"Until the next one, Radgers." The shop lanterns shut off on cue as Frid stepped away from the wall and held the door open.

"Right," Mika said as he walked out into the city's dim dusk brightness. It was the standard response to Frid's standard farewell. The two—like always—headed off in opposite directions: Mika northwest, Frid eastward to his home in a bland, middle-class section of the Old City. The docks lay west and slightly south; the print shop was on the northern edge of the old business district. Frid didn't do well enough to relocate northward to the newer parts, but he got by.

Dahlu arrived at his apartment precisely when expected. He hadn't planned for her to come over, but if he didn't visit her after work, she showed up within five minutes of sevenchime, some forty minutes after he walked through the door. He carefully set the bowl he was holding on the kitchen counter and answered the knock. "You don't look well," she said after they kissed.

"Thanks."

"I mean you look... not sick, but—"

"Tired?" he suggested. "I didn't get very much sleep."

"When did you get to bed?"

"Not too much after the usual time. Just didn't sleep very well. I had a rather... unusual night."

"Nightmares?"

"Kind of." (*Momm-eeeeee!* wailed the baby fox.) He headed

back towards the kitchen and resumed working with the bowl's contents. "It seems I found the bat yesterday after all."

Dahlu looked blank, then wide-eyed, almost ready to leap out of the beanbag she had settled in. "You went back to the docks last night?"

"No. She came here."

"What did you do?" The edge of her voice rose.

"We had coffee," he replied, grinning wryly at her. "And talked."

Dahlu stood up and clasped her sides with her arms, her tail banging the air wildly.

"You should have called the police."

"How?" He emptied the contents of the bowl into a square pan, spreading the thick glop outward, and started grating cheese over it. "Those of us who pay rent in the real world don't have silent summoning crystals. She was paranoid enough about being here as it is; if she thought I was going to turn her in, I'd be talking to you as a grease spot now. Besides, she didn't do anything wrong."

"Except kill someone."

"I meant by being here. And honestly, she was right—nobody would convict her of killing Jesse because nobody misses him."

"That's callous."

"So was he." He touched the firing gem on the oven; in a moment, it started glowing as the gas ignited. He held a finger on it until it glowed medium bright, then opened the door and shoved the pan inside it.

He came out of the kitchen and sat down on the floor by the bookshelf, looking up at Dahlu. "So, anyway, there wasn't that much to worry about. Relax."

"Nothing to worry about," she echoed. "She kills people. I'm sorry if that worries me." She folded her arms and turned away, refusing to acknowledge him until he stood up and rubbed her shoulders. It was a gambit he was used to, though; the response was automatic.

"I can take care of myself," he said softly, in a tone somewhere between affection and reproach.

"I know," she said, sighing. "But you don't. You're still just barely getting by. Going to the docks isn't going to help. And getting involved with people like that...."

"Going to the docks isn't going to hurt, either, is it? I think I'm getting by just fine."

"You're not going anywhere with Frid. You're hardly supporting yourself with it."

"And unless I get something better, I won't be able to support you, too?" He smiled, but she pulled away.

"That's not what I meant. I'd like to move in with you, yes, but I'd keep working."

Mika grunted noncommittally; Dahlu did work, but it was less for survival than for something to do with her mornings. Temporary work, volunteer jobs, with social clubs, offices that needed help, things she just bumped into or was recommended for by her parents' friends. "Are you staying for dinner?"

She looked surprised by the turn. "I don't know."

"It's tuna casserole."

"That's just what I'm talking about."

"Casserole?"

"No."

"Tuna?"

"No," she said, trying to remain properly exasperated. "I mean... I don't know. You're having that because it's all you can afford. It's bachelor food."

"No, bachelor food is tuna sandwiches. Anything that requires an oven is too much trouble. And I happen to *like* tuna casserole."

She laughed. When conversation resumed, it had moved on to Dahlu's day; Mika listened with only half an ear.

The inevitable question came after they had finished dinner. "When are you going to try and sell one of your sketches?"

"When I'm good enough," he sighed. "Trying now isn't going to do me much good."

"Your sketches are better than a lot of what I've seen out there."

"You haven't seen much of what's out there, then. And you know that just selling a few pictures isn't going to bring in much money, if you think it's going to let me quit the printing job."

"But it'd be a start. I'm not going to be able to support you if I move in with you."

"I'm not going to be able to support you, either. I don't see what your point is."

She was silent again, frowning delicately. Mika shook his head and picked up the plates, heading into the kitchen. He started a pot of water brewing for tea; it always seemed to calm Dahlu down, even if it couldn't make her doubts go away.

• • •

Something snapped—something tiny, but not insignificant—midway through the week when Mika left work. It had been a bad day, maybe the worst he'd had there so far; the press had broken, spewing ink across Mika's chest. He went home ignoring all the looks, and cursing Frid for buying a fast, temperamental jet-press over a normal plate machine. As soon as he scrubbed all the ink he could out of his fur, he changed clothes and headed down to Ted's.

Dahlu hadn't mentioned his encounter with the bat again; she had made it clear she didn't want him to associate with "those types." If he continued to, she didn't want to be involved. Well, fine. She didn't have to be. He didn't want the comfort she would give him, and didn't want to be encouraged—even tacitly—to quit his job. He had come all too close that afternoon, and he couldn't afford to.

Orlonda, Revar's vulpine friend, was nowhere to be seen. The bar was about half-full; the clientele weren't as nasty-looking as the night he had been followed out by Jesse, but they didn't look particularly friendly. He sat down at the bar and ordered a beer and another tasteless sandwich, then took them outside, sitting down at the edge of the closest dock. A huge, ungainly barge was moored at its end, in the process of unloading.

After the sun set, Mika went back into the bar and ordered another beer, and another, nursing them until eight chime sounded. "Midnight, people," the barkeep called. "Last round."

The cat looked around, surprised. The bar had filled up while he had been sitting there; now it was back to half-full.

By city law, alcohol could not be served between midnight and three o'clock. Mika paid his tab, threw down a too-large tip and wandered out. This time, no one followed.

He picked a direction at random and headed south along the docks, then cut east into downtown proper. Most of the stores were closed now, of course; some diners and "adult entertainment" stores would be open for a few more hours, and there were a few general stores and coffee shops that never closed. He headed towards one of the diners, looked in, and saw nothing interesting but one of the waitresses. He grinned and moved on.

A few minutes later he came to one of the coffee houses; several people he recognized as dock workers, burly humans and overmuscled canine types, filled the front. In a back booth a lone figure sat nestled between the cushion and the wall, loosely holding a mug in a fiercely taloned hand. The face wasn't quite visible, but the species was unmistakable.

She looked up as he approached, her face registering a degree of surprise it obviously wasn't used to reflecting. As he sat down across from her, she didn't quite smile, but set down her cup and leaned forward. "I would have thought you'd have had more than enough of wandering around these parts after midnight."

"It's not too bad," he said. "You get your life threatened by such interesting people."

She did smile at that, then leaned back. "Well, you've earned points from everyone else who's here just by sitting with me."

"Hmm?"

"I've worked with some of the people sitting up there for over a year. Most of them wouldn't have the guts to sit where you are now."

Mika looked up at the front of the restaurant. Incredibly, a few people were looking back at him, apparently talking about his boldness. "After a year they're still scared of you?"

"They'll carry on a conversation with me, some are friendly enough on the job. But not off it."

"What do you do?"

"I move big, heavy boxes on and off ships. It's exciting stuff."

The waitress, a young, overendowed black sable, came over to take his order. "Two crullers and a black tea," he said before she got any further than "Good evening, may I—". She scurried back behind the counter.

"You have a black spot on your hand," she observed. Mika growled, then quickly related the story of his day.

"So why don't you get a better job?"

"It pays well, and I don't really mind it. Most of the time."

She grunted. "Better than being a loader, I suppose. Still, I only have to work a few hours a night to make as much money as you do a day."

"Moving boxes pays that much?"

"Especially on the dead shift. Most people aren't going to work this late. For me, it's an afternoon job. My mornings and evenings are free to do whatever I want with."

"And what is that?"

Revar raised her eyebrows, then laughed. "Getting bolder, are we? Reading. Writing. Flying. Hunting. Like I said, anything I want. Although I need to pay attention to the 'hunting' part tonight."

The waitress reappeared with his donuts and tea. He took a sip and stared carefully at the crullers. "When's the last time you... ate?"

"Over a week ago. That's not good for us; going without for more than two weeks would probably leave me so weak I wouldn't be able to catch anything."

"You make it sound like a hawk catching a rabbit."

She sighed. "When I leave here, I'm going to find some nice, healthy person, grab her, and take a lot of blood from her by force. She won't recover for days. Mentally, it might take a lot longer. I have to do this three or four times a month every year for the rest of my life. There's no nice way to say it."

"No, I suppose not." He looked away, shivering involuntarily. "You can't take animals?"

"This is a city, kitten. Pocket-sized pets don't help us, and there aren't any warm-blooded game animals near here. I can't take off two days from work to go flying to a jungle, so, I end up being an outlaw."

"Well." She finished her coffee. "Anything else interesting?"

Mika coughed. "Dahlu's having another party two weeks from now."

"Hurrah. Unity Day? Nobody celebrates that holiday, they just use it as an excuse to get drunk." She shook her head in sarcastic disapproval. "You feel like doing any-

thing tonight?"

Mika gulped slightly, swallowing a bite of cruller the wrong way. He spluttered for a few seconds, to her obvious amusement. "Like what?"

"Don't act so suspicious, kitten. If you think you're being unfaithful to pasta-head just by talking don't let me put any pressure on you to be seen in public with one of *those* types."

"No. That's not it. And she's not a pasta-head, dammit."

"Would *she* think you were being unfaithful to her by talking with me?"

"I don't think so."

"But she doesn't want you associating with people like me, does she?" Revar had a knowing, fanged smile. "If she thinks that way, she's a pasta-head," she concluded.

"That's not fair."

"Nope," the bat agreed, getting up. "Maybe you and I don't have enough in common to find anything interesting to do together anyway. Will you at least deign to let me walk you home?"

He glared up at her and bolted down his tea, taking the remaining untouched cruller with him as he dropped money on the table.

They walked in silence until they left the downtown area. "Just because I don't live here doesn't mean I'm afraid of associating with you," Mika finally said.

"What's the connection?" she replied. "People tolerate me here because there's nowhere lower to try and kick me. What's *your* excuse?"

"For what, being here?"

"No, for being there." She indicated an ink spot with one claw. "Why don't you try selling one of your sketches?"

"Not you, too."

"Oh. A touchy subject. Hell, even if you don't think they're very good, you could still get something for them. Maybe just recognition. It's a start."

"I'm not ready yet."

"Yes, but are your sketches?" He flicked his tail in irritation, but didn't answer. "Is it better to have scruples or food?"

"You tell me."

"I don't have any scruples, kitten."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her skeptically, then noticed she was looking past him. He turned around. Just off the street, a big, gaunt human in tattered clothes slept against the side of a boarded-up building.

"No booze around him; hopefully he isn't drunk."

Mika gaped slightly. "Wait—"

"I can't wait to stumble over a better chance. He's in good health for a bum, and looks sturdy enough to get over it." As she walked towards the alley, her demeanor changed; her arms moved slightly outward and she crouched as she moved, her weight shifting forward on her feet.

"Dammit, you don't know—stop!" Mika said, moving in front of her. She looked up; her eyes were as black and unforgiving as they had been when she had first looked into his face, and her mouth was slightly open, the full length of her fangs showing. He flinched, but stood his ground.

Faster than he could follow, her hands wrapped around either side of his torso, claws digging in slightly. She straightened and extended her arms, lifting him a foot off the ground with no apparent effort, then pivoted on one foot and set him down. Without a word, she resumed her hunting stance and moved towards the man in the alley.

Perhaps some god watched over the derelict that night; he woke up when she was within ten feet of him and stared blankly at her, then sat up, blinking. By the time his face registered comprehension, the god's attention had moved elsewhere.

"No—" the man started to say, rising to one knee and swinging wildly; she deflected the blow with a wing and caught his face with the claw. As he grabbed her arm, she straddled him and pushed back hard with her other hand, forcing him against the wall; the hand on his face moved to only cover his mouth and tightened, tilting his head back to expose his sunburned neck. He struggled harder, catching Revar in the face with one hand; as he turned, he saw Mika, standing in the shadows, and reached out to him, yelling hoarsely against Revar's palm. His eyes grew wider when Mika didn't move, and his gestures for help became more frantic.

Revar pressed her head against the man's shoulder; the hand stretched towards Mika came around, beating futilely against the bat's back. Her wings closed around him, hiding his torso from Mika's view; then he jerked, his entire body convulsing for a second. The stifled scream was as loud as desperate thunder, and seemed to go on for ages,

getting weaker but more desperate with each passing minute. Then he lapsed into a quiet whimper; the sound of Revar's drinking became audible, and Mika closed his eyes, gagging.

When she finally let go of her prey, she stood over him for a second, wiping her mouth. The wounds on his neck were not the two neat holes from children's vampire stories; they were big, diagonal gashes from her upper canines and a ragged slash from her lower teeth. The blood was only a rivulet now, flowing freely down his neck into his shirt. The human made no move to stop it, only drawing his legs to him and hugging them with both arms, staring up her. Then he whispered something Mika couldn't hear; Revar shook her head negatively and held out a bandage. He stared at it blankly, but didn't move. She dropped it in his lap and walked back to where Mika stood, still paralyzed; she glanced at him and continued down the street.

The man remained in the fetal position, the bandage draped uselessly over his leg, as Mika turned and caught up with Revar.

It took him almost five minutes to break the silence. "What did he say?"

She didn't look over at him. "He asked if he was going to die."

"You could have...."

"Could have what?" she said, whirling on him; he felt a sudden, sharp anger from her, and stepped back involuntarily. "Made it easier for him? How?"

"You could have... apologized."

"I'm not sorry," she hissed. "If there was an easier way to do that, I would, but there isn't. I have to take blood from living creatures and in a city, other sapient beings are the easiest prey." Her voice dropped a register. "I stopped apologizing years ago. A bat that sympathizes with her victims is a dead bat."

"Aren't you afraid he'll recognize you later?"

"You're right. I should go back and kill him." She walked on before he could respond; when he had caught up, she spoke again. "I know that's not what you meant. Yes, I am. Most people on the docks won't care; they know I have to live. The police will look the other way when they can, and so far nobody's pressed the point. But if I get caught, I'm dead."

They had crossed into the Northwestern District, and Mika's building was visible ahead. They walked on for another minute, then Revar turned towards the cat. "I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have let you see that."

"It's not your fault," he said, looking away. "I can't blame you for being what you are."

She touched his hand briefly, then crouched down, knees folded, wings extended, claws resting on the ground. "I'll see you later." She raised her arms, wingtips rising above Mika's head, then leaped up, bringing her wings down hard as she moved. The arc of her jump took her feet to his eye level; as she reached it, her wings had already come up and were pushing down again. Her feet moved down, coming out of the jump, then her legs straightened and she moved up again, like she had jumped a second time starting from midair. She kept flapping, seeming to balance precariously in the air for a full second as her wings moved faster than he thought possible. On the sixth flap it was as if a tether had been cut; she soared into the sky, and was far above the roof of his building in a heartbeat. She circled higher, then dipped one wing as if in farewell and flew away southward, a wiry dark shadow slicing between the ground and the stars.

"You should hold the lead more loosely. Move from the shoulder, not the wrist."

Mika glanced up at the bat in irritation. "This is why I don't draw with an audience."

"I wouldn't be making you do this if you would show me anything else you've drawn." Revar sat on the windowsill of Mika's flat, her back against one side and her right foot against the other, sharp toeclaws digging into the soft wood frame, her left leg hanging over the side, foot barely resting on the floor. Her right arm was stretched over her head, hand on the top of the window, with her wing partly unfolded, blocking most of the view.

Mika was in a beanbag facing her posed figure, a sketchpad on his lap and a lead stick held—incorrectly, according to his model—in his right hand. "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, except maybe Dahlu."

"Of course not. She gets her way by sex, and I get mine by being a scary bitch."

"Hold still."

He drew for a few more minutes, then turned away, still sketching.

"Trying to do it from memory?"

"I have the construction lines and a basic rough done; all I really have to do now is clean it up a bit."

She hopped down from the windowsill and crossed over to him, staring down over his shoulder. "I don't have any

clothes."

"I have to get the figure first. And considering the outfit you have on would barely qualify as a bathing suit in some places, I'll only have to add three or four lines to detail it."

"This isn't a bathing suit."

"Excuse me. Lingerie."

She made a *hmp* noise. "Sue me if I don't like formal clothes. I wouldn't be wearing any at all if I could get away with it. These don't get in the way when I'm flying or fighting."

"And you enjoy the looks it gets you."

"Damn straight. Half the assholes I work with look like they want to jump me every time I bend over or lift something over my head."

"Lift something...?"

She picked up a chair and demonstrated, bending back slightly. Her chest pressed against what little fabric her top possessed, outlining her breasts in explicit detail.

He shook his head, forcing back any comments on her body (they weren't all that big, but they *were* impressive). "You might not be as likely to tease big male chauvinists if you didn't know they were already scared of you."

"If there's nothing I can do about fear, I might as well have a little fun with it. Are you finished yet?"

"Hold on a bit." He sketched furiously, then produced a gum eraser and started dabbing at the paper carefully.

"Oh, give me that," she said, pushing the eraser aside. "Do I really look like that?"

"That's as close as I can get."

"That's not what I mean. You made me prettier than I am."

"I don't know if I'd call you pretty. No offense." For the first time, it occurred to him that he might, indeed, call her pretty; he shook his head, feeling crazily disoriented.

"I was thinking about bat standards, kitten, but even so...." She studied it a few minutes more, then moved away, pushing it into his lap. "So finish cleaning it up, ink it and sell it."

"It's not that simple."

"Sure it is. You have nothing to lose but pride." He glared at her.

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A faint knock sounded on the door. "Uh-oh," Mika said. "I hadn't realized it was this late."

"Late? Being up this early is unholy, kitten. But unless you stop hanging around me, we're bound to meet sooner or later. Might as well be now."

Mika crossed to the door and opened it. Dahlu kissed him in her usual way; as she let go of him and stepped inside, she saw the bat.

"Hello," Revar said, standing and smiling (relieving Mika of a nagging fear that she would say *you must be Pastahead!* when she finally met Dahlu). The cat said nothing, staring at the bat open-mouthed. Revar's clothes *did* look like a cross between a bathing suit and lingerie; Mika winced inside. At least they weren't black lace.

"That's her?" she said, turning towards Mika, who nodded. "What's she doing here?" she said.

"I take it I don't get a kiss," Revar said, sitting down on the floor and folding her arms. "What she's doing here is getting sketched."

Dahlu looked at the bat, fear in her eyes. Revar snorted ungraciously. "Come on, girl," she said. "Are you too scared of me to even say hello?"

"I—" Dahlu blinked. "I just didn't... expect anyone to be here."

"Especially me. Yes, I'm sure of it. Look, I'll answer before you ask. I don't have any designs on Mika, either as a lover or as dinner. And you don't have to worry about me doing anything to you, either."

Dahlu smiled uncertainly, stepping into the room as if she expected the carpet to burst into flames.

"Well," Mika said loudly, causing Dahlu to jump, "now that you've been so cordially introduced, I'll start dinner."

"Well, then. I should be going," Revar said, rising to her feet. Mika stopped on his way to the kitchen.

"What? Wait. You were invited."

"Am I?" Dahlu said.

"Of course—"

Revar shook her head and flexed her wings, making Dahlu jump again. "Don't want to put a strain on your food supply, kitten. Some other time. Maybe I'll see you later tonight." She stepped outside, closing the door softly behind her.

Dahlu sat down at the table, staring into space while Mika started preparing food.

"She was really here as a model?" she finally asked.

"Yes." He showed her the sketch. She looked at it, looked at him, and looked back at the sketch again, pursing her lips. "She's quite a model."

"I suppose so."

"And that's all she was here for?"

"She was also here as a friend. A man can be friends with a woman without being her lover."

"I know that," she said, sighing. "So you've been seeing her at night?"

"Just a few times. That's when she's up. This is the earliest I've ever seen her out." Dahlu was silent. "Look, I think I'm friends with her. I spend time with the few friends I have."

"I'm not sure that's wise in this case."

"Just because she doesn't have anything in common with you doesn't make her a bad person."

"That's not the problem. A murderer you like is still a murderer."

"She doesn't normally kill people. Jesse's gang—"

"You told me that." She let out a long, shuddering breath. "I just don't think you should be that... close to her."

"Physically, or as a friend?"

"Both."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," he said.

She looked up, surprise tinged with hurt crossing her face. "I'm your lover, Mika. What I think doesn't count?"

"I'm your lover, too. Does that mean I tell you who your friends are?"

Her lower lip trembled. "That's not what I meant."

"Yes, it is. It's not what you said, but it is what you meant. I'm sorry you two don't like each other. But you're less willing to give her a chance than she's willing to give you one."

"If you really wanted me to stop seeing someone, especially someone who was just an acquaintance, I care enough for you that I'd listen."

"When that thought comes to me—and it has, for people you know less well than I know Revar—I've cared enough for you not to ask."

She was silent, looking down. "How well do you know Revar?" she finally asked.

He swore. "I already told you—"

"I don't mean whether or not you're sleeping with her. You said you weren't, and for now I believe you. I meant, how well do you know her?"

"In some ways, better than some people I've known for much longer."

Dahlu stared at him, her lip still trembling, then suddenly stood up. "I really don't think I should stay for dinner tonight."

"Damn," he said, coming towards her. "You don't have to—"

"No," she said, "I don't. But even if you're right—and you probably are—I just need to do a little thinking by myself. Okay?"

He stared at her for a few minutes, then nodded, turning away. "She's just a friend, Dahlu. She's not another you, but she's not like anyone else I've known, either."

"Well. Would you want to come for dinner tomorrow, maybe?"

He turned back towards her, but she was gone. He stared at the closed door a moment longer, then went back into the kitchen, put away all of the food, and stared at the wall as the light from the window faded.

• • •

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked Revar for the second time.

"No," she said, grabbing the lock in one hand and squeezing. It popped open; she unhooked it and swung the gate open silently. "After you."

"How the hell did you get that strong?"

"Because I can fly, kitten. My arms have to support my wings, and they have to support me."

At sunset, the park had been cleaned and locked for the night. The empty grounds were filled with muted shades of dark green, insect sounds, the faint smell of wood and flowers. The moon shone brightly enough to illuminate the paved path down the garden's center as they strolled

along. It was the largest park in the city, east of the downtown area and spanning tens of city blocks in both directions. "Don't you worry about getting caught doing this sort of thing?"

"I can't get caught."

"That's a bit overconfident, isn't it?"

"No, I mean I can't afford to get caught. It'd kill me." Her tone was serious; he looked at her inquiringly. "All prisoners get the same food, and most can't—or won't—make allowances for bats. Unless it's a simple in-one-day, out-the-next charge, the courts are lucky to take two weeks between the arrest date and the trial."

"And by that time, you might really be dead." She nodded, and they walked on, passing by several smaller, unpaved paths leading across the park in all directions.

"Do you think your fluffball is going to forgive you for not hating me?"

"Yes. But it's going to take some time," he said. "She wasn't very happy when she left tonight."

"Did she see your sketch?"

"Yes. Seeing a sketch drawn by her lover of a woman she thinks of as her rival, wearing as little as you are, didn't make her feel any better."

"No, but seeing how good it is should have."

"It wasn't that good."

"It was good enough to sell." He was silent. "You do want to be an artist, don't you?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "It's not the sort of thing that's easy to make a living at." They had reached the park's center; a pool of water blocked their path, a dragon-shaped fountain carved out of blue marble spraying water from its mouth high into the air. Revar sat down on the edge of the pool and motioned Mika down beside her.

"No. That's what you *have* to make a living at," she said. "Anything else is just a job. Loading—that's just a job. I don't know what my living is yet; you're luckier than I am. You've already found yours."

"I can't just drop everything and do what I want because I want to."

"You should always do what you want, kitten."

"That's not true." He shook his head vigorously. "Sometimes you can't do what you want. And think about what

things would be like if everybody did do what they wanted. What if I wanted to go out and rape people? What if my idea of fun was setting fire to buildings?"

"Oh, that line. Follow your responsibilities instead of following your heart." She sighed. "I went to church, too, Mika. One of the great unspoken teachings was that your morals are at war with your emotions. If you want to do what's right, you have to treat emotions like tricks sent by evil spirits to confound the righteous."

"If there's anything I've learned since then, it's that that's a load of shit." She trailed one claw in the water, then hit the surface of it, splashing both of them and sending out waves of ripples. "Answer me this. Is your idea of fun raping small children?"

"No," he said. "But—"

"What sort of person does think raping small children is fun?"

"I don't know."

"A normal person?"

"No."

"No. A madman. So the 'what if you enjoy it' line is a stupid challenge, isn't it? You can't live your life by making the choices that would be least dangerous if you were a maniac. It's a slow death, and a pretty damn boring one, too."

He watched the ripples smooth out and disappear. "So what if I don't know what I want?"

"Find out, kitten. That's so obvious, it's painful."

"I can't make money by sketching."

"Can you make a life by it?"

"You mean be happy?" He laughed. "I've heard this one before. Tell me this: are you happy?"

"Not all the time, no. But when I get the chance to be happy, I take it. I started with handicaps you'll never have; the advantages I got don't endear me to people. I'm not sure if I can make a living in a city like this, or anywhere else. Eventually I'll move on—maybe to Raneadhros. I don't know what I'll do there. But I'll still take happiness over security."

"That's just living day-to-day. What about your future?"

"What about yours? A lot of people can't understand my life. Your fluffball won't ever understand it. And it'll

probably be a pretty short life, too. But when I die, I can say that as much as I could, I lived my life the way I wanted to. How many people twice my age can say that?"

"I don't know." He stared into the water. "You don't seem too happy most of the time."

"Don't be so quick with that, kitten. Recently, I've been pretty happy." She smiled; after a moment, he smiled back, a little sheepishly.

"Thanks. I think."

"No. Thank you," she said softly, looking away. Mika watched her, unsure of himself; suddenly she stood up, extended her wings, and leaped onto the body of the dragon.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said, standing up.

She peered around the side of the dragon, then stuck her hand down its mouth. The water spurted out in a ragged arc. "Abusing public property." She moved her hand slightly, and the water shot towards Mika. He yelped and jumped out of the way. "I'm stuck," she yelled after trying to remove her hand.

"Serves you right."

She yanked on her arm, but the dragon refused to let go. "You asked for it," she told the statue, and wrapped her legs around the dragon's side, reaching under its jaw with her free hand. She gripped the side of its mouth with her claws, digging the thumb into its base with a bone-wrenching scrape, and pulled violently. The jaw snapped off; when she extricated herself and hopped down, the fountain's stream had acquired a sharp cant downward to the right, barely landing in the pool. "Think anyone will notice?"

He shook his head. "Remind me never to get punched by you." She grinned, throwing the dragon's jaw into the pool with a loud splash.

"You should come to Dahlu's party," he said after a moment.

She laughed. "Somehow I don't think she'd approve."

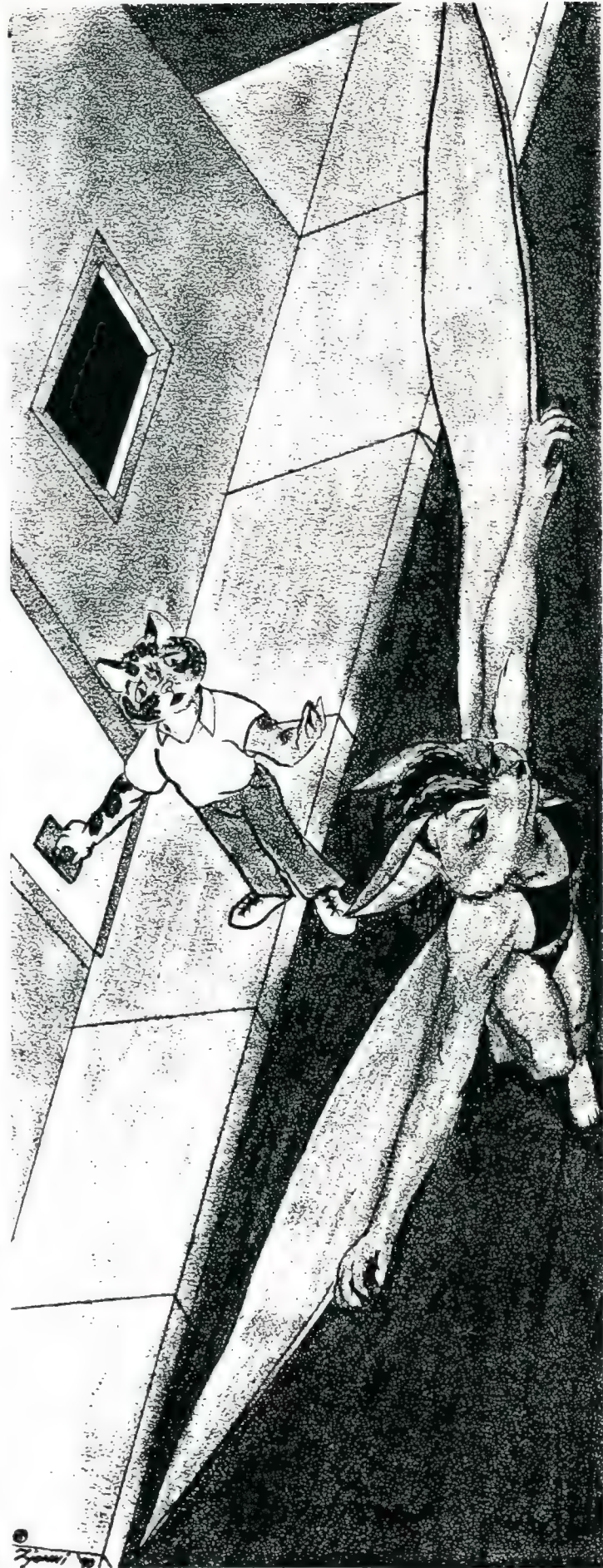
"Well, think about it. Even if you two are never going to be friends, it'd be nice if you didn't out-and-out hate each other."

"I don't hate her."

"You keep calling her pasta-head."

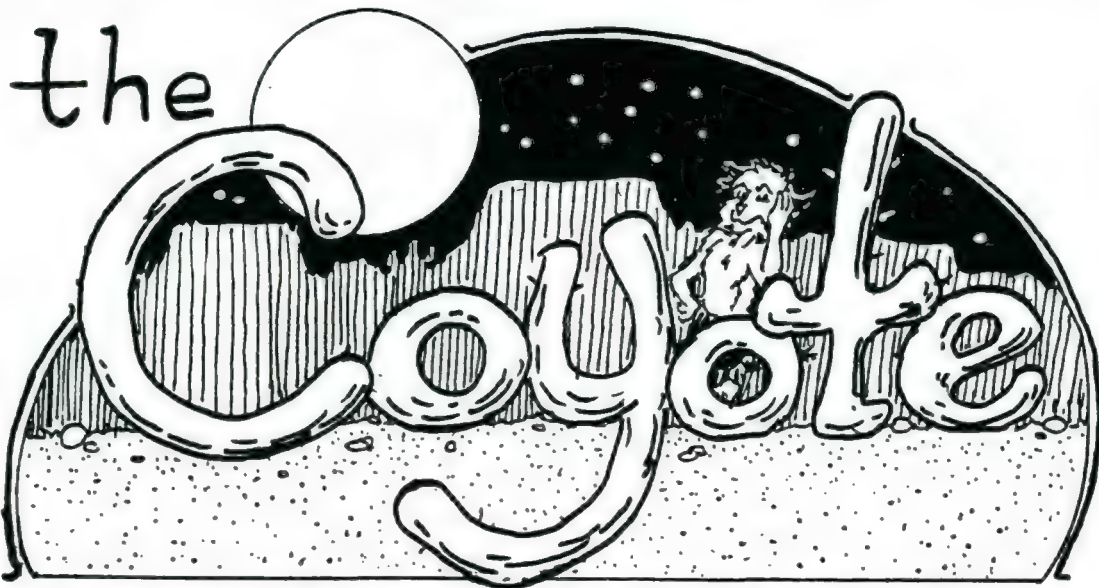
"That doesn't mean I hate her. I just don't respect her."

He laughed in spite of himself. When they left, they walked out of the park hand-in-hand.



to be continued



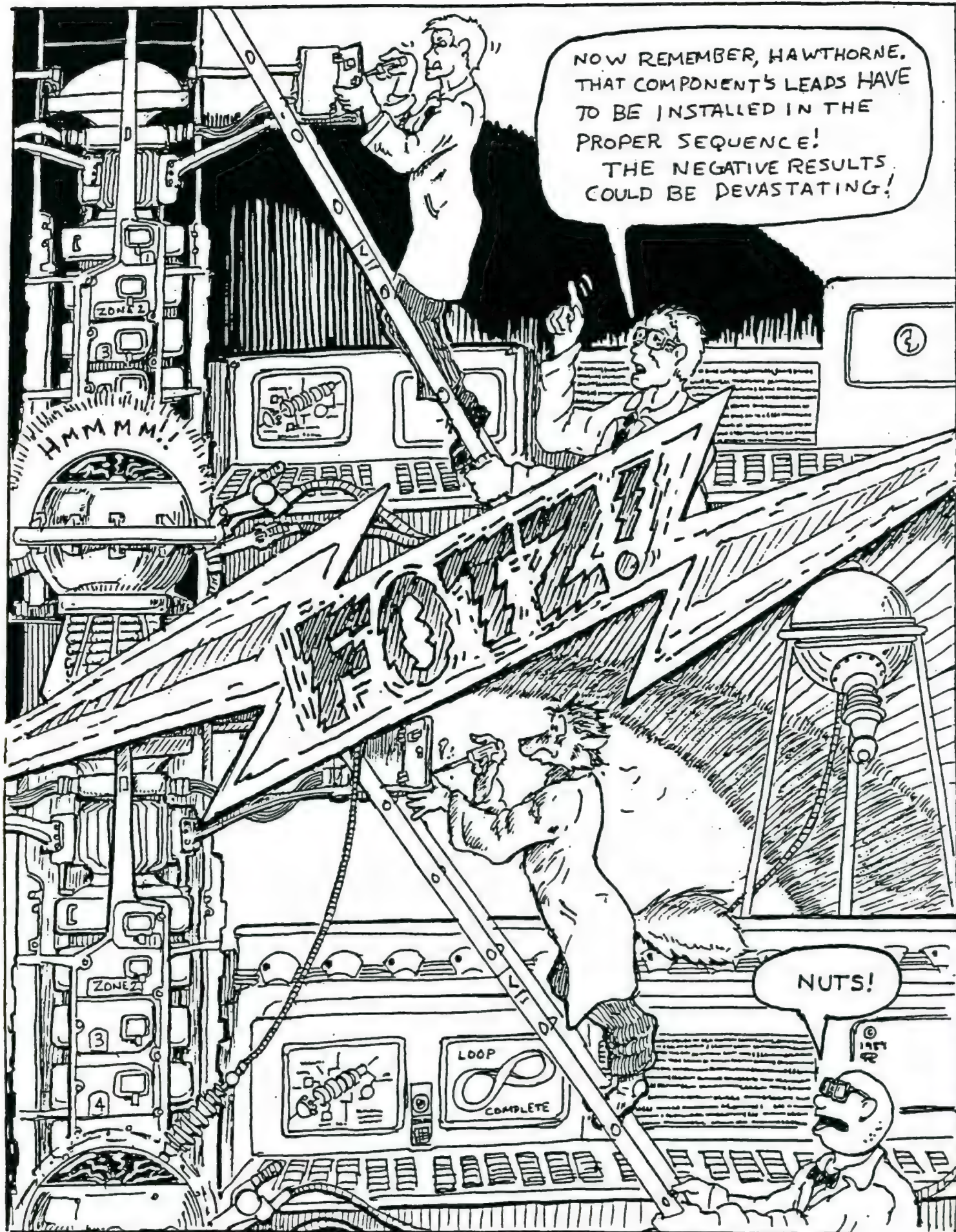


CONTRAPTION

BASED ON THE "GIFTED ONES" STORIES
of Rodford E. Smith

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY,
Roy D. Pounds II





ONE WEEK LATER...

...SO I TWEAKED THE WRONG WIRE! I STILL DON'T THINK IT WAS ANY REASON FOR THEM TO FIRE ME!



THE PAST WEEK ALONE HAS BEEN HELL ENOUGH! I MEAN, I HAD TO LEARN HOW TO WALK ALL OVER AGAIN 'CAUSE OF THESE BACKWARDS LEGS OF MINE... AND I HAD TO GET USED TO ALL THIS FUR!

- DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT A PAIN WHISKERS CAN BE?



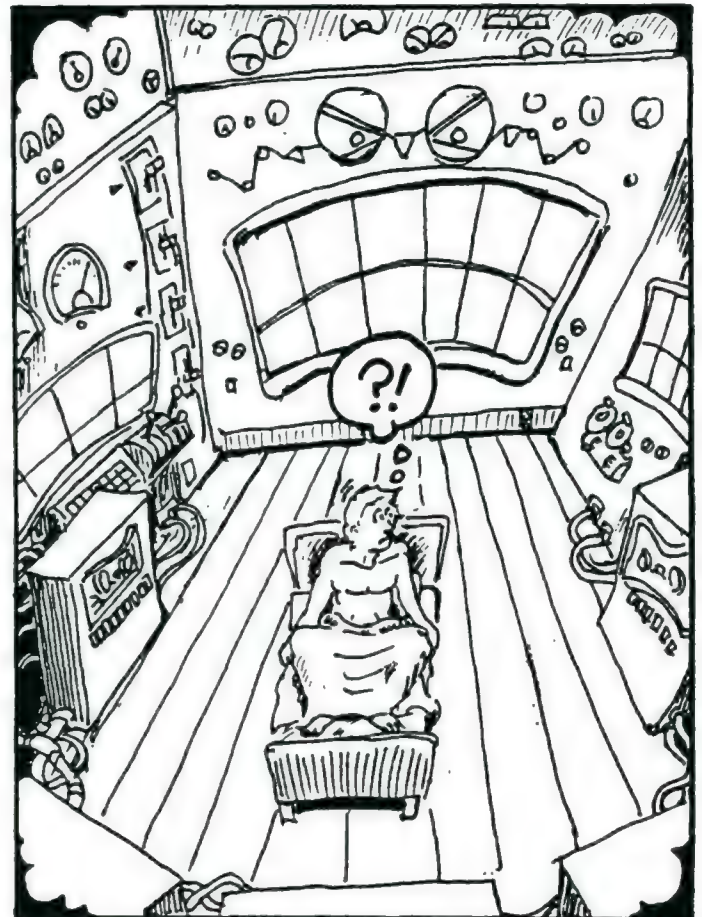
...THEY STARTED CALLING ME "WILY COYOTE" AT WORK, AND THEY ACTED AS IF I WAS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR "THE ACCIDENT." I MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO GET ANOTHER JOB 'CAUSE I'M SO "DIFFERENT." WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?



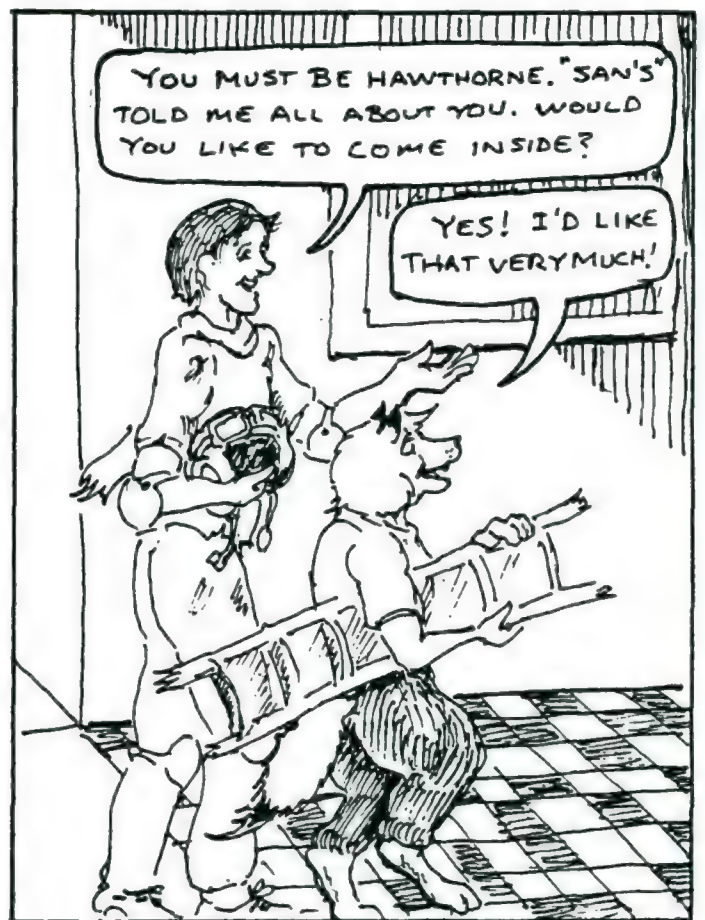
- JUST LEARN HOW TO "MAKE DO" PAL!













1976 Ray D. Pounds II



HOME COOKIN'

by Waverly Pierre III

Illustrated by Ken Pick

WebFed Universe and its inhabitants created by Kurt Miller and chronicled by Ken Pick

"Christopher." The familiar voice rang out from across the room.

Chris Watson looked up from the bench that he was lying on and across to the entrance of the gymnasium's weight room. His eyes lit on the familiar figure framed in the open doorway and a mixed look of mild annoyance and amusement crossed his face. The voice, like the figure, definitely belonged to Anielia Haiutai, his friend's sister and favorite pest.

He pushed the set of weights that he had been working on back into place on their stand and sat up, breathing heavily. 140 Kilos in Evergreen gravity was a lot, even for him. He wiped the sweat from his brow and watched as she sauntered over, the Thalendri equivalent of a smile on her Fox-muzzled face. He took note of several other males, both Human and Thalendri, who were also watching her obviously appreciating the view that she was presenting. He could hardly fault them; Anielia was something to be appreciated.

Anielia would have been considered voluptuous by Thalendri standards and more than adequate by human standards, with a body somewhat fuller than average amongst the elven-slim Thalendri. Anielia was a relatively tall vixen, 173 centimeters — only 7.5 centimeters shorter than Chris — with soft gray fur except for a creamy white chest and tail-tip, and a face which sported an unusual black mask-like expanse of fur more reminiscent of a raccoon than a fox. Said mask framed mischievously brown eyes that were locked directly on him as she came to a slow halt in front of him.

"Hello, Christopher," she said, sporting her too-innocent smile as she stood there, "what do you think?"

As she asked this, she did a slow pirouette, giving Christopher an all-around view of her latest fashion affectation. At first he mistook it for a peculiar type of Thalendri skirt, since that was what he was most used to seeing the vixens on campus wearing. He knew though it was just as likely that a fashion fad could sweep the campus at any time and turn up some truly odd combinations from the flamboyant Thalendri. This time was certainly no exception, at least for Anielia. A second, closer look showed his first impression to be completely off the mark. Rather than the bare-butt Thalendri style skirt Chris was accustomed to, Anielia was actually wearing a knee-length pleated skirt strongly reminiscent of

a kilt with a tail slit cut in back. It appeared to be a faithful replica of a Highlands kilt, except that no self-respecting Scotsman would be caught dead in the tartan Anielia currently sported: golden yellow with purple trim and just a splash of pink to make it stand out from the crowd. The upper portion of her body was clothed in a waist-hugging, silk-like blouse, with a deeply-cut v-neck that went well past her breasts to show copious amounts of furry cleavage. Chris's gaze would have hung on the cleavage more, but his eyes were having serious trouble with the searing clash of lime-green Parasilk against white chest fur. The best he could do was blink his eyes in awe at the sight.

"So, what do you think?" Anielia asked again, this time somewhat impatiently.

"I think I'm going blind." Christopher said, blinking his eyes several times rapidly.

"Oh, really, and is that all you can think?" Anie demanded with just a trace of annoyance edging her voice.

"Well, no, actually I was thinking a number of other things, but self-preservation prevents me from saying them out loud.

"Sensible attitude," Anie muttered as she plopped herself down on the bench next to Christopher. She looked around the large circular room curiously, her eyes taking quick note of the various devices, both manually operated and cyber enhanced, in use, supposedly for exercise. She thought self-inflicted torture was a better description, "Aleks said I would find you here." She continued after a moment. "He didn't say why though. I'm not sure if he understands it himself; I certainly don't."

The young vixen looked around a second time, concentrating on the individuals using the 'torture devices'. It was mostly humans, male and female, a number of whom she had at least a passing acquaintance with. Most wore shorts and t-shirts; all were busily grunting, heaving, and sweating in a mysterious ritual that totally escaped her. What was truly astounding, however, were the five Thalendri also busily torturing themselves, most with the help of human partners. These bizarre images caused Anie to shake her head in wonderment at the stranger lifestyles one sometimes encountered on campus.

She turned her attention back to Christopher, her mouth opened to form a question, when she suddenly stopped and looked at him, really looked at him, very carefully.

Unlike the other humans, his upper body was completely bare; his light-brown skin — darker than most Freehold Humans — shone in the light with a thin coat of sweat. She allowed her eyes to rove over his unclothed body in open curiosity. It was the first time she had ever seen a human so...naked before, and frankly, it was a fascinating sight.

His light brown, almond-shaped eyes matched his skin. A thick mat of dark black hair slightly curled at the ends, framed his triangularly sharp features, softening them considerably. A not unattractive package, even by Thalendri standards. But what was truly fascinating about the package, and the thing that most caught her attention, was the look and shape of the body.

She had seen pictures of nude humans before, mostly in medical texts, and of course she did associate with them on a regular basis. Most of the humans she had seen were fully clothed though, and the general shape of the people underneath never suggested anything like what Christopher had. His body almost appeared sculpted, with the muscle structure lean and well defined. From what she saw, it was probably possible to identify major muscle groups just by tracing the contours of his body. The light sheen of sweat added an interesting and, surprisingly, attractive highlight to his looks, one enhanced even more by the yellow-white light reflecting off the almost shiny skin. It had the look of sculpted, colored crystal.

"Taking liberties with my body?" Christopher asked amusedly.

Anie started at Christopher's words, her eyes dropping guiltily down to her outstretched middle finger, the bare underside of which glistened with a thin film of water.

Christopher watched in barely suppressed amusement as Anie glanced at the thin line on his chest where a finger had obviously been trailed across it. He knew that Thalendri didn't blush — at least visibly under all the fur —, yet, at the moment, he saw Anie making a credible attempt.

"I...I'm sorry Christopher," she said, flicking her tongue across her muzzle nervously. "I didn't mean to..." Anie let her last words die on her lips. She wasn't quite sure what she meant to.

"That's all right," he said, grinning as he stood, "I think I understand. Besides, I may get to return the favor someday." He glanced down at her slyly.

"You may." Anie returned his sly comment with one of her own.

Chris smiled at this remark; it was obvious that Anie had recovered and was back in her usual form, which meant that the conversation could get risqué'. This could be embarrassing, considering his current mode of dress.

"So what can I do for you, Vixene Haiutai?" Christopher asked, changing the subject.

"Um....about tomorrow night." Anie gathered her thoughts for the sudden change. "My mother says that if you're still coming to dinner, you should bring something to eat. We're celebrating the Feast of Almarai and you're playing the part of Tevi."

"The feast of Almarai?" Christopher asked, looking at her curiously.

"Yes. You've never heard of it? And you a Cultural Dynamist." Anie shook her head in surprise.

"I'm sorry Anie, I'm not up on all of the Thalendri culture yet. You can explain it to me...later. First I've got to get cleaned up, then run over to the drop-center. My mother's supposed to be sending me a package sometime this week. I want to see if it's come in yet."

"Great. I'll go with you and tell you about the Feast of Almarai."

"You're on. Let me take a shower first and you can walk me to the drop center. I'll be back in ten minutes." Chris picked up his pack and headed towards the changing rooms.

Anielia followed his progress with bright, intense interest, the corners of her muzzled mouth turned up slightly in the Thalendri version of a smile.

"Not bad. If only he had a tail." She mused, as she watched him disappear behind the sliding doors.

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"God and Goddess Christopher! What did your mother do? Ship you half of the den?"

Anielia said this with open-mouthed awe as she watched Christopher maneuver a large shipping crate, a little more than half his size, onto the levi-sled that he had rented to move the heavy object. She walked a little behind and to one side of him, staring curiously at the oversized crate. She wondered what a human mother would send her faraway cub and eagerly awaiting the opportunity to find out.

"No, it's not half of the den; just a few things that my mother sent me. Things that I couldn't take with me when I originally came over." Chris replied over his shoulder as he pushed the sled down the paved walkway towards the dens where he lived. Anielia fell into step behind him, still curiously intent upon the crate, so much so that she missed Christopher's question the first time.

"Hmm, what did you say Christopher?" She asked, blinking at him.

"I said why don't you tell me more about the Feast of

Almarai?"

"Of course." Anielia radiated subdued excitement as he brought her back to their original topic of conversation. "The Feast of Almarai is celebrated every year at the beginning of the fall season; in fact, it's the official beginning of the fall. It starts tomorrow, usually with an intimate dinner with family and friends in honor of Baroness Almarai and the gift bestowed upon her by the God and Goddess. The celebration lasts an entire week and ends with a township celebration. That's always held in the square in Old Town. It's *ari*, uh great. Almost the entire city shuts down and turns out for it. Sometimes the celebration goes on for two or three days."

"Sounds exciting." Christopher allowed with a smile. She was clearly looking forward to the week long celebration. In fact, so was he, as her excitement began to infect him. Still though, the cultural dynamist in him would not sit entirely still as a few questions popped into his head.

"Anie, where did the Feast of Almarai come from? It sounds almost like a religious ceremony."

"Well, it is and it isn't," Anielia replied thoughtfully as she considered his question. "There really was a Vanthai Almarai; she lived over eight hundred years ago and she started the original feast to celebrate the end of harvest for her barony. The thing that makes her so special was that the feast was extended to all those outside her barony as well, even to the baronies of her enemies. It was an event that was heard of throughout the continent and apparently beyond, since it seems that she eventually was paid a visit by the God and Goddess themselves."

"We're here." Christopher broke in, as he pushed the sled around to the front door of the student dens.

Anielia, her story forgotten for the moment, watched in mild amusement as Christopher considered the open doorway.

He pushed the sled forward slowly, checking the clearance on both sides nervously as he worked his oversized package into the foyer of the dens.

"Christopher, now that you've got it into the hall, how are you going to get it into your room? If I remember correctly, the room doors are smaller than the entrance doors." Anie asked following him into the suddenly crowded hallway.

"Oh, I...uh...I...you would have to ask that, wouldn't you?" Christopher said in disgust as he looked at the oversized crate. "I'll just have to unpack it in the hall and take it out when I finish."

"Sounds sensible." Anie commented blandly. "What will your roommate say when he sees this though?"

"I have no idea. I haven't seen my roommate since I got here five months ago. No one's seen my roommate; most people think he's a figment of my imagination."

"You have an imagination?"

Christopher shot her a dirty look. By the set of her ears it was obvious that she was having a lot of fun at his expense. After a few moments, he decided to let it pass, for now. He resumed pushing the crate down the hall. "Come on fuzzy, you can help me unpack."

Anielia twitched slightly at the fuzzy moniker, but decided to let it ride, on the grounds that it would do Christopher's male ego some good to have a minor victory to his credit, however small it might be.

The walk to his room was a short and lonely one, with little more than a hand's width of clearance on either side of the crate, a fact that Christopher was quick to learn when he stopped it just short of his room door and found that no matter how he maneuvered, it he couldn't squeeze past the crate. After a minute of fruitless effort he deactivated the sled, and let the crate settle to the ground until it was eye level with him. The moment it grounded, he scrambled over the top of it and started to go down the other side when Anie suddenly piped up, the amusement all too plain in her voice.

"Is that another form of exercise?" She asked sweetly.

"No, this is called getting into my room." Christopher responded with a touch of annoyance.

"There's an easier way." Anie pointed out, her voice still dripping sugar.

"Wonderful." Christopher grunted, dropping down to the other side. "Show me."

"Are you in your room?"

"Yes." Christopher called out as he cycled the door of his room open.

He stood away from the door, arms folded over each other, and watched the crate with a mixture of annoyance and expectation. He blushed a deep scarlet as he saw the sled rise slightly, then move forward just enough to let Anie into his room. She stepped inside, turned around, and pushed the crate back to its former position in the hall before turning to look at Christopher. The look on her muzzled face practically echoed the thought going through his mind: Why didn't he think of that?

"Don't say a word." Christopher muttered sullenly as Anielia opened her mouth. He walked past her quickly, the better to get away from the almost human-like grin that adorned her vulpine features.

"I'll never live this down." He murmured.

"I'll say you won't." Anie rejoined jauntily as she came up behind him.

"Damn those pointy ears." Chris said, looking back at her

with a wry grin. "Come on, let's see what my mother sent me."

Christopher stood in front of the crate and studied its locking seal. It appeared to be a standard flush-mounted, digital keypad, with Freehold English alphanumeric symbols. Chris smiled as he noted the pad's multi-colored keys. They were a special type, found only on the most secure packaging, and required a double set of codes to open. Considering that his mother sent it, it was a good bet that one wrong code could be disastrous. Fortunately, he knew the right codes.

"Chris-1, Mom-2." Chris muttered as he tapped on the keys. He noted the quizzical look that Anie gave this outburst, smiled slightly, and decided not to elaborate. Some secrets he would keep to himself.

Chris stood back and watched the crate's double doors swing open slowly, his expectant smile breaking into an ecstatic grin as its interior was revealed.

"All right, thank you, Mom." Christopher yelped as he leaped forward into the crate.

Anie rushed forward to see what had excited Christopher so much. She stopped short as he crawled back out of the crate, a wide grin on his face and a large dark-brown coat with a thick fur inner lining in his hands.

"It's a Taffea skin coat." He said excitedly. "My Taffea skin coat. There are only two ways to get one on Cameara. Either from the traders that come off Mount Ararat; or go out and get one yourself. I got this myself, and I've got the scars to prove it."

"Your parents let you do that?" Anie asked shocked.

"My parents took me out to do this. We used to do things like that every year. Anyway, this coat is just the thing I need out here. Taffea coats will keep you warm even in arctic conditions. And around here, during fall and winter, I'm going to need it."

Chris shook the coat and took it over to the coat racks that hung next to his bed. As soon as he was away from the crate, Anie rushed over to take his place, peering eagerly into the crate. She was surprised to see a number of large, dark colored jars sitting in a corner of the box on top of some heavy padding. She reached in, pulled one out, and held it up to Christopher.

"Chris, what are these?" She queried, looking at him curiously.

"Umm...Afrik Honey. It's delicious. We kept several large hives of African honeybees on our farm. We'd harvest the hives just before winter and sell our surplus in town. You'd be surprised at how much that honey would go for; it was as good as gold. Here, try some."

Chris picked up a spoon from the top of the settee on his side

of the room, took the jar from Anie, and popped the herma-seal lid on it. He dipped the spoon in and pulled up a large, viscous gob of dark yellow-brown goo. He held it before Anie, who took a cautious sniff of it before lapping up a tiny bit with her tongue. A moment later her mouth completely engulfed the spoon and a look of pure bliss enveloped her features as she cleaned the spoon of every drop of honey.

"I didn't know Thalendri had a sweet tooth." Christopher said slowly as he watched Anie lick the last vestige of honey from her muzzle. He was surprised to hear a tiny whimper sound deep within her throat as she closed her eyes again.

"I take it you liked it." Christopher stated, staring at her in awe as she opened her eyes again.

"Christopher...." She started, her eyes shining brightly.

"Yes, you can have it." Chris answered, heading off her obvious request.

"Oh, thank you, Chris!" She yelled, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

"Wow, what'll you give me if I give you two jars?" Christopher asked, as he felt her nuzzle his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed back, reveling in the soft, warm feel of Thalendri vixenhood.

"Why Ter Watson, are you trying to buy my favors?" Anie inquired, pulling back slightly and looking at him slyly.

"Well, actually, I was thinking more along the lines of soliciting your favors." Christopher husked, squeezing again.

Christopher looked down Anie's muzzle and into her brown mischievous eyes which seemed to shine brighter than usual. He licked dry lips as the sweet smell of honey mingled with the light musk of Thalendri pheromones — quite a heady scent at such close quarters. He felt his neck tighten slightly as one of her hands stroked the back of his neck lightly. So, now what, he thought.

"Christopher, what else did your mother send?" Anie asked softly as she pulled away from him.

"Um...let's see." Chris faltered. Squeezing gently one last time before letting go reluctantly, he stepped past her slowly and walked towards the crate. She leaned over as he stooped down and reached in.

"Here's a video letter," he said, pulling out a flat white metal credit-card-sized videocassette. "A music CD." He held up a shiny, silvery disc. "And....Tawni! My Sax." He cried out excitedly, pulling out a large, black, leathery case.

"A what?" Anie demanded, leaning over farther to get a better look at the case that caused such excitement in her companion.

Christopher sat back and stroked the case lovingly, a blissful, faraway look on his dark, handsome face. It took almost a full minute for Anie's question to make an impression on him, and when it did, he seemed slightly embarrassed by his reaction, enough so that he harrumphed loudly before answering.

"Umm...it's a Saxophone, a kind of musical instrument invented on Earth. It used to belong to my father until he passed it on to me."

"Oh," Anie said, staring at the case fascinatedly, "can you play him?"

"Maybe later." Christopher put the case down in a corner. "First, I want to play this video letter. See what's happening at home."

Chris walked over to the other side of his room, Anie trailing behind him curiously. As Chris settled into the chair that fronted his entertainment center, Anie spared a quick, uneasy glance at his bed.

"Christopher, how do humans manage to sleep comfortably on those stretched out things?" She inquired irrelevantly, gesturing vaguely at the rectangular pullout beds on either side of the room.

"Quite easily," Christopher returned absently. "We've been sleeping stretched out for well over a million years. We got used to it. I've tried sleeping curled up in a circular bed like your people; believe me, it doesn't work for humans."

"Perhaps, but it still seems unnatural somehow." Anie moved away from the bed slightly. "You even removed the curtains."

Taking scant notice of this, Chris tapped the button that exposed his recessed wall unit. He switched on the video player and monitor included in the room's furnishings, slipped the video letter into a slot in the player/recorder unit, and took a seat on the high-backed chair on his side of the room. Anielia took up a place just behind and to the right of him, eyes focused curiously upon the monitor's flickering screen.

"Hello son, how...."

"Christopher!" Anielia shouted, jumping forward to freeze the image on the screen. "Is that your mother?"

"Um...yes." Christopher affirmed, looking at her in surprise.

"She's beautiful." Anie whispered. She looked at Christopher, then back at the screen, her surprise growing by the moment. "You look just like her too."

Christopher blushed slightly. He agreed that his mother, Jan, was beautiful, although he doubted he looked half as good as she did. They shared a number of features — soft brown eyes, dark black hair, and thin, slightly pouting lips —

but his mother was more obviously Asian than he. The face was rounder, the almond shape of the eyes more distinct; the long, raven colored hair — currently tied back in a ponytail — held a lustrous shine that softened her features considerably, lending her face an almost ethereal quality. Looks to die for, his father once said.

"My mother got all the looks in the family." Christopher commented smiling up at Anie. "Thanks for the compliment, though."

"Don't sell yourself short, Ter Watson," Anie riposted slyly, "I have it on good authority that you've turned a head or two around campus."

"Really? Whose?" Christopher asked eagerly, leaning forward.

Anielia didn't say another word, she merely gave him the Thalendri version of a wide-eyed innocent look before switching the player/recorder back on and taking her place beside him again.

"...how are you?" His mother continued in her softly husky voice. "We're doing fine up here. It's about mid-summer now. You can't see it, but it's a beautiful day outside; about noon right now. Your father isn't here though. He's been out tracking some stray Milis that escaped from their pen a few days ago..."

"Milis?" Anielia whispered to Christopher.

"A large native bird, the size of a Skreeln -large enough to feed a family of four for two weeks." Christopher whispered back, his eyes never straying from the screen.

"...so, unfortunately he won't be on this letter. I promise the next one is his though. However, Lord Dumas is here, and he does miss you." Jan reached down below the camera's field of view to pick something up off the ground in front of her.

"Christopher what is that?" Anielia sounded startled.

"That' is Lord Dumas." Christopher replied with a broad smile as his mother brought the object into view.

Anie stared in fascination at the large, flat, furry bundle that Christopher's mother laid across her lap. The bundle stirred slightly, and big, bright black eyes stared out from under a thick mat of bristly head fur. The eyes looked down a sharply pointed snout grumpily, as if annoyed at being disturbed from whatever it had been doing on the floor. It opened its mouth in a wide yawn, exposing needle sharp teeth, before closing its eyes and snuggling down into Jan's lap for a comfortable nap.

"They look like an Earth animal called a badger, so that's what we call them. Of course they're obviously not really badgers." Chris explained.

"Is he a pet?" She asked curiously.

"Um...well, not exactly; he's sort of half-tame. He's more like one-third owner of our farm. He's been there as long as I have."

"He seems to get along well with your mother." The young vixen commented, staring at the sleeping animal.

"Me and my mother."

"What, doesn't your father like him?"

"Of course he does. He thinks Dumas'd make a great snack. But my mother and I won't let him do that. I'll tell you more about the Lord later." Christopher turned his attention back to the monitor.

"...I hope you enjoy the honey and other things we sent. We rather figured you might be ready for a taste of some home cooking. Your father sent his recipe for chili and a sample crock of it, watered down of course, and there's plenty of fresh fruit as well, so you certainly won't be going hungry for a while. And don't worry about customs, everything's been cleared already.

"I know it gets cold on Evergreen, so I sent along your Taffea coat. It should keep you warm at night — if you don't already have someone to keep you warm, that is."

Chris felt Anie's hand stiffen slightly on his shoulder at this. He grinned slightly and fought the urge to look around at Anie's expression, he simply continued to listen to his mother.

"The CD is from Ken and Tara. It's the latest from the band. They say it's all new stuff except for the last two songs. Ken says those are the last two that you and he wrote together and he thought they were appropriate for this selection. The first song is from a video sound track that the band did. Good video, good sound track. We'll try to send it to you as soon as it comes out. Ken says hurry back, and Tara sends her love and wants you to hurry back too; she says she's getting lonely.

"Well...that's all from the home front son. We miss you out here, but we know that you wanted to do this and we think it's the right thing. Still...don't forget to write....We love you, Chris."

The video letter blanked out with this last word.

There was a moment of silence as Anielia watched the blank screen. She was a bit sorry to see it end; the things that Chris's mother had said were fascinating, even risque at one point, and offered an insight into his life and past that she had never considered before. It made him even more intriguing than ever and started her thinking about some other aspect of her human...friend.

She looked down at Christopher, about to say something about the letter, when she was stopped short.

Chris was slumped in his chair, his head resting listlessly on

his left hand. She stared at him intently in an effort to read the somewhat odd look on his face, and found herself failing miserably. Some human expressions still eluded her.

"Christopher." She murmured, prodding him gently on the shoulder.

"Yes." Chris started and looked up at her.

Anie studied the wide-eyed, startled expression on his face and suddenly felt she understood the reason for his strange behavior.

"You miss home, don't you?" She asked, stroking the back of his neck gently.

"I didn't think about it much over the last few months because I've been so busy playing catch up, among other things. It just now occurred to me that this isn't home; home is on another planet clear across the border. It's so far away." Christopher sighed softly.

"Christopher, are you coming to dinner tomorrow?" Anie whispered in his ear. "We'd really like to have you."

"Of course," Christopher responded, reaching up to stroke her cheek gently, "I'll be there."

"Good. My family will be looking forward to having you as a part of it." She nuzzled his cheek. "Tomorrow at...seven. Don't forget to bring something."

"I won't. In...."

"Hey, Chris, does this lump belong to you?" An irate human female voice yelled from the hall.

"Um...yeah, I'll...uh...move it in a couple of seconds." Christopher stammered, as he jumped from his chair. "Sorry, Anie, duty calls."

"That's all right. I have to be getting on too; my mother will wonder what's happened to me. I wouldn't want her to think that I've been keeping someone warm at night. She might want to know all the details."

"She won't hear anything from me." Christopher said over his shoulder.

"I hope not. Christopher, one last question before I go."

"Yes?"

"Who is Tara, and why does she miss you?"

"Uh...You're too young."

"Christopher!" Anie cried, in mock outrage.

"Christopher!" The female voice outside bellowed in real outrage.

"Mama." Christopher pleaded, rolling his eyes heavenward.

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The cultural dynamist in him just would not sleep.

This was the thought that ran through Christopher's mind as he stood in the tree-lined plaza in Eastside that contained the haiut, home along with that of several other of Kolar's teachers and administrators. Even though he had been there before, he still found it a fascinating and educational experience just looking at the sometimes varied and unusual styles of housing that the Thalendri allowed themselves.

The homes reminded him somewhat of holos he had seen of an Italian-style villa with an enclosed courtyard in its middle. The 'villa' was actually a series of two-story homes — or what he thought of as homes. Most Thalendri would have called them dens or *Hashadrai* in Davvashi — joined together into a fairly large circular apartment-like complex set into the slopes of the Nimin River Valley. Each home sported at least one jutting balcony on its second floor, sometimes backed by large French windows. Like most things built by and for Thalendri, the complexes had few sharp corners or right angles, as such things made the average Thalendri feel uneasy and confined.

As he walked up the pathway leading to the front door, he shifted the heavy plastic container that held his contribution to the evening's meal in his arms somewhat uneasily. Although he had eaten with the Haiuts before, this time was somewhat different, mostly because he was not sure what to expect from what was, at least partially, a formal, quasi-religious repast. Most Thalendri tended to eat whenever the mood took them, the Haiuts included. Formal meals, he had learned tended to be well-planned, elaborate affairs and were normally reserved for large gatherings. He licked his lips nervously before gently touching the lighted button that sat squarely in the middle of the arched doorway.

He jumped back slightly when the door parted along its middle almost instantly upon the first chime. He was even more startled when he took note of the familiar, though surprising, figure in the lighted doorway. From the solid green Thalendri-style skirt tinged with red along its border to the delicate, symmetrical Thalendri feet, it could only be one person.

"Marta."

"Hello Tevy. We've been expecting you." The scarlet furred vixen greeted him in her soft voice.

She gave Christopher the Thalendri equivalent of a smile, the corners of her mouth turned upwards slightly with ears pointing straight up — but no teeth bared — and focused her soft gray eyes upon him.

Christopher smiled in return, something he always did in the presence of attractive vixens. He had heard it said that Marta

was rather plain by Thalendri standards, but he personally found it very hard to believe, especially when he knew that she was hardly wanting for male companionship, Thalendri, Human, or even Selkie.

"I should hope so. I was invited after all." Christopher replied in mock indignation.

"As was I; as is the custom. And like you, I also brought something. Come in Christopher; I'm curious to see what you brought." She reached out to take his left arm gently in her hand and, with a flick of her tail that said "follow me", led him into the *hashai*.

Christopher followed obediently, thrilling at the touch of Marta's hand on his arm. Although he would never admit it publicly, he found that there was something different about Marta that set her apart from — and maybe slightly above — most Thalendri he had met; an almost ethereal quality that made him feel as if he were standing in the presence of...a phenomenon rather than a living being. He recalled the instances when he had heard others refer to Marta as being Mikallai, a word which translated into "Sacred Dancer".

"Is your twin here as well?" Christopher asked as they stepped into the foyer.

Marta shook her head at the question, her ears going to the half-mast position of amusement common to Thalendri. The "twin" in question was a young human female: Jennifer Kagan, daughter of the Terran Imperial consul to Evergreen, a short, feisty young woman with flaming red hair and, sometimes, a temper to match. Born on Evergreen, Jennifer considered herself a native, a complete native, sometimes acting more Thalendri than most Thalendri. She was also Marta's best friend and constant companion.

"She's spending this time with Dar. I believe they had something...special planned for each other." Marta commented, looking up at him.

Love those eyes, Christopher thought, as he matched gazes with Marta's soft gray eyes. It was far too easy to get lost in there. "Sacred Dancer" indeed.

"You're here!"

Christopher turned, startled at the loudness of the voice, though not at the owner. He grinned lopsidedly at the sight of Aleks — minus his trademark cape, cane, and pipe — leaning against a hallway door.

"You're surprised? Since when have I ever passed up a free meal."

"Oh, a free meal that you have to bring yourself."

"Technicalities, always with the technicalities. So, Marta, did the furry crimebuster over here coerce you into this?"

"Well, yes, you might say that." Marta answered, bowing

her head slightly, a Thalendri gesture of embarrassment.

"What did you do, Holmes, tell her about her love life?"

"Of course not," Aleks huffed indignantly. "I'm too much of a noble for that. I merely inquired if she would rather spend an evening relaxing with a family, rather than trying to preserve her virtue. Obviously, she seemed to think this a marvelous idea."

"Of course it was a marvelous idea. She'd be safer in a crowd, especially from the likes of you." Anie's voice commented scathingly from behind them.

Christopher felt himself straining to hold back the grin that was trying to get out. He watched, his lips pressed tightly together, as Anie stepped into the room from the opposite hallway leading to the kitchen and dining areas of the Haiut *hashai*. She wore the outfit that he had seen her in two days ago, though this time the blouse was a soft blue that better complimented her natural gray fur. There was still a problem with the yellow and purple kilt, but averting the eyes seemed to help. In doing so, he noted that Anie—and Aleks—were both barefoot. He wondered if this particular meal would require that he do likewise, and then wondered if he dared.

His attention was drawn back to Anielia as she passed him with a wink and a flick of her left ear. She stepped smartly around Aleks, giving him a smug look as she took hold of Christopher's other arm and steered him towards the corridor.

"Really, Christopher, Marta, you should have both come to the dining room rather than stand here...talking." Anie flicked her tail in Aleks' direction. "We've all been waiting for you....Well, most of us; the important ones of us." Anie chatted breezily as she led them towards the dining room.

Again Christopher allowed himself to be propelled by the forces around him, Marta on one side, with her light Thalendri musk now more prominent since she was currently abstaining from benga smoking in honor of the holiday, and Anie on the other, her personal musk also in evidence. As he passed by Aleks, he saw the beginnings of a slow burn spread along his features. Chris shrugged and gave him a sheepish grin as he exited; it was the only conciliatory offer he could make under the circumstances. Moments like this made him glad he was an only child.

Anielia led him into the formal dining room which, unlike the foyer and main den they had just left, was a surprisingly small, circular, low-ceilinged, intimate room. It held the strong scent of fresh flowering plants which could be seen hanging from hooks placed in the ceiling and lining the far wall of the room. To Christopher they appeared to be miniature roses, a fact that he took careful note of. He knew Thalendri had a passion for flowering plants of any sort. Coming as they did from a world almost bereft of flowering plants, it was not uncommon for certain types of plants to take on a status normally reserved for public figures and

celebrities in their society.

"Hello, Christopher, you're right on time."

"Thank you, Mirai Haiutai, I try to be." Christopher responded formally as he bowed his head slightly in the proper form of address of a junior to an elder. For some reason, whenever he spoke to Amalthia Haiutai, Aleks and Anielia's mother, he felt compelled to use formal, proper language and address. He suspected that it was mainly because he attended her literature class, an arena where she insisted on a formal master/pupil relationship.

Amalthia shook her head slightly and smiled at Christopher. She was an older version of her daughter, right down to the mask-like expanse around her eyes. Chris could even see some of Aleks in her features and in the shading of her fur. She sat cross-legged on the floor, at the far end of the oblong floor table Thalendri called a *sesai*, but stood as the four entered the room. Like Marta, she wore the Thalendri-style skirt, though hers was blue-black with light purple trim.

"Christopher, you don't have to be so formal outside the classroom," she chided, motioning him and Marta to take places at the table. "This is home after all."

"I know. You've told me that before, but old habits are hard to break." Christopher blushed slightly.

"Now what do you suppose that means, Christopher?" A familiar voice asked from a darkened corner of the room.

"Hello, Mar Aleksis, I'm sorry I didn't see you sitting over there." Chris bowed again.

Aleksis Haiut, a tall silverblack fox with touches of white along his cheeks, stood up from the contour chair he had been sitting in and walked over to stand beside his daughter. He peered curiously into the box that Christopher was holding, his nose pad quivering slightly in an effort to catch whatever scents might be floating about.

"That's all right, Christopher, I find it rather gratifying to find that there are instances when you're not so observant. It makes us old Culturists and Sociologists feel a bit better to know that you youngsters can make mistakes."

Christopher blushed at this; coming from the Rector of the Social Sciences department it was high praise indeed.

"My contribution for the evening's meal." He announced, taking note of Aleksis' interest in the box. "It was once an ethnic dish on Earth. Now, it's considered a staple or a delicacy on many worlds. It's called chili."

"Really? What's it made of?" Marta leaned over Christopher's arm to look into the box.

It was a moment before Christopher could answer, mostly because he was getting over the sensation of Marta's body pressed so close to his. The thrill he had felt earlier was



Amalthia looked relieved. She was aware that most humans had a tougher palate than Thalendri where spices were concerned. She did not think that now was a good time to test that toughness.

"Christopher, will you need to make any special preparations for your dish?"

"It could stand a bit of warming."

"Anielia, take Christopher into the kitchen and help him. We'll start as soon as he's done."

"All right. Come along Christopher," Anielia began, half dragging Christopher towards the kitchen, "you and I can play...house."

"Okay, but I'm not doing the dishes." Christopher replied, as he followed meekly behind her.

"That's all right, as long as you keep me happy." Anie gibed airily.

Christopher started, but kept his head and eyes rigidly forward, afraid to look back at Anie's parents. He wasn't sure how much they knew of his and Anie's relationship (he wasn't sure himself, in all truth), and he wasn't quite sure how they would take some of the more risqué conversations he and Anie sometimes had, Thalendri humor notwithstanding. One thing he was sure of, however; he didn't want to find out. Not now, anyway.

Anie led Chris into the kitchen, another low-ceilinged circular room, this one somewhat smaller and cozier than the others. Chris noted the kitchen with some interest since he had seldom been in it. He found himself comparing it with the more familiar one back at home and even with the kitchenette in his room.

It was certainly larger than the kitchenette in his room (a portable field kitchen would have been larger than his kitchenette) and certainly different. There was the standard microwave mounted to the wall, underneath which was a disc-like flat stone slab called a *bastorai*, a traditional Thalendri griddle with a molecular agitator to generate heat, flush mounted in the cabinets that lined the wall. Next to the *bastorai* was a shallow sink with simple, but surprisingly elegant taps for hot and cold water. Further to the left was a low Thalendri-style refrigerator, its lid situated on top to keep cold air trapped inside even with the door open. All

growing in leaps in bounds.

"Um...it's a thick stew-like broth that contains beans, some vegetables, and various types of meat, depending upon what recipe you're using. My father made this, and sent it to me. It probably has either ground or shredded rabbit in it, um...a bit of peanut butter, and a lot of spices, hot ones."

"Hot." Amalthia looked distressed.

"Don't worry. I checked the recipe for toxics, its cleared for Thalendri. Besides, my mother got a hold of it before shipping it over. Neither she or I are too fond of the really hot stuff either."

these appliances were situated in a semi-circle of cabinets and shelves, a convenient arrangement upon which he placed his by now heavy burden.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?" Chris looked guiltily over at Anie.

"Stop analyzing us." Anie scolded, mildly exasperated. "Every time you come to our den you spend half your time looking everything over and the other half asking my father what it all means. You're as bad as he is sometimes."

"I am not." Christopher grumbled indignantly. "I have other interests besides Thalendri culture."

"Oh yes, Marta's feet...not to mention the rest of her."

"Marta's feet...Oh, I wanted to ask you about that. Does this evening's meal require that I remove my shoes?"

"No, you don't have to." Anie answered, surprised. "That's just Marta being Marta. She won't wear shoes if she can possibly help it. I didn't get a chance to put mine on when you came in. As for Aleks, well, he's after Marta."

"That ought to be interesting," Christopher chuckled, "I think every male on campus is after her, but none of them have caught her yet."

"And they're not likely to, unless she lets them." Anie let out a tiny yip of laughter. "But enough about the other vixen, show me this 'chili' stuff."

"All right." Christopher reached into the box and pulled out a large rounded crockpot. He set it on the *bastorai* and set the controls for a quick simmer. "My father says that chili tastes best when you simmer it over an open fire. He's right, but a *bastorai* works just as well."

Christopher plucked the thick plastic cover off the pot and sniffed deeply of the simmering brew. He moved back slightly to give Anie a chance to stick her muzzle into the rising steam.

"Umm," she murmured, flicking her tongue across her muzzle, "that does smell good. Looks good too." She stared at the rich red broth, beans, and ground meat. "Looks a bit like Elliai stew."

"Here, look at this." Christopher said, pulling a large herma-seal jar out of the box.

"What is it?"

"Yes Christopher, what?" Aleks inquired, sidling up behind them.

"Peanut Butter." Chris informed them, looking around at Aleks. "Chunky style; Terry peanuts ground so fine their own oil forms a paste. It's one of the ingredients in the chili.

This was in the package that my mother sent me: six jars of honey and six jars of peanut butter. My mother is very good to me."

Christopher dipped the middle finger of his left hand into the jar and scooped out a large gob of the thick brown paste. He held it up for a moment, contemplatively, then started to put it into his mouth. Anie suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled it towards her mouth where she engulfed the finger whole.

Christopher stared in shock as she slowly licked the peanut butter from his finger. He wasn't sure if the shock was due to the abruptness of her action or to the surprisingly erotic nature of her feast, since she was both licking his finger and drawing it back and forth along her lips in the process. Whatever the feelings that were going through his body at this action, one thing was certainly clear to him. Anielia was quite aware of what she was doing, the sly look in her eyes was proof enough of that.

"I hope that was worth it." Aleks' voice was subdued when Anie released Christopher's finger a moment later. Like Christopher, he was also aware of what she was doing.

"So...was it good for you too?" Christopher pulled his trembling, still-wet finger back from Anie's vicinity.

"Finger licking." Anie said innocently. "Not quite as good as the honey, but it certainly has a unique flavor. I don't suppose that jar is for us is it?"

"Well," Christopher drawled uncertainly, "yes, it is, but after what you just did, I'm tempted to trade you for it. Only I don't think you'll give me what I want."

"You never know." Anie coyly turned and headed for the dining room. "I think your 'chili' is ready." She suggested as she vanished out the door.

"That's not all that's ready." Chris muttered as he watched her stride saucily from the room. He noted Aleks' toothy grin. "And wipe that silly grin from your face. I'll bet you won't get nearly as lucky."

The grin fell from Aleks's face as Chris brought up his own potential mate for the evening. He gave a tiny yap of dismay, and turned to hurry back to Marta.

• • •

Christopher hastily rummaged through the utensils cabinet for a large spoon to dish the chili out with, placed the lid back on the crock, and carried both back out to the waiting assemblage, mouth watering at the prospect of the feast ahead.

"Christopher," Aleksis said, as Christopher walked back into the room, "sit next to Marta, please; she's your companion for the evening."

"Yes sir." Chris went around the other side of the *sesai*. He set the crock down on the table, somewhat to the side of himself and directly in front of Marta. As he took a seat on the floor, he glanced around the table, noting the somewhat symbolic seating arrangement. At the very head of the *sesai* sat Aleksis himself; as the oldest member of the family it was his place of honor. Directly to his right was his mate Amalthia, to his left Aleks, and next to Aleks was Anielia. Christopher had the other end of the table, opposite from Aleksis, the place for honored guests. Marta was seated to his right — which was not exactly correct since, to the best of his knowledge, she was older than he. He'd have to ask about that. Other than his and Marta's seating arrangements, everything seemed to be in order. It was almost time to start.

"Christopher," Aleksis began, gesturing for his attention, "I assume that you've already done some research on the Feast of Almarai. I don't mean to insult your intelligence by asking you this, but do you understand it? Do you have any questions about the ceremony?"

"It seems to be fairly straightforward," Christopher answered slowly as he noticed everyone watching him expectantly, "As the guests of honor Marta and myself represent the two visitors, Anya and Tevy, to Almarai's feast. They came bearing gifts of unusual foods. Anya brought the dish of sweetcakes known as *cessadrai*; Tevy brought the rolled *holli* cake and meat dish called *holli* rolls. They presented them to Vanthai Almarai with their blessings and then disappeared into the crowd. All during the day and long into the night, as the feast progressed, the people noticed that the two dishes that Anya and Tevy brought seemed to still be full despite the fact that they were constantly being eaten from. As the rest of the food ran out and the two dishes didn't, everyone began to realize that they'd been visited and blessed by the God and Goddess themselves. From that day on the feast was always looked upon as a sacred holiday, blessed by the God and Goddess as a time of peace and plenty."

"Do you understand your role in the Feast?" Amalthia queried.

"Yes, as the honored guest Tevy, I'm supposed to bring a dish, not necessarily a traditional one, and bless the opening meal."

"You seem to have it down quite well." Aleksis sounded pleased as he nodded his approval.

"All right," Christopher said smiling, "I pass the test. But I do have one question."

"Yes?" Aleksis favored him with a quizzical look.

"Um...I don't know any Thalendri prayers or blessings. I...didn't get around...to researching any." Chris hung his head a little embarrassed.

"That's all right," Marta came to his rescue, yipping softly

with laughter as she took his hand in her own. "I know some."

Christopher looked at Marta curiously as he clasped hands with her. He noted that no else did this and wondered momentarily if this was a normal part of the ceremony. A quick look at Aleks and Anielia showed that it was new to them as well, but neither seemed to want to say anything about it. A moment later his attention was drawn back to Marta as she began to speak in a soft, almost melodious, voice. It took a moment for him to realize that she was speaking in Telemdra, Thalendri high-speech; a formalized, almost poetic variant once reserved for the upper class and royalty amongst Thalendri. He found it difficult to follow Marta's prayer, mainly because Telemdra was so seldom spoken by the general public. It was now mostly the province of the priesthood, poets, and apparently vixens of Mikallai descent.

Christopher started slightly when he felt Marta caress his hand gently before releasing it. He glanced over at her to find that she was staring at him curiously her soft gray eyes locked onto his form. For a moment, it seemed as if she was staring right through him. He was surprised to find himself blushing at her intense scrutiny.

"...Christopher."

"Yes?" Christopher replied, as Anielia's voice finally registered on him. He broke the eye contact to look over in Anie's direction and was surprised to find that she was staring at him as curiously as Marta had, though her curiosity seemed to be somewhat less intense and more disturbed than Marta's. Despite this, she spoke in an easy matter-of-fact voice.

"As our rather special guest of honor it's up to you to decide which dish we should start the meal with."

"Up to me. Excellent." Chris stared at the assortment of dishes laid out on the table. It was the first time that he had given them any sort of real scrutiny, and now, looking them over, he was astounded at the assortment laid out before him.

Some of them he recognized immediately; several varieties of a meat and vegetable concoction rolled in a fried omelet, a dish Thalendri called *Mashadrai* and humans tended to call eggrolls. The centerpiece of the meal featured the previously mentioned *cessadrai*, a dish he unfortunately had to bypass due to its mild toxicity to humans. There was a heaping platter of *Bodashi* cutlets swimming in a mouth watering sweet sauce; a large plate of lightly seasoned, sliced, potato-like *Olie* fruit. A small dish of *Tressier* nuts sat next to his crock of chili; and next to the nuts was baked earth chicken, a dish which had become very popular among the Thalendri when humans first introduced them to it. It was popular with Christopher too, who fastened immediately upon the large platter.

"Let's start there." Christopher indicated the chicken.

"Excellent choice." Aleksis agreed, as Christopher speared a piece of chicken off the platter before passing it to Marta.

"I see you're a breast man." Marta murmured, as she took the platter from Christopher.

"Yes, I love breasts they're..." Christopher nearly choked and gaped at Marta quizzically. He was only mildly surprised to find that she was staring at him amusedly. She smiled when she noticed his gaze straying to her small, though obvious, cleavage. Chris averted his eyes accordingly, a frown adorning his features. Another case of being trapped by the Thalendri sense of humor. When would he ever learn?

Chris cast his gaze toward Aleks, who seemed to be trying to decide how to react to Marta's game. At the moment, he seemed to be leaning towards high amusement, though Chris did note a speculative look in Aleks' eyes that made him wonder what Aleks was really thinking.

After a moment, Christopher turned his attention to the meal at hand, forgetting, at least for a while, Marta's game. He heaped his plate with olives and two mashas before digging in. He spent several moments just chewing on the olives, finding their taste very intriguing, something like a cross between a spicy yam and a very juicy pineapple, despite being fried. A single bite of an eggroll offered another unexpected surprise. Apparently the haiuts had managed to get some real beef to stuff in their eggrolls.

"All right Christopher," Anielia abruptly piped up, "let's get on to the real event of this meal. What does chili taste like?"

Chris looked up from his plate, a rather twisted grin on his face as he tried to keep his food in his mouth and laugh at the same time. He had expected someone to push for the chili sooner or later, though he had expected to hear from Aleks first. Looking around the table, he could see that there were expectant looks on the faces of everyone present except for Aleks, who was giving Anie a sideways glare, probably because she had beaten him to the question first.

"Well," Christopher replied, swallowing the last of his eggroll, "there's only one real way to find out. Hand me your lap bowl."

Anie eagerly passed the deep-welled bowl over to Christopher who quickly ladled two large spoonfuls of chili into it. He then, in rapid succession, filled the bowls of everyone else present, including his own. As he picked up his spoon, he noted that of everyone there, Aleksis seemed to be the most eager to sample the dish, despite the fact that his daughter had made the request. Apparently, dignity precluded him from being so forward. Fortunately, opportunity and his daughter had come to his rescue. Circumstance can be a wonderful thing, Chris mused as he scooped a spoonful of chili into his mouth.

Chris swirled the thick broth in his mouth while chewing on

the thick chunks of meat in the concoction. It was definitely his father's chili. The slight taste of peanut butter mixed in with the spicy seasonings and chunks of vegetables proved that. Some more chewing showed his mother's not-too-subtle hand, mainly in that the spices were not nearly as intense as his father would normally use. More than likely his mother had bullied him into watering the chili down to a level more suited to normal living human beings.

He stopped chewing suddenly and looked around the table at the others curiously. Something seemed to be slightly wrong with the tableau before him, something that required close examination before he figured out what it was. Anie, Aleks and their parents were just scooping out the first spoonfuls of their bowls of chili and biting into it. Nothing wrong there; but, Marta was simply staring down at her bowl curiously. She didn't even bother to touch the spoon, she just stared.

"Marta," he whispered quietly to her, "what's wrong?"

Marta never had a chance to answer. There was a sudden explosive snort from Anielia, followed by a huffy gagging sound as she hunched forward and spit out the remainder of the chili in her mouth. Her action was followed almost immediately by the same action from her father.

Chris jumped back as the expelled chili just missed him. He got up and ran around the other side of the table, kneeling beside Anie while Marta ran past him to help Amalthia, who seemed to be having some trouble breathing.

Anie was hunched over the table panting swiftly and heavily, as if in an effort to cool off her entire body rather than just her mouth. Chris reached out and snagged a lap bowl full of water. He held it before Anie and allowed her to lap up as much water as she needed. The moment she stopped he turned and allowed Aleks to also drink his fill. Aleks didn't take nearly as much as Anie did; in fact, he seemed to be having a much better time of it than any of his family. After drinking his fill, he took another couple of quick pants before looking up at Christopher with a haggard expression.

"Christopher," he gasped, "don't take this the wrong way, but I'm cutting you out of the will."

"I'm glad you can joke about it." Christopher sighed in relief. "How do you feel?"

"I feel fine. My tongue however will never satisfy a vixen again."

"Not so loud, your parents are listening." Christopher stifled a chuckle. Nothing wrong with Aleks anyway.

"Christopher!" Anie demanded tightly. "Your mother said that the chili was watered down. It didn't taste watered down to me."

"It was watered down. I had no trouble with it at all. It tasted just the way my mother and I would make it." Chris was

distressed by the way the evening had gone so far.

"That was the problem, Christopher." Aleksis commented pointedly. "Your perception of what was acceptable and ours were two different things. We're so used to each other by now that we tend to gloss over those differences in favor of...."

"Okay, okay." Christopher interrupted, holding up his hand in submission. "I understand, Mar Aleksis. What may seem normal to me isn't necessarily the same for you or any of the others. I'm sorry. Some sociologist I am."

"Don't be too hard on yourself Christopher." Amalthia consoled him gently. "We were all a little too eager to try your dish. I of all people should have known better than to taste without testing first. This isn't the first time I've been surprised by human food." She finished somewhat ruefully.

"So, now what do we do?" Chris asked, looking around the table a bit helplessly.

"We go on with the meal, of course." Amalthia stated firmly, glancing over at her mate. "After we've properly fixed your chili." She stood and commenced dragging Christopher towards the kitchen.

Christopher glanced back at the others and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, mom." He said sheepishly.

Amalthia shot him a surprised stare that quickly turned to a twisted grin as they disappeared into the kitchen.

• • •

"Now, that was a feast." Aleks patted his stomach contentedly. "After a meal like that, I do believe a good slow grooming is in order."

Aleks lay back on the *cassai* — floor couch — in the living room. The feast had long since ended. Aleks and Anie's parents had gone out shortly after the meal, ostensibly to a faculty function. Chris suspected that the "function" was just an excuse for them to get away from the cubs for a while. Still, though, watching Aleks snuggle up next to Marta, he couldn't complain. At this point he was feeling slightly bloated himself, and the idea of simply laying back to a good slow grooming with friends had a great deal of appeal.

"You know, that chili wasn't really all that bad." Anie commented propping her head up against Chris's shoulder. "That is once you're able to get it past your mouth."

"I know what you mean." Chris replied, ignoring the loaded implications of her statement. "My mother once said that a long time ago, when she had first met my father, she had once used his chili as the primer for an explosive device."

"Is that true, or is it just another one of your stories from

home?" Anie inquired, glancing at him suspiciously.

"I'm not sure." Chris answered, staring into the sky speculatively. "However, every time my mother tells that story, my father won't speak to her for at least a couple of days."

"You might as well believe it, Anie." Aleks commented lazily. "After seeing some of the things that Chris can do and hearing about his past life, I wouldn't put anything past him and his parents."

"Really." Marta sounded intrigued. She sat up, slipping deftly out of Aleks's clutches. "Tell us about some of them."

Christopher glanced over at Aleks in surprise. Marta was doing it again, casting those soft gray eyes on him and completely disrupting his normal thought processes. He was even more surprised to see Aleks shrug his shoulders resignedly — a human gesture he had acquired long ago — and leaned back further into the couch.

"Might as well tell her. She'll get it out of you sooner or later. She always does."

Chris looked back and forth between Aleks and Marta, then quickly turned to look at Anie, who stared back amusedly.

"Go ahead, tell her about yourself. She'll find out eventually. She's Mikallai, she always gets what she wants."

"As long as she doesn't want the bottle trick." Chris muttered under his breath before looking back at Marta, who was still giving him her undivided, and thoroughly amused, attention.

"Have you ever heard of a badger?"

"Um, no."

"Oh, don't tell her about that," Anie interjected excitedly, "tell her about the pirates."

"No, tell her about the...band." Aleks said, getting into the swing of things.

"Or about you and your parent's camping trips."

"Or maybe..."

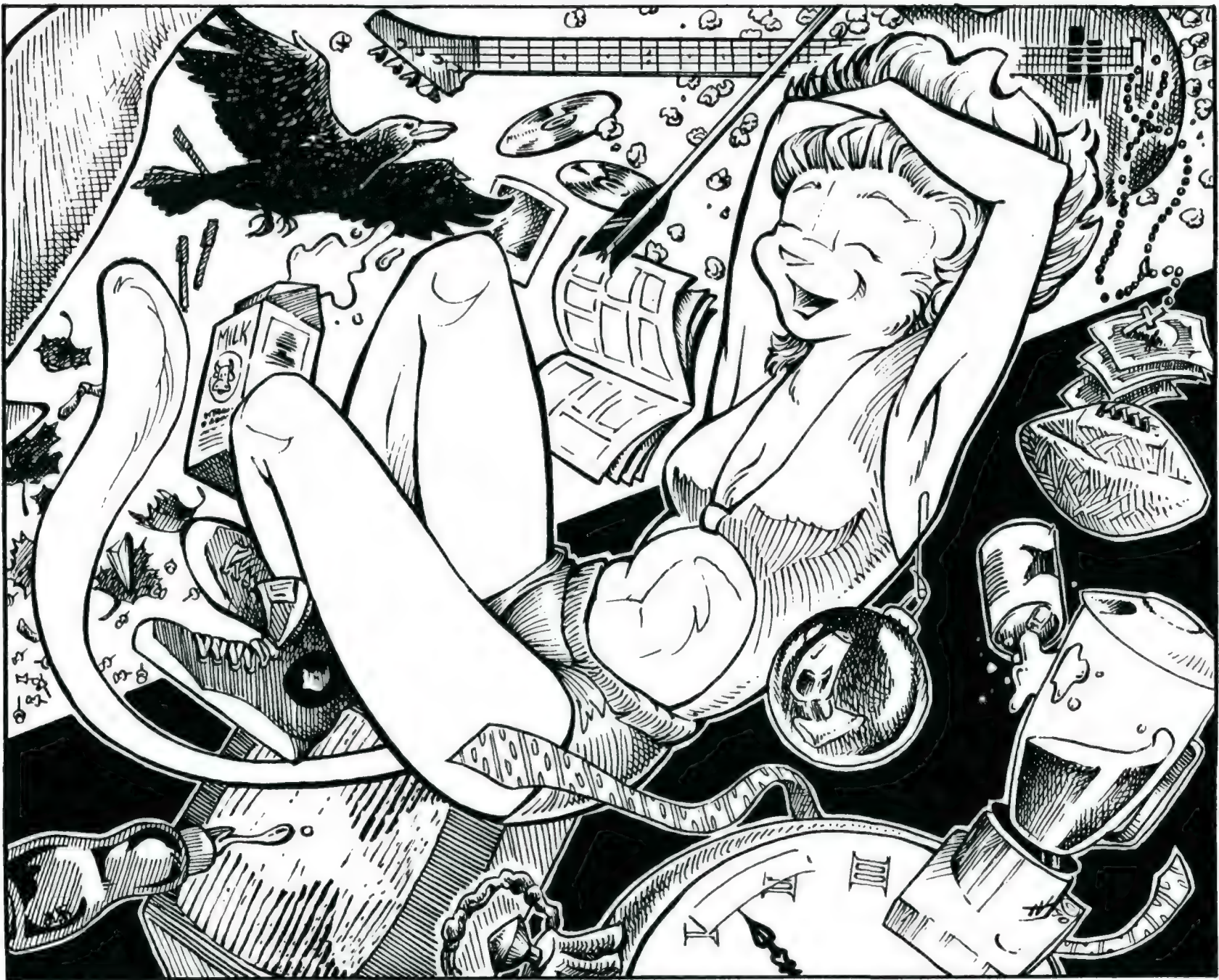
"Or maybe I will tell the stories." Christopher cut in, ending the tennis match of ideas between Aleks and Anielia. "After all its my life. I know it better than anybody."

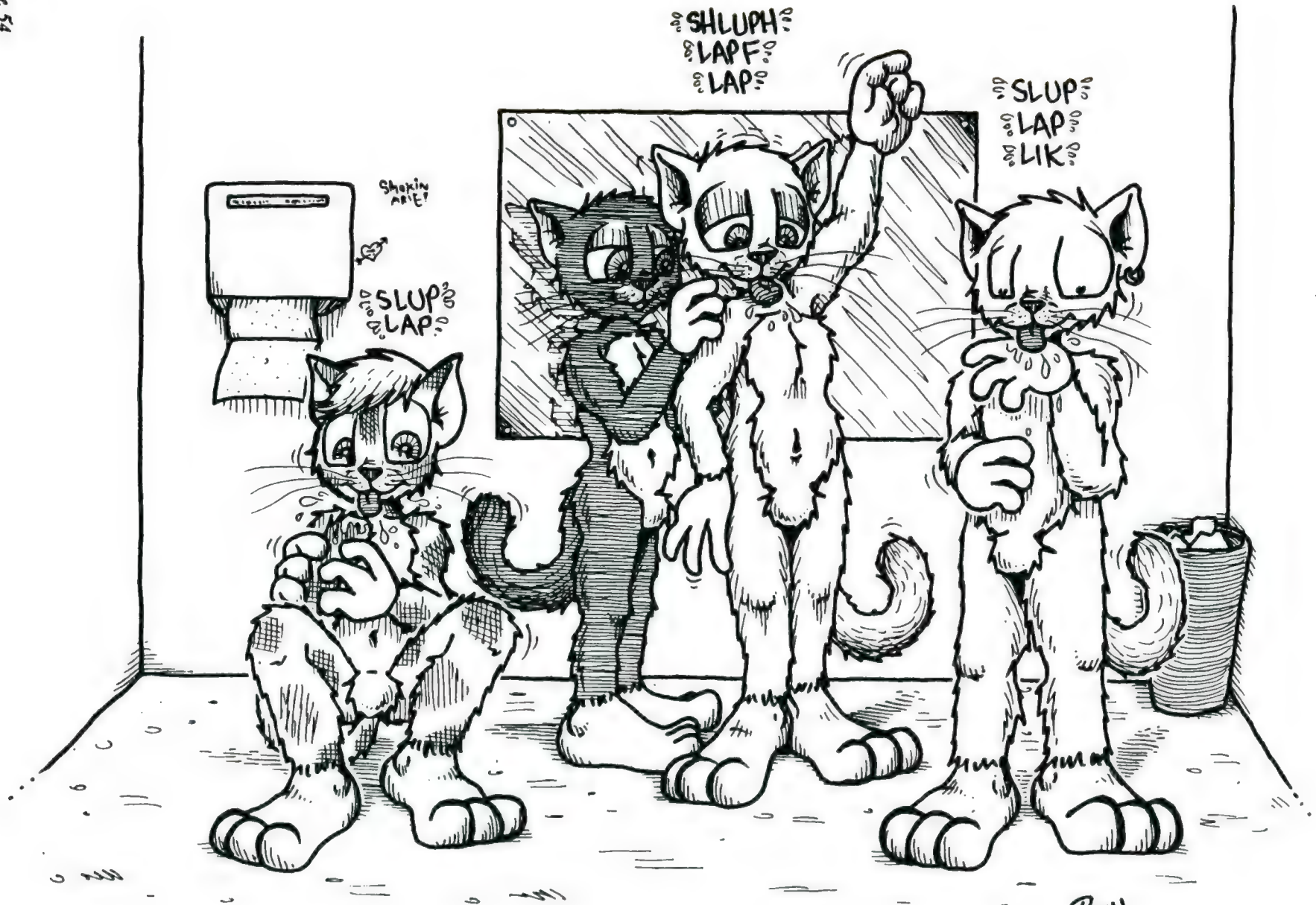
Chris sat back on the *cassai* with a thoughtful look on his face that slowly changed to a disgusted frown.

"All right," he said with a sigh, looking around at them, "where should I start..." ☹

end







"GROOMIN' IN TH' BOY'S ROOM"

Bill
FHTS 90

satisfaction guaranteed

by David White

"I'm unhappy," said Marc Palti. "I'm unhappy, I feel like shit, there's fur in my mouth and I ITCH!" He began to scratch furiously around his neck and another thin cloud of fine fur drifted up into the air of Honeyman Station's ancient great hall. Chrystal winced and opened a sideboard, rummaging about in it for a moment. She crossed the hall, a stiff massage brush in each hand, passing through the bright afternoon sunlight and beneath the displays of banners and weapons both antique and modern.

"Stop that. You'll start yourself bleeding," she chided. "Lean back and let me help."

He did as he was asked and Chrys set to work with the brushes, bearing down hard and bringing away thousands of soft gray-brown hairs from his coat.

"You should count yourself fortunate, Marc," she said. "Half the Volan have to suffer through a full body molt. Your half of the line only molt from the neck up."

"Rrrrrrrr," he groaned. "Harder." Chrys pushed down and brushed through his pelt in long strokes, pausing only to clear the brushes of fur. After twenty minutes of vigorous work, her arms aching, she gave up. She'd pulled out enough fur to knit herself a new mate and there were still thick clumps to be seen.

"Thanks, love," he said, his voice now soft and calm. "That helps. Still itches, though."

"Marc, you're impossible. You won't use your prescription because you say the smell makes you sick, so you carp for six weeks while you itch and shed on everything." She tousled his hair lovingly. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Shoot me," he replied wearily. "Please. Dimitri won't throw you out."

"Ooooo, I'd rather be thrown out than live under the same roof with your brother," she responded heatedly. "He's always so flippant, so...so irresponsible. And he talks to himself."

"Chrys, irresponsible rodents do not have a personal incomes of thirty million kroner a year. Most people in his league are shot through with ulcers and dead before they're eighty. At least Dee enjoys what he's doing."

"That's what I mean!" Chrys retorted. "It seems that all he thinks about is making money, more than any six families could spend. He could take time to do some worthwhile things, he could..."

"Whoa, whoa, WHOA," Marc said. "Dimitri does have other interests. Hell, Chrys, haven't you ever wondered why the nobility does *anything*? Most are well enough off that they don't have to work. We can do what we want, or what we believe in. I love to fly, and I believe in protecting our people. Dimitri loves to make money. But that's not all he does."

• • •

Dimitri Palti snapped his hands with increasing speed in the simple exacting pattern. Each fraction of a second, he batted a small hardball back across the space before his eyes, maintaining the complex equilibrium of zero G juggling. Without pause, he shifted the spheres' trajectory, bouncing them off the distant overhead and back to his hands. Finally, he picked off each ball as it approached and stuffed them in a pocket of his shipboard jacket. Concluding his practice, he pushed off a bulkhead and floated over to a computer terminal.

"Waldo, gravity startup routine. Go."

The ship's computer dutifully made all the preparations to restore the gravity field, then flashed the screen with the message, "Grav startup routine safety stop. Alert all personnel to brace for 1G deck relative. Hit any key to continue." Dee planted his feet on the deck, flexed his knees and tapped the space bar. The field mashed him pleasantly in the direction that was commonly acknowledged as down, and he set off for the main control. He took his time about it, performing a brief underway inspection as he went. His ship could have accommodated thirty people, but on this trip the cabins were stuffed with merchandise,

tools, rare goods and his asteroid prospecting equipment.

A brief scan of the bridge instruments confirmed that he hadn't hit anything bigger than he was and that the life support was working as advertised. The scanners advised that there was nothing of interest out there. At least, not yet. The fringe of the Frontier was three weeks behind him, the stars ahead were charted as "Not explored in detail," and he was enjoying himself no end. He should. He was on vacation.

This was the life! he thought. Get out here with a load of trade goods. Look over a few likely drift rocks and get some mileage out of your mining tools. Cut deals face to face, where a few hundred kroner worth of goods made the difference between a first rate bargain and getting skizzled. Forget about the lops who squeeze their balls to get another ten million out of a deal. Out here, it was the deal that counted, not what you made on it.

Of course, Dee Palti attributed much of his wealth to his ability to quickly determine what the other guy wanted. Not what he said he wanted, but what he *really* wanted. This sort of face to face bargaining sharpened his wits. In deep space trading, the other fellow sometimes just wanted to get the better of you. It was often enough if you simply let him think he did.

Waldo whistled a gentle alert. On the long range sensor a vessel appeared, cutting across his path. Type: Unknown! Dee switched on the broad spectrum transponder. Time to go to work.

Hirshk rotated his head from the bridge main screen towards the duty roster and checked the crew status. Hirshk was still captain, and Chaltz was still on his rising curve and had become scut cleaner. If Chaltz's metabolism continued to accelerate they would have to place him in with the females and leave him to rut. That would remove him from duty for three to four weeks. A serious loss, since Chaltz was, otherwise, their most talented scientist. Of course, if Chaltz peaked today, his metabolism would begin to decline. He would be able to use his vast store of knowledge, now trapped in a brain that functioned too fast to access it. If he slowed enough, he would become captain, relieving Hirshk to become first officer.

Hirshk settled back in his chair, his golden eyes closing, his long neck bowing down to a resting position. Any Gaak at his metabolic rate rested all he could.

Hirshk's forebears, thick tailed venomous lizards, had controlled their metabolism through the simple mechanism of keeping in or out of the desert sun. If only it were as simple now. The onset of sentience and increased size complicated and confused the once simple mechanism.

Now rates were affected by temperature, hormones, food intake, season, mating period, and so on.

The new third officer bounded up to the captain and spoke entirely to fast for comfort.

"Captain, we have been signaled by a small vessel. It appears to be a mammalian ship."

The captain made a quick decision. Gosst, the third officer, was beginning to wonder if dinner time would arrive before the decision did.

"Approach the vessel," Hirshk said slowly. "Make appropriate contact noises. Board the ship and take the mammal things alive."

"Excusemesir, Didyou say alive?"

"Speak slower. Yes, alive and intact. Boarding party will wear full vacuum suits. The furred things will be kept on their own ship. Do not foul our vessel with the reek of them. And have their gravity generators shut down. This is unpleasant enough without their oppressive gravity." The time it took the captain to give his orders had moved the ships appreciably closer together. But the fast moving crew carried out the commands with dispatch and icy efficiency.

Dimitri completed his approach to the big ship and watched the gangway snap into place on his midships docking collar. A ship that size would have all kinds of goodies to swap. If they were really hungry for something he was carrying, Dee stood to make a good profit. Then again, if they were hauling something nicely exotic, he could make a killing. He hopped to his feet and hustled down to the airlock.

He paused at the hatch to tuck in his shirt tail. He had selected his clothing, a colorful lightweight shirt and plain shorts, to look both relaxed and off-guard. As he reached out to the control panel, he fixed his face in a friendly grin and said softly to himself, "Well, whoever you are, prepare to have your clock cleaned."

The hatch slid back and he started across the gangway. The other ship's crew were very large. Maybe 500 pounds apiece, not counting the environmental suits they wore. Those suits gave him an edge in the comfort area and would allow him easier movement. The stunner actually didn't hurt. By definition, it couldn't. But it did cause a remarkable change of perspective. Dee watched in helpless fascination as the deck tilted sharply upwards and rocketed to meet his face.

Dimitri woke up floating in a corner of the chart room, his ship's navigation office. He pulled himself over to the door. Locked from the outside. He pushed quickly over to the navigation terminal. It was dark and didn't respond to his voice. Waldo had locked up tight when they'd been boarded, as programmed. Dee decided against using the voice activation mode until he had a better idea of what was going on. He floated over to the reference instruments, a panel of old style inertial based navigational instruments independent of the computer, intended for manual use in an emergency. He extended the star sight and swiveled it to see the other ship. It was still alongside with the gangway and a grapple in place. It also had a gun turret fixed on him. No sudden moves, Dee, he told himself. Unless they're VERY sudden.

The hatch slid back and two of the lizards entered, stooping and scrunching to get through the door. They could not have stood to their full height aboard Dee's ship. The first was quick, almost twitchy in his movements. The second entered as if he were submerged in molasses. They were still in full suits and wore voice translators, cheap ones that made their voices tinny and hollow. Dee could still see their mouths move behind their faceplates. The translation lag between the two reminded him of a poorly dubbed imported video.

"This was the only one aboard?" came the ponderous voice of the slow one.

"Yes, captain," the other replied more normally. "The ship has been thoroughly searched. There are no others."

"Scuse me," said Dee, "I'm Dimitri Palti. I'm a solo trader. I think you'll find that most anything you want here is negotiable. I'll even sell the ship for a good price." Yeah, he thought. Like a quick escape route.

They ignored him completely. "Third officer, secure the furred thing," the captain said.

"Ahhhh, sir, we have no appropriate restraints. We were not prepared to take prisoners on this mission."

"Shhhhhssssss," said the captain, his dismay easily crossing all language barriers. "Be creative, Gosst, in spite of your status. Use tape."

Gosst at least could anticipate his captain's wishes. He produced a thick roll of Dee's own turbo tape and approached him. Any thought Dee had of fighting back evaporated in an instant. The lizard was lightning fast in zero G, and his grip on Dee's arms made him think the bones were being crushed. In a few moments the powerfully sticky stuff had been wrapped around his wrists and ankles, right into his fur, and secured to the bulkhead grabhandles. He was spread-eagled with his face mashed into the plating. Not his best negotiating position, but he

had been in worse. One of them whacked him with a injector. He felt a warm feeling, then his heart began a strong, unnaturally steady rhythm.

"Furred thing," the captain rumbled, "your kind are a corruption. Filth. You still live only because we need data from you. We recently destroyed one of your reconnaissance carriers. They coordinated attacks by their fighter craft at great distances using a form of communication which is undetectable. You will tell us the nature of this system."

"Now, wait a minute," Dee protested, "I told you I'm an independent trader. I don't know anything about military communications."

"False," the captain eventually responded. "Your documents reveal you hold a military commission."

"I'm a Ryo," Dee said. "We draft everyone. One hundred percent conscription. I served three years in the Field Militia, but that was a long time ago. I only got the commission because I passed the tests."

"You therefore have knowledge of military systems." The captain insisted. "You will reveal the nature of the undetectable system."

"Are you sure you just didn't miss scanning a comm band?" Dee asked.

The captain ignored him. "Third officer, hurt it."

A lance of intense pain shot through Dee's back. He expected to see a steel spike push out of his chest. There was no thought of biting back the scream.

"You will not question. Reveal the nature of the system."

There is a grave misconception that if someone experiences enough pain, they will pass out. Not so. That's why surgeons use anesthetic. Because without it, just as in the early days of medicine, a patient will be awake, and screaming, through the entire procedure. Just as Dee Palti was until the captain decided to take a break from the noise and had him released to recover alone.

Dee pushed off the floor and into the chartroom head, turned on the suction and heaved his lunch. He rinsed the foul taste from his mouth and stared for a moment at the bedraggled face in the mirror. With great reluctance, he turned his back to the mirror and braced himself to check the damage. He gritted his teeth and looked.

No blood.

Stunned, he gingerly pulled his shirt off over his head, still half expecting to see his own pulsing organs. Only there

were no wounds. Except where his fur had been ripped out by the tape, and a bruise where the third officer had slugged him out of frustration, he was uninjured.

That's a fine thing! he thought, more angry than relieved. Get tortured for military secrets you don't have, and don't even get any heroic scars to take back.

If I get back.

OK, don't lose it now, Dee. What are the options?

A) Talk. B) Go mad. C) Die. D) All of the above.

Unfortunately, it looks good for option C). That hypo had been filled with Cattreosynthine, an anti-shock drug. Make D) read: All of the above in screaming agony that they can make last indefinitely.

The worst thing is, there is a new communications system small enough to put in a carrier fighter, but it's not in general production. Even though it's classified, I knew they were working on a small delta band transceiver. Hell, I was asked to bid the contract. Can't give that up. No good on option A).

Try another tact. Can't escape. They'll blast me to tatters in an instant. Can't fight. They're too strong for hand to hand, and I can't get to the bridge or armory for a weapon. Improvise a weapon? See hand to hand. Dammit! A ship as big as theirs would have delta band receivers. They would have heard something! Maybe the whole communications business is a blind, and they're actually after something else. But what could the scale shedding devils really want?

The door slid open to admit another lizard. He moved quickly and with the grace of a swimmer. With his bulk, Dee thought, he'd be immobile at one G. He drifted far too close to Dimitri's face before speaking.

"I am Choosak of the Gaak. You are a flying squirrel, the species Cha-cha-beach?"

"Sasabish!" The frustrated rodent said intently. "Can't anyone pronounce that properly? *Sasabish!*"

"Saw-za-beej?"

Dimitri sighed deeply, too tired to argue a point of pride. "Volan. We call ourselves the Volan."

"Captain Hirshk has sent me to appeal to you to spare yourself further pain and reveal the nature of the communications system," Choosak said.

"I see," Dee replied, "your captain works me over, then you offer sympathy and a kindly ear to see if I'll talk."

"Yes, that is his intention."

"Well, I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about." And you shouldn't admit your purpose, Dee thought. You're not really good at this, are you? "Why are you picking on me? We're not at war and I'm no threat to you."

"The Gaak have only recently contacted mammalian creatures," Choosak said. "As far as attractiveness goes, your life form falls somewhere between hairy spiders and gum disease. As Hirshk said, filth. Even so, you mammals have proven a difficult opponent, and every encounter has produced new surprises and more questions. The battle Hirshk mentioned lasted several days and required an entire flotilla to destroy one small scout carrier. It is necessary for us to understand the system you used to coordinate your attacks so that we may continue to rid our skies of your infestation."

"It is not so important if you tell us about the communication system," Choosak went on. "If you will not tell or do not know, we will capture others until we find one who does know and can be made to tell." The lizard's attention was drawn to the navigation instruments. He took them in with a sweep of his eyes, finding most of them familiar. Then he moved to the chart table and gazed intently at one of Dee's antique instruments.

"What is this?" Choosak demanded.

"It's..."

The question stopped Dee dead in his tracks. What the hell does he mean "what is it?" Dee thought. "It's... decorative. It doesn't work in zero G," he said cautiously.

Choosak gently pulled the item loose from its restraint and shook it, the contents floating into a cloud in their transparent container. "Now I remember this. Why do you keep something that doesn't work?"

"I told you, you need a gravity field to make it work."

"No, no, no," Choosak said irritably. "Why do you bother with an intervalometer. They don't work."

"You mean to say you've never seen a sandglass?"

"Oh yes. Sandglasses, sunpointers, watergauges. All those different intervalometers. Its all a hoax like perpetual motion. They don't work."

"You don't have any means of measuring time?"

"Of course. Calendars." He raised his head, clearly reciting from memory. "'The passage of time is affected by the observers location, velocity and metabolic status.' Do you

not know this?"

Dimitri didn't respond at once. He was boggled. "How do you manage to meet anyone for lunch?" he asked tentatively.

"Don't be absurd. If you tell someone to meet you for a meal and you arrive first, what do you do?"

"I wait."

"So do we. Wait until others arrive, or finish preparations. You are in the military. Most of what you do is wait. As for other things, the hierarchy of status permits the transfer of orders from those with metabolic rates slow enough to think to those with rates fast enough to take action. I was captain before Hirshk. Before that I was in engine repair. And before that I was in rut, I think. Hard to remember anything when rates are high. Critical thinking and higher knowledge are only accessible when metabolic rates are low."

Choosak suddenly seemed to realize he was telling more than he was learning. "Enough of school house lessons. You have no wish to discuss the communication system?"

"I told you, I don't know anything about any communication system."

"Very well. I will inform the captain."

"You don't seem very disappointed."

"The captain will allow me to dissect you if he decides you will not provide information, as long as I do it here. It is an opportunity. We so rarely take prisoners."

Dee gulped. "You mean I'm to be killed and dissected?"

"Oh, no! I cannot allow you to die. I have to observe the internal organs functioning."

Dee was appalled. "Don't you have any idea of how painful that is!"

"I've done it several times before to other furred things. I assure you, it doesn't hurt me a bit. Thanks for your concern." Choosak wheeled about and floated quickly out the door, sealing it behind him.

Dimitri floated away from his handhold goggle-eyed and wrapped his arms over his ears. Forget all previous options, he thought. Option B) has been exercised. I've started a swim to Tashket. Cached nutshells. Gone to gnaw rocks.

It's crazy! Without a constant of time, you couldn't build the most rudimentary electronics. You couldn't even navigate. You had to have clocks to build a technological

civilization!

Didn't you?

It's got to be their metabolism. As their metabolic rate changes, each of them perceives time at a different speed. They wouldn't even be able to agree on where to set their clocks in the first place, let alone agree on what speed they'd run. They missed completely the classic concept of regular, constant time and went straight into relativity. That's why they think there's an undetectable communication system. Those poor guys in the carrier would have just agreed to attack at a certain time, and hit 'em. The lizards would never figure out how it was done. And they'll never believe me if I tell them.

Never mind that now, he went on. Let the academics argue it. I've got to find a way to get out of here. They'll be back as soon as Choosak reports. There's got to be a way to get home with this information without committing treason.

A vicious smile grew on Dimitri's face. That was what they expected. It's what they want from me. They asked for it up front. Communications. So what if it means treason? They want communications, I'll give them communications. It's time to cut the deal.

• • •

Hirshk floated into the chart room, followed closely by the third officer, who seemed eager to resume his duties. Dimitri waited with his back to them, toying with the sandglass.

"Gosst..." the captain began.

"There's no need for that," Dimitri said as he turned to face them.

The captain fixed him with his expressionless, slitted eyes.

"I told you when you came aboard, I'm a solo trader. My business is making deals. I'll make one for the information you want."

"What is this deal?" Hirshk asked.

"I'll give you the information you want if you release me and my ship unharmed."

The captain considered a long moment. A lightning fast decision, considering.

"Very well. I agree. Disclose the information."

"I can't tell you anything about the operating principles. They're too highly classified. But I have one of the transmitters on board. They're sometimes issued to independent

traders for emergency use."

"Where is it and how is it activated?" Hirshk demanded.

"I keep it in the armory. Third shelf of locker twelve. It's the most secure part of the ship. As for activation, I'll have to do it. The transmitter is a one time only unit. It's a limitation of the system. If you'll take me down there..."

"You will remain here. Gosst. Go to the armory and retrieve the instrument. Take a detail and force the door if necessary."

The officer hurried off. Hirshk stared at Dimitri a long time before speaking.

"Other furred things perished after long interrogation and did not reveal any information. Why do you reveal it?"

Any regrets Dimitri may have felt vanished with those words. He felt only a simple, ruthless resolve to make the deal and escape. He shrugged and answered grimly. "The others didn't know what I know. And I don't want to end up spread all over your vivisectionist's table."

Hirshk considered this in silence. It seemed a long time before Gosst returned carrying a suitcase sized object.

"You will not touch the transmitter," Hirshk said. "Describe the activation procedure."

"There's a warm up period between activation and transmission, so you may as well activate it here."

"That was my intention. I do not intend to trust a traitor."

Dee let the insult pass. Anger would do no good now. "There's a control panel at the other end. See the ahh... the numeric indicator? Set it for one two point zero zero. There are two red remission diopter switches on either side of the transmitter. Push them both together."

Gosst followed each instruction with deliberate caution. The captain's gaze never wavered.

"Now, find the green, rectangular activation switch, and push it."

"STOP," said Hirshk sharply. "What message will it transmit?"

"I haven't programmed one, so it will just broadcast a carrier wave."

"Activate it," Hirshk ordered. Gosst did so. "We will take it aboard to our laboratory and analyze the transmissions and be sure we have not been deceived. Then we will dissect the...instrument."

They departed with the device contentedly purring.

Dimitri pulled himself to the chart table and locked his hands to the grab handles. He felt a growing apprehension. He had caught the captain's slip of the tongue. If the captain backed out of the deal... Too late to worry now. For good or ill, the deal was made. Dimitri looked over his shoulder and stared for a while at the old instruments.

"Waldo? Password Hilraldy Shimata. Activate and check systems."

The screen came to life with the colorful startup graphics.

"Waldo..."

A violent shock made the air thump through the ship. Dimitri felt it in the soles of his feet and through the grab handles.

"ESCAPE FOUR! GO!"

The engines started in a fast but dangerous emergency routine. The gangway was disposed of through the simple expedient of firing the explosive bolts and jettisoning the entire docking collar. The grapple point went the same way. The flight director set a course directly away from the Gaak ship and applied maximum power. With the gravity field off, there were no acceleration dampers. Dimitri hung on to the grab handles as his own inertia strove to tear him loose.

"View aft," he ordered.

The Gaak ship was starting to drift, switching ends. The guns pointed at crazy angles. No lights showed.

"Waldo, reduce speed. Make an escape jump. Go." In a few moments the ship was light days away. He took a deep breath and willed stress from his muscles.

"Display nearest Ryo military bases on the bridge."

Dimitri pulled the access panel next to door and eventually overrode the locks. He threw on his shipboard jacket and took his time drifting lazily to the bridge, stabilizing himself with his wide, flat tail. Using it as a rudder as his distant ancestors had.

The information he had requested was waiting when he arrived. There were two outposts on the edge of the Frontier, but a large Air Service staging area was just three days further on, and there was a better chance of meeting a warship going that way.

"Waldo, any sign of pursuit?"

The screen informed him in the negative. That was no

surprise, considering the deal they'd made. The Gaak had no idea what the new transmitter would look like. It could easily look like mining equipment. And if I'd told them what they had, he thought, they wouldn't have believed me. They'd never buy the concept of a time bomb.

Dimitri ordered the course settings and set Waldo to making the preparations for the translight jump. He also ordered the gravity field startup routine and began a quick check of cargo spaces from the loadmaster's panel.

A sound that didn't belong drew his attention. It was a sound that belonged in the engine room. A soft growl that accompanied the movement of precision equipment preparing to perform its function. Annoyed, he looked around to check on the likely malfunction.

Choosak was just floating through the door. There was blood in his mouth from being knocked around during acceleration and he was displaying every flesh rending tooth in his head. The sound Dee had heard was the nerve inductor that Choosak held before him like a dagger.

Idiot! Dee thought. He must have come aboard as soon as the captain left. I should have checked the ship. I should have at least grabbed a weapon.

Now Choosak was between Dimitri and the door. The only weapons were in the emergency locker, next to the door. Waldo's screen lit up. "Grav startup routine safety stop...Hit any key to continue." There was no way to get past Choosak to the keyboard either.

Dimitri backed up, bracing against the control panel. Choosak was drifting slowly forward, on guard, allowing no chance for escape. Dee looked for anything that could help. A noisemaker, a light switch. And beyond Choosak, Waldo's screen pleaded "hit any key."

Dee pushed himself roughly behind the loadmaster's chair, putting it between them. The back of the chair shoved the jacket pocket and its contents hard into his ribs. He knew at once it still contained his juggling kit. He quickly pulled one of the balls out and took aim, then gave it a forceful underhand toss.

Choosak's eyes tracked the sphere that sailed well over his head. It bounced lightly against the overhead and came down somewhere on Waldo's keyboard. The gravity field established itself a moment later, squashing Choosak to the deck with a force three times what his people had evolved in. He tried to push himself upright as Dimitri leaped over him, landed on his back, and scrambled to the emergency locker. He was still trying to get up when Dee's pistol shot blew through the back of his helmet, converting his faceplate into an abstract painting of Dead Lizard in Red.

Marc idly scratched and concluded his story. "Dimitri got back and reported. With the information that the Gaak had no concept of regular time, they were beaten in every subsequent engagement. They finally retreated to their home world. They're still there under quarantine and observation."

"I remember reading about that some years ago," Chrys said. "I never knew Dimitri was involved."

"He didn't want it publicized. Mainly because he didn't want it widely known what he did on his vacations. Most people still think he lounges around one of the resorts on Skand," Marc said.

"Wait a minute," said Chrys suspiciously. "You said that last Gaak had one of the nerve inductors. What'd Dimitri do with it?"

Marc smiled sheepishly and paused for a brisk scratch under his chin before answering. "He's got it. His research labs have been trying to convert the circuitry to stimulate the brain's pleasure centers. He says he'll have it in about a year."

"AH-HA," Chrys shouted. "I knew he'd find some money in it! You see what I mean about..."

Marc held up his hand to interrupt. "He's been saying that every year since he got back. Meantime, the modification that has worked *has* formed the basis of the latest neural anesthetic in surgeries and autodoocs."

"I see," said Chrys quietly.

"And he's been providing them to hospitals and frontier clinics *at cost*."

"Oh," said Chrys, now thoroughly humbled.

"Plus six percent." Marc concluded, no longer able to contain himself.

"YOU UNSPEAKABLE, UNPRINTABLE, UNPRINCIPLED CHIPTOOTH!" Chrys shrieked. She grabbed one of the pillows and swung hard, literally making the fur fly. Marc's dissolving winter pelt flew up and drifted in the sunlight of the great hall like a last flurry of spring snow. Chrys huffed a moment and glared at Marc.

"GOTCHA!" Marc roared, and laughed. Chrys wound up the pillow for another swing. It was worth it. ☺

THE END





Monika ©89



KRETEMAN
©1984



10/89

HELLO. ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF... I AM CHRIS GRANT, AUTHOR OF THIS HERE "EMPIRES" STORY. WHY AM I HERE? WELL, TO EXPLAIN A FEW THINGS. FIRST OFF, I'D LIKE TO APOLOGIZE TO MY READERS FOR THE LACK OF A NEW "EMPIRES: ACE OF SPADES" STORY IN THIS ISSUE.



I WONT PULL YOUR CHAIN... I'VE BEEN IN CONTACT WITH SEVERAL OF MY READERS, AND YOU ARE ALL PRETTY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE. THERE IS NO STORY THIS ISSUE BECAUSE THE INKING IS NOT DONE. WHY? BECAUSE I DUMPED SIXTEEN PAGES ON MY INKER A BIT TOO CLOSE TO THE DEADLINE.

SO, INSTEAD, I BRING YOU...

EMPIRES

BEHIND THE SCENES

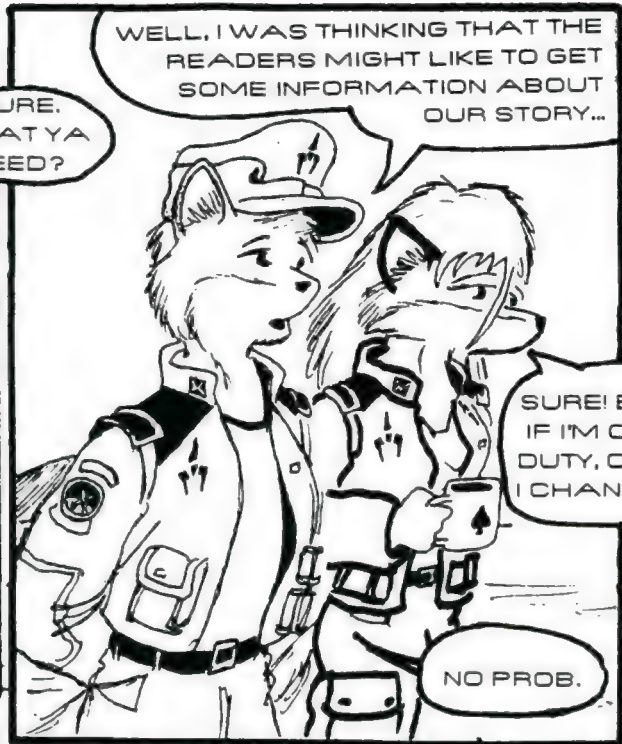
WRITTEN AND DRAWN
BY CHRIS GRANT
TYPESETTING BY LANCE RUND.





HEY, CHIEF, NO ORDERS THIS ISH. WHAT'S UP?
SOME LEAVE TIME. BARONA, COULD YOU HELP ME OUT?

SURE. WHAT YA NEED?

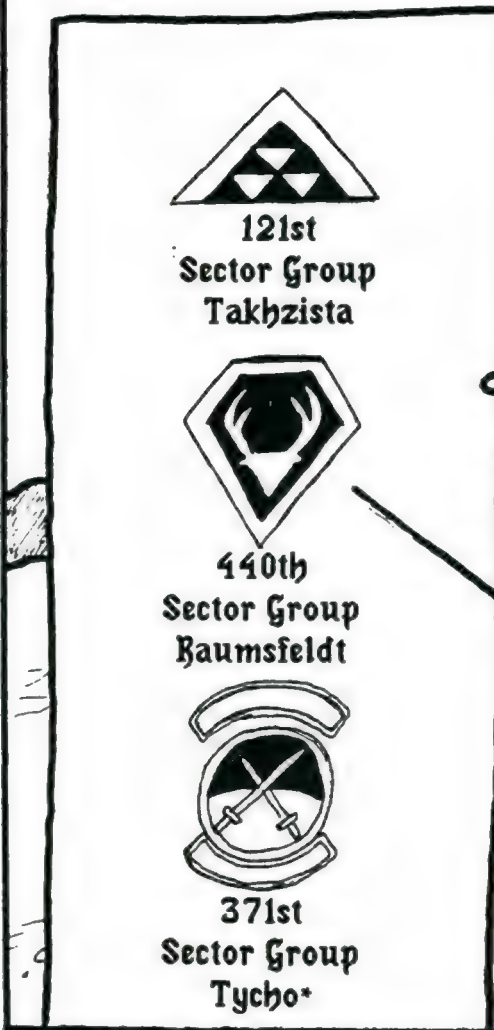


WELL, I WAS THINKING THAT THE READERS MIGHT LIKE TO GET SOME INFORMATION ABOUT OUR STORY...

SURE! BUT IF I'M OFF DUTY, CAN I CHANGE?

NO PROB.

WHAT I'LL DO IS EXPLAIN THE UNIFORM WHILE SHE'S CHANGING. THE THING I GET THE MOST QUESTIONS ON IS THE ARM PATCH. WHAT DOES IT STAND FOR? WELL, I'LL TELL YA. SECTOR GROUPS. NOW... WHAT IS A SECTOR GROUP?




121st
Sector Group
Takhzista


440th
Sector Group
Baumsfeldt


371st
Sector Group
Tycho*



A SECTOR GROUP IS AN INDEPENDENT MILITARY COMMAND THAT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SECURITY OF A PARTICULAR SECTOR. A GROUP'S SIZE IS DETERMINED BY THE POPULATION WITHIN THE SECTOR, AND ITS PROXIMITY TO A "HOT SPOT".

THERE ARE SEVERAL DOZEN SECTOR COMMANDS IN THE CENTRAL GALACTIC ALLIANCE.

* THE 341st IS THE UNIT IN THE EMPIRES NOVEL, CURRENTLY ON HIATUS FROM ITS 3rd REWRITE

A SECTOR GROUP IS MADE UP OF AT LEAST ONE BASE MOON OR CAPITOL PLANET, AND A WARGROUP, WHICH IS A CARRIER AND ESCORT FLEET...



ADDITIONAL CRUISERS AND DESTROYERS ARE ADDED AS THE NEED ARISES. THERE ARE ALSO ENTIRE SECTOR FLEETS THAT ARE NOT ATTACHED TO ANY GIVEN SECTOR. THEY ROVE AROUND AND GO WHERE THEY ARE NEEDED.



I SEEM TO HAVE LOST THE SUBJECT, HUH?



...JOB IDENTIFIERS! THERE ARE LITTLE SYMBOLS FOR DIFFERENT SERVICE BRANCHES, SUCH AS INFANTRY, ARMOR, ARTILLERY, MAINTENANCE, SUPPLY, AND SO ON.

IN FUTURE EPISODES, I PLAN ON DEVOTING A PAGE HERE AND THERE TO TECHNICAL EXPLANATIONS OF VARIOUS ITEMS. PICTURES OF THESE DIFFERENT SYMBOLS WILL BE ONE.

UNIFORMS. YES.

ANOTHER QUESTION IS, WHAT ARE THESE LITTLE COLLAR TABS? IT IS QUITE SIMPLE...



PROMISE.



ANOTHER THING I WILL EXPLAIN IN THE FUTURE IS THE RANK BAR, HERE.



AND THIS IS AN AR-71 BLASTER RIFLE. IT... OH! HIYA, BARONA...



HEY. I SAW THESE GUYS HANGIN' OUT IN THE HALL, SO I THOUGHT I'D INVITE THEM IN.

GREAT!

HEY, BOSS. HOT ENOUGH FOR YA?

PAINT PAINT



FOLKS, I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE SQUAD-SERGEANT HOLLAND. SHE'S A STAR IN MY NEW EMPIRES SHOW, "BORDERLINE", COMING SOON IN THE PAGES OF *Mythagoras*!

HI!

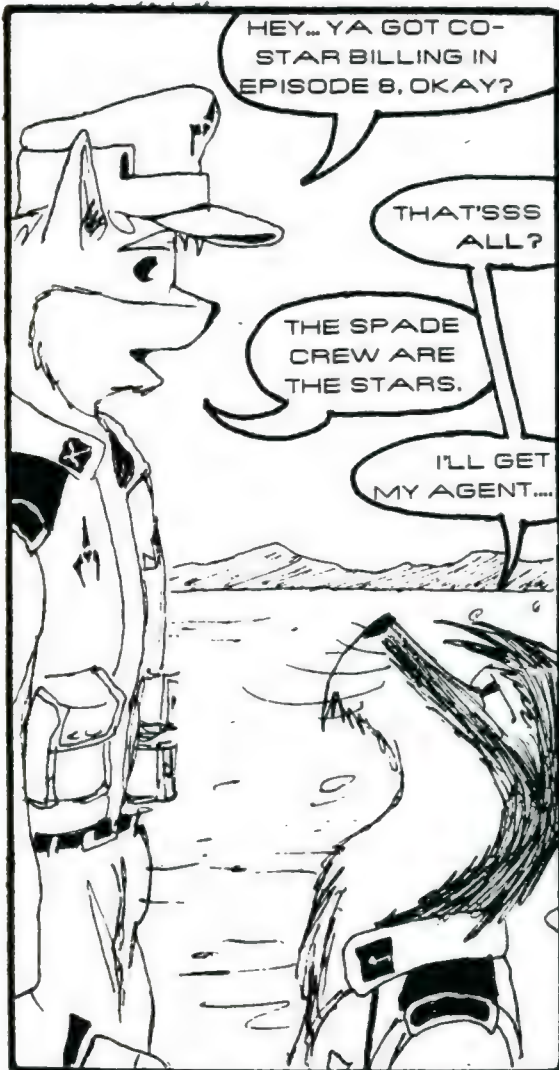




AND EVERYONE'S MET LT. KHUUAN... HE'S THE COMMANDER OF THE SHARK-FACED TORPEDO BOMBER IN EPISODE 3. KHUUAN IS A "WANNI", BEST COMPARED TO A SABLE.

HOW YA DOIN'?

fine.
WHY NOT I AND MY CREW IN MORE EPISSODESS?



HEY... YA GOT CO-STAR BILLING IN EPISODE 8, OKAY?

THAT'SSS ALL?

THE SPADE CREW ARE THE STARS.

I'LL GET MY AGENT...



I'LL GET MY ERASER. EVEN MORRIGAN DOESN'T GET A PRIVATE DRESSING ROOM.

CO-SSSTAR BILLING'SS COOL..



WHAT!? I JUST MOVED ALL MY STUFF IN THERE! WHO IS IT? WHO DO I GOTTA SHARE WITH?

HOLLAND.



I hope she's as tidy as she is loud.

I will invest in some earplugs.

-SIGH-



SHE'S A CENTRAL!

IN A DIFFERENT STORY.



I WANT A PRIVATE ROOM. NOW.

not enough studio space.

THAT PISTOL WON'T WORK, Y'KNOW.



WHY NOT?

'CUZ WHEN I DREW IT, I DIDNT PUT IN THE MAGNETIC FLUX CONVERSION CHAMBER.

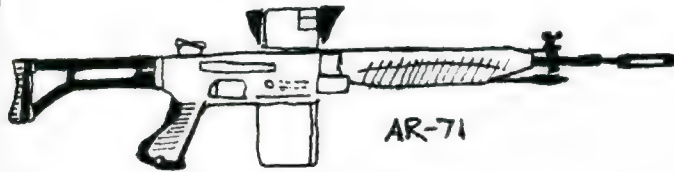
oh.



WHICH BRINGS UP ANOTHER POINT... ARE THE WEAPONS IN EMPIRES BLASTERS OR BULLET-SLINGERS?

GRUMP!

THESE ARE BLASTERS. NOT LASERS, OR PHASERS, BUT BLASTERS. THE ACTUAL MILITARY TERM IS ENERGY WEAPON. NEARLY ALL RIFLES, PISTOLS, AND VEHICLE-MOUNTED OR CREW-SERVED WEAPONS ARE BLASTERS. EXCEPTIONS ARE SHOTGUNS AND SOME SNIPER RIFLES. A PERSON CAN OPT FOR A BULLET-THROWING PISTOL, UNDER SOME CIRCUMSTANCES.



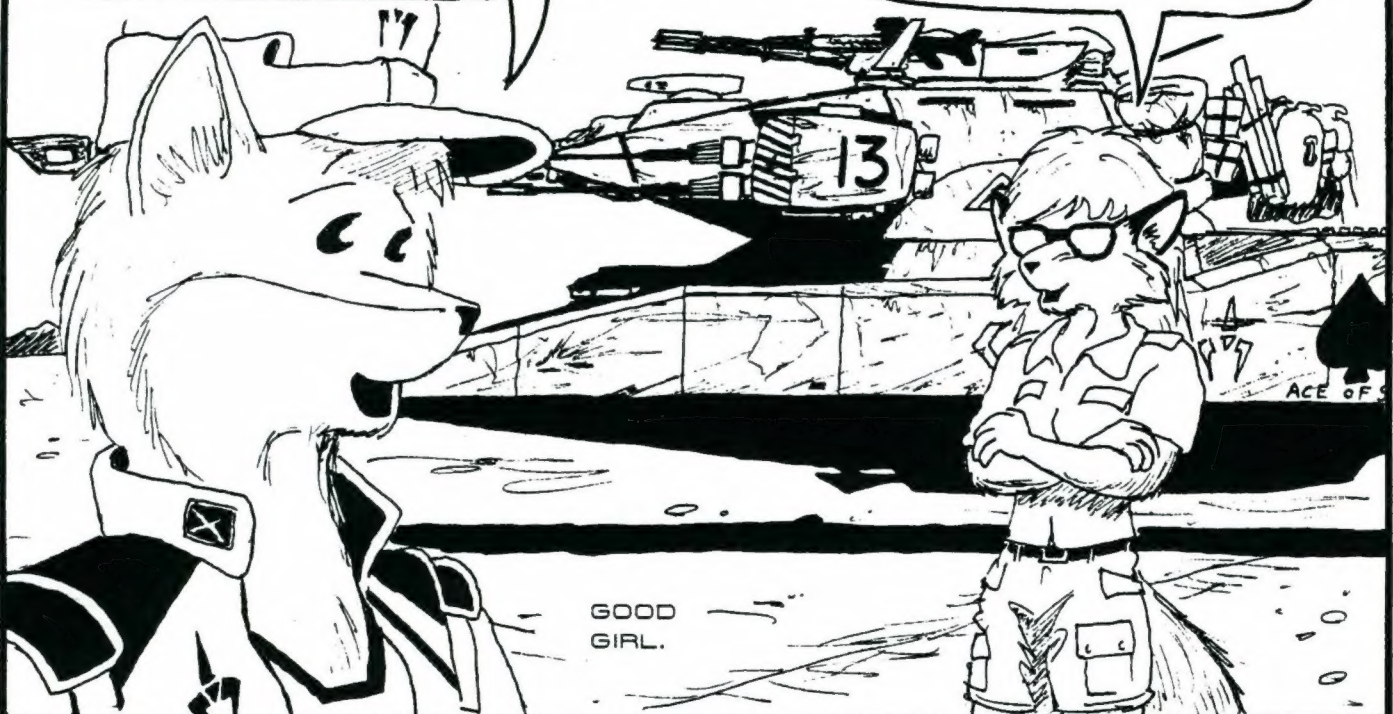
THE "MAGAZINE" IS A REMOVABLE, RECHARGING ENERGY CELL. DIFFERENT SIZED CELLS CAN BE USED FOR EXTRA SHOTS.

TANKS AND ARTILLERY CANNON ARE DIFFERENT. THOSE, AND SOME MAN-PORTABLE RECOILLESS ANTI-TANK GUNS ARE ELECTROMAGNETIC COILGUNS. THE MOST COMMON SIZES ARE 75mm, 90mm, AND 150mm FOR ARTILLERY.



...SPEAKING OF THE VEHICLES... BARONA!
WHAT MAKES THESE THINGS MOVE?!

GRAV DRIVES!



GOOD
GIRL.

WELL, THAT'S ABOUT ALL I HAVE FOR NOW. SORRY IT'S SUCH SHORT NOTICE... BUT, IF YOU
HAVE ANY OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT EMPIRES, "ACE OF SPADES", OR "BORDERLINE",
WRITE TO ME AT 6700 WARNER AVE., #5-G, HUNTINGTON BEACH, CALIFORNIA, 92647.
LOVE TO HEAR FROM YA...

SOMEONE BETTER
WRITE. I'M
BORED.

AND WATCH FOR MAGGIE
DE ALARCON'S INKING IN
"BORDERLINE"!



LATER!

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ORDERLINE

AN EMPIRES
STORY

BY CHRIS GRANT
AND
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...AND IN THE FUTURE,
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The Last Bits

DISPATCHES FROM THE ELECTRONIC FRONT

There are not too many changes in the furry BBS scene since last issue. However, if you have access to USENET or the InterNet (world-wide networks of large computer systems), you might want to look up the following newsgroups:

rec.arts.comics rec.arts.anime
 rec.arts.animation rec.arts.disney



KNOWN FURRY COMPUTER BULLETIN BOARDS:

SYSTEM NAME	SYSTEM OPERATOR	PHONE	PC PURSUIT OUTDIAL	MAXIMUM BAUD RATE	NOTES
The Fur Side	Charlie Kellner	415-571-1486	CAPAL	2,400	
Rowrbrazzle BBS	Dwight Dutton	714-842-1263	CASAN	9,600 (HST)	2 lines
The Tiger's Den	Shayn Raney	714-530-2554	CASAN	2,400	
Kyim's Scratching Post	Kyim Granger	415-452-0350	CAOAK	9,600 (Hayes)	
The Polar Den	Darrel Exline	214-361-8992	TXDAL	2,400	
The Otter's Holt	Jerry Case	714-986-1525	n/a	2,400	
Stormgate Aerie	Nicolai Shapero	213-822-6729	CALAN	9,600 (HST)	
The Electric Holt	Mitch Marmel	215-387-4326	PAPHI	2,400	
The Foxes' Den	Lance Rund	408-736-4764	CASJO	19,200 (PEP, HST, V.32)	Official YARF! BBS. 4 lines.

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JUGGLERS DO IT
WITH THREE BALLS.

L.Rund'90

YARF!

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