

**HARRY HARRISON
DAVID BISCHOFF**

BILL,

**THE GALACTIC HERO... ON THE
PLANET OF THE HIPPIES FROM HELL**



"A hangover cure for the jaded" THE GUARDIAN

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VGSF

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C H A P T E R 1

THE POSTER ON THE WALL OF THE GALactic Bureau of Investigation reception office depicted a slaverling seven-foot-tall lizardoid creature with a human arm protruding repulsively from its fanged jaws. The Chinger was a particularly obnoxious specimen of its breed, with razor-sharp scales gleaming with sadistic highlights, its claws like sharpened sickles. The hideous creature's eyes glowed with satanic evil, while saliva mixed with human blood trickled down its green body to its muscle-bulging legs and tail, wrapped modestly in chartreuse and lightning-silver Danskins. Fierce, hypnotic evil glimmered in the diamond-facet eyes. The thing looked like the revolting result of a misprinted copy of AC/DC sado-maso Comix, thought Sergeant Bill of Phigerinadon II. Bill much preferred Furville Comix.

KILL A CHINGER FOR KRISHNA! declared the

paisley three-dimensional letters glowing and revolving like psychedelic barbershop posts.

Bill stared at the thing thoughtfully, while tooth-picking from around his fangs the repulsive remains of this morning's sludge-in-a-bowl the galley had squeezed out to him.

"Pretty impressive, huh?" said the man behind the desk. A flickering holoslab labeled him as HERVIL SKIMMILQUETOAST. "That's the new design from the Emperor's Own Office of Accurate and Efficient Information." The guy was typical desk jockey meat, short, stupid and inefficient, with some sort of birth defect that made him look like a crocodile: green skin, bumps, pointy teeth and all. There were a lot of mutants in the galaxy, and as long as there was radiation, botched genetic gene-splicing and permits for Hollywoodworld producers to reproduce even more, there always would be. But that was okay, since you had to have people to run the Galactic Bureaucracy, and every other able-bodied son-of-a-bitch got shanghaied into the Troopers and paid the Emperor's credit debit. As long as they had a brain somewhere behind their alien eyes, could hunt and peck on their computer terminal and didn't short out communications wiring with their drool, they were prime paper-pusher material. "They say they used a real Chinger for photo-reference. Real arm, too. Bit of a scandal when it got et and they couldn't return it to the guy who loaned it—but that goes to show you. You can't trust a Chinger as far as you can blow them . . . I mean snow them . . ." He took his clawed finger out of a cavernous nostril, examined it unhappily, then pushed it back for a good root around. "Hmmm. Just what *do* I mean?"

There was just one thing that seemed to be normal

about this specimen from the Sears and Geekbuck catalog, observed Bill. And he leaned over the desk, giving his best Galactic-Trooper-makes-nice-nice grin. "Nice foot you got there, greeny," said Bill.

"Huh?" The bureaucrat ceased his nostril drilling, leaned forward in his chair, and blinked hard.

"I said, nice foot. Or I guess it would be, if you didn't have it in that shoe. Mind if I have a look?"

"Uhm . . . Mr. Trooper . . ."

"The name's Bill, buddy. Trooper Bill." Bill had to stop himself from grabbing the man by the throat and throttling him in a friendly drill instructor/recruiter love grip. This wasn't boot camp, but—and it was Bill's favorite game—a strange, warped variation on "Footsie."

"Trooper Bill. Did I hear you correctly? You want to look at my *foot*."

"Yeah. I got this thing for feet. Call it a podiatry problem. Pedophilia, the shrink called it. And I got a little foot problem, too. It's irresistible—my little toe begins to itch—I can't control myself—arrgh!"

With no further ado, Bill lifted his leg up, plopped a naked foot upon the saurian bureaucrat's desk and scratched enthusiastically at his toe. And what a foot! It had twelve toes, gold toenails—and the skin was Royal Stuart tartan.

The guy's eyes bugged impressively, his jaw sagged—then snapped shut with an impressive clattering of fangs.

"Jumpin' Jupiter Juice! That's some foot. Might I be so presumptuous as to ask—what happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened. Completely by accident I shot the original one off on a planet called Veneria, that's what happened." He sniffed in self-pitying memory. "That's not easy to do, you know."

"But . . . but . . . if I may be so bold to ask—" the guy had an annoying whine to his voice, kind of like the sound a whoopee cushion makes on its last wheeze—"why?"

"Simple. It was the only way they'd let me off the planet. They had to ship me out because they were short of replacement feet. Eventually they just gave me a new foot and put me back on duty. But at least it was on a different planet."

"That foot?" said Herv.

"Not this one, idiot, another one. I've had so many feet I should be a mile by now. I've had so many feet I feel like a podiatrist's lab. I've had so many feet—"

The guy got a weird, frightened look on his face. "Oh, I get it," he simpered. "I've heard about you Troopers, locked up on those dreadnoughts for years without female companionship. Something has to snap—and often does, that's what I heard. So you've got this thing for feet."

Bill leaned over the desk with a menacing scowl. "Watch it, bowb. You calling me a prevert?"

"No, no, Trooper Bill," whinnied the clerk, recoiling, suddenly aware of those rolling trapezius, deltoid and triceps that bulged from Bill's frame like an inflated scuba suit. "Look, it's just not normal for me to, uh, show summoned agents my foot!" The guy made a conciliatory grin, but Bill was going to go for his throat anyway. He was interrupted by a squawk over the loudspeaker.

"Skimmilquetoast! Is that the Trooper I sent for who is bellowing out his brains out there?"

"Yes sir," said Herv, looking with trepidation up at Bill.

"Just a peek, huh? I promise I won't touch it!"

"What are you two doing out there, playing 'Doctor'? Send the sphincter-muscle in!" The intercom clicked off with a burst of static.

"C'mon, be a pal," said Bill. "I'll give you a credit! I've got some Betelgeuse love beads with lots of juice. They're yours! How about a—"

"No. No, nothing. Here, if that's all you want, just look and then get the hell into the office before I lose my stupid job!" The clerk quickly took off his shoe and then his sock. He held up his pale green foot for Bill to see.

Bill sighed.

It was the most exquisite foot that Bill had ever seen.

From well-formed heels to perfect arches down to pedicured toenails painted pink, it looked like a Michelangelo sculpture or a Raphael painting of an angel. Albeit green. Bill's foot (on the other hand, or other foot) looked like garbage can modern.

"Nice foot," said Bill pleasantly. "Thanks."

"But what about your other one. Isn't that normal?"

Bill shook his head. "Flat. Broken toes. Corns on the cob. Usual Trooper's foot. You must be a very proud man. Cherish your foot, my friend." He wiped back a tear. "Well, I'd better see what this bowhead wants."

Bill squared his shoulders and marched into the main office of J. Edgar Insufledor, deputy director of Anti-Chinger and Commupop Menace Operations of the GBI.

As soon as he marched in, he found himself directly in the sights of a Mark Thousand and Two Howitzer Laser Cannon. This piece of artillery sprouted from

the Deputy Director's desk, which was made of riveted gray steel.

"Halt! Or be blown apart!"

Bill halted. He raised his hands in the time-honored signal for surrender, lack of weapons and requesting to go to the little boy's room. "It's just me. Trooper Bill. Loyal Trooper. Reporting as requested. Sir!"

"You sure you're not a Chinger spy!" growled the voice. Bill could see a grizzled crewcut grizzling up from behind the armorclad desk.

"No sir! Do I look green and seven feet tall, sir?" Bill knew full well from far too many personal experiences that far from being seven feet tall, Chingers were only seven inches tall. True, being from a high gravity world they were powerful little bug-eyed buggers, dangerous and crafty and killer poker-players. But he felt it best to play along with the Intergalactic propaganda crap, apparently even bought by its purveyors.

"Damned close! Could be a makeup job along with a tailectomy. True, you did make it in here through the cat-scan and failed the subliminal IQ exam. You're far too stupid to be a Chinger."

"Thank you. Sir!" Bill said, going into the usual Trooper barking mantra denoting respect, honor and the traditional raw hatred for your superiors.

"Very well, Bill." The laser cannon drooped noticeably and Bill felt a lot more comfortable. The man rose up from behind his armor shield, revealing features that looked like a cross between a warthog and a fire plug. A cigar the size of a starship escape pod stuck out from the side of his face. "Are you or have you ever been, in this life or a previous life, or have you ever even *wanted* to be or *thought about* being or might you *ever* be, in some future life in another

dimension, a card-carrying member of the Commupop Party?"

Bill's thick eyebrows knitted. "Is this a trick question?"

The Commupop Party!

The Well-Read Menace!

There had been Commupops back on Phigerina-don II, Bill vaguely remembered, but they'd been wiped out by a Trooper raid when he was a little boy. He remembered that well because suddenly his Mom wouldn't give him cherry pop sickles any more, and because Mr. Leon Trotsky down the street was discovered hanging by his thumbs in the Town Square. This made Bill sad, because it was Mr. Trotsky who had given him the cherry pop sickles and had introduced him to Classix Comix Agitprop Bookskis and the whole idea of Comix, period. The real irony, said Mrs. Bill, was that Mr. Trotsky's real name was Fred Jones and he was just a fan of Russian history and literature, not a Commupop Party Member at all. But, as Bill would find out in his adult life, Galactic Troopers were trained in Boot Camp, not Book Camp, and they hung first and asked questions later. Bill's response was to ask his Mom if coprophilia had anything to do with loving policemen. Mom had muttered something about "damned intellectuals" and just let Bill go on reading his Comix after weeding out anything educational and threatening.

The Commupop Party, of course, was the abbreviation for the Community Popular Reading Party and had absolutely nothing to do with the Intergalactic Communist Party, or Saint Karl Marx. In fact, politically they were quite neutral and about as threatening to the Emperor's reign as, oh, his terminally

backed-up toilet in his Rec Room on Wreckworld. However, the Emperor's rule being totalitarian and all, and the Communist Party being such a usual historical bugaboo, his Office of Paranoia and Disinformation fell upon the hapless Community Popular Reading Party like depleted uranium.

Thousands of hapless readers were sent to prison for reading the wrong books. A special committee was appointed to weed through the millions of books available to the general public and to ban the ones considered inappropriate to the general governmentally oppressed galactic citizen. To paraphrase the philosopher Santayana, those who do not know history are doomed to regurgitate it. The Emperor would have been better off just ignoring book readers. His persecution radicalized hundreds of thousands, who immediately became the revolutionaries the authorities feared they would be (albeit revolutionaries who, after a hard day of fire-bombing, went home to curl up with a nice thick book). Hence the creation of the Well-Read Menace, the Commupop Party.

"Trick question? Of course it's not a trick question, you idiot." The cigar bobbed obscenely and the man leaped up and hopped around, the fat on his squat body jiggling like warm Jell-O beneath his starched white shirt and black tie with Day-Glo polka dots. "You think I'm wasting my breath?"

Bill did exactly what he usually did when he faced a bureaucratic conundrum. "Look, I'm not going anywhere. The colonel told me to report here promptly at eleven hundred hours today for a special duty assignment. I ain't no Commupop Party Member, I'm a healthy reader of Blue-Blooded Galactic Comix and horny-porny comix—when I can get them—and proud of it. So while you figure out what

you want with me, I'll just sit here and have some of the medicine that the doctor ordered me to take every hour."

He took out a medicine bottle that was really a flask of 100-proof rum (even Bill was smart enough not to take vodka into the GBI office), unscrewed the cap and tipped a good half of its contents, leaving his mouth open and making lots of noise.

Bill well knew that if he'd done such a thing in a Trooper office, he would have promptly been keel-hauled from the nearest deepspace freighter. However, this wasn't military business, it was GBI stuff and he was on loan.

Instead of being unhappy, however, the Director was sniffing the air ecstatically. "I can't believe it! You're just the man I need!"

"What? You want a hit too?" Bill offered the flask, already feeling the comforting kick of alcohol flattening his senses.

"Uhm . . . No, thank you, Trooper Bill. And now that my memory is refreshed and I reexamined my files, I remember why you're here. Sorry about the grilling. Knee-jerk reaction. If it's not the Chingers I must worry about, it's the damned Commupops. Bill, I got a very special assignment for you. The fate of the universe rests upon those considerable shoulders! Or something like that. Sit down, Bill, and let me turn off this damned machine here. Don't want to fry our most promising Special Agent, now, do we?"

Bill sat down, took another gurgle of drink, then tucked the flask back into his front pocket. It would have been a good idea for him to have put the top back on and to tuck it into his pocket bottom first, since he managed to spill about four ounces of primo

rum onto his lap, staining his crotch and running chills down the hairy sides of his legs.

Bill shivered and grimaced, but managed to squelch an embarrassing shriek.

"Ha! Ha!" said the Director, pointing a stubby forefinger at the Trooper. "I saw that!"

"Uhm, uh, well—"

"No need to apologize, soldier. I myself get a *petite frisson* when I think of performing a special task for our glorious Emperor!" Overwhelmed by patriotism, the Director of the GBI swiveled and snapped a snappy straight-armed salute to the Illustrious Emperor, whose three-dee chinless and adenoidal picture hung prominently on the wall behind him. The Emperor's computerized image (the same Emperor whom Bill had very nearly almost met or at least perhaps got close to a stand-in in his youth) responded reflexively with a salute as well. Remarkable, thought Bill, gazing at the picture. They haven't fixed his strabismic eyes. It was nice to know that even an emperor had physical problems. Even as Bill regarded the stereoscopic image, the Emperor's right eye seemed to drift over of its own accord to spot Bill staring at him. But, of course, it *was* only a picture. Wasn't it? Of *course* it was. The Emperor was far too busy to spy on a lowly Trooper. Right? Paranoia was okay in its place, Bill thought. But *really*!

"Yeah, uh, right." Bill of course had no idea what *frisson* meant, but he never argued with, or attempted to understand, officers. "About the secret mission, sir." He didn't want to stay here too long, now that he'd dumped his liquor supply.

"The mission? Oh yeah. Right. The mission." J. Edgar Insufledor took a laser-pistol from a drawer and relit his monstrous cigar, boring a hole in the

ceiling in the process. Bill could see many such holes in the ceiling, so he presumed that the upper office was either empty or a place used for private GBI executions. "Real simple, Bill. Barworld. Chingers." He spat the words out like he was expectorating cigar tips. "Time Continuum Vortex Nexus Locus Chasm!"

Bill's jaw dropped. "Barworld," he gasped. "D—d—did you say? *Barworld*?" He didn't hear anything else, just those beautiful, incredibly lovely words.

"I didn't say *Bearworld* and I didn't say *Jarworld*, Trooper. You heard me right. *Barworld*. That's where I'm sending you. That's where some trouble seems to be. There's rumors of some kind of Time/Space disturbances there on the Transgalactic Seismo-Grundger, and our agents say the Chingers could well be at the bottom of the problem. And if they aren't, they're going to be! The Chingers have been looking for the secret key to Time for years, and do you know why, Bill?"

"*Barworld*?" Bill could only repeat like a litany. "*Barworld!*" *Barworld*, of course, was tantamount to a legend among Galactic Troopers! Perhaps it *was* a legend. But no Trooper ever got to discover the truth, since it was a resort world, and Troopers *never* got leave.

"I'll tell you why, Bill. Because those Chingers, they want to sneak up on us not only behind our backs—but the vermin want to sneak up *yesterday*! That's why."

"I volunteer!" said Bill, waving his black arm enthusiastically. "I'll go! I'll go."

"Those Chingers!" said J. Edgar Insufledor, foaming emphatically. "My duty in life is to rid this world

of those God-damned infernal Galactic-grabbing Chingers!"

Abruptly, the door to one side of Bill crashed open. There, lumbering toward the Deputy Director, multiple arms thrashing and gigantic saurian face snapping snaggle-fanged jaws, was nothing less than a perfect representation of the Chinger in the poster! Minus, of course, the human arm in its mouth. Apparently that had long since been digested, and the Chinger was in need of fresh human meat.

Wait a moment, thought Bill in the back of his mind. Chingers don't get this big. His eternal adversary Bgr the Chinger (who had come into his life as the lackeyish recruit Eager Beager) was only a fraction over seven inches tall!

Still it was difficult to argue with a roaring lizard alien, hands full of knives and guns, and eyes full of the promise of nothing but hard, hot death.

Fortunately, though, the giant Chinger was headed straight for J. Edgar Insufledor, not giving Bill a moment's pause. The Deputy Director was ready for him, though. "C'mon you piece of deep space sludge. Come and get it, planet grunge!" The Deputy Director pulled out a duplicate of an antique prehistoric vintage G-man style submachine gun and aimed at the charging beastie.

"Grrrumargggggggggg!" roared the savage space beast. Bill had *never* heard a Chinger utter this particular outcry before. He'd heard Chingers curse in Greek, Swahili, Russian and of course their own hissing and eructing language. Still and all, this particular specimen uttered the cry with such complete conviction that Bill took its word for it. Never one to question the wisdom of the hasty retreat in such brutal matters as these, Bill nonetheless immediately saw

that an exit, albeit hasty, would put him in the path of submachine bullets. Instead, he jumped behind the overstuffed couch.

"Take this, you foul creature!" cried J. Edgar Insuffedor. When the beast was just a yard away, the Director fired. The submachine chattered and bullets chunk-a-chunked into the lizard's green hide, kicking up divots of flesh. The Chinger sprayed blood like a lawn-watering device. It was pushed back a full foot, its guns knocked spinning from ruined claws. A single knife remained in its possession as it screeched sanguinely and leaped for the director again, slashing his weapon like molten lightning.

Bill cringed helplessly behind the couch. He didn't know what was going on here, but it was certainly a great deal deadlier than Denubian tiddlywinks.

"Aha! You enjoy eating hot lead!" the Deputy Director said calmly through gritted teeth, his still-fuming cigar sticking up like an exclamation point. "Then have some more, Chinger!"

J. Edgar Insuffedor shot off the knife hand and then put another clip of bullets in the Chinger's chest. The creature went down like a sack of bloody potatoes, spasming and slashing still at its prey. Jaws snapping, it pulled itself toward the Director.

J. Edgar Insuffedor threw aside his Thompson. "This is a job for Deathdealer," he said, a smile crinkling the corners of his mouth and eyes. From behind his desk he pulled out a two-handed claymore sword. "Okay Chinger. Let me show you how a real man deals with a bowby alien."

J. Edgar stepped forward and proceeded to hack open the Chinger's skull with untrammelled ferocity.

Green blood geysered everywhere, splattering on the walls and, when he ventured a peek, into Bill's

eyes. By the time he cleared his vision the Chinger was literally chopped into nuggets on the carpet, oozing and stone-cold dead. Only the tip of its tail flickered about like a snake whose head has been lopped off.

"Bill!" cried J. Edgar Insufledor. Somehow in the struggle, the top of his shirt had unbuttoned, revealing a clump of manly chest hair. He put a possessive foot on the largest chunk of the creature and seemed to pose like a big game hunter. "Some tussle, eh? Wise of you to take cover! These varmints are mean mothers!"

Hesitantly, Bill rose up from his hiding place. "You wouldn't have a shot of whiskey hiding anywhere about, would you?"

"Nope. Don't touch the stuff. Harms my precious Puritan bodily fluids. But your taste for it and your unusual record of service is why the GBI wants you!"

Skimmilquetoast stuck his head into the office. "Oh dear. Thank Mithra, sir! You got it. The assassin Chinger just charged through, slapped me aside and headed straight in for YOU!" The man turned to Bill and gave him a broad wink. Bill, nonplussed, could only gape. "Yet, once again, you have saved yourself and the day, to say nothing of the welfare of the Galaxy!"

The Director grunted. "All in a day's work. Just get a crew in to clean this mess up. And oh—mount the usual trophy with its head, eh Skimmilquetoast? Makes for a wonderful dinner conversation piece!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Now then, Bill. You will be dispatched to Bar-world with complete instructions surgically subcutaneously planted in your left earlobe. However, although you certainly enjoy your drink, it has been