

Starfight (working title)

by Hannibal Tabu

Cool currents of air tiptoed across Josie's dewy countenance as she rocked back and forth, her body moving in time with Billy. She scanned the bright, starry night as he huffed on top of her, her thoughts adrift with no real focus. She spared a moment to glance at Billy, hair like lengths of dirty straw, and made a pleased sound before resuming her stargazing. It wasn't that she didn't like sex -- that summer with Jerry, hitchhiking across the desert states grabbed her consciousness with a flash before just as quickly letting go -- and Billy was a sweet guy who she'd probably end up marrying. He just didn't have much going in the passion department, and she'd gotten used to that over the last five months they'd been together.

She smiled as she noticed Billy starting to whisper her name over and over. That normally meant it wouldn't be much longer before he was done, and Josie began thinking about the blue green gaze he'd be giving her in a few minutes, the textured sentiments of devotion that were worth more than any sexual experience she'd ever had. She leaned back and smiled at the sky, and her eyes were almost closed when she saw them.

Josie tried to concentrate on the sky and tune out Billy's insistent whispering and insistent thrusting, because her Kansas-bred brain was having a great deal of difficulty wrapping itself around what she was seeing. In the sky, like it was a big movie screen, two ... well, she didn't even know what they were, but it was clear they were fighting. The one on the left, which looked something like a man, was dressed in some kind of loose blue and red tunic with baggy pants and no shoes. She noticed as his leg swung up for a kick that he had no toes, just one seamless extension at the end of his leg representing a foot. She'd first noticed his back moving towards her (towards the ground? what was this?) as he was seemingly pushed into her view. The other combatant looked like some kind of octopus

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or squid, all flowing translucent colors and what looked like six trunk like tentacles. Josie stared, dumbstruck, at the sky as they traded blows and ducked each other's attacks, not even bothering to keep up her pretended pleasure as Billy proceeded, blissfully unaware.

Thankfully he was indeed done in a moment, and she looked down at him with a forced smile. He kissed both of her cheeks, and leaned back, his back settling on the left side of the Mustang convertible that had been safehouse and bedroom for them many nights since meeting at the Chi Delt spring social. He leaned back and finally took note of what was happening over his head.

"What the f ..." Billy started, his eyes locked on the sky's ceiling.

Josie reacted as though she hadn't seen it before. "My god, Billy, what is that? Is it some kind of movie or something?"

Billy was quiet a second, his attention fixed above. "It can't be," he surmised finally, rubbing his clean shaven chin. "Look -- you can see actual stars *moving* as they fight, like they're running into them. Man, I don't ... I don't know what's happening."

Josie realized that she should probably be scared, but for some reason she felt a strange sense of indifference. Still, playing along had been her plan for most of her life, from her month-away degree in education to her love for this plain, simple boy Billy. She reached for him and drew herself close, saying, "Oh, Billy, I don't understand."

Billy rubbed her red shoulder-length hair absently, never looking down, and whispered that it would be all right. Josie suspected he was right -- nothing ever really affected her life, which was as normal and plain as the nightlife around their school, University of Missouri-Rolla. She nuzzled into his neck and wondered if she left

her iron on in her dorm.

The reports began to come into the newsroom fast and furious, and it was too huge a story to be a local hoax or phenomenon. Jeremy got up from his desk and walked over to the TV, turning to the ABC network feed, now going out over his own WISN affiliate in Milwaukee.

Alison Stewart was on, an almost comically serious African American newscaster who'd come over after tours of duty with MTV News and CBS. Jeremy met her once, on an affiliate junket to the mothership at ABC News HQ in New York, after the terrorist attacks. She'd smiled brightly at him and all the other backwoods yokels just like they were big city newspeople, and he'd always appreciated that.

"... across the nation. There is no clear understanding of what is being seen, and the scientific community is dumbfounded by the appearance of this gargantuan battle taking place millions of light years away."

Jeremy stopped to think about that. If this was really happening, and two strange giants were trading blows in space, it was happening literally billions of miles away. As long as it takes light to travel, this could have all been over before the first Cro-Magnon turned to his Neanderthal cousin and realized he could do better. He turned his attention back to Stewart, now adjusting her schoolteacher spectacles as she read from something that had been handed to her.

"According to scientists at NASA, there will be some kind of tidal disturbance along the coastlines of the world, which should pass within a week, but could happen soon and cause damage. This is based on these images showing a planetary mass hurtling rapidly through space, which will pass about forty-five million miles away

from the earth. According to NASA, there is no danger as it is clearly on a trajectory that will pass where the earth was a month ago. It is not clear if this is connected with the phenomenon in the earth's skies. ABCNews goes to Dr. Brent Rollins at NASA in Cape Canaveral. Dr. Rollins ..."

Jeremy walked back to his desk, disturbed. He'd been a newsman for just over six years, taking his spunk and determination from crappy UHF copywriting to a major network affiliate in a decent sized market. In that time he'd seen a lot, but the sheer scale of this cowed his comprehension into a corner, took its lunch money and talked about its momma. He flopped down in his chair, knowing the news director would call a meeting soon and discuss how to cover the "local" angle of this story, but somehow it just seemed ... unimportant. He let his eyes look across the newsroom, with the never ending drone of information gathering massaging his eardrums, and wondered.

Ahmir growled at his monitor, wishing he'd spent the money on the faster Athlon processor as he waited for his familiar Linux command prompt to appear. When he woke up and saw the news, he rushed into his room to turn on the computer, knowing that anything worth being heard or seen would not be on TV, but on Usenet, out in that vast chasm of raw data and unfettered ego that comprised so much of his life. Absently he thought about calling in to work, and telling them he'd be late or was sick, but as soon as the blinking cursor signalled his brain to the machine's readiness to go, all other thoughts were gone.

Ahmir didn't consider himself a conspiracy nut. Sure, the bumper sticker on his broken-down '96 Metro said, "THE FEDS SELL DRUGS IN THE GHETTO," but that was a fact discussed regularly in popular media. Okay, maybe his nightly sweeps of his one bedroom

apartment with the "bug finder" he bought at a gun show was a little paranoid, but nobody had ever been hurt by it. Especially Ahmir. In times like this, he ran into the welcome arms of the truly informed, those who kept their eyes out while he was ordering around high school morons at the Foot Locker.

Sure enough, the discussion was lively and passionate on talk.answers and alt.conspiracy.cabal. Ahmir kept both windows open while trying to load a hacker site in his browser, and the sheer volume threatened to knock him offline. Just for fun, Ahmir considered checking what the straight media was saying about all this. He set a window to try and open CNN's site, which was predictably swamped with requests and unable to answer his.

A regular on alt.conspiracy.cabal called EthiCal had posted a series of links involving Roswell and so-called technological advances of the last few decades, implying that either one or both of the fighting super-sized aliens were well known to the Feds, and that Dubya himself was in communications with their home world. Ahmir saved the post as a text file, knowing he had most of those links bookmarked already, but figuring he could always learn something new. Another poster going by the handle Sally Babcock ("What kinda name is 'Babcock?'" Ahmir wondered to himself, "Nobody could have a name that kooky!") quoted passages from comic book writer Grant Morrison's *JLA*, suggesting that the AOL Time Warner megacorp had summoned one of these creatures to help them take over and/or destroy the world, and the other one was heroically fighting to save us. She unfortunately couldn't or wouldn't note which was the relative good guy, which drew flame posts from all corners.

Ahmir didn't have a theory, and therefore felt comfortable lurking through Usenet, his randomized IP address emulator and his Usenet alias "FamilyMan" extra layers of security he wouldn't need today. No, he just felt a pressing need to find out all he could and figure out what to do with that knowledge later. Much like the gigabytes of

data he'd already collected and burned onto CDs, littering his bedroom amongst Gundam figures and photo printouts of Lisa Nicole Carson.

Ahmir finally found something really useful after about a half hour of reading through guesses and hypotheses. An independant news outlet in the Phillipines had aimed a pretty good webcam at the night sky and was beaming the results to the world. A number of his favorites had already set up mirror sites to handle the demand, and some even had earlier excerpts archived. "God bless the internet," Ahmir thought to himself as he let the QuickTime stream load.

It was almost 11 a.m. in San Jose, which meant the United States was aimed the wrong way, cosmically speaking, to get a look at what was going on. Ahmir cursed himself for taking that cough medicine and knocking out while watching Kilborn last night, because it seems like this all started a few hours after that. Most nights would find Ahmir awash in the glow of cathode rays until at least three, fingers hammering down on his keyboard relentlessly. Last night he gets a tickle in his throat and is down before 1 a.m. Dammit!

He watched the fight. Ahmir considered the humanoid, if you could call it that. He figured any bipedal creature with opposable thumbs, one head and two arms was humanoid enough for him, despite not having clear eyes, mouth, nose ... as though once it had them but they faded from lack of use, like vestigial tails on some humans to this day. Anyway, the humanoid fought smoothly, using a combination of moves that were reminiscent of t'ai chi but even more fluid. Most blows he was able to brush aside or redirect without taking much of the impact, but his strength was doing little against the cephalopod, who reminded Ahmir of Shuma-Gorath, the chaos demon from that *Marvel vs. Capcom* videogame. They seemed pretty evenly matched, and for the most part seemed to be holding one another at bay. Every once in a while, one would blast the other with a sneaky milk-colored energy discharge from a hand or a

tentacle, and once it was clear that the cephalopod actually threw a grouping of stars (nebula? constellation? Ahmir made a note to consult the web later) at the man-fighter, which sailed past due to a well-timed duck.

After about fifteen minutes, Ahmir started to get bored. Sure, this was the most important discovery in human history, that not only was there life in outer space but it was frickin' huge! Still, it was a fight like almost any other (and the more he watched it, the more it did seem like *Marvel vs. Capcom*, only with worse animation ... reality often disappointed him) so he bookmarked the mirror site and swore to download any relevant highlights later. He looked up at the clock and cursed, grabbing his gear and making a run for the door, determined to catch the next bus as his computer kept showing the images to the empty room.

Andrew Card walked into his office quickly and shut the door behind him. In the time that he'd been White House chief of staff, he was certain that he'd seen the worst of things, the worst any chief of staff had ever seen, and it couldn't get any more intense.

He was wrong.

Storming past the standing men and women around his desk, he took a seat behind the mahogany piece, originally a gift to his father from George Patton. He dropped a pile of folders to his left and bid them all sit down.

"I have to brief the President in a half hour," Card said to the assembled room. "Talk to me."

Some looked nervously to each other, others simply glanced at the floor, the ceiling, the window. Finally, Dick Myers, holding his blue

Air Force cap in hand as he stood to the right of the desk, spoke up.

"As I've already assured the Secretary of Defense," he began slowly, "we are certain that there is no threat to the United States at this time from this event."

Card looked at Myers with a slight smile. "General, there's gonna be a whole planet flying past us in about seventeen hours. According to everything we know, all of this has been over for centuries, but we're just getting this rushing planet data. I get all that. Tell me something *useful*. Who or what are we seeing?"

A balding man in a trenchcoat near the back spoke up. "Sir? I'm Dr. Donald Henderson from NASA, sir." Henderson nervously wrung his hands as he spoke. "We've gotten the latest telemetry from our long range telescopes planetside and in orbit, and we're sorry to say we have no new information to report. This is certainly not a hoax, as the same thing can be seen across the globe, and other agencies are reporting similar things back to us.

"The human shaped fighter, who we've dubbed 'Big Man' is basically a being much like us in shape, just considerably larger. He stands approximately thirty five million miles tall, and the creature he is fighting, who we've dubbed 'Big Squid,' is slightly larger than that. We were able to approximate that by looking at the stars they bump into and calculating the difference in size. Our body of science simply has no capacity to work on this kind of scale. How these creatures came to be, where they're from, why they're fighting ... we have no way to know."

Card knitted his fingers together and leaned his chin on them. "Okay, so we've got 'this is harmless' from General Myers, and Dr. Henderson throwing up his hands, unable to give us any hard data on what we're dealing with. In the meantime, we've got the whole world looking at the sky and wondering what's next. What do we tell

them?"

A clean cut young man leaned against the wall in an impeccably tailored suit cleared his throat, and all eyes turned to him. He looked up and smiled, a bright alabaster expression of happiness made for television commercials and breaking hearts. "Well, sir," he began, "this is the kind of birthday present that someone else always seems to get, that you've always wanted."

Card frowned a moment and considered this. "Excuse me?" he asked.

The man stood up and brushed down his suit jacket. "I'm Ted Baxter, Office of the Chief of Protocol, State Department. I just see this as an opportunity par excellence, sir, and we'd be remiss to let it slide."

Card glanced around the room. "Anyone in here have less than Alpha level security clearance?" he asked.

No one spoke up as they all glanced around. Card gestured to Baxter to go on.

"I spent seven years with the company, sir, and we learned to never look a gift horse in the mouth. My former superior was in charge of the Hussein scenario, and that did very well for our 41st President. While we had a huge windfall of good tidings from the unfortunate events of September 2001, that public opinion is beginning to sway and this could serve to secure them once again to our side.

"You see, sir," Baxter continued, pouring himself a glass of water, "the American people are scared spitless. The entire world is scared spitless. Thirty five million mile tall giants fighting in the sky, hurling planets at us willy nilly ..."

Dr. Henderson interjected, "We have no proof they threw this

planetary mass, Mr. Baxter, and we can be sure they didn't throw it at us."

"*You* can be sure, Doctor," Baxter smiled, sitting on the edge of the desk. "Can Jonny and June Pitstop in Backwater, Oklahoma be so sure? How about Rahim and Shaniqua Jackson in Chicago? Or whoever. There's a story to tell, and a profit to be gained from that story ..."

Card nodded slowly, the wheels in his head starting to turn. "If we say we need to defend the people against possible interstellar threats ..."

Henderson wondered aloud "... the budget would be astronomical itself ..."

Baxter finished, "... with no one able to say, one way or another, about where or how the money is spent. Billions of dollars vanishing into the void without having to fake a \$700 hamper or a \$2000 toilet seat. Money we can use for whatever the administration deems necessary."

A brunette woman sitting to the left finally spoke up, her nametag identifying her as Maureen Arlington from Defense. "Are we saying that we should recommend the president redirect funds from the national budget for undisclosed purposes, under the shadow of monsters from outer space?"

The room was silent a moment before Baxter noted, "It sounds so ... wrong when you put it that way."

Card nodded. "I mean, we're all about stopping terrorism, true, but do you really think there's any connection with the offshore oil drilling we snuck through Congress and Osama Bin Laden? We work to achieve lesser goals on the coattails of larger goals. It's the

philosophy behind every legislative amendment. I don't believe we're saying *none* of the money would be spent on research and development of tools to negotiate or defend ..."

Baxter nodded, "That would be wrong. But ... well, Dr. Henderson ... how would you like for NASA to have a listening post on Mars, as an early warning system for incursions from outside the solar system?"

Henderson nodded vigorously, unable to form a sentence due to his excitement.

Card said, "That could happen in ... hell .. less than 10 years, with the right funding. Good thinking, Baxter."

"Thank you, sir."

"I believe I know what to tell the President, unless there's anything else pressing on this matter?"

No one had anything else, each already sizing one another up and planning on backstabbing somebody, anybody for their share of this financial windfall. Card rose, satisfied, and left, as the rest filed out quietly.

Ramon and Gloria sat on the roof of their apartment, with other neighbors nearby, watching the sky. Ramon was a big boxing fan, so this was better than pay per view. Gloria just kept trying to think about where the beings in the sky came from -- did they have families, were they missed by somebody? -- and she loved seeing Ramon happy.

"That guy got moves like ultimate fighting championship!" Ramon exclaimed as the cephalopod took a kick to the midsection.

Gloria smiled and cuddled closer to him, reaching for the bag of corn chips resting nearby.

"Aw ... no! Aw, man, no!" Ramon exclaimed. Gloria looked up and saw that the two were still fighting, but that kick nudged the monstrous squid creature away from the earth, and they began to grow smaller and smaller in the sky. After a few minutes, the sky was as empty as it had been for most of human civilization, with only pinpoints of light to keep humanity company.

Ramon stood up, fists clenched, looking up. All around, people were packing up their towels and blankets and climbing down off the roof.

"That's messed up! Get back here!" Ramon cursed at the sky.

"Baby," Gloria comforted, "they couldn't be up there, fighting forever, it's okay."

"I just wanted them to finish the fight!" Ramon said, picking up the picnic basket they'd packed so carefully. "I had two hundred riding on the squid thing winning it all."

"What? You told me you stopped gambling!" Gloria crossed her arms and turned away, angrily.

Ramon came up behind her, encircling his arms around her waist. "Baby, the odds were 17 to 1, and if we won, I could take you on that vacation we're always talking about. As it is, we didn't lose anything -- all bets are off if the fight doesn't end."

Gloria thought about it. "So you only did it for this?"

Ramon nodded, turning her towards him. "*Mija*, we never seen nothing like this. Nobody ain't ever seen nothing like this. I ain't bet

on nothing in more than a year before this, and I'm done now, I promise." He brushed her cognac colored lips and squeezed her.

Gloria wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight, her eyes scanning the sky.

