

The Ark according to Captain Blood

CHAPTER 1

(Fishy goings on)

This sinister little tale started life one grey and drizzly winter's day. The city was soaked to the bone. A constant honking of angry car-horns drilled and shook the air, even the dry if stuffy kind that hung around the 20th floor of 10 Eezy street, where a sheet of grimy paper taped to the door of number 7 vibrated arthritically. The writing on the paper said:

BOB MORLOCK

FOR PITY'S SAKE KEEP QUIET

"As if angry car-horns could read..." thought the postman, shaking his head in disgust. He knocked. The door opened a fraction.

"You Morlok?"

"Gasp! How did you guess?" yawned a bleary shadow behind the door.

"Special Delivery. Sign here!" snarled the postman wearily, sticking a greasy pad with ball-point attached into Morlok's unshaven face. Managing trembly if recognizable cross, Bob Morlock was handed a letter. Muttering what may have been "thanks", he shut the door and looked around for the letter-opener.

Then he remembered what had happened the last time he'd used it, and ripped open the envelope with his teeth instead.

Your Royalties for the second quarter. Total before taxes = 35c.

Best wishes, your publisher.

Bob tried but couldn't keep back a violent bout of nausea. He smoked his first Camel of the day.

Thirty five cents to live on for three months! "I gotta program a major hit", thought Bob "with a killer story-line. Or else" This attic room had a skylight. He gazed through it at the dripping roof-tops and sighed.

He was clean out of ideas. He shut his eyes and squeezed. Nothing came. Total block. Crushing his last butt into an overflowing ashtray, Bob announced to anyone who cared to listen (no one did) :

"Blood's dead. Stone cold dead as a dodo. He'll write no more games and his pseudonym will as of now disappear from all local Computarama shelves, for ever."

Bob Morlock sighed once more and decided on a breath of air.

The joint in Binary street was open. Loud music poured out. He walked over to the bar and ordered a coffee. Beside him, some kids were noisily wiping out aliens on a video game. Bob turned to look. Intergalactic robots exploded with inhuman shrieks. The skinny kid locked onto the joystick was yelling triumphantly - he'd just made the hi score.

Bob snorted, "What a zero!" The insult had the effect of breaking up the party atmosphere.

"Oh yeah? Go ahead and beat my score, pops!", skinny snickered.

This was what Bob had been angling for. His right hand closed over the stick and his left pushed "PLAY". The following carnage of screaming metal, green blood and exploding alien troop-ships was all over in a few seconds.

Enemy losses were so sickeningly enormous that the score blocked on 999999. Without even looking, Bob typed in B-L-O-O-D as the latest hi-scorer.

"Y-you're B-Blood?", stammered skinny who looked like he'd just swallowed a live pac-man.

"Gaze up in awe, junior" drawled Bob kindly, "you've just lived through a major moment in your life." With that he turned and disappeared through the door, leaving behind one unpaid-for coffee and a bunch of amazed kids.

"That really zapped em" grinned Bob to himself. He was savouring the glory so much that he didn't see the old man walking towards him. Bob Morlok looked down at the old guy sprawling on the sidewalk.

"Gee, I'm really sorry. Are you okay?", he asked, helping the other to his feet.

"Sure, sure. Don't worry about it, young feller. Not your fault if I'm so absent-minded."

Suddenly Bob's eyes switched on.

"Wow ! You can't be ! You aren't ! Damn it, you are Charles Darwin, the famous bio-whatever."

"No need to shout it out, son; there may be newspaper hacks lounging in the trash-cans."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Say, listen. Your books really made a major impression. All that stuff about super bonus scores for the fastest."

"Yes, well, that's one way of..."

"Hey, wait a minute. Aren't you supposed to be dead, theoretically?"

"Let's just say I'm living incognito for the moment."

"Wow ! That's major. Hey listen. Let me buy you a drink. No, really."

Morlok guided his new friend into a nearby bar. They sat down close to a pinball machine.

"Beer", said Bob to the guy who was taking orders.

"Water, please", said Darwin.

"Water, huh", muttered the waiter and disappeared.

"Interested in biology, are you, Mr uh..."

"Blood. That's my name."

"Blood, eh? My, my. Well, well."

The old man's gaze centered on the pinball machine. He glowered.

"Accursed invention. I've been working on video games for months. That's the reason I came here to Slick City - but who listens to an old dodderer called Mortimer Slithe!"

"Slithe. Your pseudonym is Slithe? You could've done better than that!"

"A long story. And unpleasant. I'm stuck with Slithe. No matter. Do you believe in aliens, Blood?"

Bob was taken aback by the question. He stammered, "well, you know, I er.." But his lack of conviction went unnoticed. Slithe was getting into gear:

"They're here !", he whispered, waving his cane toward the video game. Then looking Blood right in the eye, he thundered, "They're here! Pac-men are reproducing in millions! They actually exist, do you hear me!"

Bob-Blood reeled in shock.

The old man suddenly stood up and left the bar. Bob was too stunned to stop him. That was the last he ever saw of Charles Darwin.

CHAPTER 2

(And Bob made Blood)

Back in his apartment, Bob's mind was still reeling. Darwin, Pac-people, aliens...what if it was true?

"Ye Gods! If it's really happening, something's gotta be done!", thought Bob.

"I know", he cried. "I'll infiltrate them. That's my new masterpiece ! I'll need to create a being based on a man, a kind of super man, completely competent like... like, MYSELF !"

And while he raved, Bob was already at the keyboard, typing in the vital first instructions.

Months past. List-outs snaked through all the available space. Ashtrays were piled on ashtrays. Bob programmed on.

Six months later, he had created a vessel called ARK, fitted with an on-board computer called bio-consciousness.

Still later, the Ark was placed under the command of his computer double : Captain BLOOD. His mission : fight evil in all the computerized universe...

Lastly, he created a bio-writer whose task would be to recount the amazing saga in detail.

Finally came the great day. He typed in the final momentous instruction:

"RUN"...

At that very instant, something major happened : Bob winked out. I mean, he physically DISAPPEARED!"

CHAPTER 3

(Report from Ark's Bio-writer)

The Ark had materialized somewhere near Andromeda. It's shape corresponded down to the last hump to what Bob had programmed. You couldn't tell it apart from any other boring astroid. It's stupendous mass prevented it from landing anywhere, but that was compensated for by the sheer amazingness of its bio-tech systems.

Inside, in a very snappy conapt, lovingly done up by the program, a mummy looking like Bob sat in a padded arm chair, in front of which a multitude of instruments flickered in the phosphorescent blue light diffracted by an enormous 3D screen that filled one whole wall of the conapt.

The Ark bobbed gently in the magnetic tide. The bridge clock showed "000" when the screen came on, prolonging the conapt into infinity. The diamond-dust brilliance of Andromeda sparkled in the distance.

Blood came to life very suddenly. The first pains were awful: a tearing noise in his head, as if something had split his skull open. The pain gave way to a strange feeling. His first thoughts filled him with a sense of well-being: the passage from nothingness to superior Beinghood was now possible.

He tested his memory implants. Nostalgia filled his mind: a sandy beach at summer's end. Salty breeze, childhood, Disneyworld...

"HONK here. Check sum implant : 10/10."

"Medicheck in progress."

The voice of Ark's bio-consciousness tore Blood from his daydreams.

"Mission recall", it barked, "Please state orders."

"Activate the neutrino scanner", croaked Blood, "and for pity's sake, don't bark so loudly. Try being normal."

"Understood, Mr Blood. Scanner on."

"Attaboy", approved Blood. "Now, Mr Honk, activate the local map."

The map appeared instantaneously on the conapt screen. Blood studied it carefully.

"Superimpose the radar image", he ordered. A myriad of flashing points covered the map. They were all converging on the centre, the Ark's position. Blood shrieked : "They're all over the bloody place !" He wasn't exaggerating. The attack was as terrifying as it was sudden. The 3D screen revealed a pack of Invader-type fighters, 5th generation, bristling with advanced weaponry.

Blood didn't hesitate. Only one thing to do : get out of there, fast !

At that instant, a deafening explosion shook the Ark.

The starboard side of the Ark had taken a direct hit from a multiple warhead missile.

"Hyperspace light now, dammit !", screamed Blood.

"Understood Mister Blood. Do you require a vessel status update in triplicate", came the warm and caressing voice of bio-consciousness.

"Get out of here, you moron !" Hardly had he finished, when he was thrust violently against the armchair by a phenomenal force. The Ark was plunging into Hyperspace.

"Wow ! we really outwitted those guys !" sniggered Blood.

"My lord, captain : the ship has no significant damage. Some minor problems with the bio-lit. I'll repair it immediately. The Hyperspace jump did not conform entirely to schedule./.../... the jump was not interrupted, however. Oh, Good Heavens... !"

"Whak ! Kalk ! Whak's happening?" roared Blood. Fear gripped his soul.

"The multiplex failed during the jump... Oh, no !... the Kelepolkel has cloned you ! At least thirty copies are loose in destination galaxy !"

"Whak ? Are you crazy ?"

"Afraid not, captain. And there's worse... you're short of vital fluid. The process of degeneration has already started." Kl kl kl kl kl kl klklklklklklkk...k...////

CHAPTER 4

(Clones)

Kss ksystem bio-kss re-askssvated sk as ksoon askss bio-consciousnesskss completed repairkss...

BIO-WRITER TEST:

ESSAY

Subject: Describe a space ship bobbing in inter-galactic space.

UNIVERSAL TIME 45372.

Essay:

The space ship bobbed gently in the magnetic tide. The galaxy shone with the brilliance of diamond-dust.

Mark : 7/10

Not a bad effort, but could do better. Temper those poetic flights.

END TEST : Apt for service.

Blood had had a close shave. Moreover, during the jump, every space-jock's nightmare had come true : cloning.

(The effects of CLONING are hair-raising. There are now an army of Bloods, all but one of whom are fakes. The cloning process has triggered a gradual cellular degeneration in the original Blood. His only hope of survival is to find all those clones in the destination galaxy, in order to recover the vital fluid.)

A daunting prospect. Finding the NUMBERS (that was the name Blood gave his clones) among that mass of stars wasn't going to be easy.

Meanwhile, Honk, Ark's bio-consciousness was working on a series of complex bio-mech supports designed to back up the captain's weakening life systems. One by one his heart, lungs, liver and kidneys were replaced by artificial organs.

Blood struggled courageously against a formidable force summoning him to become a wholly synthetic being : a ROBOT...

CHAPTER 5

(The OORXX layer)

One night Blood was violently aroused from post-surgical coma (his cerebellum had just been removed):

"Captain, I'm getting a weird message. The neutrino radar is saturated. Something's closing in on us !" exclaimed the bio-consciousness.

"Glasp. Garks. Wha..." answered Blood. He was having trouble getting words out. His tongue felt swollen and his 100% teflon skull hurt horribly.

He managed to add, "standard procedure, whatever that is".

"Aye aye, captain", replied the bio-consciousness somewhat dubiously.

Blood suddenly sat up.

"What ? Why didn't you wake me up, dummy ? Activate magnetic shield, stop everything, switch on the radar screen."

The screen glittered, then filled with radar echo. Not far from Ark, a vaguely oval object was speeding. Fast.

At that instant an alarm sounded and a message came up on the screen printed in Universal Protocol/Communication : UPCOM(1).

"SOS AM IN DISTRESS SOS GL GL HOC...3"

"Wow ! Who the blazing Darwins are you ?", rasped Blood.

"I FEMALE OORXX SOS FAST..."

"Boy, what a zappy dream I'm having !" chuckled Blood.

"WELL WHERE'S THE HELP...", the OORXX's message said on the UPCOM.

"Sure, sure. Let's not get hysterical", retorted Blood, just a little irritated. "She's in a hurry as well. What do we do now, Honk ?"

The bio-consciousness thought for a moment.

"The regulations are pretty strict on this. Ever since the NOSTROMO affair, it's forbidden to teleport strangers on board, Captain, unless they're in temporary cryogenic death status. I suggest teleporting her to the Frigidtorium. She must, however, be willing. Otherwise the teleport won't work, as you know, Captain."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I tumbled the old Rippley dame before she got command of the old Folk's home on Proxima.

She told me about it..." explained Blood, typing in the following message on the UPCOM(1) keyboard:

"OK, we'll teleport you."

Days went by. Honk happily analyzed, studied and dissected the OORXX. One day...

"Captain, hey, it's completely major, Cap, wow !" Honk seemed rather excited.

"What ? Calm down, kid and don't call me cap. Now, what gives ?" Blood wasn't in one of his better moods. The day before, Honk had fixed him up with bionlyn skin(hi temperature no-shrink wash. Drip dry), and they'd been testing the hi-temperature wash feature.

"If we modify, just a teeny weeny bit, the OORXX's genes, we can control the eggs and put together some really zappy biomissiles, with all space fish characteristics and amazing firepower as well. We could easily train the OORXX babies to go on suicide missions for you ! You'd radio control them. You'd see through their eyes. Think of it. You could visit every planet in the galaxy without leaving the conapt. It's completely major !" Honk shut up for a moment, waiting for his master's verdict.

"You are DISGUSTING !" exploded Blood. "You are INHUMAN !"

"But, master, they're only OORXX !" protested the bio-consciousness.

"Yeah, well, that's true", admitted Blood, pinching his silicon earlobe.

"They are only OORXX. And they are officially extinct. And I'd be right here in my padded armchair, wouldn't ? Okay, we'll give it a try !"

And so Honk reactivated the OORXX layer, and the first second generation OORXX babies were born

CHAPTER 6

(Mastochok)

Honk spent a long while experimenting on the mother OORXX's genes. Sometimes the eggs were too big, sometimes too long. Huge babies were born that had to be ejected from the Ark immediately. The long babies had to be reeled onto special spools which were difficult to stock. Blood wasn't satisfied. He was too well aware of time passing, and with it his chances of survival. It was becoming more and more urgent to catch some NUMBERS so he could recuperate the vital fluid he so desperately needed. One night...

"Captain, Captain, I've got it ! It works !", yelled Honk. "We can start testing".

"At last !", exclaimed Blood, rubbing his hands together. They were now covered in scales and the sound produced was like two crocodiles having sex in a packet of cornflakes.

"Hyperspace. Target galaxy: Xunk 07. That's where I'd go," he added confidently, "if I were them".

"But, Captain, you ARE them !" cried the bio-consciousness.

"Eh ? Sure. You're right. Let's go anyway".

Ark thundered. Several moments later, it fused into hyperspace. Blood admired the pretty time-space twirls on the 3D screen, their mathematical convolutions hovering at the brink of human understanding, hurling the mind into a vortex sublimated by the theoretical vacuum thus evoked and whose description is but a pale reflection in the rank and brackish water of a foul and bottomless swamp from which no escape may be envisaged...

Then, quite majestically, appeared a round and greenish ball in the infinite blue night.

"Mastochok", murmured Blood, "planet of the CROOLIS !" He seemed ecstatic before the magnificent sight that was planet Mastochok."

"That's where they are", he declared with the utter certainty of one who knows.

He breathed raspingly to the accompaniment of hisses from his pneumatic lungs.

He twiddled some very nice knobs on the control panel, selecting the Landing option. The baby OORXX slid into the lubricated ejection tube.

"EJECT !" he cried, his eyes popping with emotion.

The OORXX shot from the tube with a sound like a bottle being uncorked.

"Ejected", replied Honk, "I'm switching on the video circuits. From now on, the OORXX is you. Go easy on the stick".

The OORXX came up on the 3D screen. The tormented surface of Mastochok was approaching fast. Too fast !

"For pity's sake, pull back the stick. You're going to crash !", screamed Honk.

Blood pulled back on the stick. Lots of pointy mountains appeared. The OORXX was skimming over them.

"Down, down, gently. There !" Honk was clearly troubled by the captain's lack of experience. "Careful ! Aaah !"

A shuddering thump indicated that the OORXX had flown into a mountain-top. The baby spacefish squealed in pain, bounced, then came to a halt nose to nose with the mountain.

"YOU'RE GOING TO KILL THE THING !", roared the bio-consciousness, trembling with rage.

"OK, OK, calm down. Anyone can make a mistake. Anyway, the OORXX isn't damaged. Look, everything works fine." Blood handled the stick carefully, and the image began to move again. The OORXX once more travelled through the wild if strangely wonderful terrain.

Suddenly Blood saw the entrance to a gigantic canyon, and flew in.

"The canyon of the CROOLIS", he murmured.

The OORXX slid through the air with incredible agility, responding instantly to the slightest move of Blood's hand.

The steep canyon walls sped by in a sound of gliders. Blood was in total control of the OORXX. And that's the mark of a true hero, whose speed of adaptation leaves common mortals far behind. And true heroes are immortal, just as Blood felt himself to be.

They landed at the end of the canyon, as majestically as a bird of prey, as gracefully as the moment deserved. Blood knew the CROOLIS were watching.

A CROOLIS appeared onscreen.

"UPCOM on, Honk", ordered Blood.

Honk activated the UPCOM.

"VAREUX OR ULVES ?" asked the CROOLIS sternly.

"Vareux or Ulves ?" repeated Blood, somewhat at a loss.

"Uh", stammered the bio-consciousness, "better not answer that one. Vareux CROOLIS and Ulves CROOLIS are hereditary enemies".

"I MAN", typed Blood, "I SEARCH NUMBERS, YOU KNOW ?"

"(LAUGH) I KNOW, BUT YOU TAKE ME TO PLANET ASCODA. THEN I TELL."

"Ascoda, that's real bad, captain. That's where the most dangerous MIGRAX on the universe hang out."

"OK", typed Blood, "WE TELEPORT YOU".

He pressed a button on the left side of the control panel. The Croolis vaporized on the 3D screen and rematerialized in the FRIGITORIUM. It took on a blue colouring and looked fairly dead.

"You're not going to accept, are you ?", asked the bio-consciousness, horrified by his master's suicidal streak.

"Yes", replied Blood shortly. "I've got an idea. How do we get the OORXX back into the Ark?"

"Ah, well. That's something I haven't given much thought to. You see, they resist badly to landing. As a matter of fact, they self-destruct", admitted Honk ruefully.

Blood said nothing. Loudly.

"Hyperspace", he murmured. The plop of a new OORXX entering the ejection tube was heard.

"Hyperspace on", replied Honk.

Ark shot forward...

Ark re-materialized beside a pock-marked astroid called "OX1 45A (300)". Blood ejected the new OORXX, who landed gently on "OX1 45A (300)". Then he activated the inverse teleport process. The Croolis disappeared from the Frigiditorium and found itself on an ugly, pock-marked asteroid. Blood watched on the 3D screen.

The UPCOM was working:

"PLANET NOT BE ASCODA (SWEAR)", swore the Croolis.

"Wow ! That guy's been zapped !" chortled Blood.

"Yeah !" sniggered the bio-consciousness.

"Okay, let's see if he'll tell us where the NUMBERS are", said Blood.

He typed on the UPCOM keyboard:

WHERE BE NUMBERS ? ANSWER, CROOLIS !"

"(SWEAR !) (SWEAR !) YOU BRING ME BACK THEN ?" asked the Croolis.

"YES", keyed in Blood.

"Planet ZULU COORDINATES 124/674" admitted the Croolis grudgingly.

"THANKS BYE", answered the captain on the UPCOM, "and now let's get to Zulu. Hyperspace, Mr Honk !"

"Hyperspace, sure thing, captain." Honk was relieved. Ark tore off.

On asteroid "OX1 45A (300)", the Croolis was babbling insane diatribes. "I'll get that son of a Vareux, by the glabration of my Croolas..."

CHAPTER 7

(The final 5 NUMBERS)

800 years later at the edge of galaxy BABY 1...

The medireport came through on the telox. An incandescent meteor tone through space with a scissors sound. Blood read the report slowly. Cellular degeneration was increasing since the last report. A frightening question came up from his synthetic throat:

"Honk, how long can I live without the vital fluid of the NUMBERS ?"

"312 Universal Time Units", replied the bio-consciousness. "Permit me to augment your optimism levels; your metabolism can't afford despair, and I've isolated a suicidal impulse in the B Cortex of a bulb gene in your right brain."

"Go ahead", acquiesced Blood. "Have the last 5 NUMBERS been located ?"

"Negative. They are equipped with radar scramblers."

"Five NUMBERS are left, hidden somewhere among those stars", thought Blood. 5 damned NUMBERS waiting for him, warned by the MIGRAX who were only too willing to sell the information for a price. Five clones of himself, ready to defend their stinking NUMBER hides : one, two, three, four and that son of a bitch NUMBER 5.

Blood shouted, "How many OORXX does Ark have ?"

"18 adults. The bionic layer has laid 14 missiles which will be operational in 5 Times", replied the metallic voice of Honk.

"Direction Ondoya", ordered Blood. "Reactivate the layer, lock the georadar on target, pump up the nuke shield, we'll need it. We're gonna zap those guys !"

Ark tore off thunderously. Down in the pram Zone, the OORXX layer squeaked in pain, and three more slimy missiles rolled down the birth ramp.

End of report from Ark's Bio-writer.

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