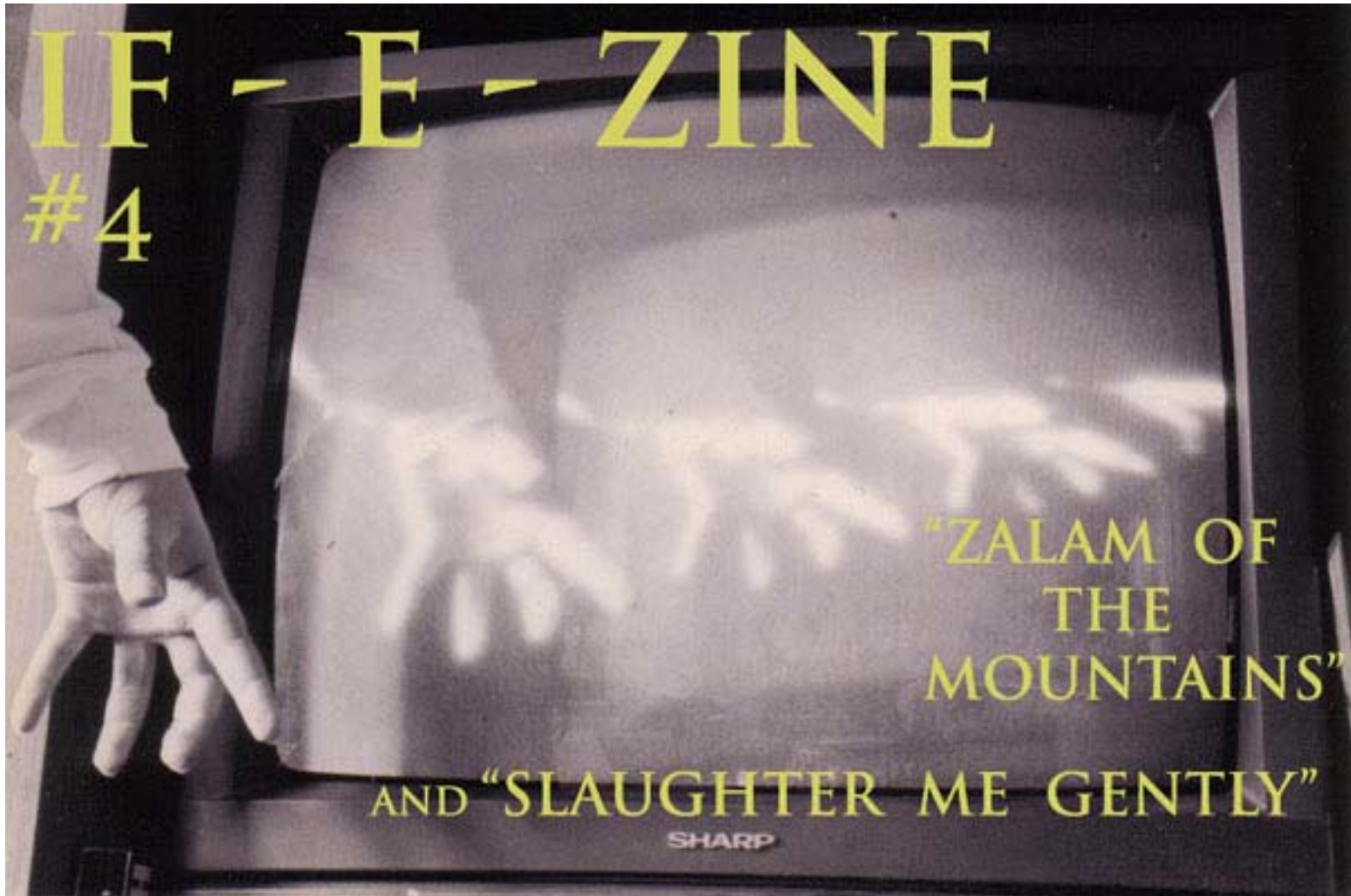


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Editorial

by Charles Shaver

This issue may seem sparse, especially after last issue's 30-page story "The Sarge." But I am experimenting with new looks and formats for the e-zine. I'm hoping to discover new things that'll make this e-zine better and more enjoyable for all of you who come to visit me here on my site.

Without going into too much detail, a lot of bullshit has been going on in my life. My one escape has been writing. A writer, after all, is not a writer if he does not write. So I've been writing almost every day, six or seven days a week. For this, I am happy.

This issue, while it may seem thin, has some good stuff I feel. Zalam returns in "Zalam of the Mountains." There's also a rather wicked little story in the short "Slaughter Me Gently." Both of which I am proud of to some degree.

The cover art this month was done by me. Called "Spectral Visions" it is actually a captured still frame from a piece of video footage I took with my hand in front of a Tyco B&W camera hooked into a television. The ghostly image is created by the camera being pointed at the television as it tapes the images live. A rather simple but effective technique.

I hope you all enjoy.



"Zalam of the Mountains"

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Killing a man is never easy for those with a conscience. For Zalam, he had never killed except when called for, when only at war. And a warrior's death was never sad. Or so he thought.

He had killed many in the War of the Sabres, as some had come to call it. It was the war for the Kingdom of Protuculus. Zalam's uncle had been the King and since he had no son, Zalam had been the rightful heir. But when the time came and his uncle refused to abdicate the throne, Zalam made war against his own kin. The war ended when Zalam killed his uncle, King Qik-tahr. It was not an especially socially acceptable act, but the Laws of the Kingdom must needed be observed. Qik-tahr had disobeyed these Laws. So war was the next logical, and lawful, step. When Zalam killed his uncle, he took the throne and immediately gave the former king a warrior's funeral. That was four Protuculean years ago.

And then, a month ago, Zalam's greatest enemy, the greatest adversary to the throne, one known as Norikahn, attacked the Palace of Protuculus. In the ensuing battles, Zalam killed the unknown bastard son of Qik-tahr, a derderoid named Nord. So, Zalam had thought at the time, that is why uncle refused me the throne. Illegitimate children borne of a mistress is a shameful thing to our people, no matter the station of those who commit the act. King Qik-tahr must have been trying to prepare the throne in a way for Nord that would bring no shame, no controversy.

And that death, his cousin's death, confused Zalam. He was healed by his friend Calibos the Mage and taken to the Temple of Argon in the Argonian Mountain Range. The Temple Regents allowed Zalam to stay, though reluctantly. The Order of Fraebrothers, the order of Mages that Calibos and the temple belonged to, had always distanced themselves from the affairs of others, especially those of politicians. They wanted nothing to do with the world outside their temple. They just wanted to remain distant and learning in their magical arts.

But the Fraebrothers took Zalam in as a wounded man. It was an act of compassion, which was well within their temple doctrines to do. Zalam had spent most of the last month in meditation on these things; he thought of his cousin, his uncle, Norikahn and himself. His confusion over his cousin's death altered, shifted from pain to sorrow. He could find no solace except in the Codex of Warriors. A warrior never gives up, Zalam chanted quietly to himself during several days of fasting, he survives until his death is a necessary thing.

And so a month had passed. He felt that he could no longer impose upon the Order of Fraebrothers. So, with his triple-bladed vibro-sword in hand and a few leather satchels of vegetables, and a pack full of wood for shelter or fires he gave his thanks to the Regents and said goodbye to his old friend Calibos.

"Take this," Calibos offered a wool robe of the order to him.

"I can't," said Zalam. "I am not a holy man. Nor do I wish to be. I am just a man."

And with that he left the temple to face the harsh eternal winters of the Argonian Mountains.

The truth was that Zalam was not a man, not a human man. He was a derderoid. Very few of were left and they were spread thin across the galaxy. Derderoids usually stood in at about ten feet tall with gray skin. They had a total of four arms. The first pair were elongated like a simian's and acted as their main set of arms. The two smaller arms, located just under the first pair, were much smaller. They appeared totally useless at first, until upon closer inspection one would find that the smaller hands ended in very long, sharp claws. They were perfect for tearing apart the strongest of substances, including steel. A derderoid's torso and legs were extremely gaunt and wiry. The legs, much like that of an insect's, were muscular. Their feet were something more like hooves. They provided extraordinary leaping power.

Zalam had thought about the best route of escape from the pursuing army that Norikahn would most surely be sending out to hunt him. And the best, he thought, was surely through snow-capped peaks of the Argonian Mountain Range. Legends say that a once mighty Mage had cursed the mountains to remain forever in a state of winter. Not much can live in the area and it stretched for thirty-two miles and was six miles wide at its widest point.

But a day into his trek and he found himself wishing he had stayed at the temple. It constantly snowed, day and night. He felt himself lucky for having found the mountains and cliffs pocked with caves large and small. These caves, and his fires, provided some, though not usually enough, sanctuary from the harsh climate. Most of all, he wished he had more food than the vegetables that the temple grew with magic.

Zalam prodded along, knee-deep in snow. His skin was growing cold and dry. He feared frostbite. But he knew he'd have to keep moving. So he pushed on. To the south of the mountain range was the equatorial jungle of Bahktah. He concentrated on getting there, though at his current rate it may take a month. I'll be dead long before I get there. Dead before I even see Norikahn once again, he thought.

He found another small cave. He had precious little wood left. With this cave he felt himself lucky. It had a small opening. He used some of the wood and the leather from the pack to make a windbreak at the aperture of the cave. With the rest he built a small fire. He even found himself cursing his blades for the chill of the steel when they pressed against his skin.

Zalam ate the last of his vegetables. He leaned against a cold wall, then decided to curl up next to the fire as close as he could get himself. As he lay there, he felt consciousness slipping away. As his mind drifted, he felt his life also fading from within. He had little strength to fight but uttered, "A warrior never gives up, he survives until his death is a necessary thing."

Inky blackness filled his soul.

* * *

Grunt! Grunt!

A small sound awoke Zalam. His fire was all but dead, he noticed.

Grunt! Grunt!

The sound was definitely in his ears now. He slowed his breathing and listened.

A crunch of snow. A grunt and a pant. Something was just outside the cave entrance. Zalam rolled quietly and grabbed his triple bladed sword. He sat up, making no noise, and approached the small door he had made earlier.

Another crunch of snow. Another grunt, but this time joined by something that sounded less like a pant and more like an animal sniffing the air. Good, thought Zalam, I could use some meat.

With a quick click his vibro-blades came to life. He reached and pulled the windbreak aside. At the entrance to the cave squatted a bulk of hair trying to hide a human-like face. The thing rose, extending itself to its full twelve feet in height. It certainly could not still see Zalam, but Zalam could see it. The creature was massive, looking human but with impossibly long arms and hair that covered its body in full.

“Änkiot-Ule!” Zalam found himself saying aloud. Änkiot-Ules were an ancient race, rumored to be the first race of Protuculus, and were rarely seen. They were not supposed to be an intelligent race, but a hardy one. Many signs of their existence had been found over the years, but only three sightings had ever been spoken of in Zalam’s years.

The thing reached in toward the cave. Zalam’s derderoid warrior breeding kicked in and he leapt out into the snow, intention filling his soul to bring the fight to the Änkiot-Ule. He rolled through the snow and brought himself into an offensive stance, his blades low and ready to slash upward.

The Änkiot-Ule’s face was the only thing not covered with hair. And two long tusks extended from within his lower lip, like those of a boar.

“I wish not to kill one such as you,” cried Zalam knowing his words would be heard but not understood, “but if I do kill you, I will eat and maybe survive my way to Bahktah!”

The wind whipped about his body, pushing him sideways. The Änkiot-Ule stood unnerved. Zalam noticed a hunger in his eyes. He, too, was seeking food so he may survive. Zalam knew he must pose as a tempting meal for the creature.

It swung an arm wide. Zalam rolled through the snow sideways and under the attacking arm. As it passed Zalam’s head, he realized that the creature’s hand was almost as big as his own chest. He knew he would have to kill this Änkiot-Ule as quickly as possible if he hoped to walk away unscathed. The creature, Zalam was sure, would not want to miss his target a second time.

With all his strength, Zalam pushed forward with his compacted legs, fling through the air and brandishing his sword. He let his weight fall behind the three vibrating blades. At the same time the Änkiot-Ule brought the same fist around into a backhand. As Zalam’s blades sunk deep into the left leg of the creature, Zalam was smashed in the middle of his back by the massive fist. He was thrown downward and he sank deep into the snow. The Änkiot-Ule gave out a horrendous shriek that sounded unnatural.

Zalam’s back burned with pain as the rest of his body was near freezing. He struggled to dig himself out of the snow. When he did, he heard the continued grunts, pants and occasional shrieks from the Änkiot-Ule.

Lying in a mound of red snow, the Änkiot-Ule grasped at its leg in horror. Zalam had succeeded in slicing the leg off just below the knee, making it somewhat immobile.

Zalam raised his sword. “I am sorry, old one.” He approached the beast. “I must survive. I have a terrible vengeance to bring onto another. A great injustice to rectify.”

The Änkiot-Ule, with a speed that surprised Zalam, swung again with his fist. Zalam kicked his feet out from under himself just in time to let the creature’s fist pass over his body without touching him. Zalam fell into the snow once again. He sat up and found the same fist swinging back toward him. Zalam raised his sword before him, braced it at the hilt and pulled back at its base, creating a cleaving lever. The fist hit Zalam in the face, knocking him backwards. Dark, sporadic spots twisted in Zalam’s eyes. He blinked furiously, hoping to rid himself of the spots.

Another shriek bought Zalam back up. Vision or no, Zalam thought, I must not give up this fight! He sat up and found the Änkiot-Ule rolling in the snow in even more pain. Something caught Zalam’s attention from the corner of his eye. When he dared turn his head to glimpse, he found the creature’s balled fist, separated from its arm, lying in the snow next to him.

Zalam stood. He approached the Änkiot-Ule who this time gave little notice to his opponent.

“Again, I am sorry,” Zalam said, and then he delivered the final blow.

Zalam found it difficult to move the body all at once, so he cut it into pieces while trying to preserve the skin and hair. Once inside the cave, Zalam did his best to stoke the dying fire, even using some bone and hair from the Änkiot-Ule. But once he threw on a piece of meat, the fat ingratiated the fire and its flames climbed higher and higher.

Zalam stopped, gave a quick thanks to the ancient creature, and proceeded to cut up the meat for easy carrying. Once done, and once he had eaten, Zalam brought in some snow to melt it and use it to wash the pelt. He began work right away on making for himself a robe shield him from the cold.

“It seems,” Zalam said quietly, “that perhaps I will survive this forever-winter after all.”



"Slaughter Me Gently"

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The air conditioning hummed softly. It hummed and filled the ears of Joseph Anatole until it was dead and unnoticed. The hum made him nervous without being sure as to what was making him nervous. His arm twitched. He grabbed a hold of it with his opposite hand, hoping to settle it. A gentle puff of life silently coughed from the A/C's vent, lifting the flimsy gown that he was wearing.

"God, I hate these," Joseph quietly cursed. He straightened his gown, bedecked with the hospital's insignia, and added, "At least it'll be the last time I'll have to wear one."

He sighed, pushing the edges of the gown down onto his knees with both hands, and looked about the room. It looked like a million other rooms in a million other hospitals in a million other parts of the world. He sighed again with boredom and nerves. Another random quiet blast of cooled vapor trailed up his gown and reminded him of his nakedness. He became more nervous. He fondled his thick mustache and matted black hair.

He sat. And sat. And sat. His butt cheek tingled. He rocked his hefty body from side to side and thought about getting up off the table and walking around a bit.

The door opened.

"Mr. Anatole?" A male nurse walked in. His outfit was made of the same flimsy material as Joseph's gown, but it covered his whole body like a jumpsuit. Joseph wondered why. Both served the same purpose, more or less, but the nurse's was like a modern suit of armor whereas his gown was like a limp rag.

"That's me," Joseph answered.

"Follow me."

The nurse wasn't very personable. Joseph was used to nurses being personable, being nice. But then, Joseph hadn't really ever seen a lot of nurses. He hadn't ever had the time for such things. And this wasn't a normal hospital. It was a corporate hospital.

Joseph Anatole was lead into a slightly larger room where another man in a similar sterile jumpsuit and a lab coat awaited. A plethora of testing equipment, and some odd things whose purpose Joseph wasn't sure of, dotted the room's walls and corners.

"Mr. Anatole?" said the new man in the lab coat.

"Yes," Joseph nodded.

"I'm Dr. Stargen."

Joseph took his hand.

"This will be simple enough," Dr. Stargen said. "Let's start by stepping up on the scales." The doctor lead Joseph over to a device to weigh him. Joseph stepped up onto it.

"Let's see," the doctor fiddled with machine. "That'll be 137 kilos and... just about a quarter kilo over." The doctor looked beyond Joseph.

Joseph turned and saw the nurse had procured a datapad from somewhere and was recording the number.

"Well, Mr. Anatole," Joseph turned his head back to the doctor as he spoke, "At \$402.46 a kilo, that should bring in quite a bit of money."

“Wait, doctor,” the nurse said. “We still have to get his fat content ratio.”

“Oh that’s right. I’m sorry.”

The nurse stepped up beside Joseph. The datapad was now under his arm and a new instrument had appeared in his hands. He lifted Joseph arm, poking and prodding at the folds of his flesh.

“That’s fifteen percent,” the nurse finally said, trading the new instrument for the datapad. He recorded the new number.

“Oh,” Dr. Stargen said. “I’m afraid that’ll only bring you \$363.34 per kilo, Mr. Anatole. I’m sorry”

“What?” Joseph gasped.

* * *

The human race has dominated the Earth for over two hundred millennia. Their biology has remained the same all that time. It has never adapted. A creature need not adapt unless it is necessary and humanity has caused nature to adapt to them, so no need ever arose to evolve.

Mistakes were made. Catastrophes struck. Some things aid the price. Others died. But all things became virtually inedible as they grew and evolved outside the human range of needs.

Most food was now processed, synthesized. Meat nurtured in vats in sterile environments. Prices for foodstuffs raised. Real foods, food rose naturally and traditionally, were all done in sterile labs. Cows and chickens and lambs and such were grown in sterile labs. These garnered the highest prices.

Surviving off the land, eating food naturally grown outside the lab, was still possible. People survived this way. Mostly and for a short time. The lifespan of a Dirt Eater, for that is what they were called, was something along the lines of a mere forty years. The environment had changed too much, and what grew naturally simply no longer met the needs of human biology for humans, as I have said, never really evolved along with the rest of nature.

The rich, however, those who could afford the best pure, unspoiled, genetically created food that met all their nutritional needs and then some, grew ever older. They lived to be 120 to 150 years old, and in fact the eldest record to date was just over 200 years old.

Grain and vegetables remained a common stock while meat became a prized thing. And the most prized meat of all, the most expensive, most exotic was youltan: human meat.

As old religions died away and old taboos faded, cannibalism became an accepted thing. Not entirely accepted. There were many who did not, would not, eat the meat of a fellow human. There were even those who banded together, forming factions or orders that defied the new palette of humanity. The largest and noisiest of all the groups was the Human Rights Movement.

While no country or corporation claimed to participate in hunting human game, the HRM said they did. Studies were done and showed that all humans who were put to the slaughter had openly, willing given themselves over to be made into youltan. Not

everyone believed this, but this was the world that humanity had reigned over for 200 millennia.

* * *

“I’m sorry, Mr. Anatole. While some fat is desirable in youltan, too much fat isn’t. Fatty youltan sells cheaper.” Dr. Stargen went about analyzing Joseph, who sighed with regret. For the last few months he had been eating as much as he could in an attempt to plump up. He had no clue that a higher fat content would mean lower prices. but he was here, ready to do what he had to do for the sake of his family.

“Drugs analysis?” Dr. Stargen asked the nurse.

“Clean.”

“Good, we won’t have to lower the price any more.”

Joseph nodded in relief. “How much will I get?”

The doctor reached for the nurse’s datapad. He looked at the thing. “It comes to \$49,777.58. And it looks like everything’s in order for your family to receive the money.”

“Good,” said Joseph. “That’ll feed my family for a few more months.”

“All set. Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Joseph answered. He followed Dr. Stargen into another rather sterile room. Unlike the last room, however, this room was bare with the exception of a single chair with a ton of metallic gadgets attached underneath it in the center of the room.

“Please have a seat,” Dr. Stargen steered Joseph towards the chair. Joseph sat. The chair reclined automatically. Joseph knew what was to come. Some sort of gas. It would be a painless death.

Dr. Stargen appeared standing over Joseph with a gas-mask in his hand.

“Anything more before we get started?” he asked.

Joseph nodded. “Yeah. Please be gentle with me,” he said, then added, “It’s my first time.”

Dr. Stargen smiled.

The mask was wrapped about Joseph’s head. A cool air flowed into his lungs, feeling like liquid pleasure. Joseph smiled, knowing that his family would be okay.



Reading & Viewing List

Once again at a loss for a theme in this issue, I have chosen to pass on to you some of the things that I've been reading and watching as of late. Enjoy.

- 1.) **The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories** - Ed. by John L. Apostolou & Martin H. Greenberg. This book has some great short fiction by Japanese authors. While time did not permit me to read the entire anthology, those stories I did read I thoroughly enjoyed. Try "Cardboard Box" by Ryo Hanmura.

- 2) **Night Gallery** - I'm not exactly sure if you're all aware that Rod Serling didn't begin and end with The Twilight Zone. While that series may be arguably his best work ever, he also had another show called Night Gallery that emphasized horror over other types of speculative fiction. At times reminiscent of early horror comics and at other times cutting edge 1960s vision and audio turned kitsch, the show is nothing short of classic. It was also one of those shows that stars of both the big and small screens would come out for. Everyone from Roddy MacDowell to Joan Crawford, from Leslie Nielson to Tom Bosley turned out for these shows. Leonard Nimoy and Steven Spielberg are even amongst noted episode directors. It's definitely worth watching one or two episodes.

- 3.) **A Graveyard for Lunatics by Ray Bradbury** - There were times that I felt that the author was having far more fun writing and telling the story than I had reading it. But that's always a part of Bradbury's charm and eloquence. His enthusiasm is infectious and fun, as are his stories. This book, while slow in some parts, was an incredible nostalgic romp through a classic era of Hollywood that Mr. Bradbury himself lived... livened up just a tad bit with a murder-mystery thrown in. A good, fun and easy read, especially for summer or fall reading.

- 4) **"The Country of the Blind" by H. G. Wells** - When speaking of my favorite sci-fi authors, H. G. Wells will most definitely and eventually come up. In this short story a man comes across a secluded mountain society where everyone has evolved into a state of blindness. They work at night, sleep at day and practice religion and general life in a completely simplified way. An extraordinary short with a long-lasting impact.

- 5.) **Political Science Fiction: An Introductory Reader by Martin Harry Greenberg and Patricia S. Warrick** - I'm slowly making my way through this text. It reads like a collection of essays about the socio-political impact and importance that some science fiction can have. A good read for any hardcore fan of science fiction or of literature.

