

New York Times Best-Selling Author

JOHN RINGO

LIVE FREE OR DIE



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John Ringo

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For Aunt Joan

**May you find a cozy spot by the fire where the door never closes, the owner runs credit, the
taps never run dry and the piano is always playing.**

&

As always

For Captain Tamara Long, USAF

Born: 12 May 1979

Died: 23 March 2003, Afghanistan

You fly with the angels now.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first acknowledgement is that this book is a total rip-off.

For many years I have been a fan of webcomics. Previous readers who have googled Bun-bun know of my affection for Sluggy Freelance.

Now look up Schlock Mercenary: www.schlockmercenary.com. Go ahead. I'll wait.

For a looong time. Because Schlock has been peacefully (not) trundling along under the pen of one Howard Tayler, bon vivant and man about Salt Lake City, since June of 2000. And unlike some webcomics (and some authors who shall remain nameless), Howard has been able to stay on focus and deliver consistently amazing stories. Every. Single. Day. People talk about my output but I really don't have a clue how he does it. It's like voodoo. Sickness? Injury? Nothing has stopped Howard and I hope nothing does for a longer time. May he be given the gift of eternal life.

But while I like Schlock and Tagon's Toughs, what really intrigued me as a writer was the first contact period which is only lightly touched upon. What *would* happen if an alien race suddenly trundled a gate to other worlds into our solar system? And Howard wasn't perfectly clear what happened in the immediate aftermath. Instant "one-world"ness is, in my opinion, unlikely.

The next thing I love about Schlock: Back in the day in SF, people were willing to think *grand*. Since we've had problems with getting off this mud ball, writers seem to think that we have to think small. Howard (and I) disagree. Space is mind-bogglingly huge and vast and neat and scary and neat and huge. The main character in this book is a person who, possibly because of his stature, thinks "Cheops was insufficiently ambitious." This is a book about *grand* vision. The hell with microsats. Give me vast fleets of roaring spaceships! Give me the vision to terraform worlds! Give me battles that make a human feel their tiny little cosmic insignificance and characters that shrug it off and go "Yeah, but we *created* these engines of war so who is *really* larger?"

And if I can't get that in near-earth, near-term SF from anybody else, well, damnit, I'll just have to write it myself!

The last thing that I love about Schlock is that Howard isn't afraid to dive right into the science part of science fiction and dig hard. So you can expect a certain amount of science in this here science fiction. Get over it.

This is not a book for people who love the "other." There are no "original" concepts of how otherworldly aliens would be. One of the nice things about Schlock is that aliens are just people. Not particularly good or bad, not particularly great or menial, not particularly otherworldly. Just people. As are Howard's humans. They haven't changed themselves into something unrecognizable. They're just people doing their jobs. (In the case of Tagon's Toughs, killing beings and breaking things for as much money as they can squeeze.) And in this book and the others that I hope follow, that's what you're going to get. People being people and aliens being not so much different.

Is this the prequel of Schlock? That's up to Howard. With his permission, I'm sort of playing about in his universe. And loving every minute of it.

The second acknowledgement, very much as great as the first, is to the people who helped me with this novel. I believe, firmly, that if you're going to write science fiction, you should get your science right. Don't get me *started* on people who *think* they can write SF and don't know basic chemistry, physics or astronomy. (M. Night Shyamalan comes to mind.) Alas, even my own knowledge of all three is limited. I am not, as Robert Heinlein was, an engineer. Nor an astrophysicist like David Brin.

Thus when I get big, crazy space ideas, I need help. Lots of help. In the Vorpall Blade books, that

is ably supplied by Dr. Travis Taylor, Ph.D. Alas, Doc has a very busy day job currently and his own projects. In this case, I had to refer to others for assistance.

The most notable of the many people who gave input on this novel are assuredly Bullet Gibson and his lovely wife Belinda. Between the two of them they took a very rough manuscript and, without any support but thanks, fixed not only the many problems of mass, volume and velocity but my (numerous) grammatical errors.

Any mistakes remain mine. But you should have *seen* what they had to *work* with!

Enough. Let the insanity begin.

FOREWORD BY HOWARD TAYLER

If you ask any two witnesses exactly how events unfolded at the scene of the crime, you are going to get two different stories. The less contact the witnesses have with each other prior to your questioning, the further divergent the stories get. Hair colors, car colors, even skin colors and names may change between their accounts.

The longer you wait to question these two following the event, the more their testimonies will begin to sound like tales spun around different characters in different universes.

In the Schlockiverse it has been a thousand years since the Gatekeepers barged in on Humanity and installed a new front door for Sol System. My own memory of that event is pretty fuzzy. Who am I to say that John doesn't have it right? And if he got some of the hair colors, skin colors, or names (or species) mixed up, well . . . I'm pretty sure the tale is true in spirit.

It is often said that Truth is stranger than Fiction. This is not an aphorism. It is a formula. If this book isn't the truth about how we go about carving the phrase "Humans ~~were~~ ARE here" on the great edifices of Galactic Society, it's because Truth read John's Fiction and said "Okay, I'll have to do better."

THE MAPLE SYRUP WAR

Prologue

*Of all the warriors of the world
Those of Troy were the most fell
They were those born of Winter.*

It is said that in science the greatest changes come about when some researcher says "Hmmm. That's odd." The same can be said for relationships: "That's not my shade of lipstick . . ."—warfare: "That's an odd dust cloud . . ." Etc.

But in this case, the subject is science. And relationships. And warfare.

And things that are just ginormously huge and hard to grasp because space is like that.

* * *

"Hmmm . . . That's odd."

"What?"

Chris Greenstein, in spite of his name, was a gangling, good-looking blond guy who most people mistook for a very pale surfer-dude. He'd found that he was great with the ladies right up until he opened his mouth. So his public persona was of tall, blond and dumb. As in mute. He had a master's in aeronautical engineering and a Ph.D. in astrophysics. The first might have gotten him a really good paying job if he could just manage to get through corporate interviews without putting his foot in his mouth. The second generally boiled down to academia or "Do you want fries with that?" He had the same problem with academia he had with corporations.

Chris was the Third Shift Data Center Manager for Skywatch. Skywatch was an underfunded and overlooked collection of geeks, nerds and astronomy Ph.D.s who couldn't otherwise find a job who dedicated themselves to the very important and very poorly understood job of searching the sky for stuff that could kill the world. The most dangerous were comets which, despite having the essential consistency of a slushee, moved very fast and were generally very big. And when a slushee that's the size of Manhattan Island hits a planet going faster than anything mankind could create, it doesn't just go bang. It turns into a fireball that is only different from a nuclear weapon in that it doesn't release radiation. What it does release is plasma, huge piles of flying burning rock and hot gases. Over a continent. Then the world, or the biosphere at least, more or less gets the big blue screen of death, hits reset and starts all over again with some crocodiles and one or two burrowing animals.

One comet killed the dinosaurs. Most of the guys at Skywatch made not much more than minimum wage. It gives one pause.

The way that Skywatch looked for "stuff" was anything that was quick, cheap and easy. They had databases of all the really enormous amounts of stuff, comets, asteroids, bits, pieces, minor moons, rocks and just general debris, that filled the system. They would occasionally get a contact from someone who thought that they'd found the next apocalypse. Locate, identify, headed for Earth? yes/no? New? yes/no? Most of it was automatic. Most of it was done by other people: essentially anyone with a telescope, from a backyard enthusiast to the team that ran the Hubble was part of Skywatch. But thirty-five guys (including the two women) were paid (not much more than minimum wage) to sort and filter and essentially be the child of Omelas.

Chris was a nail biter. Most people who worked for Skywatch for any period of time developed some particular tic. They knew the odds of the "Big One" happening in their lifetime were way less

than winning the lottery fifteen times in a row. Even a "Little Bang" was unlikely to occur anywhere that it mattered. A carbonaceous asteroid with a twenty-five megaton airburst yield like Tunguska was unlikely to occur over anything important. The world is seven-tenths ocean and even the land bits are surprisingly empty.

But living day in and day out with the certainty that the fate of the world is in your hands slowly wears. Most people stayed in the core of Skywatch for fewer than five years if for no other reason than the pay. Chris had started as a filter technician ("Yes, that's an asteroid. It's already categorized. Thank you . . .") six years ago. He was way past his sell-by date and the blond had started going gray.

"It's a streak. But it's a really odd streak. The algorithm is saying it's a flaw."

The way that asteroids and comets are detected has to do with the way that stars are viewed. The more starlight that is collected the stronger the picture. In the old days this was done by having a photographic plate hooked up to a telescope that slowly tracked across the night sky picking up the tiny scatter of photons from the distant star. Computers only changed that in that they could resolve the image more precisely, fold, spindle and mutilate, and a CCD chip was used instead of a plate.

When you're tracking on a star, if something moves across your view it creates a streak. Asteroids and comets are closer than stars and if they are moving across your angle of view they create such a streak. If they're moving towards you it creates a small streak, across the view a large one. The angle of the Sun is important. So is the size of the object. Etc.

Serious researchers didn't have time for streaks. But any streak could be important so they sent them to Skywatch where servers crunched the data on the streak and finally came up with whether it was an already identified streak, a new streak, a new streak that was "bad," etc. In this case the servers were saying it was "odd."

"Define odd," Chris said, bringing up the data. Skywatch researchers rarely looked at images. What he saw was a mass of numbers that to the uninformed would look something like a really huge mass of indecipherable numbers. For Chris it instantly created a picture of the object in question. And the numbers were *very* odd. "Nevermind. Albedo of point seven three? Perfect circle? Diameter of ten point one-four-eight kilometers? Ring shaped? Velocity of . . . ? That's not a flaw, it's a practical joke. Who'd it come from?"

"Max Planck. It's from Calar Alto. That's the problem. Germans . . ."

Calar Alto was a complex of several massive telescopes located in Andalusia in southern Spain and was a joint project of the Spanish and German governments. The German portion was the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy and despite its location, Max Planck did most of the work at Calar Alto.

"Famously don't have a sense of humor," Chris said. He looked at the angle and trajectory again and shrugged. The bad part of working for Skywatch was worrying about "The Big One." The good part was that nothing was ever an immediate emergency. Anything spotted was probably going to take a long time to get to Earth. "Mark and categorize. It's not on a track for Earth. Angle's off, velocity is all wrong. Ask Calar to do another shot when they've got a free cycle. And we'd better keep an eye on it because with that velocity it's going to shoot through the entire system in a couple of years and if it hits anything it's going to be *really* cool."

"You know what it looks like?"

"Yeah. A halo. Maybe it's the Covenant."

Chris picked up his phone groggily and checked the number.

"Hello?"

"Chris? Sorry to wake you. It's Jon. Could you come in a little early today? We've got a

manager's meeting."

"What's up?" Chris asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. Jon Marin was the Director of Skywatch. He knew his managers didn't get paid enough to be woken up in the middle of their equivalent night.

"It's Halo. There's been an . . . anomaly. We'll talk about it when you get in. We've got a video conference with Calar at four. Please try to be there."

"Yes, sir," Chris said. He looked at the time and sighed. Might as well get up, day was shot to hell anyway.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Heinsch . . ."

Jon Marin, in spite of his name, looked and sounded like the epitome of a New York Jewish boy. Which was what he was. His first Ph.D. was from NYU, followed by MIT and Stanford. His brother was a top-flight attorney in New York who pulled down a phone number every year. And his mother never let him forget it. He kept trying to point out he was a doctor, to no avail.

"Dr. Marin, Dr. Eisenbart, Dr. Fickle, Dr. Greenstein . . ."

"Doctor." "Doctor." "Doctor." "Doctor."

"As first discoverers we have named the object the Gudram Ring. This will, of course, have to be confirmed. But there is an anomaly we are having a hard time sorting out. We had a cycle that was doing a point to that portion of the sky but when we attempted to find the ring, it appeared to have disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Chris said. "How does something ten kilometers across disappear?"

"We wondered the same thing," Dr. Heinsch replied soberly. "I was able to get authorization to do a sweep for it. It took three full sweeps."

"Your sweeps cost about . . . ?" Dr. Marin said.

"A million Euros for each. But something that was once there and now is not? We considered the outlay appropriate. And we were right. We finally found it. Here is the new data."

The astronomers leaned forward and regarded the information for a moment.

"It slowed down," Chris said after a moment. He finally found a finger that wasn't chewed to the quick and started nibbling. "Was there . . . It didn't have anything to cause a gravitational anomaly. It's coming in from out of the plane of the ecliptic."

Most of the "stuff" in the inner Solar System lay along a vaguely flat plane called the "plane of ecliptic." Earth, Mars, the asteroid belt, were all formed when the Sun was a flattened disc. The outer layers cooled and congealed into planets and then life formed and here we are. We are all star stuff.

If the ring had been coming in along the plane it might have passed a moon or planet and had a change in velocity, what was referred to as a "delta-V." But there weren't any planets "up" in the Solar System and it was inside the Oort Cloud.

"Correct," Dr. Heinsch said as if to a particularly bright child. From the point of view of "real" scientists, those who can, do, those who can't, teach, and those who can't do or teach, work for Skywatch.

"Is this data confirmed?" Dr. Marin asked very cautiously. Skywatch generally only made the news when they screamed "The sky is falling!" Since every time they'd screamed that, it hadn't, they'd gotten very cautious. And this wasn't the sky falling. This was . . .

"Absolutely," Dr. Heinsch said. "However, we have sent it to you in raw form. We have also contacted the Russian, Japanese and Italian Institutes."

"Yes," Dr. Marin said, nodding. "I think we need to stay very cautious about this until we have a

confirm all around . . ."

"It's a *spacecraft!*" Chris blurted.

"We need to be very *cautious*," Dr. Marin said, turning to glare at Chris.

"But it's *decelerating!*" Chris said, waving at the screen. "At the current rate of delta it's going to come to rest somewhere near *Earth!*"

"It appears to be headed for the Earth/Sol L2 Lagrange point," Dr. Heinsch said, nodding. "What it does then, of course, is the question."

"We need *definite* confirmations on this before we take *any* action," Dr. Marin said.

"I'm sure we will have those quite quickly. I would request that you contact Palomar for their take. Good day, Doctors."

Planning for shots by the big telescopes of Earth's major countries is blocked out months and even years in advance. They also cost a lot of money.

As the terminator circled about the globe that night, all such scheduling was put on indefinite hold and dozens of telescopes pointed to a very small patch of the sky.

There was, of course, a huge outcry amongst "real" researchers who had grants to study oxygen production of Mira Variables that, naturally, were more important than anything else that could possibly be happening especially with those bunglers at Skywa—A WHAT?

And then the press found out.

"The Gudram Ring has settled into a stationary position in the Sun-Earth L2 Lagrange point," Dr. Heinsch rumbled, looking at his notes. "The position it has taken is not entirely stable but it seems to have some form of stabilization system. Since it was able to maintain delta-V such as to decelerate into the system, that ability is self-evident. However, the L2 point creates a stable point of gravitational interaction which is why so many space telescopes are placed there. Power output for stabilization is, therefore, reduced. As of now, we have no idea as to its method or purpose. Questions?"

"What is it for?" the first reporter asked.

"And I repeat, we have no idea as to its method, we don't know how it works, or its purpose, we don't know why it is here. At this moment, it is as enigmatic as the monolith from *2001* . . ."

"Office of the President. If you would like to leave a message for the President of the United States, press one. For the Vice President, press two. For the First Lady, press three . . ."

The phone bank for the general contact number for the White House was not in the White House. It was in a featureless office building in Reston, Virginia. There a group of seventy receptionists, mostly women, received calls from the general public directed at the President.

In the early days of telephone, all calls were listened to, notes taken and daily they would be collated and tracked. This took a lot of people looking over the notes and figuring out what they meant. But there were general tenors. Do a three-part scale. "I love the President so much I want his sperm." "The President's an idiot." "The President is going to die at four PM on Friday." So then there were standard forms. Then computers came along. And Caller ID and voice recognition and automatic voice synthesis and phone trees and . . .

What the seventy people did was mostly let the computers handle it.

But if you worked the phone tree hard enough, you could get a real human being.

"Office of the President."

"This is not a prank call," a robotic voice said. "This system cannot normally block Caller ID. Please look at your Caller ID."

The receptionist looked at the readout and frowned. The Caller ID readout was a random string of numbers.

"The penalty for hacking the White House is—"

"Please contact your intelligence agencies and confirm that this call is coming from a satellite and has no ground-based transmission. We are the Grtul, the People of the Ring. We come in peace. In five days, on your Thursday, at 12 PM Greenwich Mean Time, we will call your President through a more secure means. This should give him time to clear his schedule. This will be a conference call with several of your major leaders, all of whom have been contacted or will be contacted. Please ensure your President is informed of this call. Thank you. Good-bye."

"So . . . do we know *which* secure line they're calling?" the President asked.

The Secure Room in the White House was, like most of the rooms in the White House, small. And compared to some secure rooms, not particularly secure. It had been repeatedly upgraded, but when you started off with a concrete basement in a limestone building built in the 1800s there was only so much you could do. The Joint Chiefs much preferred the Tank in the Pentagon.

"We're ready no matter where it comes in, Mr. President," the chief of staff said. The room was more or less at capacity since nobody knew the agenda for the meeting. State, Defense, the Joint Chiefs, NSA, DNI, himself, even Treasury and Commerce had horned in. About the only member of the "core" cabinet not present was Interior. Surprising even himself, the Director of NASA *had* managed to get a seat.

"Nobody talks but me," the President said just as the phone rang. He took a deep breath and pressed the button for the speaker phone. "President of the United States."

"Waiting . . . Waiting . . . Present are the presidents of the United States and Russia, prime ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Japan, China, India, Brazil. Each have staff present. We will not be responding to questions. We are the Grtul. We come in peace. The ring in your sky is a gate to other worlds. We produce these rings and move them into star systems. Use of the ring requires payment. The payment schedule will be sent to you. There is to be no use of hostile energy systems within three hundred thousand kilometers of the ring which are capable of damaging the ring. Anyone who pays may use the ring.

"In seven days we will make a general broadcast to the people of your planet on the subject of the ring. This will give you sufficient time to make your own statements and prevent panic.

"You have a distributed information system. We will establish a document on the information system which will give the full rules, schedules and regulations of the ring. We will include a list of answers to questions. In the last ninety million years we have been asked most conceivable questions. We will now answer the three most common questions asked and then we will terminate this call.

"By 'anyone can use the ring' do we mean that another species can use it to enter your system? Yes. Does that mean that hostile or friendly forces can use it? Yes. Are you allowed to block the ring? No. Goodbye."

"Hell," the President said as the phone went dead. "Those *were* my top questions. NASA? Input?"

"There is a real philosophical question whether there *can* be hostile species at the level to be able to use interstellar travel," the director said. "The energies involved mean that survival as a species if you are innately hostile becomes difficult. If you can create a spacecraft that can go three hundred thousand miles in any reasonable time frame, you can more or less destroy a world. The biosphere at least. Over time, hostile species will tend to wipe themselves out."

"That's a great philosophical point," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said. "But the fact that the Grtul mention hostile species and not fighting near the ring probably means you're more or less dead wrong. Pun intended. And according to my people, we can't even *get* to this thing."

"Oh, we can get there," the director said. "We're working on a proposal for a manned spacecraft capable of the journey."

"Time and budget?" the President asked, wincing.

"About five years and . . . well, the budget is still being worked on."

"Under or over a trillion?" the national security advisor asked.

"Oh, under. Probably."

Two Years After First Contact

(NASA has completed preliminary studies to the studies necessary to begin preliminary design phase of the bid phase on a potential ship to reach, but not enter, the Gudram Ring. Cost: \$976 million dollars.)

The prime minister of Britain picked up his phone without looking. It was the ringtone of his secretary.

"Yes, Janice?"

"Actually, my name is Andrilae Rirgo of the Glatun. I am the captain of an exploratory vessel which has just exited your Grtul Ring. We come in peace and are interested in trade."

The prime minister looked at the handset then at the phone, which was registering a random string of numbers from the Caller ID. Just as he was getting over the shock the door opened and his secretary started waving her arms frantically. He was able to read her lips well enough to get the words "Gate emergence." The rather graphic hand motions, not to mention his current conversation, helped. He nodded at her and went back to his conversation.

"Well, uh, Mr. . . . Rirgo did you say? Welcome to Earth."

"So we really don't have anything they want?" the President said.

"No, sir," the commerce secretary said. "The computer chips they're offering are centuries more advanced than anything we produce. Enormous storage and something close to infinite parallel processing. They also integrate with terrestrial systems seamlessly. Somehow. The IT experts are scratching their head as to how. But why they can just take over our systems is now pretty obvious. The chips are more like viruses than computers. But what they mainly want is precious metals. Specifically the platinum group which are pretty rare. Also gold."

"Do we mine those?" the President asked.

"We do in small quantities," Interior said. "More in Canada. Most are extracted from nickel and copper mining. Most of the world's deposits are in South Africa or Russia."

"Damn it."

Three Years After First Contact

"This had better be important," the President said as he entered the Situation Room. The Secret Service had practically yanked him out of a meeting with the Saudi ambassador.

"We've had a gate emergence," the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said over the video link.

"We've had those every few months for the last year," the President pointed out. "Mostly what I

suppose could be tramp freighters, no offense to our Glatun friends intended."

It had quickly become apparent that even tramp freighter captains could access any electronic transmission. This had less to do with the super advanced chips they traded for enormous amounts of heavy metals or anything else that seemed of some worth than their software systems and implant technology. Efforts to duplicate their information technology had so far been unsuccessful and most experts put humans as at least five hundred years behind current Glatun technology.

"Not Glatun. The ship looks like a warship and isn't responding to our standard hails."

"Is it . . . big?" the President asked. He'd been elected on the basis of his domestic programs and wasn't quite up to speed on international affairs much less interstellar.

"It really doesn't matter how big it is, Mr. President," the admiral in command of Space Command responded. "We still don't get the engineering of the Glatun reactionless drive or their power systems. So we're grounded. If it's a warship it's going to be able to hold the orbitals. And who holds the orbitals, holds the world."

"Oh."

"All stocks of precious metals," the secretary of state said. "Private, corporate and governmental. We can keep enough stock of gold to keep the IT industry running but that's it. We pointed out that it would make us more efficient at extraction and they accepted the argument, but palladium, which turns out is important for hard drives, has to be turned over. That's for all the world's governments. Our cities get what Mexico City, Shanghai and Cairo got. Pony up and the Horvath won't nuke the rest of the world."

"Technically they weren't nukes," SpaceCom pointed out. "They were kinetic energy weapons. Practical effect is similar but no fallout, thank God."

"Why those three?" the President asked. "Did they say?"

"No, sir," SpaceCom said. "But if you've ever seen a night shot of the world, it's pretty obvious. They picked the three that are most noticeable. Since we're in a shield room I'll point out that that was a pretty poor choice on their part. I don't think they'd developed full intel on the planet. Doesn't really matter but it's a potential chink in their armor. They're not gods."

"True," the JCS said. "But we also can't fight them. Recommendation of the JCS is that we pay the tribute and try to get the Glatun to intervene. We just *can't* fight them."

"So are we going to have them landing here?" the President asked. "If so there's going to be a major security situation."

"So far we haven't even seen the Horvath," the secretary of state said. "All discussion has been electronic or with their robots. As to where they are landing . . ." She nodded at the secretaries of commerce and interior.

"We and Canada will ship our small amount of production to South Africa, which will handle the transfer," Commerce said. "There will only be landings in South Africa and Russia. And only to pick up refined metals. They appear to want to keep the world running so that we can fill their holds. Not that we can; the whole world's production amounts to a few dozen tons a year."

SpaceCom looked a bit irritated for a moment, possibly because his aide had touched him on the arm, then grunted.

"What I don't get is why they're getting them on the planet," SpaceCom said. "According to my experts, most of this stuff is to be found in asteroids. We've got a ton of asteroids just cluttering up the damned system. Most of what we mine is from asteroids that have crashed into the Earth. Why not just mine the asteroid belt?"

"Possibly because then slaves don't do it for them," the President said dryly.

"It's a matter of what your world calls realpolitik," the Glatun representative said politely. The Glatun was a bit over a meter-and-a-half-tall biped with blue skin, red eyes, a vaguely piglike head and snout and a mane of white fur running down his back. He was dressed in an informal tunic for the discussion which was, in diplospeak, "non-binding and informal." Which was where all the really serious binding resolutions were always hammered out.

"We have called for the Horvath to remove themselves from your world's orbitals and they have chosen to ignore our requests. Since Earth is, to them, a very good conquest, relatively rich in heavy metals compared to Horvath, they won't leave absent either armed confrontation or, possibly, a trade embargo. Since Earth has, essentially, little or no value to the Glatun Federation, we have a sufficiency of strategic metals, and there are negative aspects to both choices on our part, we must unfortunately state that we remain neutral in this dispute."

"We have . . . an extensive asteroid belt," the undersecretary of state for interstellar affairs said, throwing in her only bone. "We believe it to be rich in the platinum group."

"For which you should be grateful," the Glatun replied. "Most inhabited systems are mined out. However, our laws, and long experience, prevent us from mining your asteroid belt as long as there is not a centralized, or at least effectively sovereign, system government. The Horvath meet the definition, not the United States of America. Certainly not the UN. The Horvath have, also, offered the asteroid belt. Be equally grateful that we declined that offer. There are enormous problems with asteroid mining. It requires quite large lasers and fabbers and is fuel and energy intensive. To make it worthwhile for a Glatun corporation to invest in this system would require long-term leases. In the current security and political situation the Glatun Federation would not permit such legally binding contracts."

"We're on our own." The USSIA finally said, becoming decidedly informal. "We have sixteen million dead, three major cities in ashes and you're *neutral*?"

"Since we are speaking frankly . . ." the Glatun said. "The decision of our policy makers is that Earth is simply sufficiently unknown and unnoticeable to take the chance of losing credibility in a minor dispute. The reality is that the Horvath, who are not much more advanced than Earth, would probably leave if so much as a single Glatun destroyer entered the system and ordered them to do so. However, if they didn't and shots were fired, much less loss of Glatun life, there would be questions asked in Parliament, AI queries, and of course the press would simply go wild. It is easier and safer to do nothing. Absent Earth becoming more of a hot topic in the Glatun Federation or becoming in some way strategically important, yes, you are on your own."

One

Tyler dropped his chainsaw and pulled out his cell phone. He'd barely felt the vibration and it was impossible to hear over the saw. He looked at the Caller ID and tried not to curse. Three missed calls from the same . . . Arrgh!

"Tyler Vernon."

"Tyler, it's Mrs. Cranshaw. How are you today?"

"Just fine, ma'am," Tyler said, squeezing his eyes shut and waiting for it. She always started nice. "And you?"

"Fine, just fine," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "Fine weather we're having. Getting cold. The frost should bring out the leaves a treat."

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler replied. *Here it comes.*

"Speaking of it getting cold, I think I asked you to bring by some firewood."

"Yes, ma'am. And I said I'd get it over there on Friday."

"Well, it's gone Wednesday. Are you going to *be* here on Friday?"

"When I say I'm going to be there, I'll be there, ma'am."

"Well, I asked for it last week. Seems you could have got it here before Friday. You're not doing much else."

Just working at the market, part-time, working in the bookstore, part-time, working at the mill, part-time, cutting wood, splitting wood, by hand, and answering your damned phone calls every damned day. Oh, and the rare consulting gig. But other than that I've got all the time in the world! I suppose I could point out that I could have delivered it Sunday night at 10 PM but she'd go and tell all her friends I'd been snippy with her and half my clientele would dry up rather than go up against her vicious tongue.

"Gotta work at the market this evening, ma'am," Tyler said politely. "Couldn't get it by until late. Tomorrow I'm going to be working at the bookstore all day and then in the market that evening. I'll be there at one Friday if the job I've got to do at the mill don't take too long. No later than four."

"You'd better be here by one," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "I don't want to be without wood this weekend."

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said.

"You be with the Lord, Tyler Vernon," Mrs. Cranshaw said and hung up.

Tyler closed the phone and swung it back and forth in his fist, wanting to crush it and the whole damned world that seemed to be determined to do nothing but ruin the life of one Tyler Vernon.

Tyler Alexander Vernon was five foot two, one hundred and thirty-five pounds and long over the problem of having three first names. He'd been born and raised in Mississippi, graduated from LSU with a master's in computer science and, after applying five times at NASA, ended up working for an internet backbone center in Atlanta. That had led to various positions in the IT field and a pretty steady corporate advance culminating in a senior manager position at AT&T in Boston. Then came the real breakout: *TradeHard*.

He'd had it made in the shade. He and his wife, okay, had some issues. But even if money could solve everything, it could solve a lot. He'd never thought that his webcomic was going to be anything other than something to fill the time and maybe make its nut. How was *he* to know it would take off like a Delta rocket? The awards, the adulation. He'd really not cared that much about the money. He really hadn't. It was more about making a change in people's lives. But as it turned out . . .

No, that was unfair. Petra hadn't cared about the money. She cared about the lifestyle the money brought in. ~~She'd hitched her wagon to a rising star at AT&T back before he'd been doing much more than scribbling.~~ Dug in there though the tough years, reveled in the good. Tyler hadn't really wanted the cabin in New Hampshire but he was glad they'd bought it. And paid it off as the money got better and better and . . .

A science fiction based webcomic about a free-trader ship. One of the few that had gotten national syndication. A small TV show. A movie deal in the works.

And the gate opened. And science fiction, as an industry, died.

Well, there was always IT. Five years was a lifetime in IT. Catching up was possible but hard. He'd been *making* it.

And the Horvath came. And the inevitable depression that followed the orbital bombing of three major cities. Not to mention the stripping the world of all its heavy metals.

And like one of those rocks tumbling towards the planet below, his life had gone into freefall. The fiery reentry culminating in the plasma explosion of the divorce.

And now he lived in a cabin in the woods and saw his kids when he had any time between working five jobs.

He put his phone away, picked up the saw, yanked it into life and applied it to the oak he was chunking. Hard.

"Tyler, Chuck needs you to work on Saturday."

Steve Moorman was the night manager of Mac's Market in Franconia. Tall, stooped and prematurely balding, his life ambition seemed to be to retire as the night manager of the Mac's Market in Franconia. Tyler considered him lacking in ambition. But despite his current downcycle, Tyler considered most people to be lacking in ambition.

Since it was Chuck that needed help, that meant day-shift and there was an "issue." He had a gig at a con in Reading on Saturday. The greater SF market may have suffered the fate of the dodo but fandom just would not let go. There was even some anime still going.

He did some quick calculations.

He wasn't getting paid for the gig; the only reason he was invited as the Artist Guest of Honor was that he was somewhat famous, local and cheap. But he still could move some merc in the dealer's room and people still bought his sketches of Gomez, Frank and Forella. The market was a little saturated but he'd still make more sitting on his butt in the dealer's room than working it off in the store. And Saturday sucked. The ski-birds from Boston and NYC would be flooding in and asking "Why don't you have arugula? Where's the couscous?"

The flip side being that if he said no, not only would one of the other stockers get asked the next time some extra time came up, but Steve, the passive-aggressive asshole, would probably start cutting back on his hours.

Short-term money or long-term money? More like medium-term because he was *not* going to retire as the night manager of Mac's Market.

Somehow the con co-chair had gotten a Glatun to attend. That decided it. The chance to talk to a real-live alien wasn't one to pass up.

"Steve, I'm really sorry but I'm already scheduled for something on Saturday," Tyler replied, diplomatically. "I'd love to work but I've got a gig in Boston."

"Uh, huh," Steve said, slowly. "Isn't that one of those . . . convention things?"

"Yes," Tyler said, just as slowly. "It's one of those convention things. I can work the evening shift

—"

"No, that would be too much juggling in the schedule," Steve said, puffing out his cheeks. "I'll just ask Marsha."

"Sorry about that," Tyler said. "Anything else?"

"There's a spill in produce," Steve said. "Help Tom clean the oranges."

"Right away."

Tyler took the two crisp twenties from Mrs. Cranshaw and nodded.

"Thank you," he said politely.

"Forty dollars seems an awful lot of money for a cord of wood," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "Not like I don't already own plenty."

Owner of five maple sugar distilleries and over four thousand acres of maple forest and white pine, one of Mrs. Cranshaw's noted peculiarities was that she was so tight with money she made the buffalo squeal.

"Going rate, ma'am," Tyler said. He'd wondered when he started delivering wood to her why he'd been chosen rather than one of the local lumberjacks. You know, people who *worked* for the old witch.

The answer being, nobody else would put up with her.

"Forty dollars is just robbery for firewood," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "When I was a girl, Cokes were a nickel. A nickel, I tell you!"

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said. If you tried to stop her she got mean. Best to just ride it out.

"And the winters is getting worse. It's these damned aliens."

At best the orbital bombardment of Shanghai, Cairo and Mexico City had dropped global temperatures by .0001% according to Glatun-backed studies. It took a lot more than a few megatons rock and, okay, some really major secondary fires, to disturb Earth's climate.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm thinking about selling this place," she said. "My old bones can't take these winters."

She'd apparently been saying that since before her fourth husband died. They'd all been wealthy, they'd all left her all their fortune and they'd all died of natural causes. Anyone who suggested anything different had better move out of the county. Besides, after husband three there'd been a prettily thorough investigation and the final result was "dead of stress."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Everything seems to go up but maple sugar land," she said angrily. "Wood isn't bringing what I used to, not at all. Nor maple sugar. Damn aliens. Hate those damned aliens."

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said. He bit his tongue to keep from adding: "*And so do the Chinese, Egyptians and Mexicans.*"

"They're listening to everything we say," she said, looking at the sky nervously. "They're up there right now, listening to us."

While the Horvath information systems did seem to be able to track just about any conversation made around an electronic device, Tyler rather doubted that they were personally listening in on this one. He had a moment's empathetic thought for any Horvath who was and quashed it rather automatically.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well," she said, relenting a bit. "You did stack it neat. I like a good neat stack of wood."

With most people when you delivered a cord it was "Here you go" and get it off the pickup as fast as possible. All done, that'll be forty bucks.

Not with Mrs. Cranshaw. That firewood had better be stacked in a neat and tidy cord on her back porch. Which took about five times as long as just dumping it in the yard.

Speaking of time.

"Ma'am, I'd love to stay and chat. But I've got an event in Boston where I'm the speaker and I need to be going."

"Speaker?" she asked, incredulously. "About what?"

"The webcomic I used to do," Tyler said evenly.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Cranshaw said, with the most perfect note of neutrality that descended past condescension and straight to contempt. "You used to do that comic thing."

"Yes, I used to do that comic thing," Tyler said. "And now I'm going to go talk to people about doing comic things."

"Used to run in the paper," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "Never did get what was so funny about it. And didn't like all them alien names. Couldn't figure them out."

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said.

"Well, if you've got a commitment you best be to it," Mrs. Cranshaw said. "Can't hardly figure out what you're going to talk on seeing as there's real aliens now. But you do go on and talk about comic things."

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said. "See you in a couple of months, then?"

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Du Vall," Tyler said, shaking the con-chair's hand. "Got hung up doing some server work."

"Not a problem," the convention co-chairman said. James Du Vall was 5'11", AmerAsian and shaped something like a large bear. He had black hair, a white and black beard, and it was patterned in a very familiar way. Tyler had never met him but could just about guess his nickname . . . "Call me Panda. Everybody does. You're just in time for opening ceremonies, which was your first panel."

Tyler had gotten a peek into the ballroom as he was walking in and shook his head.

"I thought you said this was a small con. There must be a thousand people in the ballroom."

"I'd say they're all here to see you," Panda said with a shrug. "Truth is they're mostly here to see ___"

"A real-live Glatun," Tyler finished, gesturing with his chin at the alien standing in a corner and watching the "pros" straggling into the small, walled-off area. "I won't ask how you got him to attend"

"Simple," Panda said, smiling thinly. "I paid him. More than I'm going to get out of the con but that wasn't the point. Science fiction isn't dead, it's just become reality. And fandom is still where people who want to work for the future gather. I could go on but we've got to get going."

"Lead on," Tyler said.

Panda headed up the steps to the stage and the other "Special Guests" sort of straggled after him

There was the usual series of tables flanking a podium and the usual milling as people tried to figure out where to sit. And Tyler had his usual flash of annoyance at it. *They're chairs. You sit in 'em. Sit. Heel.*

Since the Glatun looked particularly puzzled, he caught its eye and waved to a chair, pulling it out. Fortunately Glatun and human design were similar enough a human chair worked just fine. The Glatun sat down and Tyler snagged the chair next to it by right of conquest. Worked for the Horvath.

"Ladies and Gentlemen and honored extraterrestrials . . ." Panda said to some cheers at the last part. "Welcome to MiraCon . . ."

"You are Tyler Vernon," the Glatun whispered as Panda started into what sounded like it was

going to be a very *long* speech.

Tyler noted that the voice, which was fairly human normal, was coming from a small pod on a collar and the Glatun had not, in fact, opened his mouth. He'd heard that they mostly communicated through their implants but it was still a bit of shock.

"Yes, I am," Tyler whispered back.

"I am Fallalor Wathaet, captain of the *Spinward Crossing*. A pleasure to meet you. You used to write *TradeHard*, did you not?"

"Yes," Tyler said, shocked again. "How did you . . . ? *Why* do you know that?"

"The security situation on Terra for traders is good," Wathaet said. "But if I was going to be dealing with people, I wished to know who I might be near."

"We are, after all, potentially dangerous locals with bizarre and disgusting customs," Tyler said.

"'Who will do anything to screw us out of our credits. Our job is to be better screws.' "

"You *read* the comic?" Tyler was still recovering from the earlier shocks. This was water on a duck.

"It is one of the few times when I have understood human humor," the Glatun said. "Perhaps in part because it struck so close to home and was so true. Although banks do not routinely send mercenaries to collect your ship. There are people in our government who do that quite well, thank you."

"It was a rare situation," Tyler pointed out. "But . . . thanks for the compliment."

"I almost stopped reading in the first few panels," Wathaet said, "because I did not understand the cultural conditions of stealing the infant's candy. When I was able to grasp it fully, though, I very nearly had an accident. Rule Nine: If the other guy doesn't feel screwed we're not doing our jobs. I printed that out and put it up in the mess. We all got it. But I personally feel it's more of a guideline."

"Same here," Tyler said. "If I'd really been a backstabber I would have been a VP."

"Why did you stop writing?" Wathaet asked. "I was only able to find the comic on an archive server and there were no notices to explain your cessation."

"Whew . . ." Tyler said. "Big answer. Basically, it was an economic decision. As soon as the gates opened, everyone in the industry quickly saw that anything SF was falling off. So I got dropped like a hot potato in most of my markets. The website traffic and merch fell off sharply as well. Then with our Horvath protectors requiring a very high payment for protection, server space started getting expensive. Eventually it simply wasn't economical."

"You have very few new drawings on your personal system," Wathaet said. "Sorry about looking. But your information systems are so primitive that it's a bit like trying not to look through a plate glass window. Once I'd scanned all your available archives on other systems, I set my system to find more and only realized I was in your personal system when I saw many of them were partials. But I think you haven't had much time. Your personal and business finances are terribly screwed up. My apologies. Again, it's rather hard *not* to look."

"No problem," Tyler said, gritting his teeth. "On another subject, was trading good?"

"No," the Glatun admitted. "With the Horvath control of your heavy metals, which were paltry anyway, your world has virtually nothing to trade. Despite that, every time one of our ships comes here we have to first meet with members of your senior governments who ask if there's anything we, the traders mind you, can do about the Horvath. No, there's not. Then we meet with senior corporate representatives who have gathered such things as we might be interested in and we trade. The pattern is always the same. And, really, what am I going to get for folk art?"

"The Venus de Milo is hardly folk art!" Tyler said. He'd seen the news. "Not to mention the

paintings." He paused and sighed. "Sorry. I really do understand the situation. Probably better in some ways than those 'senior representatives.'"

"Hmmm. From your comic I would say that is the case, but how exactly?"

"Look up Polynesian contact with the West," Tyler said. "I assume that is . . ."

"Yes, the similarities are there. We do not carry diseases but . . ."

"You're trading iron nails for pearls," Tyler said. "Well, you were. Now our Horvath benefactors receive the pearls as an honorarium for their defense of our system. And we only have coconut husks and carvings to sell."

"Do you really think the Horvath are your benefactors?" Wathaet asked.

"Of course I do," Tyler said, smiling. "Our Horvath benefactors who find our systems as porous as you do and are listening to this conversation on my cell phone are our *friends!*"

"Ah," the Glatun said, making a noise something like a sneeze. "Don't worry. The Horvath are most certainly not listening to any conversation *I* am involved in."

"Really?" Tyler asked.

"Really. Horvath systems are better than *yours*. But the information systems on what they call a battle cruiser, which is not much bigger than a Glatun admiral's landing barge, are no match for even *my* ship. And I'll admit I don't have galaxy class systems. The Horvath are most certainly not listening."

"In that case," Tyler said, smiling again. "Of course we're poor. They're stealing all our metals. What I don't get is why the Glatun don't throw them out so Glatun traders get the metals."

"Other than assuring the safety of trade, our military tries very hard to avoid nonstrategic entanglements," Wathaet said. "That has not always been the case and we've had times in our history of military adventurism and colonialism. But we've given that up mostly."

"I can understand that, too," Tyler said, nodding. "I know this is a shot in the dark, but have people sort of shown you, well, *everything* we have to trade?"

"What do you mean?" the Glatun said, then held up a hand. "Your turn to talk."

"Damn," Tyler said, getting up and trying to remember what he was going to say.

He managed to stumble through some remarks then sat back down quickly.

"You said something about everything you have to trade," Wathaet said. "Your produced items are rather crude and expensive for you to produce compared to fabbers. Not economical for us. There's not much mark-up in the market for things that are simply made by hand. A fabber can produce variation easily. We produce what you consider precious gems practically as industrial waste . . ."

"Got all that," Tyler said. "I mean, you *read* the comic. Covered that."

"True. And Forella really screwed those natives."

"Well, they deserved it. What about commodity materials?" Tyler asked.

"You mean foodstuffs?" Wathaet said. "I did read the comic. You know as well as I that your foodstuffs are chemically incompatible. We may have some similarity in appearance to terrestrial organisms but our chemistry is radically different. You covered that as well."

"Which is all very good theory but it hasn't been *tested*," Tyler said.

"Yes, it has," Wathaet said. "By the first contact ship. We're incompatible."

"Did they test *everything*?" Tyler said. "If not—"

"My turn to talk," Wathaet said, getting up. "Where is that . . . Ah. There's the speech . . ."

Tyler sort of tuned out his speech and thought.

"What are you doing before you leave?" Tyler asked as Wathaet sat back down.

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