

Best Friend

Sarah Morrow

First Prize Winner

BSFS 2001 Young Writers' Contest

The evening was cool and dark, like just about every other evening in the village. Fires flickered from the houses, each flame hosting a family of unsuspecting villagers. Their simple lives did not include going out at night, so they all missed the frenzied action going on outside their windows.

As they supped on bread, soup, and fresh meat, demon armies marched across the fields, crushing everything they trod upon. While families lingered by the dying fires, the opposing forces of peace marched across the rest of the fields, crushing everything they trod upon. During the middle of the children's bed time stories, the demon army erected a stone wall around the village. The village market place was replaced with a tall, evil castle. While the parents were kissing their children good-night, the demons retired to the only 24 hour restaurant, *Mr. Bumble's House of Gruel*. There, each nursed a small portion of gruel in a large bowl. To Mr. Bumble's dismay, no one asked for seconds.

Finally, when the entire village slept, the demon queen arrived.

Queen Agnes.

A queen so evil, so disgusting, that she is found in the dictionary as the definition of *bad*, *mean*, *demon*, and *non-penguin*. So ugly that even a rock could not look upon her face without being repulsed, she'd won her crown while the rest of the demons were vomiting. Queen Agnes had won *'Squire* magazine's "Most Gross Evil Person of the Year" award eight years running.

Now, on the newest garden-turned-battlefield, she was about to face her latest hero and heroine, Steve the Mighty and Janice the Powerful. It wouldn't be until after the battle that Agnes' lawyers would realize that Agnes had forgotten to renew her life insurance.

As the demon camp began to calm down, Aaron sat in the opposing camp trying to find out how he had gotten to this place in his life. "Pathetic," he muttered as he watched his best friend, Steve, slip away from the fire with his girlfriend, Janice. Turning away, Aaron tried to remember how he had landed the cursed job of being a hero's best friend.

A group of soldiers broke out into a rowdy song. Obviously drunk, they reeked from nights on the road, following Steve around the country as he did 'good' deeds.

Aaron got up and talked to himself as he walked away from the camp fire. Reliving the past, he didn't care if anyone thought he was crazy. "We left home when the wizard tried to kill us. Sometime between meeting Queen Agnes and saving Janice from the midget dragon, *I* became the best friend. It's not fair! I get the lame horse, the bad armor, the second best reputation. I always have to be happy for Steve because *I'm his sniveling best friend!* Suddenly angrier than it was possible to get in a split second, Aaron yelled up at the sky, "Damn this world for being so laid out! Damn it for assigning people specific parts and telling the same story over and over again!"

"Yes, it is a shame," a voice said next to him. Aaron tuned to see an old man sitting on a nearby log.

"Who are you?" Aaron demanded, speaking clearly so that anyone listening could understand. Then remembering his manners, he added, "I'm the hero, Steve's, best friend."

"I'm sorry," the old man said, understandingly. "It's a bad job, but someone has to do it. Heroes just *can't* go running around without best friends."

"Who *are* you?" Aaron persisted.

Embarrassed at forgetting his job, the old man fished around in his pockets for his Designated Character

Card and Instructions. “I’m your friendly Soothsayer/Doom Foreteller Who Shows Up and Disappears Suddenly, but you can call me Bob.” He squinted in the dark, reading character directions, names, lines, and staging all together. “Bob, that’s me, says: *Beware of Queen Agnes. She has a Bad Plan.* Aaron, that’s you, says: *We know. Steve has a great plan. He and Janice will use their wonderful, magical powers to destroy her.* Bob, that’s me, stands up. Bob: *Watch out for flying fish—oh wait,*” Bob broke off. “I was supposed to tell you that last week on the boat. Sorry.”

“It would have been nice to know then,” Aaron growled, rubbing his bitten neck.

Bob ignored him and continued, jumping ahead, “Bob: *Here’s a hint, don’t look at Agnes’ face. Look at the ground.* Aaron—you: *Will do.*”

“I don’t even need to be here, Aaron muttered to himself. “He’s playing both parts.”

“Aaron looks up at the sky and Bob disappears. Aaron sees Bob next in the village just before he oops! That’s tomorrow’s edition,” Bob stopped. They stood for some time, staring up at the stars. Aaron began to wonder if Bob would ever disappear. “Is this how you’re spending your last night as a best friend?” Bob asked finally.

“Yeah. After Steve and Janice win tomorrow, they’re going back to The—City—With—The—Unpronounceable—Name to be the king and queen. I’ll go back home to the mountains,” he sighed.

Bob laughed sadly, “You poor guy! No one ever told you, did they?”

“Told me what?”

“The best friend always dies,” Bob said, shaking his gray head with sorrow. “He has to die to spur on the hero. That way the antagonist is killed.”

Shaken, Aaron stared at Bob.

“Look at that!” Bob pointed suddenly to the sky. Aaron looked up just as Bob crashed through the woods, trying to disappear as quietly as he could.

“Broken bobble stones!” Aaron cursed. Still dazed at the prospect of dying in the morning, he headed into the village for a much needed bowl of cold gruel.

The next morning dawned gray, typical storm weather for a battle. The villagers, surprised at the changes that had occurred the night before, were not happy with suddenly being under Queen Agnes’ rule. They also did not like Steve’s army outside killing their crops. However, the laws of the world said that ordinary people could not interfere with heroes, villains, armies, and/or magic.

Aaron stumbled out of *Mr. Bumble’s House of Gruel* carrying a small doggy bag, half full of gruel. Instantly he realized that he was on the wrong side of the wall. He hurried out of the village just as the archers from both sides began to fire flaming fire-arrows. Several buildings blazed and soon the battle was a huge mess of fire, dead bodies, looters, ruined buildings, confusion and chaos.

Weeding his way through the crowds, saying “good-morning” to the humans and demons he knew, Aaron forced his way to the back of the battle. He spent an hour recovering from his gruel hangover before he saw Steve.

Steve came over and began to talk to Aaron needlessly about how to defeat Queen Agnes. Aaron spaced out until he heard Steve say: “...so I thought we might try Spain.”

“Look, all you have to do is not look at her face. Bob, our Friendly Doom Foreteller, said you just have to look at the ground,” Aaron sighed, wondering once more why he was the best friend and Steve the hero instead of the other way around.

“No,” Steve said, dismissing the idea automatically. He thought for a moment, then brightened, “I know! I’ve figured it out! All we have to do is not look at her face!”

Aaron gave him a look of disgust, which Steve naturally mistook for awe.

“Look,” Aaron said, trying to distract Steve, “Where’s Janice? Is she out there fighting?”

“No,” Steve said, shifting into a more comfortable position. “We were out there for the beginning of

the battle, but we came back so she could fix her hair and change her clothes. After that we'll have lunch, then we'll walk the horses around the battle to the back door. Then all we'll have to do is find and kill Queen Agnes."

Feeling his gruel hangover threatening to come back, Aaron managed to stay away from Steve and Janice until it was time to go to the castle.

"We'll go in front and you watch the rear," Janice instructed as she examined her face in her shield. They set off at a fast pace, only stopping to rid the world of another demon. When they reached the castle they were covered with small wounds and the sky seemed ready to drench them at any minute.

Aaron lagged behind, actually doing his job and watching out for anyone behind them. Suddenly a demon leaped out of the tree and landed onto the back of his horse. Aaron's horse reared, dropping the demon and Aaron onto the ground.

"Don't kill me," Aaron said just loud enough for the demon to hear him. The demon's sword was dangerously close to his heart. "You don't want to kill me, you want to kill them."

"I have to kill you," the demon, afraid to try something new. "I was told to."

"Aren't we all?" Aaron muttered to himself. Holding his chest in as hard as he could, he talked quickly. "Look, I don't want to die. But according to all the rules and traditions I'm supposed to. But if you kill me, your queen will die and we'll be stuck with *them* in charge. We can fake my death and call the queen down here to fight. While they're fighting, you can get away and start your life over."

"I don't know," the demon said doubtfully. "What would I do?"

"How should I know?" Aaron demanded. "The point is that you will be able to do *anything you want to do!*"

The demon nodded, resigned to keep his excitement down to a low simmer, "Okay."

The demon raised his sword and brought it down in the space between Aaron's arm and his chest. Aaron dumped the gruel from his doggy bag on his chest, letting the catsup—from the catsup packages that came with the gruel—mingle with the gruel so that it turned red.

"My queen!" the demon hollered. "Come down! You are summoned to your fight!" Forced to come down by the summoning spell, the queen appeared on the field, still as ugly as a squashed toad with a hernia.

The demon ran away as Steve ran up to Aaron. "You're dying," he said, breaking down. "It's all my fault! I never should have made you guard our backs!"

Thinking as fast as he could, Aaron tried to ignore the exchange of insults between Janice and Queen Agnes. Trying to act as if he was dying, he said, "Don't blame yourself. Remember, don't look at her face. Kill the queen for me." Aaron rolled his eyes sarcastically, disgusted by what he had just said. Steve took it that that meant Aaron was dead.

"I will, my friend," Steve whispered, actually appearing slightly noble. He turned around and stormed toward the queen, holding up his shield to guard his face.

Wielding his magical sword, he joined his power with Janice's. They chanted weird words that resounded around the field, stopping all of the fighting. With their last words, Queen Agnes gave a loud shriek and her body burst into flames. After a few moments, she dropped to the ground, dead.

Oddly exhausted from their 'firework' display, Steve and Janice helped each other onto one of the horses, not noticing that the demon army had disappeared when the queen had died. They rode off toward The—City—With—The—Unpronounceable—Name, their army close behind.

Left on his own, Aaron sat up and tried to scrape off the gruel. When his attempts proved to be fairly successful, he reentered the village, where the villagers had turned into an angry mob.

"We are tired of having our village wrecked and our crops destroyed!" a woman on the podium said. The mob agreed with her loudly. "We are tired of having our homes looted and families wrecked! We

will no longer put up with this kind of treatment!” More loud agreement. “They wreck our lives, dump a bloody castle in the middle of our village, and now they’ve left the queen’s body for us to clean up! *Well I say enough is enough! We’re not going to let these heroes walk all over us any more! We are going to send this- this... body, this dead queen back to them!*’ The mob roared in agreement. “On a calmer note, let’s start with putting out the fires and fixing up the village and replanting the crops,” the woman said, easily calming the crowd down.

Aaron worked his way up to her as the crowd drifted away to clean up the village. He got there just in time to see her talking to a young, teenage boy.

“Obin, you can take the body to ‘their royal majesties’,” she said sarcastically.

“I’ll do my best,” Obin promised earnestly, as eager to please as a young puppy.

“You!” the woman said, looking up at Aaron, “You’ll either go with Obin, or you better start helping.”

Aaron quickly reviewed his choice. “I’ll go with Obin,” he said, deciding that would be better than being bullied around by this woman.

“Great!” Obin said. “We’ll travel together, and after we give them the body we can travel around the world together! We’ll be best friends!”

Taken by surprise, Aaron groaned, but it was too late. He had said he would go, and now he was to be Obin’s best friend. As they left the village, Aaron saw Bob sitting in the middle of the market place, searching for his cue cards. Reading ahead, Bob burst out into hysterical laughter, then looked up and saw Aaron. Bob tried to swallow and watched Aaron leave as Bob tried to shake his head disapprovingly.

The Keeper of the Ring

Alyssa Ashley

Second Prize Winner

Balticon 2001 Young Writers' Contest

Most fairytales begin with once upon a time, but this isn't any normal fairytale, and it certainly isn't make-believe. This is a story that really happened, and it happened to me... My name is Anna Bruns, and I have experienced something, along with my little brother, Jeremy, that no one else has.

It all started one spring day when we were both off from school. I, being a nosey child, decided to rummage around in the attic for something to play with, while my mom was at work. All I wanted was to find a game or a book to read, but I ended up finding so much more.

As I was pushing some boxes around, I ended up knocking over a box of old things that my great-grandmother had given my mom when she died. I found some of her old jewelry and clothing and thought it would be fun to play dress up. After countless hours of pretending to be a princess trapped in a castle and being saved by a dashing prince, I grew bored and decided to continue my adventure at some other time.

As I was putting everything back, I was distracted by my brother and immediately left the attic. He was curious and wanted to know what I was doing, but instead of inviting him to join in on the fun, I scolded him for being so nosey, and then I decided to leave my house. I decided to go take a walk into the woods by my house where I might be able to get into some more mischief. But as I got further into the woods, I grew more and more lonesome. I wished for a friend, someone who I could play with. I wished so hard that I said it aloud.

"I want a friend to play with!"

Just then, as the words left my mouth, my hand began to shake. But as I stared in bewilderment, I noticed that it was the ring on my finger that was causing my hand to shake and not my hand itself. It was my great-grandmother's ring! I had forgotten to take it off. I was terrified. I had no idea what was happening to me. Just as I was about to run away for fear of what I had done, a little man appeared out of thin air.

"Who are you?" I asked, unsure of whether I wanted to know the answer.

"I am Baron Brown of the tribe of Brown Dwarves. Who are you and what tribe are you from, because you certainly aren't a dwarf," he said peering up at me.

"My name is Anna and I am a human," I said as politely as I could, because I didn't want to anger him. We seemed to talk for hours, learning about each other's worlds and how different we both were. I learned of all the different creatures Brown had seen, and I wanted to see them for myself.

"What if I summoned a group of fairies?" I asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. They are very temperamental, and they will never leave you alone!" Brown warned.

But I didn't want to listen to him, I wanted to see them for myself. How bad could a group of little fairies be? I called upon the ring and within a few seconds, the fairies appeared. They were very rude little things. Yes, they were very pretty, but they acted like annoying flies buzzing around my head and picking on Baron Brown because he was so small. Most of them flew away after Brown swatted a few of them, all except one.

"Who are you?" I asked, "Why didn't you fly away with your friends?"

"They bother me. They are too immature," she said, "I am Flora Fairy. I come from the Daisy Tribe.

I don't mean to be rude, but who are you? I've never seen your type of species before."

"Oh, don't worry, you're not being rude. You are very nice compared to those other fairies. I'm Anna and I am a human." I said slightly chuckling at her curiosity.

Just then, I heard my mom calling me from the house. I promised my friends that I would meet them tomorrow, and then I rushed back home.

"Where have you been?" my mother asked, "and what is that mess up in the attic? You are punished today and tomorrow young lady, and I don't want to hear a word about it."

I was heartbroken. What would happen to my friends? They would think that I had abandoned them! Slowly tears began to fall down my face. I didn't think that things could get any worse, but just then, they did. My mom discovered the ring on my finger. She was so upset that I was playing with such expensive jewelry that she yanked it off my finger and then took it upstairs and laid it on her dresser. If I were to take the ring back, she would notice in an instant.

Later that day, I noticed my little brother running into the forest. I was very curious to find out where he was going, so I crept into my parents' room to find the binoculars. As I turned to leave the room, I glanced at the dresser.

"OH NO!" I moaned, "Jeremy took the ring! He must have been spying on me in the woods, and now he knows of its power. Who knows what he will do with it. I must somehow get it back."

I devised a plan in my room, and it really seemed like it was going to work, until I looked outside. The sun began to hide behind the clouds, as if it were afraid of something, and from what I saw next, I could understand why. A giant dragon was flying through the sky, and it was headed straight for the house!

"He must have been playing "Dungeons and Dragons" again!" I exclaimed.

I knew that I had to act fast to save my family, especially my brother who was right in the dragon's path. I quietly shut my door and placed some pillows under my covers to make it seem like I was sleeping in my bed. Then, I carefully climbed down the rainspout almost breaking my neck a few times. I then ran as fast as I could towards the woods running both from my mother, who might notice me sneaking out, and the dragon, who might view me as a potential meal. Although I was young, I had to swallow my fear for the sake of my brother's life. I wasn't even sure of what to do, but deep down my heart led me. I ran to my brother and grabbed him just in time to save him from the dragon's scorching flames. After that, I ran to find my friends. Maybe they would have a suggestion or two.

I found them at our meeting place, and we quickly discussed things. The only thing that could save my family and the rest of the world from this ruthless dragon was the prick of a unicorn's horn.

"Only something as pure and innocent as a unicorn could save anyone from such evil," Baron Brown said.

"Yes, but someone with an equal amount of strength and courage must lead the unicorn to the dragon," Flora reminded.

"I will do it!" I exclaimed, "I discovered this ring and began the cause of all this mess. I should be the one to get rid of it."

I quickly grabbed the ring from my brother and invoked the power of the ring one last time.

"Show me a unicorn with a heart of gold," I commanded.

All of a sudden, the ground began to shake. To this day, I am not sure whether it was because of the ring's power, or the dragon's earth shaking stomp so close behind us. But just as I had commanded, a unicorn appeared before our eyes. It was a beautiful sight, one that I will never forget. But I had no time to marvel at the sight, I had to slay a dragon.

I calmly walked up to the unicorn, and it was strange, because it already seemed like it knew what to do. I jumped on, and we galloped off to challenge the dragon. As we got near, it reared its ugly head and

blew fire into the air. It scorched the earth around us, and I could hear the burning and crackling of the trees. Then, it charged. We had to be quick, but the unicorn already reacted. It quickly ran underneath the dragon's legs to confuse it, and before the dragon could react, the unicorn pierced it with its horn. Sadly though, the dragon's reflexes were sharp, and it jerked back so quickly after it was pierced, that it snapped off the unicorn's horn. The dragon was withering away, but the unicorn remained in pain. I knew a unicorn couldn't live without its horn, so I ran to where the dragon had disappeared and luckily found the horn. Maybe if I placed it back it would heal. I ran to the unicorn's side and placed it on its forehead. Sparks began to shoot from its head and slowly the horn was replaced.

I knew that I couldn't let any harm come to these poor souls who were transported to a foreign land. So, I sadly said my good-byes, and commanded the ring to send the creatures back to the lands they came from, including the annoying fairies. As my brother and I walked back home, we hugged each other, and no words were needed to express what we thought. We both knew. These events will be something that he and I will share forever, that no one else could begin to understand. I am now the keeper of this ring, and no evil will come from it ever again.

“The Price of Peace... the Price of War”

Chris Cheok

Third Prize Winner

2001 Balticon Young Writers' Contest

The enemy interceptor smashed into the shields of the *Unchallengeable*, making the Monolith Strike Cruiser shake enough to throw the Solornian admiral to the floor. “Shield status, Mr. Nap”

“Fifty percent and dropping fast, Admiral Mako. Engineering reports the number three shield slagged.”

“Very well,” replied Mako. “Helmsman, show them our port side. Mr. Cole, I want all port guns engaged to the maximum.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the gunnery officer. The cruiser shook as the first salvos of turbolaser fire leapt from their barrels and out towards the opposing Mandel class destroyer. The *Protector* responded with its own turbolaser salvo. The deck plates vibrated with the impact.

“Sir, I suggest that we recall the bomber squadron to take out the *Protector*,” said Mako’s first mate, Captain Burton.

“Our bomber’s primary target is the Alcanian shipyard on the far side of the planet,” answered Mako. “That shipyard is one of the last obstacles that stand in the way of Solornia controlling the new fuel source.”

“Very well, sir,” sighed Burton. The battle wore on, and both the Solomian and the Alcanian fleets suffered massive casualties. With each loss of life, Scott Mako became a little more troubled and a little more disillusioned. Just as things seemed to be going routinely for *Unchallengeable* and the rest of the Solornian fleet, a flash of light announced the arrival of several ships dropping out of hyperspace.

“Whose ships just exited hyperspace?” demanded Mako.

“Not ours, Sir, two Alcanian fleet carriers and several gunships exited hyperspace 20 clicks to our starboard,” yelled the tracking officer. “The Alcanians now have as many ships as we do. They’re launching birds too.” As he spoke the newly arrived fleet carriers disgorged their fighters and bombers, filling the surrounding area with blips on the sensor window.

“Direct our ships to launch their remaining fighters and send them on an intercept course toward the new ships,” ordered Mako, “I don’t want any of those fighters any closer than they already are.”

Kirtan Planch was waiting in the cockpit of his fighter when the command comm channel clicked into life.

“All remaining fighters aboard the *Unchallengeable*, be prepared for launch to intercept the incoming fighters.” With that the comm was silent and Kirtan went to work on the pre-tlight checks. Within three minutes he was lined up and ready for the battle. As the squadron leader, he was first and with a burst of throttle, shot into space and away from the *Unchallengeable*. After clearing the hangar, he idled his engines and waited for the rest of his squadron.

“Blue Squadron report in,” said Kirtan over the squadron comm frequency.

“Blue Three here.”

“Blue Four here.”

“Blue Ten here.” Kirtan listened as his squadron reported in. All present and in the green.

“Enemy fighters and bombers closing in at 5 o’clock high,” said Blue Five.

“Roger Five,” Kirtan replied. “Blue Squadron, form up in flights of four and head towards the far right of the enemy formation.” His squadron acknowledged him and started toward the mass of fighters quickly approaching them.

“Fighters defending the fleet,” came the voice of Admiral Mako over the comm, “Blue, Green and Gold Squadrons will engage the enemy fighters, Red and Grey will target the bombers. Good luck gentlemen, may you fly fast and shoot straight.”

As the two groups of fighters closed the gap, little more was said. Kirtan put all power into his front shields as he entered into laser range of the incoming fighters. He nosed toward the nearest fighter and started to open fire on the Alcanian craft. As Kirtan and his squadron’s fighters shot passed the enemy fighters they re-balanced their shield and turned and started to dogfight the opposing interceptors. Kirtan brought his fighter behind an Alcanian T-Class fighter and opened fire. Laser fire punched holes into the hull until the T-Class exploded and sent debris flying.

As the battle progressed, more and more signals disappeared from the sensors screens and both sides were taking a beating. Mako observed the dogfight from the bridge of *Unchallengeable* and the frown on his face was more evident than ever.

“Sir, Yellow Squadron reports that the shipyard on the far side of the planet has been destroyed,” reported Nap.

“Good,” replied Mako, “re-engage the squadrons and send them on a course to back up the other fighters.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Kirtan knew that he was outnumbered. Blue Squadron had been reduced to two flights of three, and similar results were being reported in by the other squadrons. Just as all hope seemed to be lost, Yellow squadron and the rest of the bomber wings came to their assistance, blasting away at enemy fighters. What the Solornian K-Bombers lacked in speed and agility, they made up for in sheer fire power. With three laser cannons and two particle cannons their entrance into the fight had destroyed about seven enemy T-Class fighters and several S-Class bombers.

The result of the battle was settled with the return of the bomber wings. Their fire power allowed the Solornian fleet to beat off the rest of the Alcanian fleet. On the bridge of the *Unchallengeable* Mako assessed the damages.

“*Liberator*, *Gatekeeper*, and *Bright Hope* all destroyed. What is the condition of the remaining fleet here?” inquired Mako.

“*Anderson* reports that it has severe hull damage and slagged shield generators,” replied Burton. “The rest of the fleet reports similar damages. Our fighter Captains report that our fighter strength is at three-fourths.”

“Very well,” responded Mako. “We will go back to Solomia to repair, refuel and restock.. If anyone needs me, I will be in my cabin.”

The cabin was the standard size for a Monolith Strike Cruiser, but it was far too big for Mako. Any normal Admiral’s cabin would be lined with awards and medals. Mako’s had none, he preferred an empty room. Finally away from the havoc and noise of the bridge, he was able to think. He remembered when the two systems, Solornia and Alcania, were allies fighting on the same side. That was at least 15 years ago, but it seemed as if it were just yesterday.

Scott Mako had just graduated from the Solornian Military Academy when the Reptile Wars began. Ships from the far side of the universe began attacking human ships and planets. Several systems had put aside their differences and allied together so that the reptilian invaders would be driven back into their own space. Mako graduated at the top of his class and was assigned to be the first mate on the Gunship *Steadfast*, which was sent to the front lines in the fight with the alien invaders. During the battle for the planet Alos, the human forces faced a very large Reptilian strike force. During the battle, the commander of the ship, Rear Admiral Stukof, was in the hangar overseeing the launch of the ship’s fighters. Mako remembered that scenario too well.

“Admiral, we have two reptile cruisers coming in at 3 o’clock low. What should we do?” asked Mako over the ship’s comm.

“Call for some help, and target the cruiser’s missile launch tubes,” replied Stukof. “That way they won’t...” The ship rocked from a missile impact and Mako was thrown to the floor.

“What happened? Admiral, Admiral, come in!”

“We have been hit by a missile when the shields were opening to release the fighters. The whole banger is destroyed,” replied the very concerned ship’s shield technician. Worst yet, we’ve lost Stukof. Looks like you’re in charge, kid.”

Mako’s first action was to send out a distress signal on the fleet-wide band, and then he waited and hoped that someone would respond.

“*Steadfast*, this is Dap Blackar, Captain of the Fleet-Carrier *Alcania’s Pride*,” said the face of a man with blue eyes, brown hair and accented cheek bones over the video cmm. “I believe I can offer you some assistance. We are on our way.”

With the help of *Alcania’s Pride*, Mako was able to drive off the incoming ships. That was the start of a friendship that lasted past the war with the reptiles. Even after the war, the two found time in their busy schedules of commanding star ships to see each other and talk about the old times. They both wished the peace would never end.

That peace did end. Several years later, a new energy source was discovered on the planet Char, an energy source that was clean, efficient and almost infinite in quantity. Naturally, there was a race to control the planet. Thus the Emonium War began and the two biggest contenders for this planet were Alcania and Solornia. Two planets, once friends, were now were bitter enemies. People with Alcanian blood were deported from Solornia and similar actions were taken on Alcania. Mako was promoted to Admiral of the Solornian fleet and lost contact with his Alcanian friend.

Mako sat in his cabin and remembered his old friend and wished that this war would end so that they could talk again. Or better yet, if he could only talk to Blackar now, they could easily settle the differences and end the war. After all, no amount of new fuel could justify all this life. Just then, his first mate came into the room.

“Admiral, we have orders from the President,” said Burton. “We are, at the first opportunity, to jump to the planet Char. The Alicanians have amassed their entire fleet 500 klicks from the planet and we are to confront them,” continued Burton. “We are to meet in Sector 12, which is about three light-years away from Char.” With that, Burton left Mako’s cabin and Mako sat down and thought some more about past times.

With *Unchallengeable* as their flagship, the Solornian fleet in all its entirety jumped toward the final battle ground of the Emonium War, the planet Char. When the Solornian fleet exited hyperspace, they formed around the *Unchallengeable* and launched their fighter screens. As they were arriving at sector 12, the Alcanian fleet became aware of their presence. They formed up and started on a course that would bring the two fleets together in a little less than 30 minutes. In the center of the Alcanian fleet was their flagship, the Avenger Class Destroyer *Liberator*.

On the bridge of the *Unchallengeable*, Mako was making last minute checks on the fleet and the fighters. “Mr. Burton, what is the distance between the two fleets?” inquired Mako.

“Just over 100 klicks, Sir,” Burton replied.

“At 50 klicks, launch all the bombers, escorts and fighters from the bays. Keep the current fighter screen close to the ships,” commanded Mako.

“Yes, Sir.”

The fighters and bombers launched and headed towards the Alcanian fleet. When the bombers were in range, they launched their torpedoes towards the enemy ships. The enemy fighters started to pour

out of the bays of the fleet carriers and cruisers. The battle for Char had begun.

Mako was giving out commands as fast as he could. The Solornian fleet was outnumbered but they out-gunned the Alcanian ships.

“Mr. Nap, tell all the Ellipse Class Destroyers to not use their anti-matter guns until the fighter lanes have cleared up. We don’t want our boys getting in the way.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I want missile tubes firing as fast as they can and all flak cannons keeping up the counterfire,” said Mako.

“Incoming, ten enemy missiles,” cried the sensor officer.

“Brace for impact!” shouted Mako, “All flak guns, FIRE!” The *Unchallengeable* had over twenty flak cannons at each end of the hull for missile defense. At Mako’s command, the bow guns fired several rounds filling the surrounding space with a dense cloud of scrap metal. Most of the incoming missiles hit the flak and turned into blazing explosions. A couple missiles made it through and hit the shields of the *Unchallengeable*. The ship shook from the impact. Mako had known that this battle would not be an easy one.

As the battle wore on, more and more flaming ships dotted the horizon, more and more signals disappeared from the screens on the *Unchallengeable*. Mako observed the tactics used by the Alcanian fleet. They were different from what he had most recently seen but seemed strangely familiar.

“Someone get me a hyperlink to the Alcanian flagship,” said Mako. Within seconds he was staring at the face of someone with whom he was very familiar, but whose features had visibly sagged.

“Scott, is that you?” came a surprised voice.

“Dap? Dap Blackar, it is you,” replied Mako.

“Scott, you old dog, I’m glad to see you alive and well again, although not in a situation like this,” responded Blackar. Seeing Blackar’s face again brought back many fond memories.

How the two had helped each other out. “Scott, can’t we work this out, we don’t have to fight,” said Blackar.

“No, we could but our planets harbor no such friendship; it would not work,” came Mako’s response.

“Then we shall have to destroy each other,” said Blackar.

“No, we won’t,” replied Mako. With that he closed the link.

“Admiral Blackar, there is a Solornian B-Class fighter heading strait for the planet Char. I don’t know what’s going on,” cried an Alcanian aboard the *Liberator*.

“What is Mako doing?” Blackar asked himself

In the solitary fighter headed toward Char, Mako looked behind him and at the battle that was still going on. The payload on his fighter was no ordinary payload; he was armed with several high explosive bombs and numerous high yield concussion missiles. While not as much as a full fledge bomber, Mako knew it was enough to get the job done. He wondered if he had made the right decision as he and his fighter slammed into Char. His answer was a loud roaring—then silence.

Six months after the battle for Char, Blackar stood on the bridge of *Liberator*. He had read the news stories about the incident many times. But each time he read it, he still was almost brought to tears. In his suicide plunge towards the planet, Mako destroyed the Emonium deposits with one large explosion. Without a cause, the fighting had essentially stopped with the exception of small and isolated skirmishes. Blackar stared into space, remembering the ultimate sacrifice his comrade had made so that at least one of them would have a future.

The Ballad of the Eco-Rustlers

Robyn Weiss

Judges' Choice

2001 BSFS Young Writers' Contest

"The perimeter's been breached!" The alarm wailed. Chad Boswick jumped from his bunk. The CRT displayed a JPEG of the ranch. Three red lights blinked in the outer pastures. Two more dots blipped just outside the ranch's border. An icon indicated the presence of a hovercraft.

"God-damned eco-rustlers!"

Chad unplugged the Winchester from the recharging unit on the mantel. He threw an extra fuel cell in his holster. The computer confirmed that the life signs were rustlers. Chad checked his rifle. A green light flashed on the gun. The green light that authorized a kill.

The defense network calculated Chad's plan of attack. It fed the coordinates into his "black stallion," and forwarded his status to the Pinedale sheriff. The posse showed an ETA of thirteen minutes. Thirteen minutes! They wouldn't arrive on time! The eco-rustlers, with their insipid vegan ways, had been working the Western Range for the last three years. Their insidious objective was nothing less than the complete destruction of the Wyoming cattle industry. Chad's quick draw was the last hope for the honest townsfolk of Pinedale.

He mounted his steed. He straightened his white hat. With an explosion of petrochemicals, Chad launched into the morning skies.

The lazy morning sun peeked from behind the jagged summits of the Windy Mountains, their peaks casting long dark shadows on the black clad rustlers. Chad circled above. The glint from the stallion's muffler caught a glance of their dark eyes.

Chad let go with three rapid shots. The first caught a rustler in the chest. Her right arm flew from her shattered body in a spiraling arc of pain-ridden death. The second shot ricocheted from a rustler's energy deflector as he high tailed it toward the barbed-wire fence. The final shot barreled into desert sage.

From a nearby hover craft the rustlers' gang fired a disrupter. The blast knocked Chad from his gallant steed. He tumbled to the ground below. Where's that damn posse? Chad's hand was broken and useless. With his tongue he flipped his rifle to maximum charge. The eco-gang's hover craft was already fleeing into morning haze. In a final burst of desperation, he emptied the weapon in the direction of the craft. The shots glistened in the sky, then crashed into the condominium complex in the foothills.

Where's that damn posse? His wrist console showed an ETA of six minutes. The bad guys won again. Chad loaded the second cartridge in his gun.

He took a quick survey of the cattle. Seven of the beasts had been fitted with 'trodes. Oblivious to the searing pain of his sprained ankle, Chad ran toward the beasts. He tried to remove the 'trodes, but Chad's laptop confirmed that seven beasts were infected with the cogno-virus. The cattle were rapidly developing cognition. Chad had to work fast! The 'trodes were a diabolical tool of the eastern liberal elite. These strange devices, when planted in a cow's brain, would stimulate rapid neural activity, increasing the cattle's cognitive awareness. Once consciousness hit 0.75 AJOS (Average Joe On the Street), the 'trode would dial in and register the cattle with the Social Security Administration.

The 'trodes worked fast. Within a scant fifteen minutes of infection, one could bring a cow from prime grade beef to the worthless legal sentience. Once registered with the Federal Sentient Life Commission of the Social Security Office, the cattle were protected by the misguided, liberal National Sentient Statute of 2026, and could not be destroyed.

The only hope for the Western town was to put the cattle down as quickly as possible. Chad aimed his rifle toward the closest beast. A green light flashed. He pulled the trigger. The gun hesitated. He yanked on the trigger again. It bucked once, then let forth with a thunderous blast.

A pale yellow light surrounded the eighteen hundred pounds of prime beef. The cow fell to the ground in spasmodic death. He aimed at the second cow, but the authorization light had turned red. A recorded voice from the gun spoke:

“You are pointing this gun at an unarmed, registered sentient life form. According to our records, this life form is harmless and cannot be zapped into oblivion with this device. For more information please type [F], or consult your user manual. Thank you for using the Winchester Zap-O-Matic Death Ray.”

Chad yanked on the trigger to no avail. The cow stood back in terror. Chad clutched the weapon like a club, and rushed the cow.

“Ouch!” said the cow, “Why is this ape-like creature hitting me with a stick? What have I done to be the focus of such anger?” The cow jumped back and plodded out of swinging range.

The five other sentient cows stared at Chad in utter amazement. They looked at the dead woman. They looked at her arm lying in a patch of purple larkspur. Larkspur always causes stomachaches. A dead woman lying in Larkspur looked even less appetizing. The bull walked over and poked at the carcass of his comrade lying in the morning dew. The carcass had a ‘trode protruding from its neck.”□

Was this ‘trode the thing that suddenly gave them the ability to perceive and discuss their surroundings? What should they do about the human with a stick? What were those strange metal birds circling overhead? This was too much for the cows on their first day as registered rational beings. They stampeded away.

The posse was late. Three of the deputies dropped out of formation to check on the girl, the rest flew in the direction of the rustlers’ vapor trail.

Chad looked in dismay at the retreating cattle. Twenty grand worth of prime beef wasted! Had he arrived seconds sooner, he could have at least slaughtered the cows before they developed enough neural pathways to become welfare collecting citizens of the United States.

It was another sad day for the honest hard-working cow folk of the Western Range. How much longer could they survive the onslaught of the eco-rustlers? What good are cattle that discuss Plato? But, now was not the time for idle speculation. Chad spat into the dirt. He had some beef to slaughter.