

# FREE IF-E-ZINE™

Issue #10  
March 2008

**"From Here  
to the Stars!"  
starring Tad  
Manly**

**"Captain  
Destiny and the  
Creature from  
Atrius-99"**

**... and so much more!**

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## Table of Contents

Editorial..... 3

“From Here to the Stars!” ..... 4

“Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99” ..... 7

“Rescuing the Dead” ..... 9

Reading & Viewing List..... 12

“Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra” ..... 13



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**Editorial**

Welcome back, folks!

This is a big year! If – E – Zine™ will be five years old this August. That's a pretty big achievement considering most other ezines appear to me to have a life span of no more than three years. I think, in part, If – E – Zine™'s success stems from the annual Special Halloween Edition as the sole publishing requirement I enforce. Such a simple requirement creates minimal pressure for me.

I also attribute this ezine's five years to publishing almost exclusively my own work. In that, I have only myself to make demands of.

This year calls for more than a single issue to be published. Besides the current issue, I plan on publishing at least one more issue PLUS the Special Halloween Edition.

But all that comes later this year. Let's have a look at what's in this issue:

In "From Here to the Stars!" we are introduced to Tad Manly, the masked alter-ego of a luchador. He generally plays the part of the of the bad guy in the ring, but outside the ring he is well-loved. Will his desire to be good in the eyes of the public catapult him to worlds unknown?

And then in "Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99" we meet Captain Destiny. This story holds to the promise I made last issue to deliver at least one monster in a story per issue of If – E – Zine™. Will Captain Destiny's lust for fame and fortune drive him into the mouth of danger?

We then get a visit from our old friend, The Sarge. In Issue #3 he starred in a short military science fiction piece called "The Sarge." He now returns to face the aftermath of what happened while on duty in the previous tale!

Finally, we once again visit with our old friend Zalam in part one of "Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra". After being deposed as king and on the run through the Argonian Mountains, Zalam finds himself in the legendary and mystical city of Adul-Ra. Will he escape the city and its despotic ruler alive?

Read on to find out, folks!

Enjoy,

Charles Shaver, ed.



**“From Here to the Stars!”**

introducing Tad Manly!

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## PART 1

**T**wo soft yellow lights illuminated the entire locker room. One flickered the color of aged papyrus. Men and women both clothed and washed themselves, preparing for the night's events. Elaborate costumes of every kind were donned.

Eddie Estevez sat on a bench alone, his head leaning forward. He had already pulled on his light blue tights and black-and-white checkered wrestling boots. A mask, one side a blue matching the color of his tights with a star cut out for an eyehole, the other side red and white striped with an oval eyehole, rested in his hands. He sighed.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Adrienne Lo asked. She was a small, busty woman of Chinese descent. She was cinching up a bustier, making her breasts appear to be perpetually falling out. Feathers adorned her buttocks, giving her the appearance of an Asian swan.

“Sometimes I just get bored of all this,” Eddie said.

“The wrestling? The show? The kids?”

Eddie shook his head. “No, no. I love the kids. The show, though, is demanding. And... well...”

“What is it, Eddie?”

Eddie sighed. “I’m tired of being the villain.”

“But the villain is important to any storyline. You know that.”

“I just don’t feel like a villain. Then there’s Cosmico who’s a jerk behind the scenes, but he gets praised wherever he goes.”

“It’s only a show,” Adrienne reminded.

Eddie shook his head. “I’m tired of the bad guys always winning.” He pulled the mask on over his head.

“It’ll be all right, Eddie. This business gets to us all one time or another. It makes each of us want to quit at times.”

“Then why don’t we?” he asked through his mask.

“Because we need the money. And because we love it... and the kids.” She leaned over and kissed him on his head. She then sat in his lap, her arms around his neck. “You’re character, Tad Manly, is the biggest heel we’ve got, Eddie. You’re so over you’re practically loved as much as you’re hated. You’re making the big money, now. Soon you and I can get that sailboat you want and sail all the way up the coast and leave all this behind.”

Eddie chuckled. “Yeah, that’d be nice.” He looked into her eyes. “I love you, girl. I’d go to the ends of the universe for you.”

“I love you, too, papi.” She kissed his mask again. “Have a good show tonight.”

“You, too.”

The ring was lit in the center of the auditorium. The crowd cheered crazily at the action within the ring. El Hombre Super Guapo was wrestling in a fast-paced match with King Gato. El Hombre Super Guapo was dressed in all blacks with intricate gold trim. His mask boasted a thick, proud fake mustache. The top of his tights were open, showing his muscular, hairy chest and a massive gold medallion.

King Gato wore tan tights. His boots and gloves were made to look like lion's paws. His masked was surrounded by long, flowing hair to emulate the mane of a lion.

They wrestled, flew, dived and rolled to the excitement of the crowd. Chants were started.

Eddie Estevez behind the entrance curtain, watching. As soon as their match was over, Adrienne rushed by with two massive feathered fans.

"Welcome to the ring, Adrienne Lo! Our one and only lovely fan dancer!"

Eddie watched as Adrienne did her burlesque routine. He smiled as the crowd cheered and hooted.

Soon her portion of the show was over. Eddie welcomed her backstage.

"Good show, honey."

"Meh, it gave the crowd a chance to go to the bathroom before the main event. Good luck tonight, by the way."

A booker approached. At his side was C3smico, Eddie's opponent for the night. C3smico's tights were full-bodied. The front was a reddish color that faded at the sides into black in a sunburst design. His gloves were long and extended out into mock flames. He wore a wig over his mask that also emulated flames. His eyes were covered with glittery silver and as he moved his head they twinkled like a million stars. His mouth was the only part of his body that was exposed and it showed his thick mustache running from under his nose down into two bars under his chin.

"Here's the deal," said the booker. "Here's how it's gonna go down: go out there and put on a better than usual show. Remember, this is C3smico's hometown so make him look good, Eddie."

Eddie nodded.

"Go out there, put him over, really work the crowd and, in the end, Eddie takes the win."

"What?!" C3smico raged. "This is *my* hometown! How can I lose in front my hometown crowd? I thought for sure I'd get a shot at the title after I won in front of my hometown crowd!"

"You'll get your shot," explained the booker, "but first we really want to build you up in a feud with Tad Manly, really put you over as a hero. This match tonight will make him a bigger heel, he'll work to make you look good even if you lose so you become a bigger face, then three more matches and you'll get your title shot. Besides, who would care if a hometown hero wins in his hometown? It's too predictable. But make him lose in front of his hometown crowd and the whole country will be talking about it!"

C3smico grumbled.

"I'll put you over," Eddie promised.

The ring announcer chatted with the crowd, working them up into a frenzy for the main event. "And now," he announced, "hailing from the Northern Empire, the one and only Tad Manly!"

"Good luck!" Adrienne called after Eddie as he stepped through the entrance curtain to a booing crowd.

"It'll work out for the best in the end," the booker patted C3smico on the back and walked away.

Cósmico eyed Adrienne as Eddie worked the crowd as Tad Manly, acting full of himself and superior to everyone.

“Hey, chica,” said Cósmico, “why don’t you get with a *real* man?”

Adrienne rolled her eyes.

Cósmico grabbed her about the waist. “Come on, I know this town. I’ll take you out for a real nice meal after the show. They’ll treat us like celebrities.”

Adrienne slapped Cósmico’s face and he let go of her.

King Gato and El Hombre Super Guapo witnessed the exchange from nearby and ran to her side.

“Hey, leave the girl alone!” El Hombre Super Guapo demanded.

“I’m just trying to make time with the pretty lady,” Cósmico said.

“Everybody knows she’s Eddie’s girl,” King Gato answered.

“Thanks, guys,” Adrienne said. “But King Gato’s not the only one who has got claws around here. And unless Cósmico wants a bloody face, he’ll just go out there and do his job.”

Cósmico grunted, turned, waited until his name was announced and stepped through the entrance to a crowd gone mad with cheers.

“Are you ok, Adrienne?” King Gato asked.

“Yeah,” she answered.

*Be sure to check back in the next issue to read PART 2 of “From Here to the Stars!” featuring Tad Manly!*



**“Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99”**

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## PART 1

**D**ashing Darius Destiny sat at the controls of his silver flying saucer, the *Quequeg*. Sitting next to him and to his left was his fourteen foot tall first mate, Nal.

“How’s our course?” Captain Destiny asked.

“We’re on track. We’ve got a straight flight to Atrius-99. Do they know what the atmosphere is like on this new rock?” Nal asked.

“Nah. We’ll have to orbit first when we get there and scan the conditions of the planet,” answered the captain.

Captain Destiny and his crew were used to flying to unknown worlds without any knowledge of where they were going or what was awaiting them. In fact, that was their job. They were space explorers in the truest sense of the word.

“I wish you would have held out for more money,” Nal said. “This seems like an awfully dangerous one.”

Captain Destiny glared at Nal. Had any other crew member uttered such contempt, they would have been ejected into deep space immediately. Captain Destiny tolerated no level of disobedience on his vessel. But this was Nal, his first mate. He had served aboard the *Quequeg* for more than seven years and was practically Captain Destiny’s only true friend. “The planet? We know nothing of it, which isn’t new to our explorations. It’s no more dangerous than anything else we’ve ever done.”

“It’s not that, Captain,” Nal explained. “It’s that no one has ever been so deep into space, nor for so little money.”

“Dammit!” Captain Destiny raged. “If I hadn’t bid so low that damned Captain Starr would have won the contract and we’d be sitting home waiting for another one from the Space Exploration Administration or returning to pirating and smuggling just to keep a little money coming in!”

Nal grew silent. He didn’t want to further anger his captain.

Nal was a T’Chaka, an alien from the colonial world of Sr’ka. His skin was light gray, his eyes wide and dark violet. His mouth was small though he had the ability, as all T’Chakas do, to dislocate his own jaw and grow it wide for consuming large amounts of food or to use his serrated teeth as a weapon. His limbs were long, muscular. Sinews rippled beneath his flesh. He had been quite rebellious at one time and loved to fight for money in underground circuits. Nal had signed on with Captain Destiny seven years ago while running from the law for the accidental death of an opponent while in one such illegal fight. The high adventure, the harsh living and the dedicated lifestyle of an exploration and space traveler appealed to him, hence his seven years of service to Captain Destiny.

Captain Destiny himself was human. He could trace his ancestry back to Earth, though he had been born upon the space station Darius-X, from which he gets his name. He enjoyed portraying the image of the old salt, like those men of the sailing ships of old. He occasionally wore a gray pea coat and always wore his beard thick, full and long. He also was rarely seen without his gray wool fishing cap he had traded a crate of rare craitallium crystals for.

The *Quequeg* boasted anywhere from ten to twenty more crew members at any one time.

“Atrius-99 approaching, Captain,” Nal said.

Captain Destiny sat at one of the console chairs and eyed various instruments. “Once we get into orbit, start the scan.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The helmsman, Sharn, steered the flying saucer into orbit around the gold and orange planet. He, too, was human and very young, barely twenty-years-old.

Nal punched at several buttons. “Scan started,” he said. Then immediately afterwards he said, “Captain, we’ve already got something.”

“Put it on the viewscreen,” commanded Captain Destiny.

A small monitor flickered to life before them.

Sharn’s jaw dropped at the image on the screen.

Nal shook his head, saying, “I knew I wouldn’t like this trip.”

Captain Destiny stared, grimacing and stone-faced.

On the image appeared a large rolling, hilly field and in that field a creature something like a Tyrannosaurus Rex with a spiked dorsal fin all along down its back and mandible claws around its mouth. The creature bit down on some hunk of another animal, blood gushing from its mouth as it ate.

Giant scavenger insects buzzed around the carcass. The dinosaur creature roared at them, screaming to chase them away. It then lifted its head skyward, growling in frustration. It appeared almost to be staring, roaring angrily at the crew of the Quequeg.

*Watch for Part 2 in the next issue!*



## “Rescuing the Dead”

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*This story has roots in an older story I wrote for Issue #3 way back in May of 2004. The story in that issue was titled simply “The Sarge” told the tale of a squad of futuristic space marines on long-range recon patrols within the swamps of a planet called Dakkaran.*

*In the original short story, the characters find a little girl named Arlia being hunted by an assassin squad of space marines known as Death Dealers.*

*This new tale, entitled "Rescuing the Dead", picks up right where that original story left off. I took great care to flesh out the world and present a story that stands alone so you'll not be required to read the original story should you choose not to. Of course, I recommend it.*

*Please enjoy the further adventures of Sergeant Drake!*

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### PART 1

"Sergeant Dalius Severin Drake in Service to His Exalted Worship Overlord Hrakkuris and Lord Devian under Him; Soldier Serving in Hastings Company Commanded by Knight Viscerrak on the Dakkaran Outpost, Thirty-Second Squad, please rise for your judgment and penalty."

Two men were spotlighted in an otherwise dark room. One was the speaker, the Lord Judge Overseer of the Hastings Company Court. The other was Sergeant Drake himself. The Lord Judge Overseer sat comfortably high in a chair behind a dias raised some ten meters above the floor. Sergeant Drake, however, was shackled by the wrists, ankles and neck to the cold concrete floor. He did his best to stand, but could only crouch under the weight of the heavy chains. Where the Lord Judge Overseer was swimming through thick robes, Sergeant Drake had been stripped to his skivvies.

Sergeant Drake looked up pleadingly at the Lord Judge Overseer. He hoped his crouch would do.

Seeing the sergeant struggling to stand, the Lord Judge Overseer carried on, accepting the attempt to rise without acknowledging it.

"After long deliberation and counsel with fellow judges," the Lord Judge Overseer indicated the other judges hidden in the shadows off to either side of him, "we have agreed that while you are the most likely suspect in the atrocious murders of the soldiers of Thirty-Second Squad, there is insufficient evidence to prove as much. It is therefore our judgment that Sergeant Dalius Severin Drake is proclaimed innocent and may return to his post as soon as possible."

Warm water ran through Sergeant Drake's dark hair. This was his first respite from imprisonment. He was determined to enjoy it and the solitude afforded him this moment prior to his release.

Somewhere behind him a door opened. He could hear the slap-slap-slap of bare feet against the tiled floor. The Sarge wondered why someone else would be allowed in during this time, but he didn't care overly much. He soaped up and rinsed off.

The shower came on next to him. "Sure beats cold water being shot at ya, huh?"

The Sarge recognized the voice. He turned to look. Standing under the showerhead next to him was Corporal Paulo Diego.

"What the hell are you doin' here?" The Sarge asked.

"Same thing you are, I guess. Gettin' released."

"I haven't seen you since they brought us in."

"I tried to get them to let me speak at your trial. They wouldn't let me. I tried, Sarge. I swear."

The Sarge looked at him, contemplated his squad-mate, then nodded. "I know."

"It's gonna be great to get out," Diego said.

"I still can't believe they'd suspect *us* of killing our own men."

"I dunno why they'd blame just you, too," Diego added. "We both made it out alive. We both coulda done what they were accusing."

"We were both suspects for a time, but I was the superior out there on Dakkaran. If anything happened, even if you were involved, I'd still be the one they'd hunt."

"Did they reinstall you, too?"

"Completely."

"Think they'll keep us together?"

The Sarge thought a moment, pausing in his bathing, "I dunno. We're grunts, Diego. We go where ordered."

Diego nodded. After a moment he asked, "What do you think they did with her?"

The Sarge stopped all movement. He leaned forward against the wall from which the showerhead was protruding. He breathed deep. "I dunno."

The dropship looked much like a funnel with protrusions like wings that spun as propellers and carefully set the craft down on the army-made landing strip. Beowulf Base had been expanded upon with some construction still on-going since Sergeant Drake and Corporal Diego saw it last. They eyed the base and then each other as they left the dropship.

They walked together towards the Command Marshal's office.

"I can't wait to get my Combat Suit back on," Diego said. The two men were dressed in black jumpsuits adorned with metals and colored ribbons on their shoulders and left breast indicating their rank, unit and campaigns served in.

The Sarge could find no familiar faces. "Things've changed," he told Diego.

"A lotta things it seems," Diego said.

They entered the Command Marshal's office. There they found an old familiar face.

"Corporal Theiss!" Diego cheered.

"By the demons and gods, I thought you two were done-for!"

Diego and Theiss shook hands, grinning and glad to see one another again. The Sarge recognized Theiss as the Command Marshal's clerk. He shook his hand and shared a smile with him, as well.

"Where's the Marshal?" The Sarge asked.

"In his office," Theiss said.

They entered through an automatic sliding door. Command Marshal Villam looked up from a monitor at the two men. The Sarge had expected a smile or some semblance of recognition similar to that of Theiss'. He got cold distance instead.

"I'm no longer your Commandant," said Villam.

"Excuse me, sir?" The Sarge asked.

"It's as I said. Someone's been waiting for you. You can have my office. Sit, I'll give you the opportunity to meet with him here."

"Commandant, what's this about?"

"You'll have to ask *him*."

"Who is it?"

"Again, ask *him*."

The Command Marshal removed himself from the room.

"Ya know, Sarge," Diego said, "Ever since that bounce out in the swamps when we found that girl, nothing's been quite right with the world. It was tough enough adjusting from my homeworld to military life in space, but eventually I learned the routine and settled in. That's all I needed to feel easy: a routine. Since that routine's blown to smithereens I'm not easy about this whole thing any more."

"Keep it together, Diego," The Sarge said. He sat in one of the few random chairs in the office. Diego followed suit.

After a moment's silence Diego said, "I really miss Hank. I miss all of them."

The Sarge looked at Diego but said nothing. He crossed his arms and sighed and lowered his head.

The door slid open. In walked a tall, thin man in a black jumpsuit and crimson-colored cape. Seeing the marking on the shoulders of the cape, Diego and The Sarge stood at attention, each with a salute.

"At ease, gentlemen," the Field Marshal said. A Field Marshal, they knew, was like a Command Marshal in rank, but commanded men not from inside a base but on the field of battle with the troops. Their ilk were a proud and rare breed and deserved respect. Both men knew some serious business lay ahead of them.

*Part 2 is on its way! Look for it in the next issue!*



### **Reading & Viewing List**

- 1.) The Terminator – A classic in science fiction that still maintains relevance and a certain timelessness. The overall look, however, screams 1980s, but that is in no way a strike against the film.
- 2.) Robocop – One of the great action-packed cyberpunk films of all time, sans the haughtiness of other such cyberpunk vehicles.
- 3.) The Last Dragon – An awesome flick, with 80s kitsch at its best. SHO ‘NUFF!!!
- 4.) Superbad – A cute film, hilarious at times but tends to drag towards the end when the writing seems more geared towards a finishing line rather than entertainment. Overall, I think this will become a cult classic for generations to come... like Porky’s or Animal House.
- 5.) Marvel Zombies – Written by Robert Kirkman of The Walking Dead fame. It’s a clunky tale. It’s not life-changing stuff, but it’s not even the best Kirkman himself has to offer.
- 6.) “The Children of Spider County” Outer Limits Episode – One of the greatest episodes of the original series. A young man doesn’t know his origins, which may very well be alien.
- 7.) Danger at Anchor Mine (Choose-Your-Own-Adventure) – This is the last book I read. It’s a good romp through Canadian backwoods. Choose-Your-Own-Adventures are always fun!



**“Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra”**

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## PART 1

**W**ith flurry and thrust the twin goltons, men made of stone, dropped their cargo at the base of the pillowed throne of Rasiki-Ha. The old man, a human, floated atop an ensorcelled sitting pillow. His legs were crossed, perhaps forever. His face was weathered with age, the thin whispers of a mustache veiling the edge of his mouth, his brow wrinkled with thought and time, his eyes sparking gold with magic. Beyond the mustache, no hair adorned him. His limbs thin to the thews. He creaked with each breath, spit dust as he spoke. He eyed the bundle that had been dropped before him.

“Goltons,” his voice was an un-oiled hinge, “remove the fur.”

As the two stone men followed the command in unison, the old man’s eyes widened with curiosity. Wrapped within the thick fur had been the body of Zalam, a derderoid and once the king of all Protuculus. Beside him lay a sword with three blades.

Another golton crept to Rasiki-Ha’s side, his gray stone body adorned only with two green and one red feather tied at the temple with a thin leather strap. In his hands, being used as a walking stick, he carried an iron staff.

“Olmec,” Rasiki-Ha’s voice creaked. “What is this?”

The be-feathered golton spoke, “I would say a derderoid.”

Rasiki-Ha’s eyes widened more to bulging. “What purpose would exist within the heart of this interloper?”

Olmec shook his head, “I cannot say.”

“Fah! What counsel are you? What good is a mind left unused? Where is Lizarus? Perhaps *he* can enlighten me where you cast only shadows.”

“I offer apologies, my lord. I know not the whereabouts of my esteemed colleague.” Olmec rested his weight upon the thick staff.

Rasiki-Ha huffed. “He schemes if he is not in my sight. He schemes or he sleeps.”

Olmec was not entirely shocked by this statement, in large part because of its truth, but he felt the need to act surprised and offended nonetheless. He gasped, “My lord! Lizarus would never! His loyalty to you—”

“His loyalty to me is a farce. He is no more loyal to me than he is your *esteemed* colleague. An indentured servant is a scheming man.”

Rasiki-Ha watched Olmec’s stony, emerald eyes widen as his own golden eyes drew closed to squinting with thought and accusation. “Yes,” Rasiki-Ha hissed. “I know what lies in your heart, golton. You may not be so bold as Lizarus, but every opportunity you receive to plot your escape you take.”

“Please, my lord!” Olmec bowed. “I-I don’t—”

“Lies! To plot against me is natural, to lie to me an insult! Away with you!” Rasiki-Ha turned his attentions back onto Zalam. “Goltons, remove this derderoid. To the dungeon with him!”

The goltons did as they were told as Olmec bowed thrice, backing out of the throne room.

His scales shifted with unease.

In an alley populated only by shadows where no torch could splay the darkness to reveal for certain his loneliness, Lizarus cloaked himself in the sanctuary of a doorway. His green scales twitched with nerves. Deep, dark red eyes pierced the night. A forked tongue lashed out, tasting the air. He tightened his burgundy robe about his waist. His movements were slow with the chill of night.

Shadows stirred. Feet shuffled.

“I’ve been waiting a long time,” spoke Lizarus. His voice was low, breathless, hissing.

“Waiting is the task of all things living and dead. Learn that and impatience will never be a sickness on your mind.” The voice was flush with tone. Falstilis, a human wearing a dirty, thin green cloak and capelet approached Lizarus and joined him in his makeshift cave.

“Your tassste isss mossst foul on the wind. Mussst you be at my ssside?”

“Would you have me parade through these mock sunlit streets? I will gladly supply you that request.”

“Death and cursssesss to you, whipping boy.”

“It is true I exist only to be whipped by Rasiki-Ha’s minions for his enjoyment and entertainment, but station exists only amongst those whose desires disagree. You and I do not disagree on many things, at least not where things truly weigh. And must we forever meet in darkened alleys of city streets? There must be someplace else... perhaps in the palace?”

“Sssanctuary isss unknown anywhere within the city of Adul-Ra... or at leassst ass long ass Raskiki-Ha rulesss.”

“Then perhaps we should end his rule?” suggested the whipping boy.

Lizarus’ smile went unnoticed, but Falstilis could hear the small chuckle he produced.

“We could burn his pillow,” Falstilis said, “if only one of us would make of him a tailor’s pin cushion.”

“Sssome tasssksss are far easssier sssaid than done.”

“I wonder at times if Rasiki-Ha is not yet dead and your hands unspoiled not from minor opportunity but lack of impetus. A wrist weakens by floe blood.”

“Watch your tongue, whipping boy.”

“Why is it, Lizarus, that your Orn steel shines so bright?”

“Becausse I’ve yet to join it with your ssskull.”

“I doubt you could even kill me, let alone Rasiki-Ha.”

“You dare accusse me of weaknesssss?” Lizarus’ voice echoed down the alley. The two crouched in the doorway, silent, watching to see if anyone had heard. When they felt comfortable and saw no eyes spying them, Falstilis spoke.

“I apologize, old friend. I express my own impatience by attacking you. I wish to be free of Rasiki-Ha so strongly. Take no offence. My venom is surely not as strong as yours.”

Lizarus grunted.

“Speaking of which,” Falstilis said, “he has sent for you. It would be no surprise to me if a pair of goltons scour the city for you as we speak.

“He sssussspectsss foul play.”

“As well he should.”

“What of the creature I heard was found by the regular patrolsss outssside the city?”

“He has been taken prisoner.”

“Oh?”

“If you stayed at the palace you would know such things.”

“Who isss thiss prisssoner?”

“A derderoid.”

Lizarus paused in thought. “A true outssider? A thief, perhapsss?”

“That is doubtful. It is said he was found near death. He came, they say, with a rather wicked sword with three blades.”

“An invader then?”

“Unlikely. Olmec has told me his condition was true and not a feign.”

“Olmec? Fah! He would lie to you no matter the conssequesss. I think he knowsss of our dealingsss and he would lie to keep me uninformed.”

“Perhaps, but I doubt an invading army would risk a soldier being found thusly lest they be found out entirely. I suspect a wanderer.”

“A nomad of the Argonian Mountains? Such a man would be mad.”

“Mad or escaping worse fate than certain death in the frozen mountains.”

“Thiss blade... thesse bladesss. It mussst be sssign and sssymbol of a warrior.”

“Your thinking is well placed. Such a blade could prove to be useful to our ends.”

Both quietly smiled in the shadows.

A stranger, a drunkard passed by the mouth of the alley. The two conspirators watched him until he was far out of sight and earshot.

Zalam awoke. Musty moss and stone filled his thin noseless nostrils. His giant black insect-like eyes blinked, clearing his blurred vision.

“Never have I used more poultice, never have I used more prayer,” said the gravelly voice of Olmec.

Zalam looked about, his vision blurred. He felt he lay on hard stone. As he continued to blink, he spoke blindly. “Where am I?”

“In a cell in a dungeon in the Golden City of Adul-Ra,” answered Olmec.

“Adul-Ra?” Zalam turned his head in towards the voice. “The Lost City?”

“I would guess that is what you outsiders would call it. For us it is only Adul-Ra.”

“Myth and liars,” Zalam cursed. “I knew Golgotha would be filled with myth and liars.”

Olmec chuckled, “We are not the City of the Dead, though some might say we are close to it. Adul-Ra is populated by goltons and inbreds and very little else.”

Zalam’s vision finally cleared. He immediately noticed he had been locked away in a cage made of steel bars in a dank, dark dungeon. At his side, just outside of the bars, sat the squat stone man named Olmec. Zalam’s nerves rippled his skin with agitation. He hated to find himself in such a condition. Exhaustion, however, subdued the agitation into something more like apathy.

“It would seem,” Zalam said as he sighed, “unconsciousness would be my destiny.”

*What will happen to Zalam now?! You’ll have to wait until the next issue to find out!*

