

Schlock Mercenary

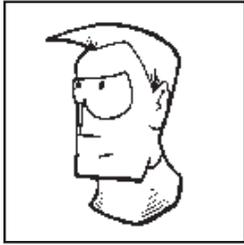
UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT



By
Howard Tayler

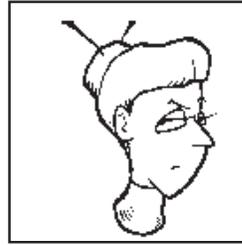
with an introduction by **John Ringo**

Cast:



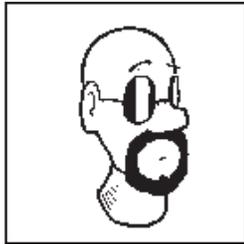
Captain Kaff Tagon:

He and his mercenary company have been dragooned into doing government work. It pays the bills, provided they can survive to collect their pay.



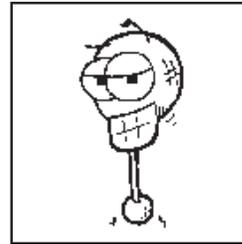
Colonel Jeeve Geeta:

Thanks to the government contract, she's Tagon's boss... or at least that's the plan.



Commander Kevyn Andreyasa:

He invented a new starship drive, tried to make money with it, and NOW look where it's gotten him.



Ennesby:

This former boy-band A.I. and one-time computer virus now pilots the mercenary warship *Serial Peacemaker*. Finally... honest work.



Sergeant Schlock:

He got hired for pointing a plasma cannon at the recruiter. He got promoted for buying stock in the company. He gets paid to hurt people and break things. He is smiling because he loves his job.

Credits:

Created by Howard Tayler

Pencils and Inks

Howard Tayler

Colors

Jean Elmore

Bonus-story Colors (pp 75-79)

Howard Tayler

Deck Plans (p 74)

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www.sff.net/people/kitsune/traveller

UNS Logo (p69)

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www.blambot.com

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Introduction

"There is no such thing as 'Overkill.' There is only 'Open Fire!' and 'Reload!'"

I remember the first time I saw that quote. I had become known as one of the "modern masters of combat science fiction" and, thus, got a lot of email on the general subject. So when a fan sent me a link to a webcomic called "Schlock Mercenary" I sort of went "Ho-hum, another internet comic." I had gotten addicted to a couple but most left me cold. But I clicked on the link, why not?... and promptly blew a mouthful of mocha latte all over my computer screen.

After I'd run through the archives, loading Schlock Mercenary became a daily ritual. When I run short of ideas for the next scene in a book I bring it up and shake my head in wonder. Howard's inventiveness seems limitless. From alien turd-monsters (and there is no other description for Sergeant Schlock) to Petey the Bughouse AI to Tagon chortling over the concept that there is such a thing as getting paid "too much" for a job, there is no depth to which his characters are unwilling to sink to save the universe, get the cash and revel in Ovalqwik orgies.

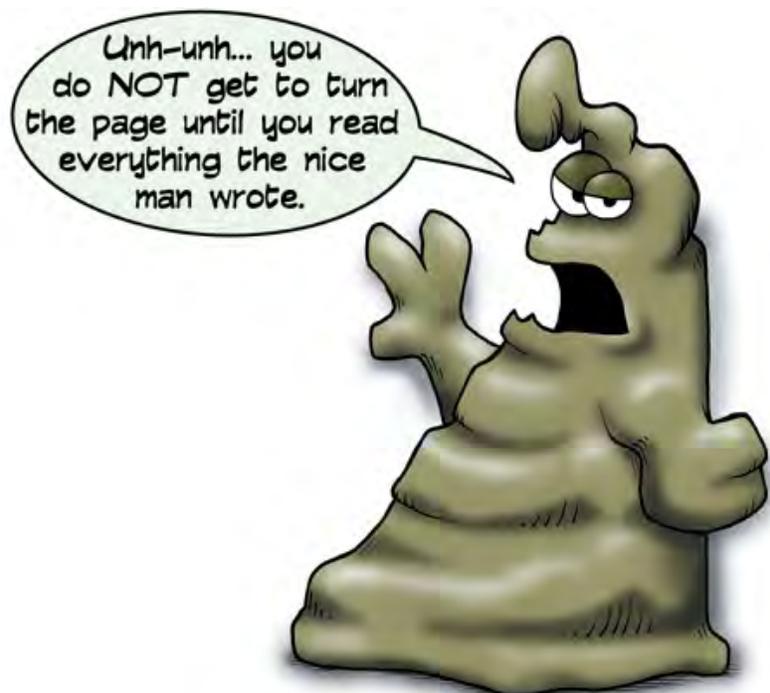
As time went on I got in touch with Howard and eventually met him by the simple expedient of going to a convention which he was attending. There we met and got along famously. (He even sat through the humiliation of watching me play Riff in Rocky Horror!) Despite the differences in our backgrounds I view him as one of the tiny number of people I call True Friends. (Friends help you move. True Friends help you move bodies.)

I am proud and honored to have the opportunity to write the intro to his latest book. Among other things, it gives me a chance to say something VERY IMPORTANT.

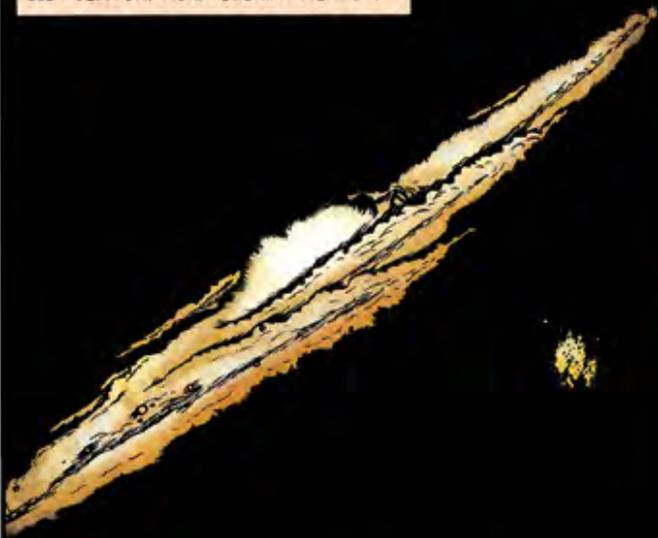
Set down your drinks and go to the bathroom before turning to the first page! Otherwise you're going to ruin your computer and your clothes.

This is your final warning! So long, good luck and if you have a heart condition, ensure you have an AED nearby!

John Ringo
Chattanooga, TN
December, 2005



FROM A DISTANCE, THE MILKY WAY GALAXY LOOKS MUCH THE SAME IN THE 31ST CENTURY AS IT DID IN THE 21ST.



IT WHEELS ON OBVIOUS TO THE CONCERNS OF ITS INHABITANTS, THE COMPLEX STELLAR MACHINERIES CHURNING OUT TERRIBLE ENERGIES THAT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO MEASURE IN TERAWATTS PER NANOSECOND IF YOU WERE ALLOWED ENOUGH ZEROES.

CLOSER IN, HOWEVER, THE VAST MAJORITY OF THAT CHURNING, BURNING SPIRAL IS JUST EMPTY SPACE, SPECKLED WITH THE OCCASIONAL LONELY MOLECULE.



IN SHORT, MOST OF IT IS QUITE BORING.

Schlock Mercenary

COME TO THINK OF IT, THOUGH, STELLAR FUSION AND SINGULAR ANNIHILATION ARE ULTIMATELY RATHER REPETITIVE. THUS, THE STARS AND THE GALACTIC CORE TELL BORING STORIES TOO.



IT'S ONLY IN THE BORDERS, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THOSE LONELY, LOFTY BLACKNESSES AND THE INFERNALLY CRUSHING DEPTHS, THAT WE FIND ANYTHING OF DRAMATIC SIGNIFICANCE.

YOU ASKED FOR DRAMA? HERE FLY FLEETS OF GIANT WARSHIPS, WHO ARE IN THEIR OWN TURN WIELDING AND UNLEASHING TERRIBLE ENERGIES AS THE FIRST PAN-GALACTIC CONFLICT IN THAT INTERRACIAL MEMORY KNOWN AS 'RECORDED HISTORY' UNFOLDS IN ALL ITS BLOODY, BLISTERING MAJESTY.

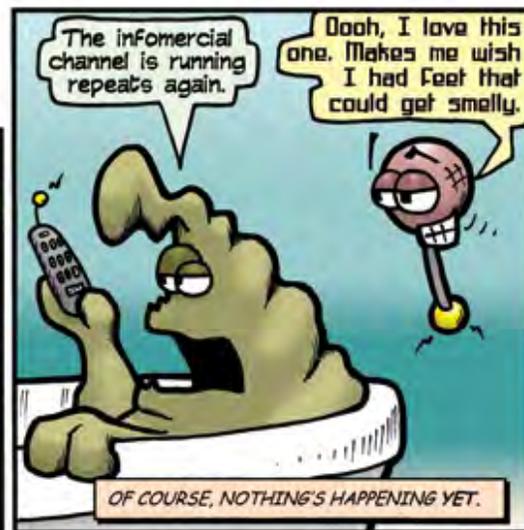


HISTORY, EVEN IN THE MAKING, IS FAIRLY DULL. IT LACKS PERSONALITY. WAR AND PEACE... WE ALL KNOW IT REPEATS ITSELF.

YOU WANT DRAMA? IN THE INHABITED BORDERLANDS BETWEEN THE STARS AND THE NOTHINGNESS, IN THE TURBULENT INTERSTICES BETWEEN THE WAR AND THE PEACE WE FIND ENORMOUS POTENTIAL ENERGY. IT IS WITHIN THESE TURBULENT FRINGES, THESE BORDERS WITHIN THE BORDERS, THAT LIFE GETS EXCITING, AND WE BEGIN OUR STORY:



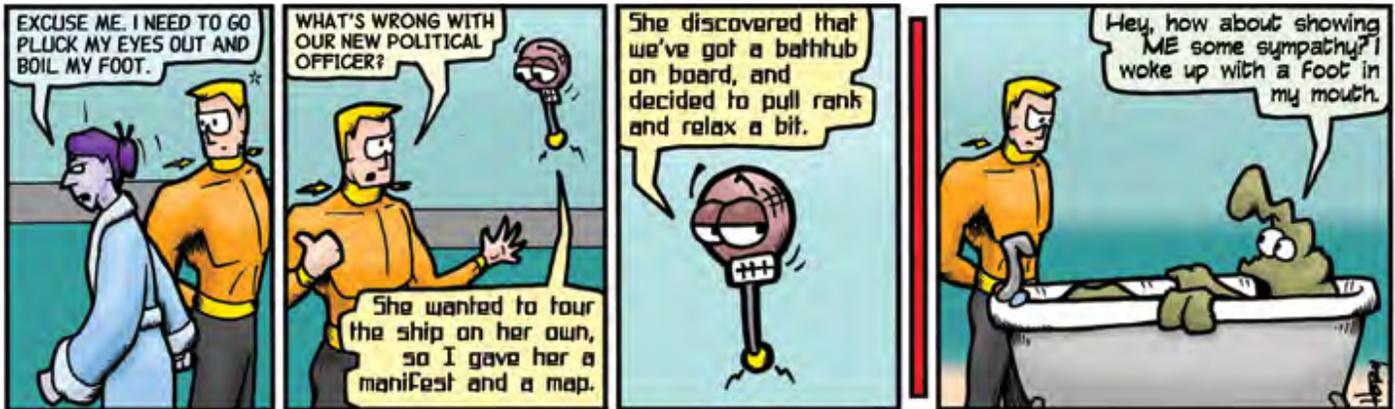
WELCOME TO SOL SYSTEM, WHERE, ABOARD A SMALL MERCENARY SHIP, MONEY HAS BEEN ACCEPTED FOR BETRAYAL, TREASON WILL BE REPAID WITH TREACHERY, AND RESISTANCE WILL BE MET WITH IRRESISTIBLE FORCE.



The infomercial channel is running repeats again.

Oooh, I love this one. Makes me wish I had feet that could get smelly.

OF COURSE, NOTHING'S HAPPENING YET.



Note: "Purps," less commonly known as *homo sapiens purpureum*, are a human sub-species, and are the result of a half-finished (one might say "half-baked") attempt to modify human stock to be more energy efficient. Eight hundred years after the original project was terminated, they still breed true, but are only a tiny bit more energy-efficient than their cousins, and then only when standing stark naked in direct sunlight.

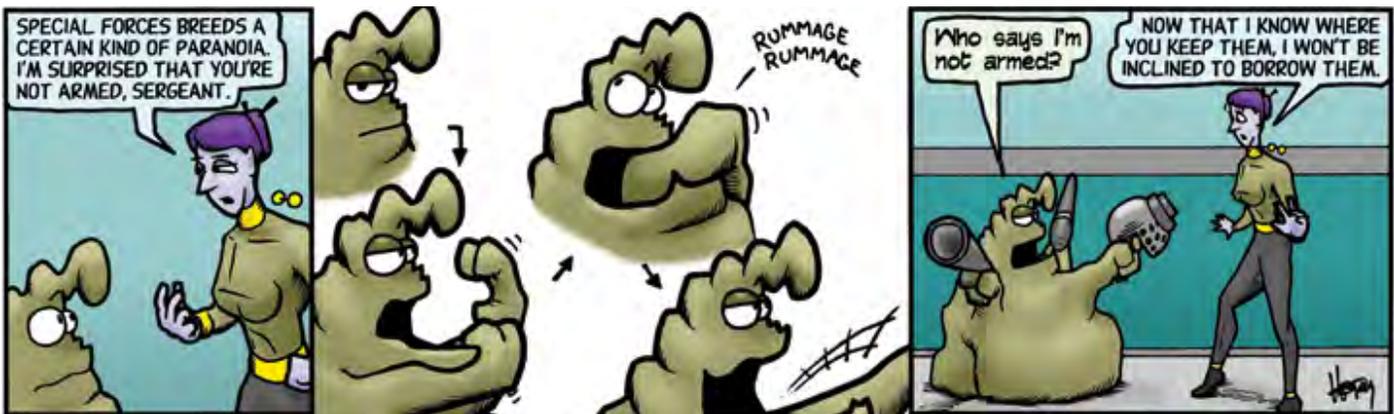
The extra chromosomes they carry make cross-breeding between purps and standard humans less than successful: the resulting infant is blue, not because of photosynthetic skin, but because it is dead. For this reason, when Momma tells you "don't go marryin' one o' them purps," it's not because purps are inherently bad people, or because your Momma is a bigoted, buck-toothed racist. It's because Momma wants to be a grandma. I'm sure that purp girl you met is very nice, but if you two want to start a family, you're going to need to hire an adoption agent, a good geneticist, a marriage counselor, and maybe even a personal trainer.

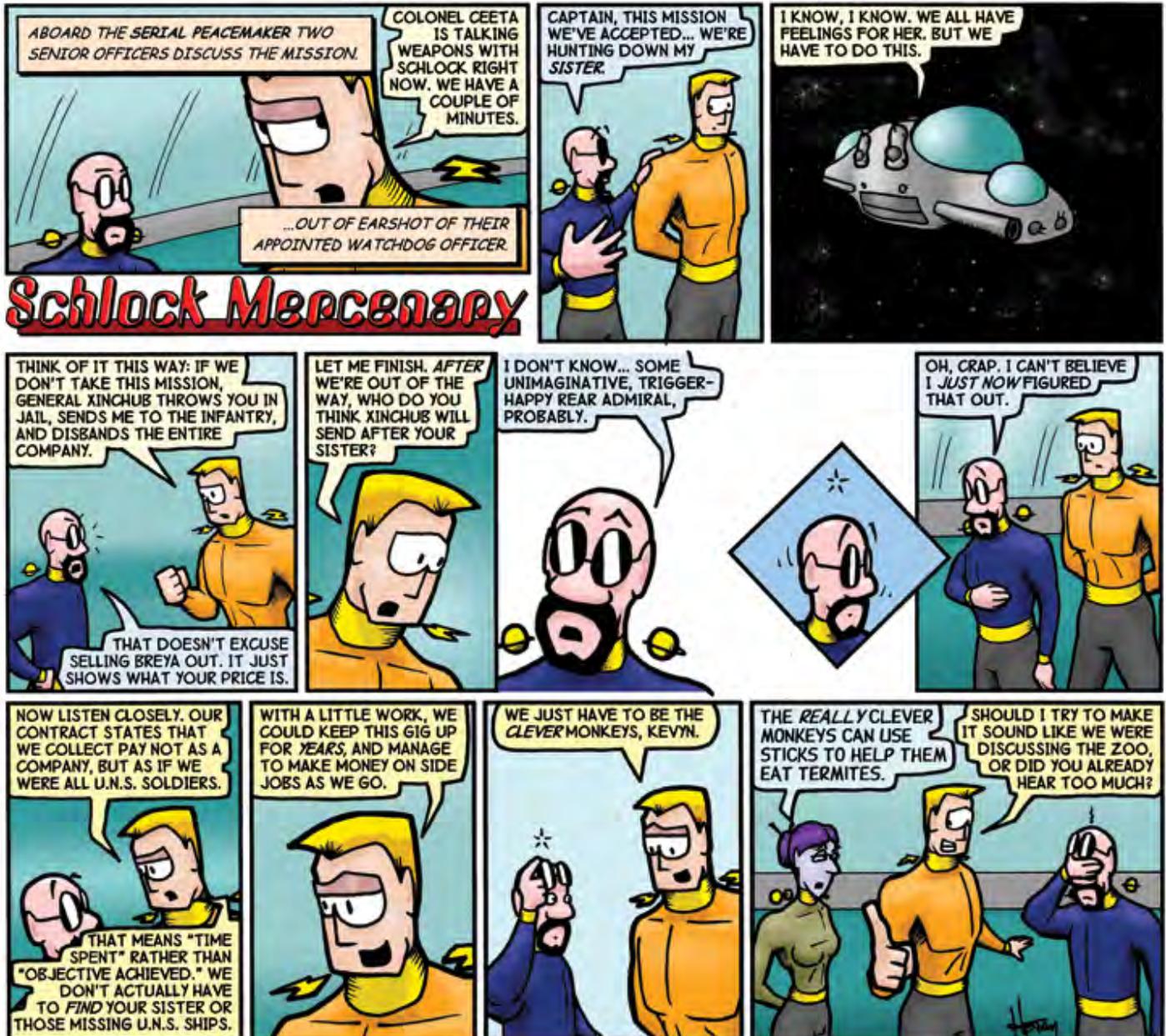




Note: Sergeant Schlock's kind are usually classified as "carbosilicate amorphs," and by molecular weight they are essentially peaty, clay-infused hairballs. The 'hair' is actually carbon nanotubes filled with the complex molecular machinery of memory and self-replication, but what you see from three feet away is startlingly similar to the droppings of a very large, very healthy ungulate.

Before you go lording it up over an amorph based on the fact that he or she is essentially 'peaty, hairy, clay,' you should bear in mind that by the same rules you are a "bag of no-longer-potable water."





Note: The really, really clever monkeys can use sticks to pick the locks on the parental control systems on their hypernet terminals, but they're the ones in the shiny, sterile labs where termites are hard to find. The people of Earth are not finished monkeying (ahem) around with the lesser primate genome, so it's anybody's guess how clever the monkeys will end up. It's safe to say the TV remote will end up hidden somewhere besides the couch-crack before this work is done.

Addendum to Note: The phrase "people of Earth" is a handy way to refer not only to *homo sapiens*, but also to *pan troglodytes sapiens*, *gorilla gorilla sapiens*, *elephas maximus sapiens*, *loxodontus africanus sapiens*, and numerous other former members of what is now politically incorrect to call the 'animal kingdom' who have been genetically "improved" to the point that they now have the right to vote (note the quotes). The term is mildly discriminatory since the trillion or so sophonts-of-Terran-stock are scattered through tens of thousands of star systems, but most folks will still know what you mean when you use it.

Addendum to Addendum to Note: It has just been pointed out to us that two classes of sophonts were omitted from the previous list — human sub- (or super-, depending on who you're talking to at the time) species like *homo sapiens purpleum*, and artificial intelligences (er... 'people of machine ascent'). This illustrates nicely what happens when life is denied the cozy constraints of conventional evolution, while social concepts like political correctness are allowed to naturally evolve into the true monsters of the next millennium.



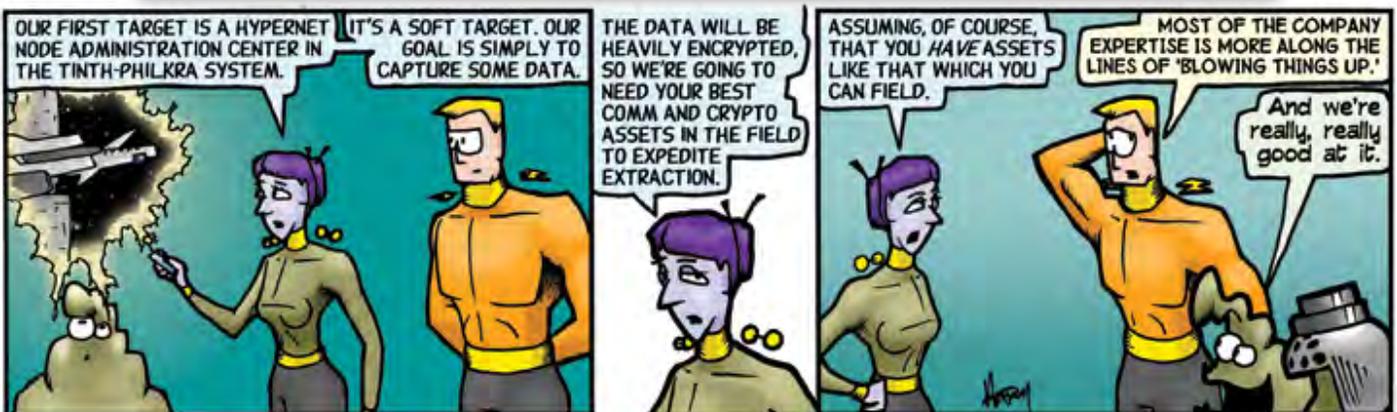
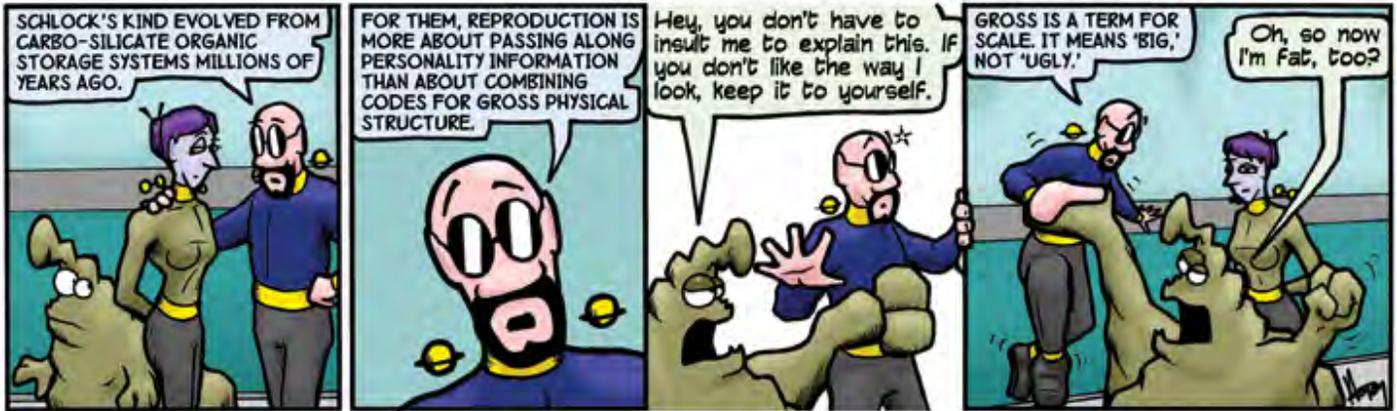
Note: Once upon a time an entrepreneur named Brea Andreyasn had an idea. Specifically, she thought that she and her brother, inventor Kevyn Andreyasn, could market his revolutionary new invention by buying a mercenary company. Kevyn's invention, the Teraport, gave these mercenaries an extremely powerful combat advantage, as well as some extremely powerful enemies.

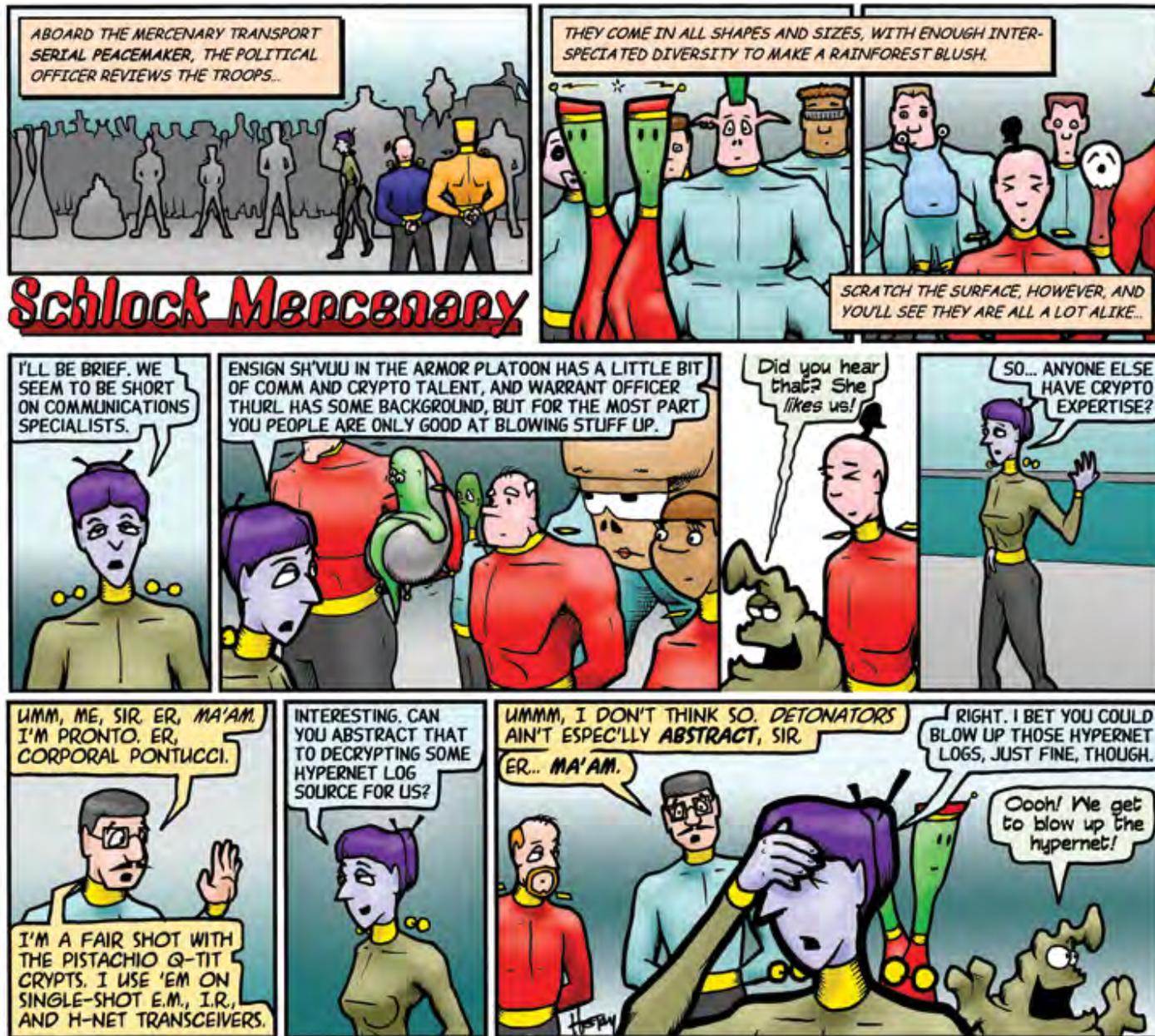
Brea named herself "Admiral" of the mercenary company she owned, and though the company had but a single small cruiser she managed to make the pretense stick. "Commodore" would have been a real stretch. "Admiral" should have been out of the question, but she pulled it off.

When her investors pulled out and the secrets of the teraport were released into the public domain, the pretense began to unravel. Then Petey, the A.I. for the mercenaries' second ship, the *Post-Dated Check Loan* turned on her, and managed to get her thrown out of the company. Her brother Kevyn stayed behind, while she took a single loyal soldier, Haban, with her in a shuttle.

She had big plans, and piles upon piles of moxie. In less than a year she was a REAL admiral, commanding a fleet of over a thousand warships from numerous worlds. The joint operation dissolved, however, in betrayal, treason, and a disastrous retreat, and Brea took the UNS Destroyer *Athens* into hiding. Since then little has been seen or heard from the Admiral and her loyal company of marines. Her former captain doesn't know where she is, the amorph who had a crush on her has no clue where she is, and her brother wouldn't tell anyone even if he did know.

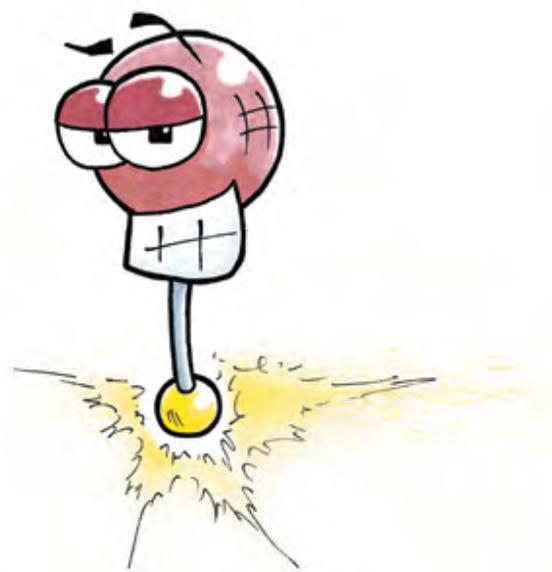


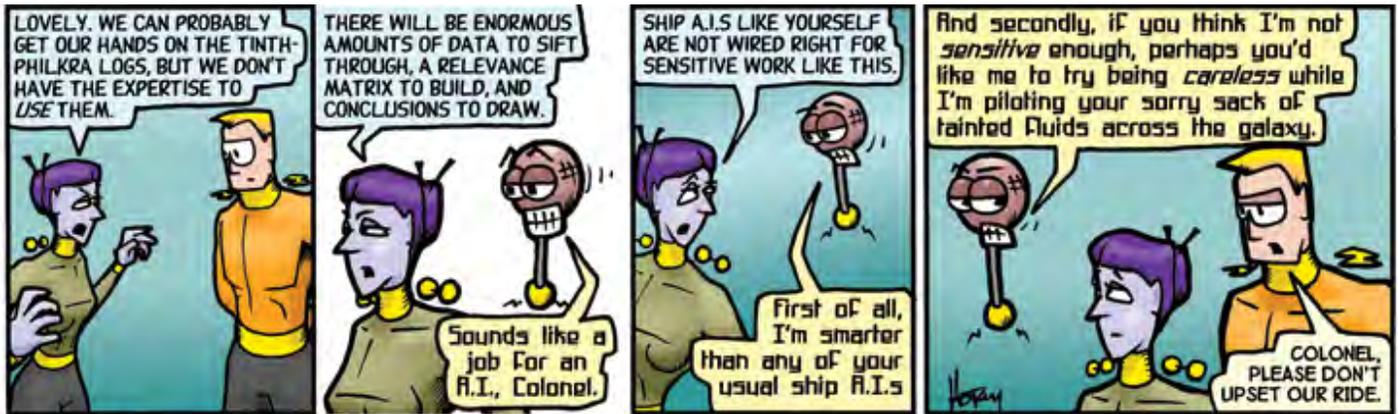




Note: The term "q-tit" is short for "Quantum Trinary unit," which is the fundamental processing unit for many 31st-century computers, including sentient Artificial Intelligences like Ennesby, shown to the right.

How it was possible for the term 'tits' to be allowed to replace 'bits' in technical jargon is one of the grand mysteries of political correctness. It might have something to do with not being able to determine both an engineer's position and his velocity when he's just inadvertently made an anatomical reference in front of an attractive colleague.





Note: Jevée repeatedly uses the phrase “Tinth-Philkra” to refer to both the data she is looking for and the star system where it may be found. Depending on your perspective, this is either incorrect or prophetic. You see, it’s the Philkra system — “Tinth” refers to a class of massive space-station in that system. The fact that a very infamous piece of whistle-blowing ‘historical’ commentary (the source of which Jevée and the Toughs are trying to track down) seemed to originate from Tinth III in the Philkra system, and was subsequently named “The Tinth-Philkra Dialogues” led most folks to assume that the name of the system was actually “Tinth-Philkra.” Eventually the new name stuck.

Of course, it took years for the new name to stick, so Jevée is either way ahead of the curve on nomenclatural error, or she can see into the future and has decided to drop some hints as to how it’ll turn out.

(Now you know that the star system survives our heroes’ upcoming adventures in it. Sorry to spoil the ending.)





Note: The "non-lethal Goober rounds" Kevyn speaks of are nanomotile in nature, and have a sort of communal synthetic intelligence. Which is to say a target hit by enough goober fire becomes embedded in a solidifying mass of something dumb. The stuff is just smart enough not to kill the target, migrating away from buildups of respiratory gases. This has led to numerous escape attempts by targets who think that by blowing on the goober-goo they'll somehow convince it to let go. It never works, and it never ceases to amuse law-enforcement officers. Goober-goo may be dumb, but it's not THAT dumb.

The nanomotile nature of goober-goo ensures not only target immobility, but can also promote maximum discomfort. Green-mod 30 will give wedgies, and it's impolite to talk about what green-mod 19 will do.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE HUMANS BURST ONTO THE GALACTIC SCENE, THE ENIRETHS UNDERTOOK THEIR SECOND MOST AMBITIOUS ENGINEERING PROJECT, AND MOVED THREE PLANETS INTO A SINGLE ROSETTE ORBIT.

THE TINTH-PHILKRA ROSETTE, COMPRISED OF ONE NATURAL WORLD AND TWO HABITFORMED WORLDS, EVENTUALLY TRIPLED THE SIZE OF THE ENIRETH BIOSPHERE, BUT NOT BEFORE CREATING A SMALL TIDE PROBLEM.

THE PHRASE "SMALL TIDE PROBLEM" IS AN ENIRETH EPITHET. THE ECOLOGICAL DISASTER ON THEIR NATURAL HOMEWORLD LED TO THEIR MOST AMBITIOUS ENGINEERING PROJECT... EVACUATION.

THE FIRST HUMAN TOURIST IN THE TINTH-PHILKRA SYSTEM TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE MAGNIFICENT CLUSTER OF ARKS AND SAID "OOH! IS IT A COMMERCIAL FOR SUBWAY?"

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A THOUSAND YEARS LATER THERE ARE HUMANS LIVING THROUGHOUT THE 'SANDWICHES,' AND THEY ARE UNIFORMLY-BUT-(MOSTLY)-QUIETLY RESENTED BY THE NATIVES.

SANDWICH-NESS ASIDE, OUR HEROES HAVE A JOB TO DO ON ONE OF THESE ARKS...

The target is adjacent to a university library, which means public access all the way to the front door.

U.N.S. military intelligence assures us that security is negligible. The most dangerous thing we'll face is frat boys.

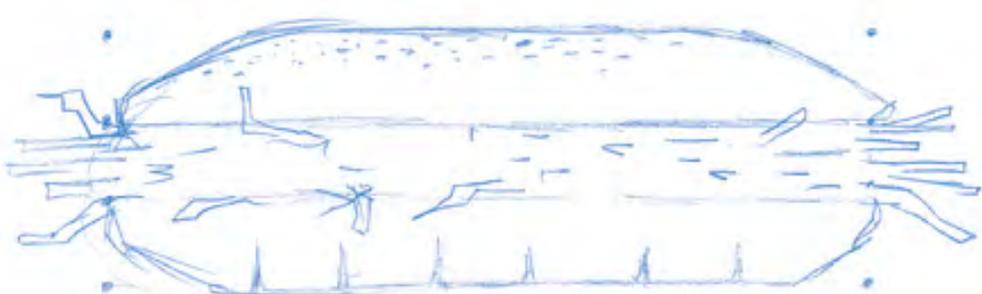
It's really unlikely we'll run into them in a library, if you know what I mean.



Of course, who'd expect to run into mercenaries in a library, right?

IT LOOKS LIKE A BIG SANDWICH.

I'm hungry. Who wants sandwiches?



Note: The word "Tinth" means "sky-zoo," which can be roughly translated into Galstandard West as "ark" with little loss of meaning. Translating it as "really big sandwich, like the kind you'd bring to a frat party on an eight-foot long plank" would be less accurate, and quite a bit more likely to get you a knuckle sandwich for your trouble.

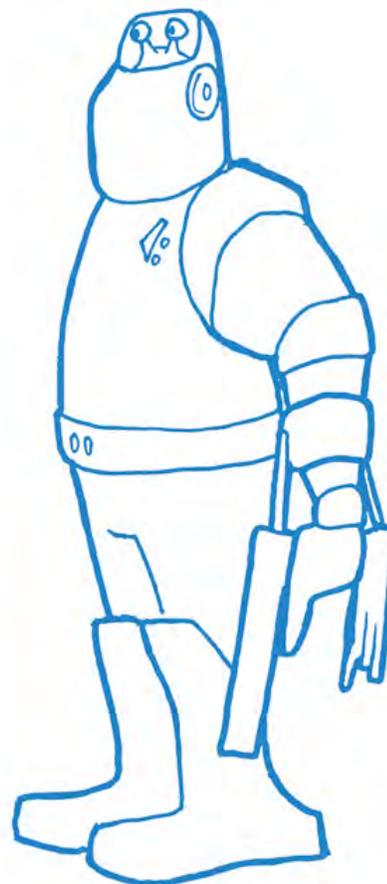
Fortunately for translators everywhere, the Enireth do have knuckles.



Note: Humans who have dreams in which they fly sometimes fantasize about being angels, or supermen, their reasoning being that we dream of flying because we are somehow destined to.

Some Enireth who have similar dreams postulate that their ancient evolutionary ancestors must have been able to fly. They point at artifactual 'blips' in the fossil record, and suggest that flight was abandoned in favor of more robust body structures. Naturally, they're ridiculed by the Enireth scientific community at large, who would look at the colorful evolutionary diagram above with disdain at best.

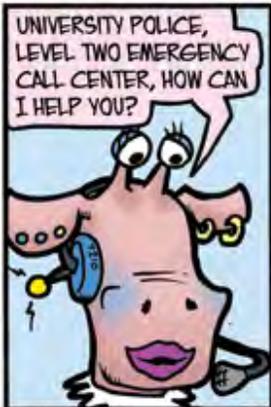
They're all wrong. Humans and Enireth both dream of flight for the same reasons: parents irresponsibly swing impressionable infants around, burning feelings of vertigo into barely-post-embryonic neural structures. The 'dreams' are nothing more than post-traumatic stress, and the fact that the Enireth DID evolve from what is essentially a flying toad has nothing to do with it. Those little flying toads did not have enough brain to properly appreciate flying, much less remember it, as evidenced by the fact that they gave it up so that they could be fat instead.







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Note: The state of higher education being what it is, the symbols "puddy," "sphat," and "bilger" mean about as much to Galstandard-speaking frat boys as random greek letters mean to 21st-century college students.

In the ancient Enireth script, "puddy" is a glyph of a giant pseudo-primate, and one connotation is "nobility". The "sphat" glyph is a sleek fish, commonly synonymous with grace. A "bilger" is a pack animal, and one of the symbols of Enireth politics, denoting the diligence of the working class.

Naturally, the antics of the "noble, graceful worker" fraternity quickly led people to use alternate meanings for the symbols. It took very little stretching for them to come up with "big, drunken asses."





Note: 21st-century readers may be appalled to learn that not only is racial profiling prevalent in certain 31st-century societies, it's both legal and encouraged. Of course, the definition of "race" has changed. While it may be unfair to pre-judge or profile a human based on the color of his or her skin, it's quite fair to pre-judge or profile a person based on whether or not he or she is actually human to begin with.

The challenge, of course, lies in the fact that the galaxy has over 200,000 "races" of sophont. Fortunately only a few will be found in any given place, so law enforcement officers don't need to try to remember which ones exhale ammonia and which ones are intoxicated by it. They need only pay attention to which people in this crowd don't look like most of their citizens, and then decide which of those are acting the least like tourists.



Note: Throughout history there have been countless "dangerous books," tomes whose contents have empowered, enabled, or armed the reader. None were quite so dangerous as the first (and only) printing of Hallmark's Scratch n' Sniff edition of the *Chemical Reference Supplement to the Anarchist's Cookbook*. After all, while it's important to be able to identify various chemicals by smelling them, it's even more important that some of these chemicals not be inadvertently mixed under the unwary reader's fingernail.



