

# *Schlock* *Mercenary*

THE TERAPORT WARS



With an introduction by  
Brandon Sanderson

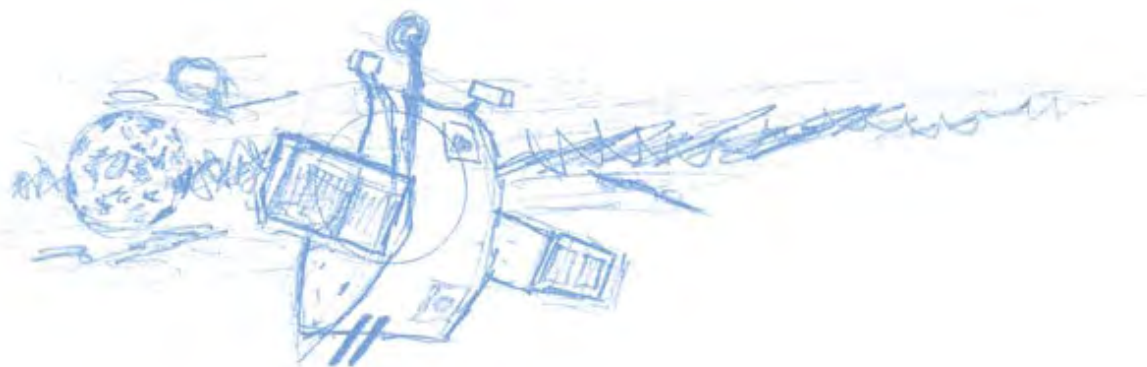
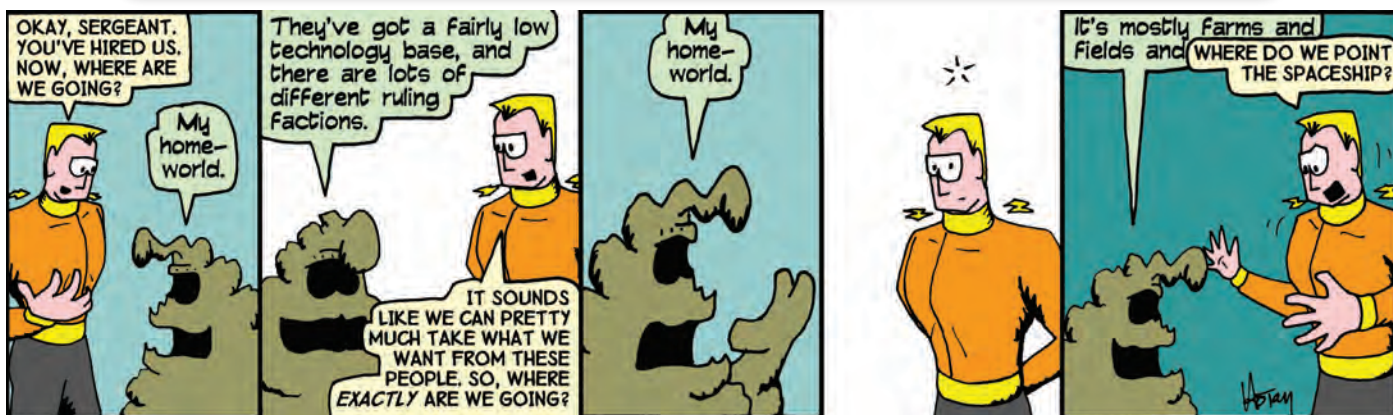
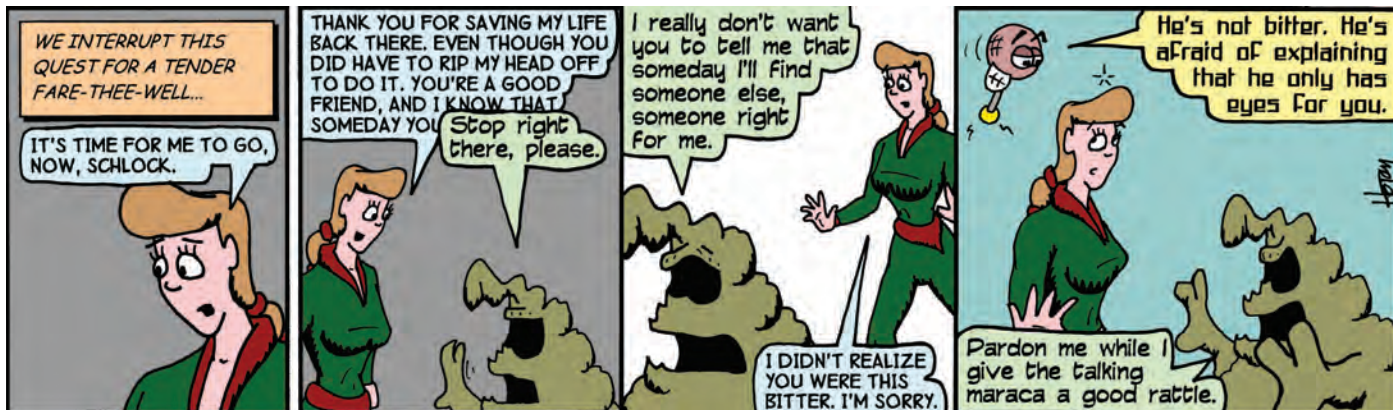
By  
**Howard Tayler**



# Schlock Mercenary









BEFORE OUR HEROES CAN DEPART ON THEIR QUEST, THEY NEED TO KNOW WHICH WAY THEY'RE GOING...

SCHLOCK, HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY NOT KNOW WHERE YOUR HOMEWORLD IS?

Hey, when I left, I wasn't doing the driving, okay?

CAPTAIN, I SUGGEST WE LET THE SERGEANT TELL US EVERYTHING HE CAN REMEMBER. I'LL THEN CROSS-REFERENCE ALL DATA POINTS WITH THE PUBLIC WORMGATE NETWORK.

EXCELLENT SUGGESTION, PETEY. SCHLOCK, TELL US A STORY.

IT'S STORYTIME! YIPEEE!!

# Schlock Mercenary

Well, where I come from there is only one space-port, and my people don't have much to do with it.

In fact, mostly we ignore it. And the smugglers, pirates, and expatriates who fly ships onto and off of my world mostly ignore us. We're just part of the landscape.

Without fail, he's never heard from again. Of course, amorph parents are quick to point that out to wayward youngsters.

Once in a while, an enterprising amorph will decide he wants 'off this rock,' and he'll stow away.

So there I was, with what passes for a migraine among humans. And amnesia. All I knew was that I was being hunted.

I remembered a few things, but it wasn't clear. Like how maybe I'd killed a fellow amorph for the eyes I was using.

...or how there was this unioic pirate looking for an amorph for his crew.

Well, he found me... or I found him. And three worm-jumps later our ship had a hole in it, and I was being shipped off to some circus.

OOOH, THAT TALE IS JUST CHOCK-FULL OF USEFUL STAR MAPS, NOW ISN'T IT?

Artificial intelligence. Real sarcasm. It's so nice to be back on board.

Note: The full story of Schlock's circus adventures can be found in *Schlock Mercenary: Under New Management* and *Schlock Mercenary: The Blackness Between*.

IF YOU COULD REMEMBER SOMETHING ELSE ABOUT YOUR TRIP, I MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP.

At this point, you know everything I do.

AND IT'S TAKING AN IMMEASURABLY SMALL PERCENTAGE OF A FRACTION OF...

...LESS THAN A QUARTER SMIDGEN OF A TINY BIT OF THE LEFTMOST...

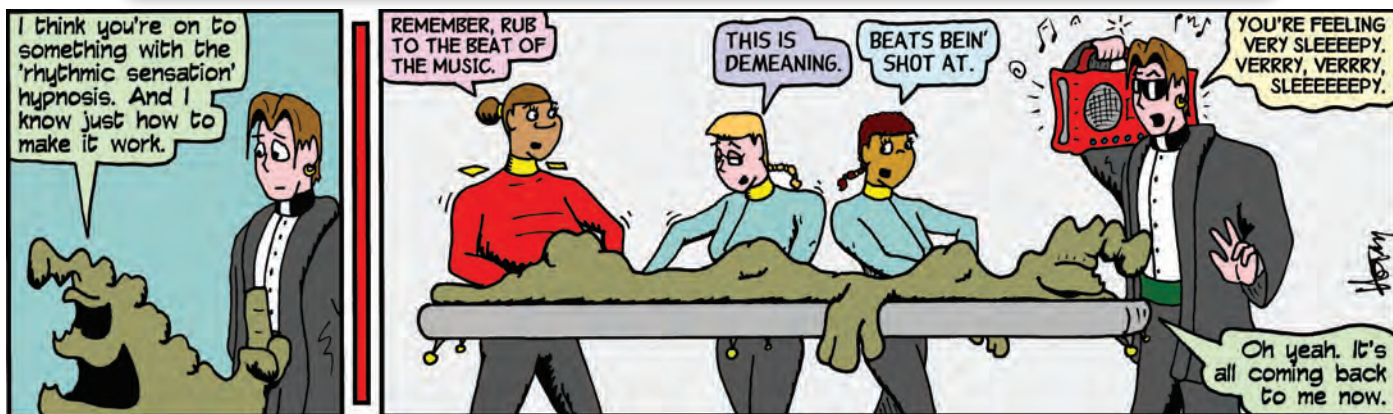
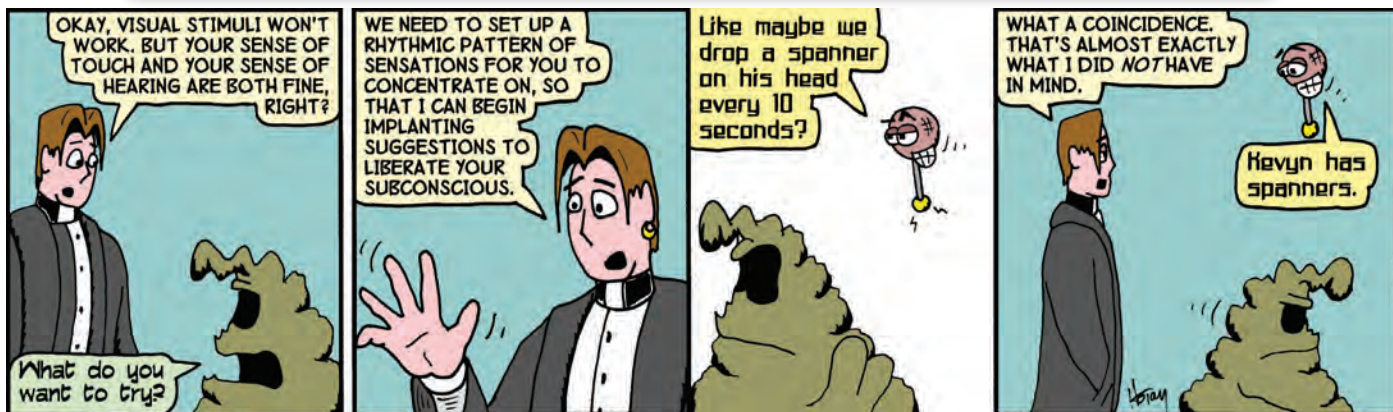
...SUBSYSTEM OF THE... WHAT?

Finish the joke already.

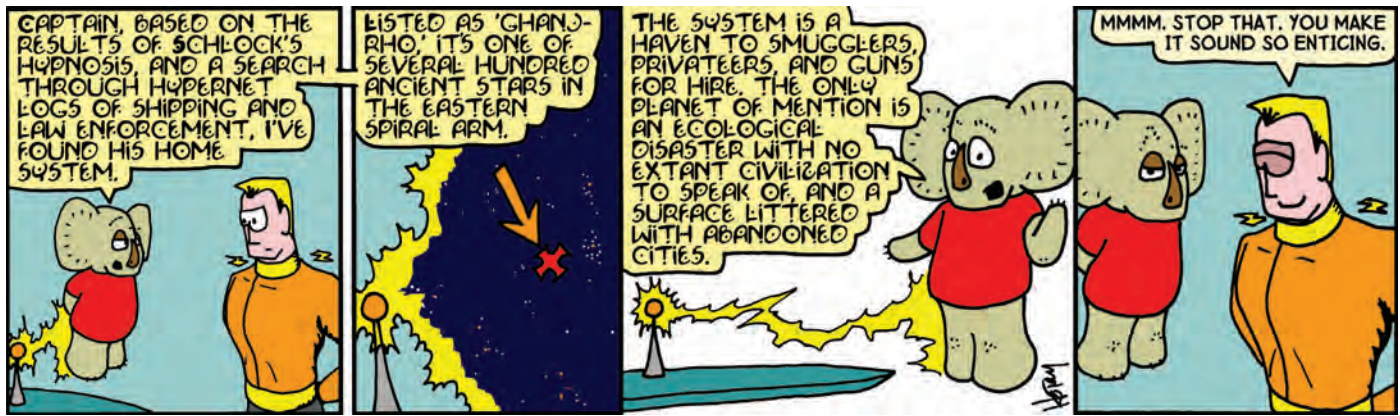
Hah. You may know more than I do, but I can still ruin your delivery.











Note: For those interested in the relevant details, Schlock was able (under hypnosis) to clearly describe the rescue vessel that pulled him from the holed pirate craft he was aboard. That description pegged the ship as belonging to the government of the *Bhaan-triit*, whose enforcement logs could then be searched for records of the event. This led to the discovery of the registry (forged, but still trackable) of the pirate craft, which was tracked back two jumps to the *Uuna-Uuna-g'Thwap* system. No prior jump was recorded, but that system's wormgate is a serial gate rather than a hub gate, and is only tuned for "upstream" and "downstream" travel, which narrowed the search for the source of the original jump to two possible systems in the serial gate sequence. The upstream (away from the galactic core) system, *Parhchintofleekybok*, was one the pirate craft must have traveled through to get to *Uuna-Uuna-g'Thwap*, since its gate was also serial, and *Parhchintofleekybok* was too heavily developed to match Schlock's story. Thus, three jumps in from the hub system of *Bhaan-triit*, Petey identified *Ghanj-Rho* as Schlock's point of origin.

So now you know. Aren't you glad you asked?

Arist Commentary:

Uniocs are a fun race to draw because they are so inherently funny. Who wouldn't laugh at the one big eye and two hovering eyebrows? When I needed pirates for the Quest for Second Sight storyline, I picked uniocs because putting an eye patch on one is hilarious.





THE MIGHTY MERCENARY WARSHIP 'POST-DATED CHECK LOAN' RIPS UNCOUNTED TERABILLIONS OF HOLES IN THE FABRIC OF SPACE, SMASHES ITSELF INTO PACKETS OF SINGULARIC GRAVITY, AND SHOVES ITSELF THROUGH THE HOLES LIKE OVER-COOKED SPAGHETTI THROUGH A COLANDER.

# TERAPORT

THE PROCESS TAKES JUST OVER SIX SECONDS, AND WOULD SOUND LIKE A COFFEE MACHINE PASSING AN ALUMINUM BASEBALL BAT IF THERE WERE ANY ATMOSPHERE TO CARRY THE SOUND.

THIS NOW RAISES AN INTERESTING QUESTION: "IF A COFFEE MACHINE PASSES A BASEBALL BAT IN THE FOREST, AND THE ONLY ONE TO SEE IT HAPPEN IS A MIME, WHAT DOES HE SAY TO THE POLICE?"

NATURALLY THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH OUR STORY, AS THERE ARE NO POLICE HERE.

## Schlock Mercenary

WELL, SERGEANT, WE'RE HERE. WHERE DO WE FIND MORE EYES FOR YOU?

There's a ridge of cliffs east of a space-port. On the other side of that there's a forest where my people grow fresh eyes.

I BELIEVE I'VE FOUND THE AREA YOU'RE LOOKING FOR. IT'S IN A HIGH VALLEY WITH A CRATER LAKE ABOVE IT?

That's the place. Get me down there, and I'll have a new pair of eyes in ten minutes.

EXCEPT THAT THE AREA SEEMS TO BE SHORT EXACTLY ONE FOREST.

I'VE FOUND A LOVELY PATCH OF SCORCHED WASTELAND FOR YOU, THOUGH... LOTS OF NICE ASH IN THE SOIL.

YOU GROW THEM? WHAT... ON TREES?

SERGEANT, THE MISSION PROFILE HAS CHANGED.

How? We just have to find *where* they're harvesting eyes first. No big deal. Find 'em, steal some, we're done.

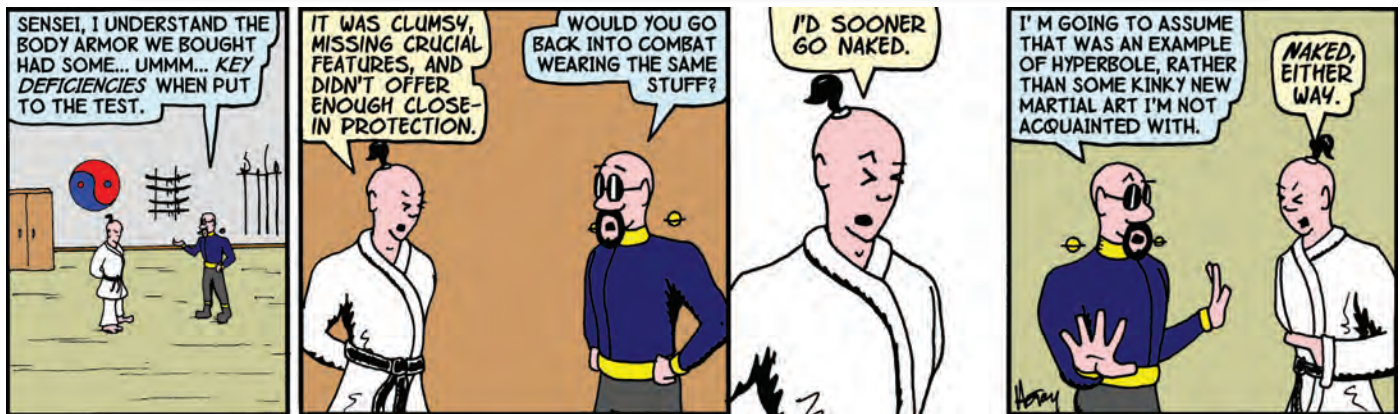
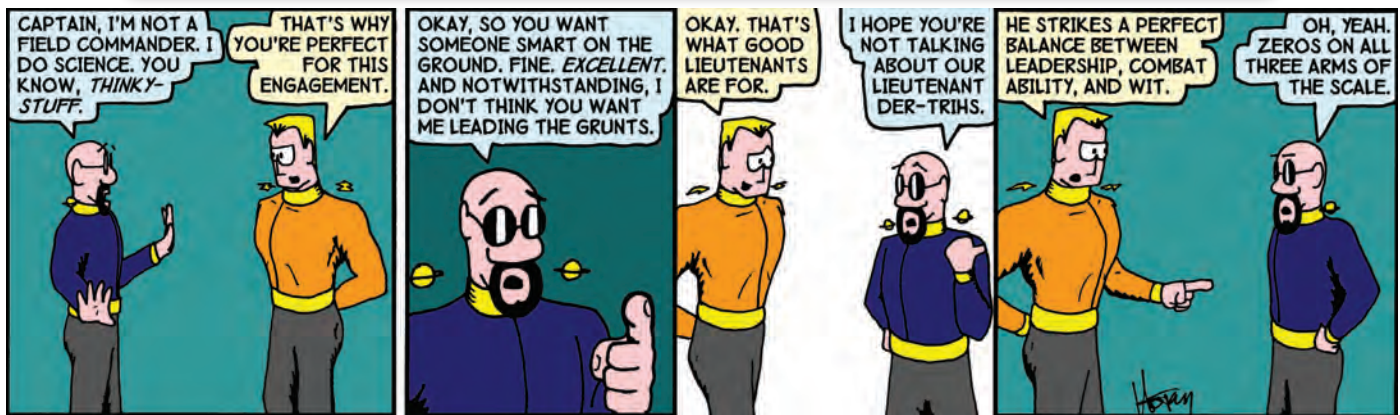
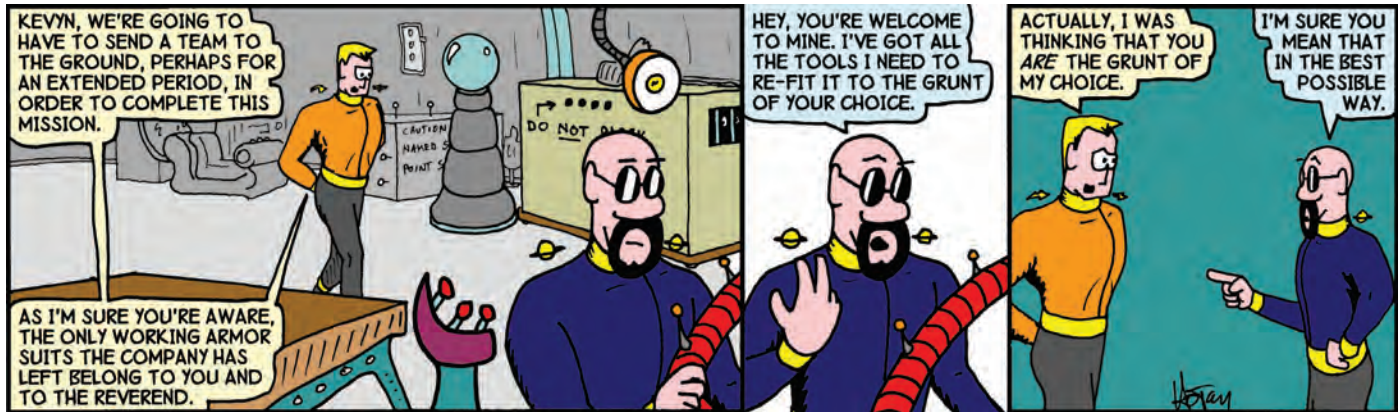
ORIGINALLY WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO FIND THEM FROM ORBIT, REMEMBER?

NOW WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO SCOPE THINGS OUT FROM A BIT CLOSER IN. LIKE, ON THE GROUND.

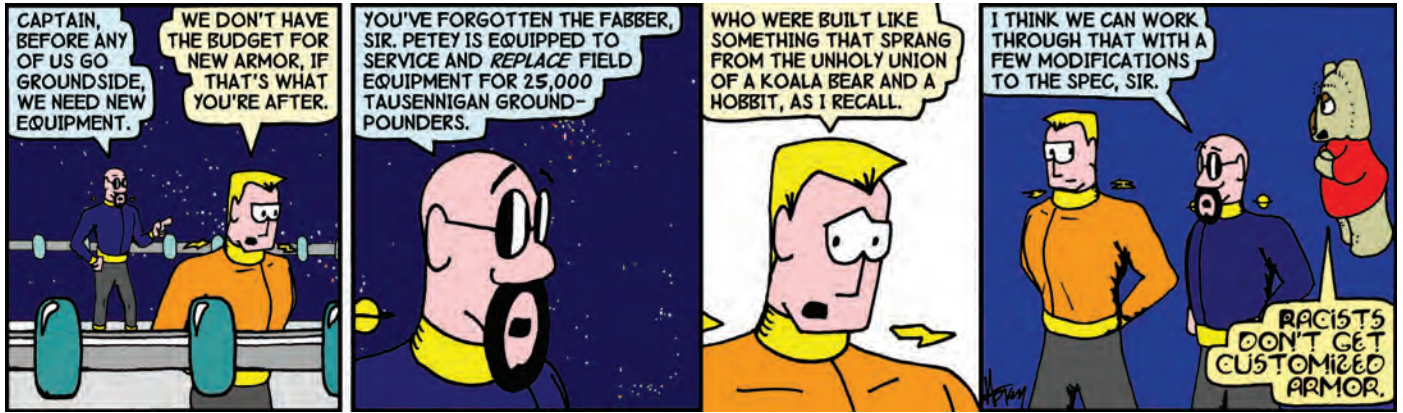
Are you worried about sending troops into harm's way?

NO. I'M WORRIED THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE TO DO SOME SERIOUS THINKING DOWN THERE, AND THAT'S NOT WHERE THEY'RE STRONGEST.







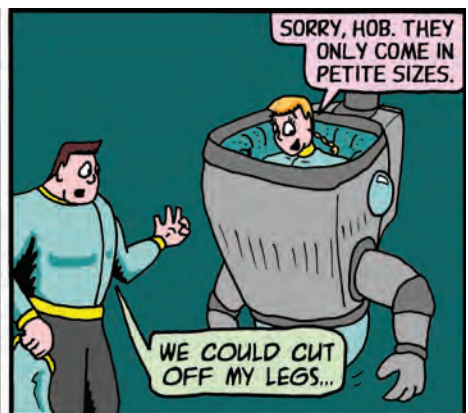
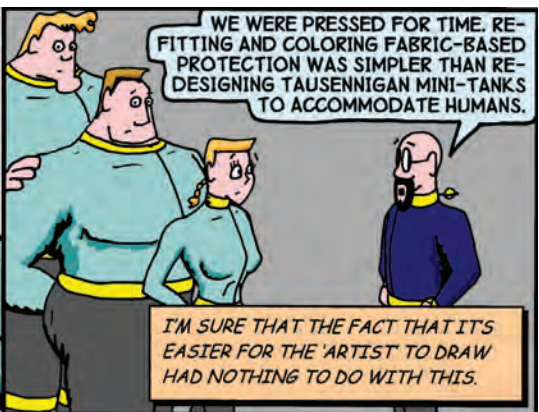
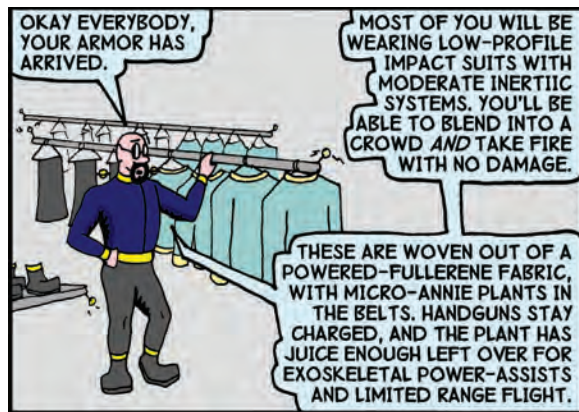
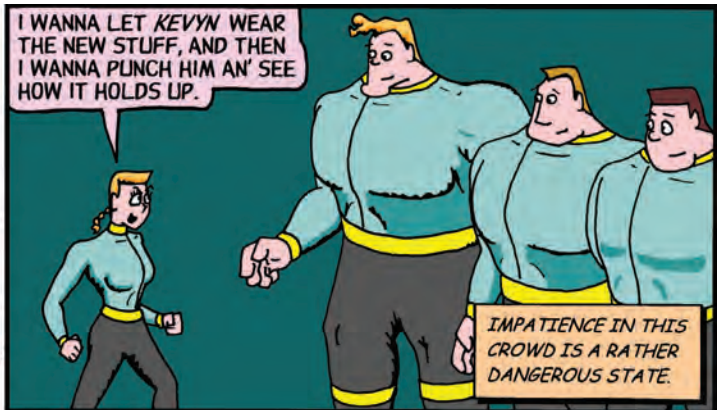
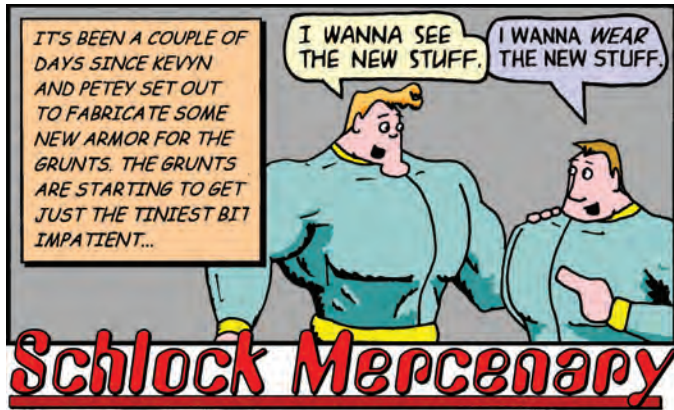


Note: It may surprise some readers to learn how well-read Captain Tagon is. After all, while some images may be part of the collective 'common knowledge,' not everybody knows what a koala looks like.



Artist commentary:  
 I don't like working with colored pencils. The result always looks like crayon, only without the childlike innocence of crayon work. This probably means I'm doing it wrong, and is just one of the reasons the comic is colored digitally.

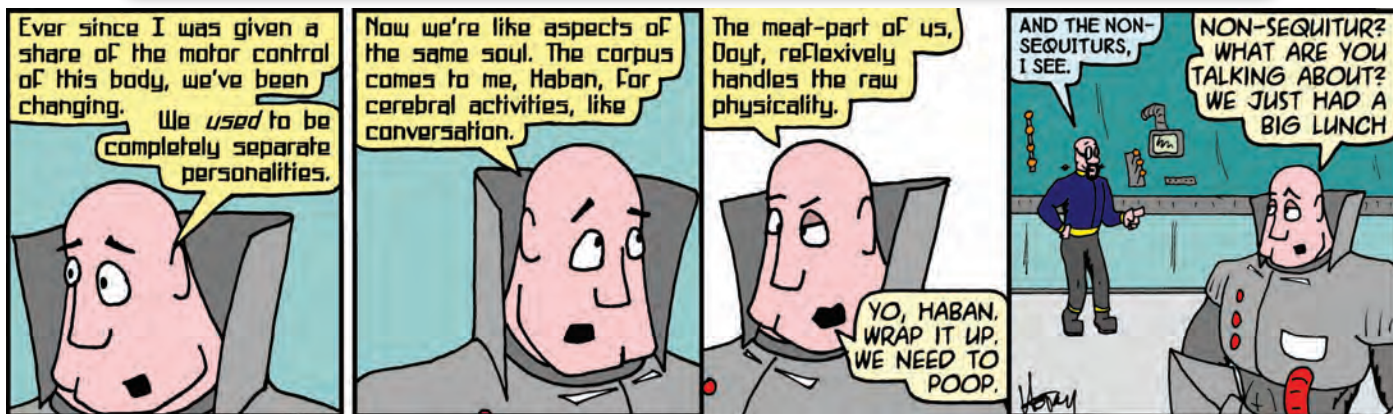
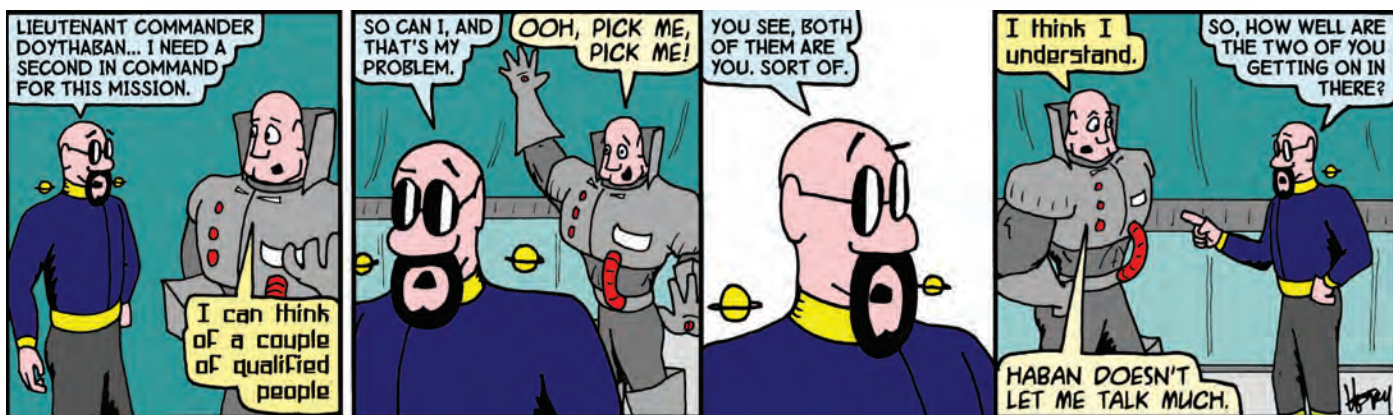
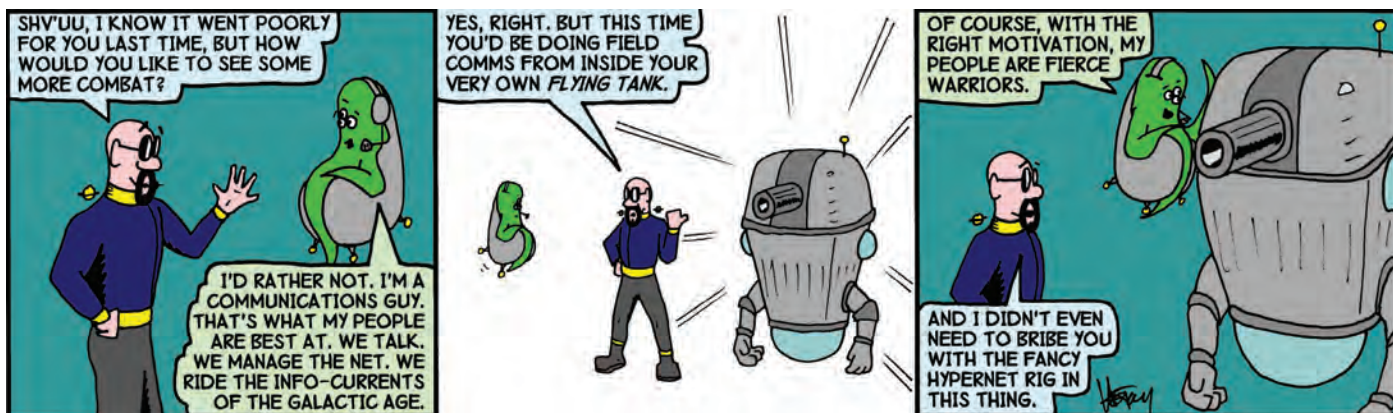




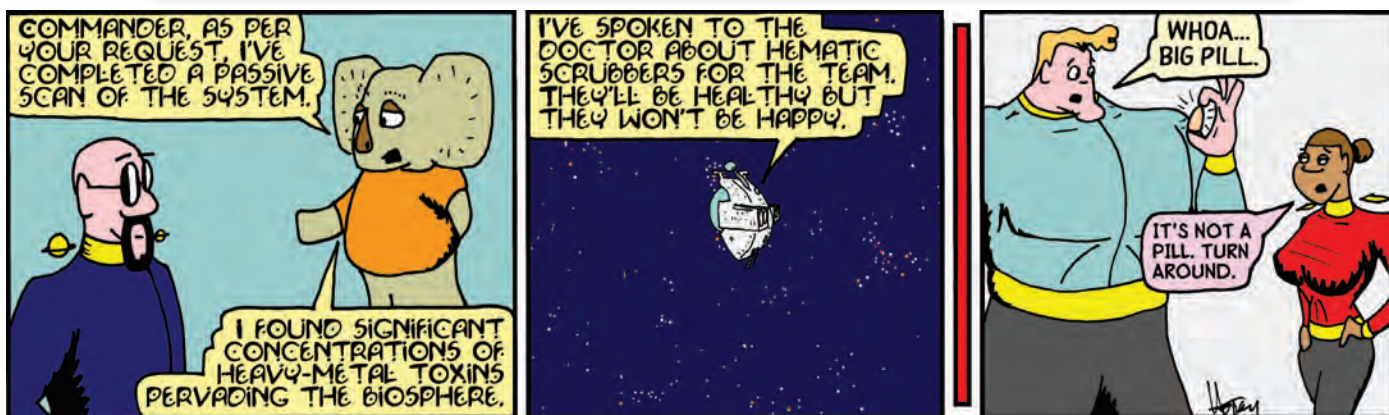
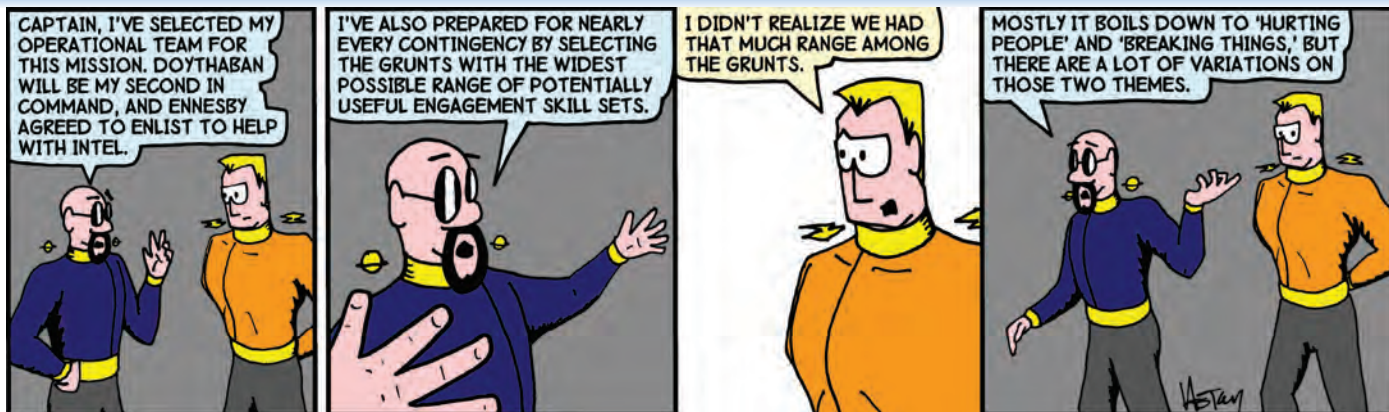
Note: The Tausennigan mini-tanks Petey has blueprints for are made for Tausennigan Ob'enn soldiers, most of whom are between 1 and 1.5 meters tall. Elf is only about 4 centimeters taller than that, and she's slender, so the only thing that needed re-working in the design was some of the interfaces. The 'tanks can double as dog-fighters, providing both air-cover and ground support. They are moderately stealthy (when parked... there's nothing stealthy about a full-sphere grav shield) and can dump waste heat with 99.99% efficiency through the weapons systems. Armed with energy weapons, mass-slingers, and a solid supply of smart munitions, these things can kick unholy quantities of ponderous butt. They just can't carry pilots with ponderous butts.



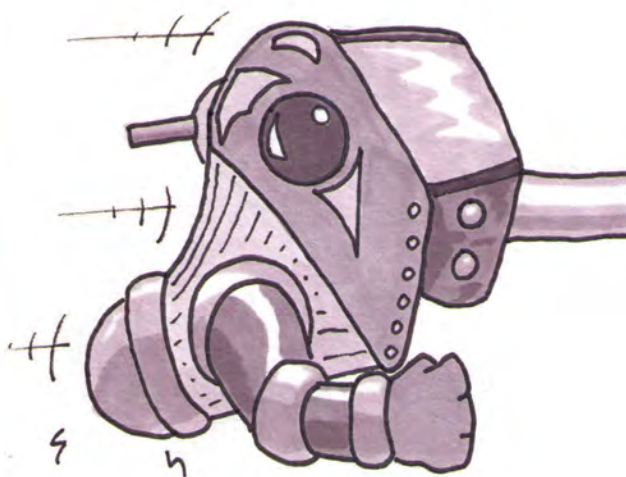




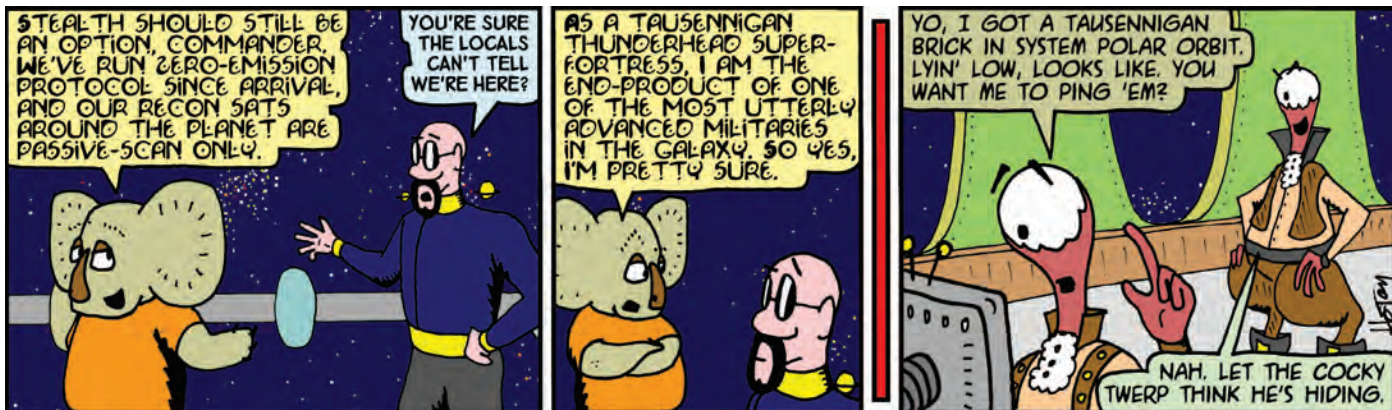
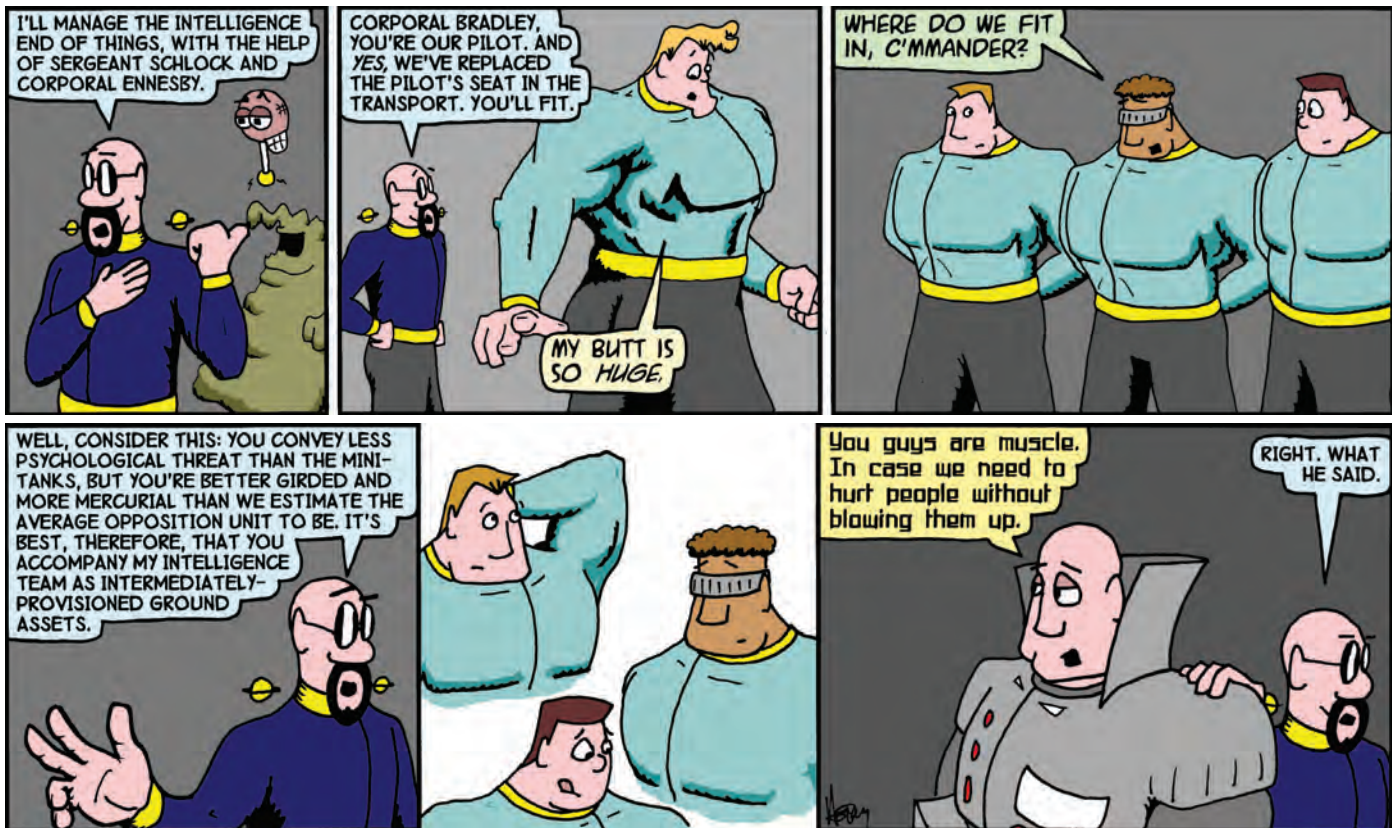
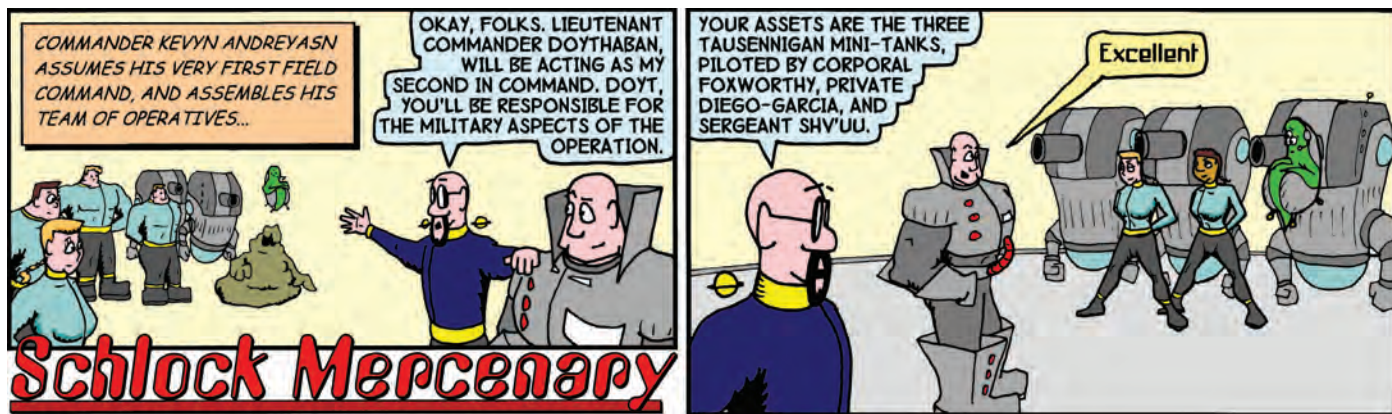




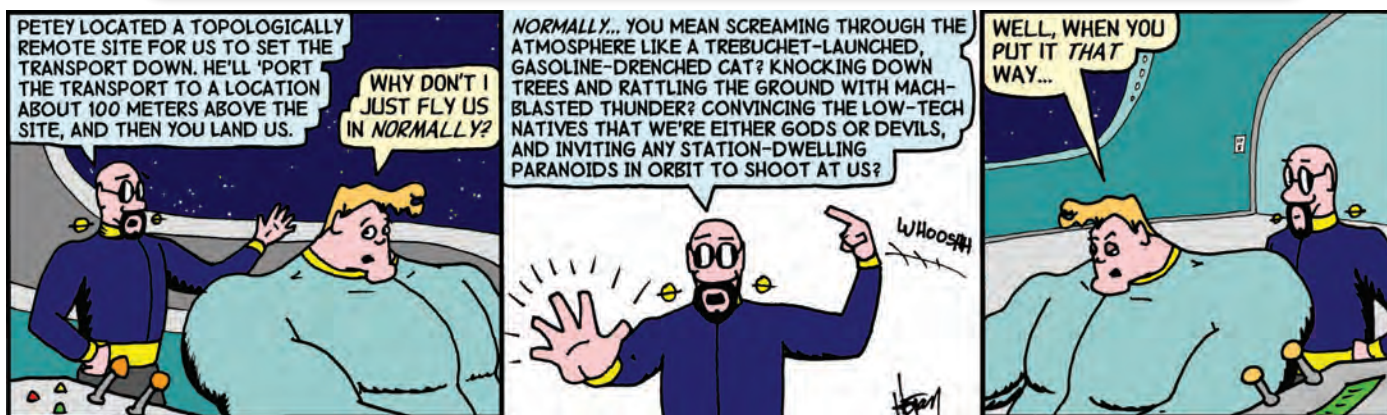
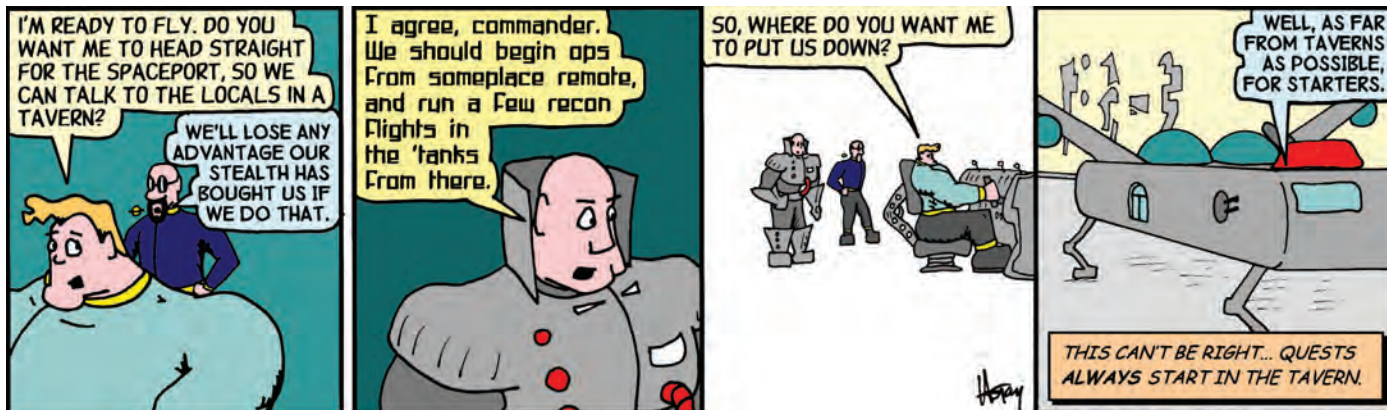
Note: A hematic scrubber processes blood at the gastrointestinal interfaces and passes the neutrally-wrapped toxins into the fecal system for disposal. Half the point of a hematic scrubber is to keep you healthy. The other half of the point is to remind you that you should not put down roots here. This is accomplished by discouraging the patient from sitting for an extended period.





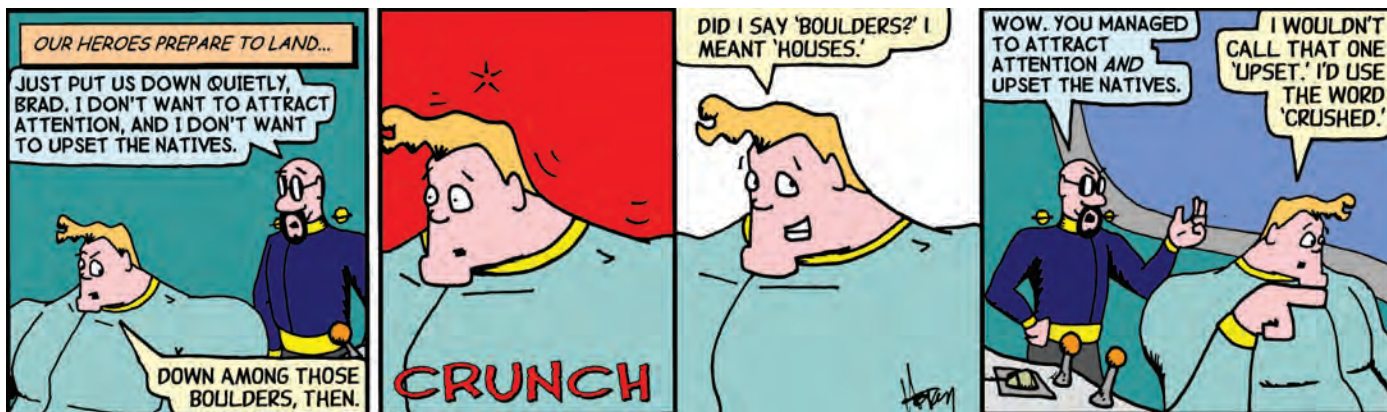




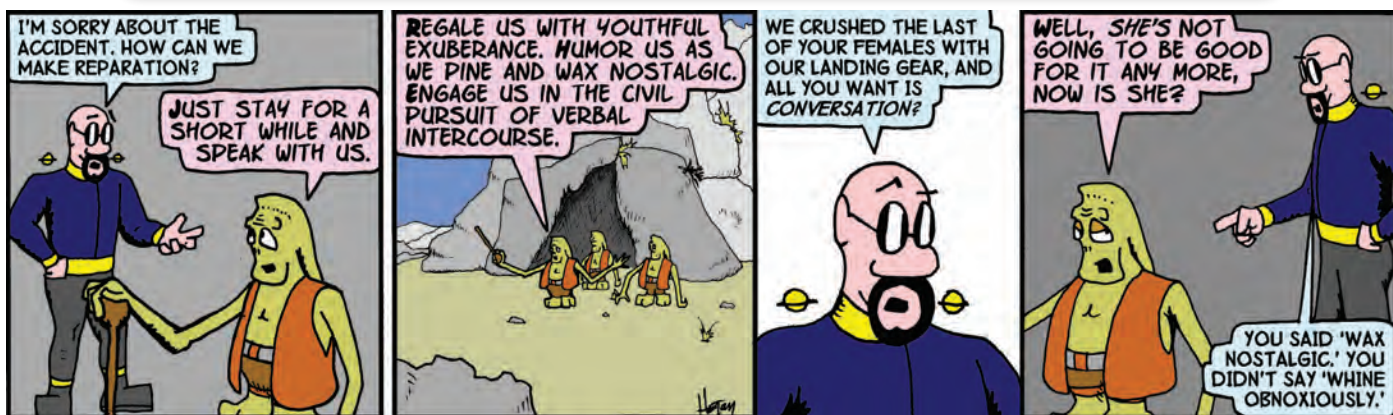
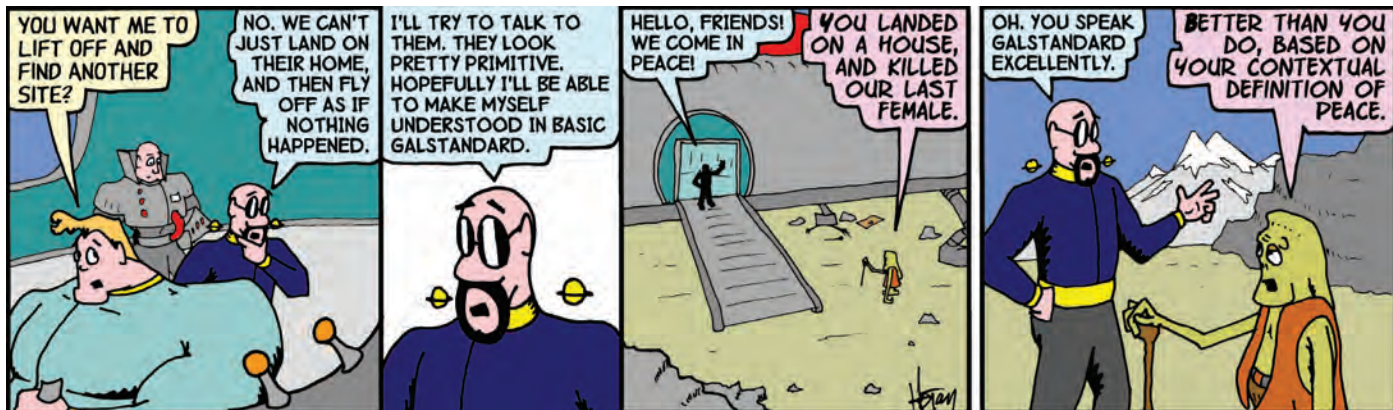


Note: One may wonder what uses are found for gasoline, a messy source of chemical energy, in an economy where far more advanced power sources are widely available.

Contextually, it would appear to have at least anecdotal use in relation to cats.

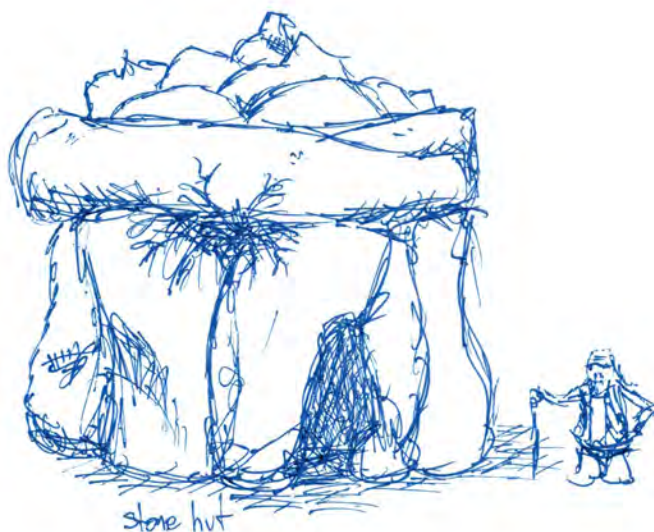
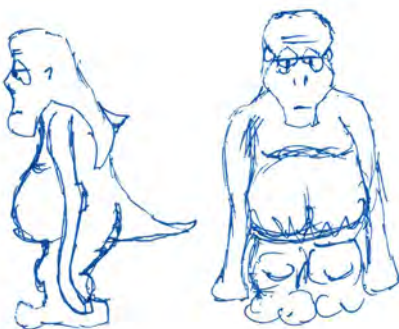






Artist commentary:

When I designed the Bradicator I was shooting for "wrinkly," "old," and "short," but I didn't want them to look like Yoda. This was solved by leaving off their ears. Also, I'm not sure the tail in this sketch ever made it to the final design. It's possible that it falls off with extreme old age.





HIGH IN THE CRAGS OF AN ANCIENT RANGE OF MOUNTAINS, OUR HEROES HAVE FOUND THE LAST MEMBERS OF A DYING ALIEN RACE. THIS CAN MEAN ONLY ONE THING... IT'S TIME FOR SOME SERIOUS PLOT EXPOSITION.

WE WERE THE FIRST INTELLIGENT LIFE TO EVOLVE HERE. OUR CIVILIZATION WAS GRAND, BUT FELL A LONG, LONG TIME AGO.

WE CHANGED OUR BIOSPHERE, AND IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE ALL THAT COULD LIVE IN IT WAS US, AND THE THINGS THAT WE BUILT.

THEY ARE OUR ONLY CHILDREN, NOW. THEY HAVE RIGHTFULLY INHERITED THIS WORLD, AND WE WELCOME THEM TO IT.

# Schlock Mercenary

WHO ARE YOUR CHILDREN? WHO ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

WHY, THE AMORPHS, OF COURSE. LIKE YOUR FRIEND HERE.

You mean I'm artificial? I'm like... like...

Like me?

Kill me now.

'YOUR KIND BEGAN AS SELF-REPAIRING DISTRIBUTED STORAGE SYSTEMS FOR OUR SUPERCOMPUTERS.'

'WHEN THE CITIES FELL, SOME OF YOU SURVIVED, AND CHANGED JUST ENOUGH TO CONTINUE TO SURVIVE AND EVOLVE.'

YOU ARE NOW AT LEAST A MILLION GENERATIONS REMOVED FROM ANYTHING WE CREATED.

ME PERSONALLY? WHAT DO YOU THINK I LOOK LIKE? SOME KIND OF AN ENGINEER?

ACTUALLY, WHAT I THOUGHT WAS THAT YOU LOOKED REALLY, REALLY OLD.

MEH... YOU YOUNGSTERS, ARE ALWAYS SO CUTE WITH YOUR LITTLE ACCIDENTAL INSULTS.

NO, I DIDN'T CREATE YOU. ENGINEERS DID. I CREATED SOMETHING FAR MORE POWERFUL... THE MARKETING CAMPAIGN THAT MADE YOU PROFITABLE.

YOU CREATED? YOU DON'T MEAN YOU PERSONALLY, DO YOU?

SO HE'S NOT SCHLOCK'S GRANDFATHER. HE'S MORE LIKE A CRAZY UNCLE.

MEETING ANCIENT, NEAR-IMMORTAL ALIENS... SO MANY QUESTIONS TO ASK.

FOR YOU TO BE THAT OLD, YOU'D HAVE TO BE NEARLY IMMORTAL.

WE'RE NOT IMMORTAL, BUT NEITHER DO WE SUFFER FROM MOST OF THE BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF AGING.

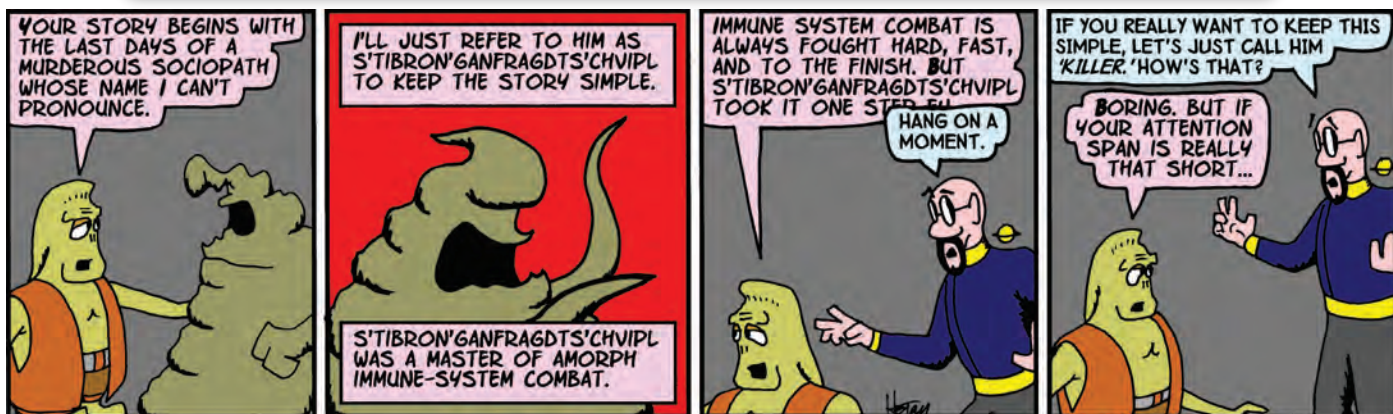
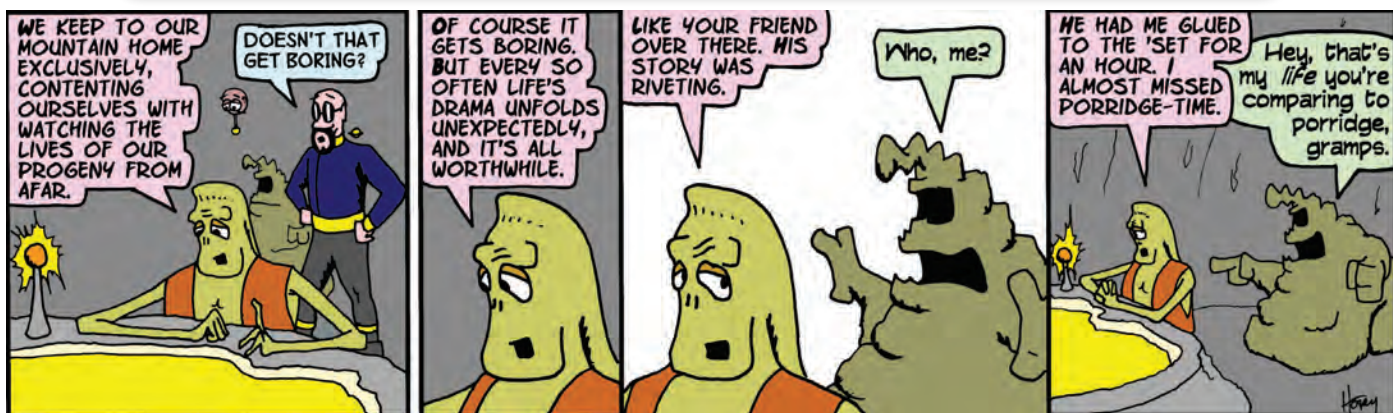
BUT YOU DO SUFFER FROM SOME OF THEM?

THERE ARE ONLY A FEW EFFECTS OF OUR EXTREME OLD AGE. OUR MEMORIES, FOR INSTANCE, ARE NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE.

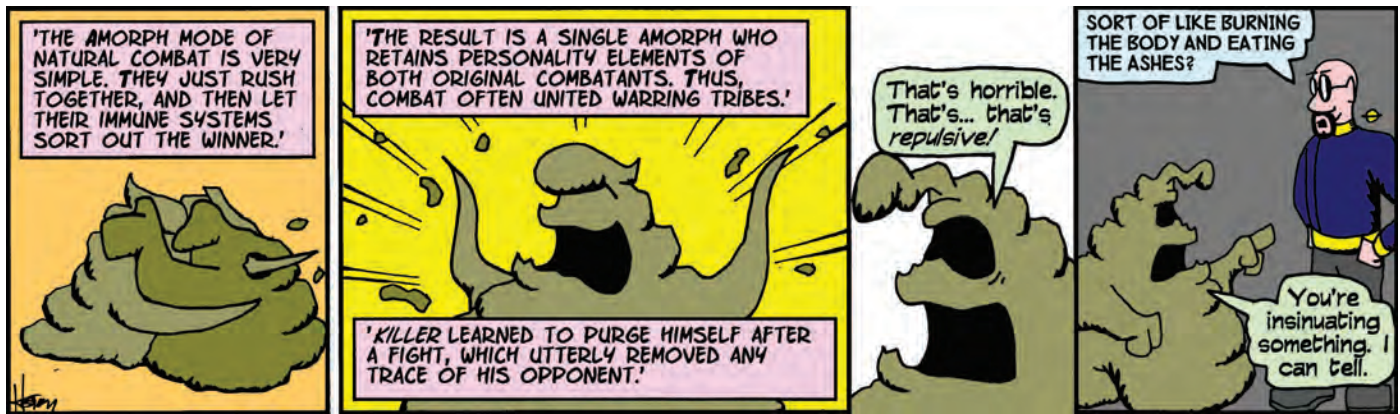
WAIT, LET ME GUESS... YOU'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT THE REST OF THE EFFECTS ARE.

I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN ENOUGH FOR THAT JOKE TO BE FUNNY AGAIN.



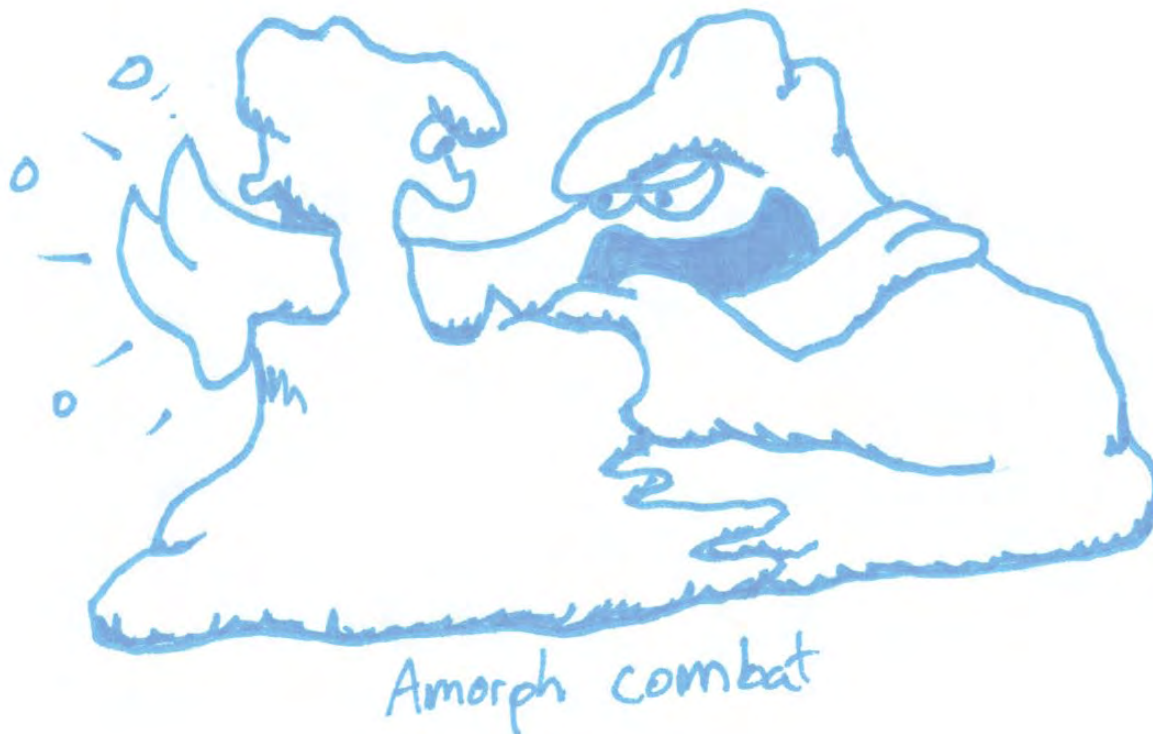






Artist commentary:

Every so often authors have these "ah-HAH!" moments. Discovering that amorphs do battle with secreted chemical weapons was that kind of moment for me. It made a lot more sense than two creatures simply ripping pieces off of each other and trying to throw the bits farther away than the other guy did.





AN ANCIENT ALIEN RELATES A TALE OF TERROR...

KILLER HAD TRULY HONED HIS IMMUNE SYSTEM AS A WEAPON, AND MURDERED COUNTLESS FELLOW-AMORPHS WITH HIS PERVERSE ORGANIC CHEMISTRY. MORE THAN A FEW OF THEM WERE CHAMPIONS, SLAIN TRYING TO PUT AN END TO HIS MENACE.

'A NEW HERO WAS NEEDED. WE'LL CALL HER JANE TO KEEP THINGS NICE AND SIMPLE FOR THE HUMANS IN THE AUDIENCE.'

OKAY, THAT'S JUST UNCALLED FOR.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE, OR MENTIONING THAT'S WHAT I'M DOING?

**Schlock Mercenary**

Get on with the story already.

'JANE WAS A SCIENTIST AMONG HER PRIMITIVE KIND. DAUGHTER OF AN AMORPH AND A HUMAN EXPLORER, SHE

'WHOA, THERE... WHAT WAS SHE AGAIN?'

IF I NEED TO EXPLAIN AMORPH REPRODUCTION TO YOU, WE'RE NEVER GOING TO GET THROUGH THIS.

'I'll tell 'em about the birds and the biomemes later. Make with the storytelling.'

RIGHT. ANYWAY, THIS JANE UNDERSTOOD HER OWN ORGANIC CHEMISTRY VERY WELL, AND WAS THEREFORE UNIQUELY ABLE TO TAKE ON 'KILLER.'

'JANE'S PLAN WAS TO ATTACK KILLER'S MEME-STRUCTURES IN THE OPENING EXCHANGES, USING A SET OF BIOTOXINS LIKELY TO DESTROY HER OWN PERSONALITY AS WELL. SHE WAS A TRUE HERO, KNOWING WITH A COLD CERTAINTY THAT SHE WOULD BE FIGHTING NOT TO THE DEATH, BUT TO TWO DEATHS: HER ENEMY'S, AND HER OWN. HER SACRIFICE WAS TO BE THE STUFF OF LEGENDS.'

'FROM THE OUTSIDE, THE FIGHT DID NOT LOOK LIKE MUCH.'

'THOSE WHO KNEW JANE'S PLAN EXPECTED THE FIGHT TO LEAVE BEHIND A SINGLE LUMP OF INERT, TOXIC AMORPH FLESH. THEY WERE QUITE WRONG.'

WHAT IT LEFT BEHIND WAS YOU.

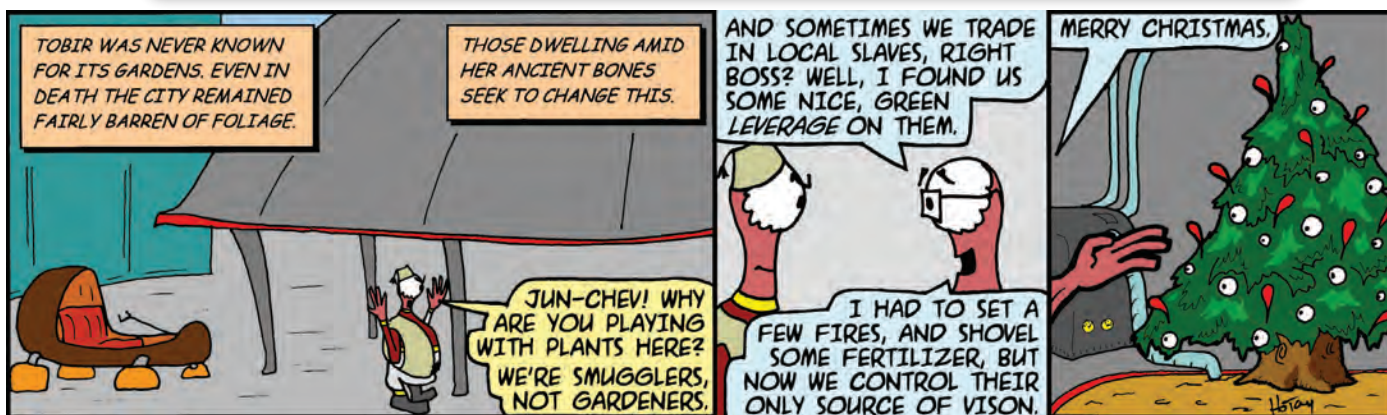
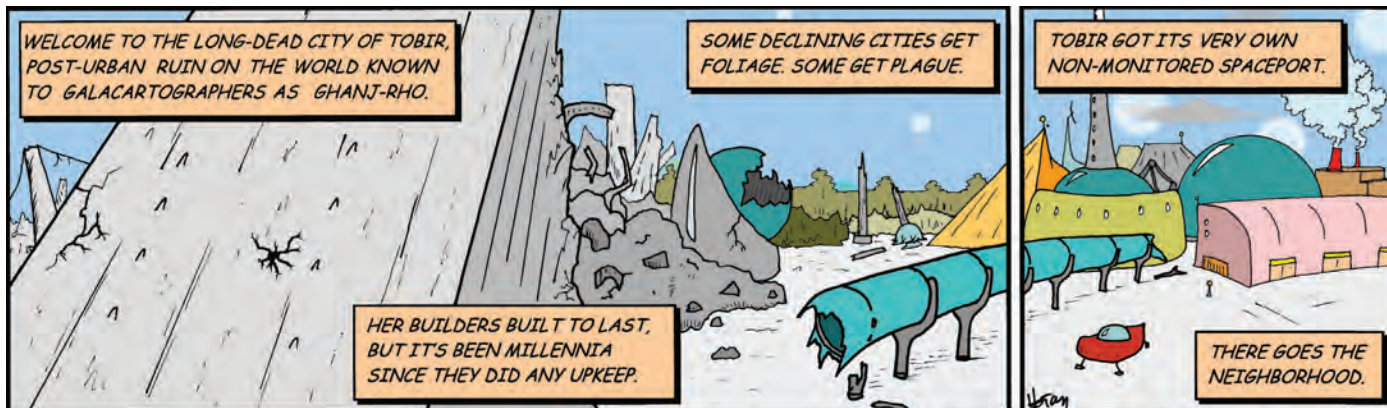
YOU, SCHLOCK, WERE AN ABOMINATION. ADULT THOUGHT, WITH MEMORY-FREE INNOCENCE; ADULT COMMAND OF YOUR FACULTIES, BUT WITHOUT THE MORAL STRUCTURE IMPOSED BY THE PASSAGE THROUGH ADOLESCENCE.

'NATURALLY, THE HATE-CHILD OF THE KILLER AND THE HEROINE HAD TO BE PUT TO DEATH. AND NOT SURPRISINGLY, YOU WERE VERY HARD FOR ANYONE TO CATCH, MUCH LESS KILL. AFTER ALL, YOU WERE BORN OUT OF NOTHING LESS THAN THE RAW, BIO-MOLECULAR ESSENCE OF THE WILL TO SURVIVE.'

I THINK HEARING ABOUT AMORPH SEX RIGHT NOW WOULD BE ANTI-CLIMACTIC.

'SO, WHO'S UP FOR SOME NICE, COLD PORRIDGE?'





Note: Since the epidemic of earthlings burst upon Galactic Culture in the late 21st century (Human Prediaspora Calendar), societies across the breadth and depth of the spiral ancient humans quaintly called the 'Milky Way' have been infected with choice bits of human language, culture, and even religion.

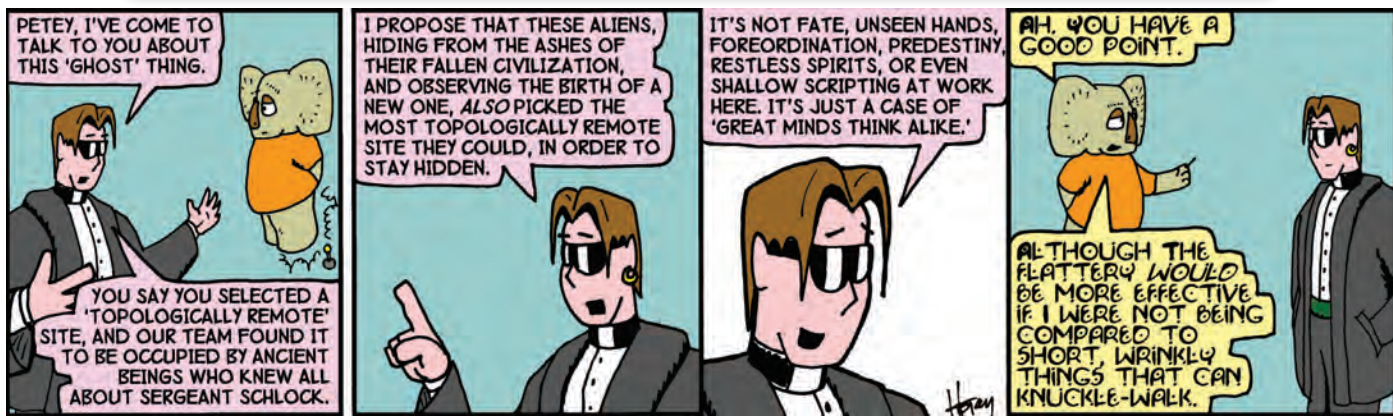
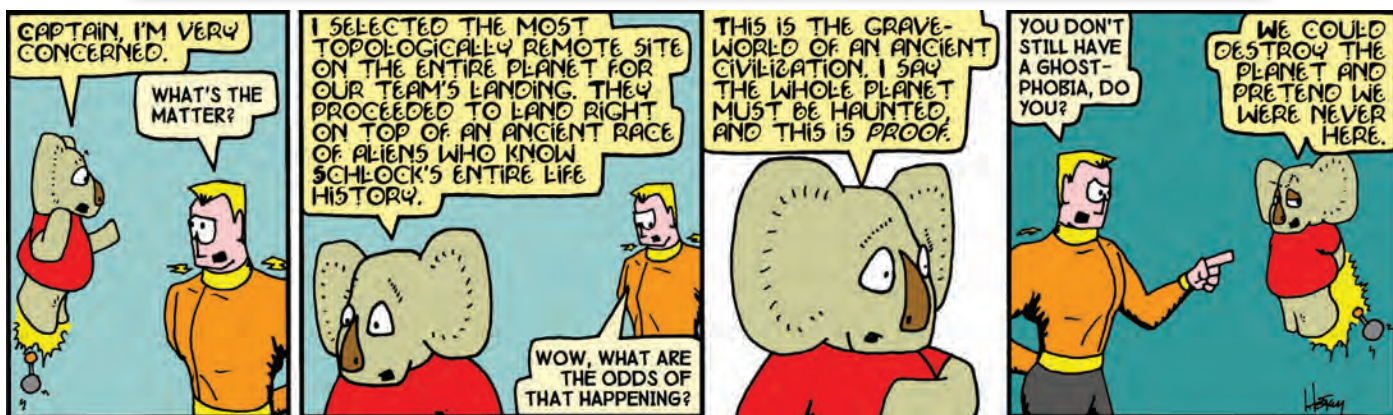
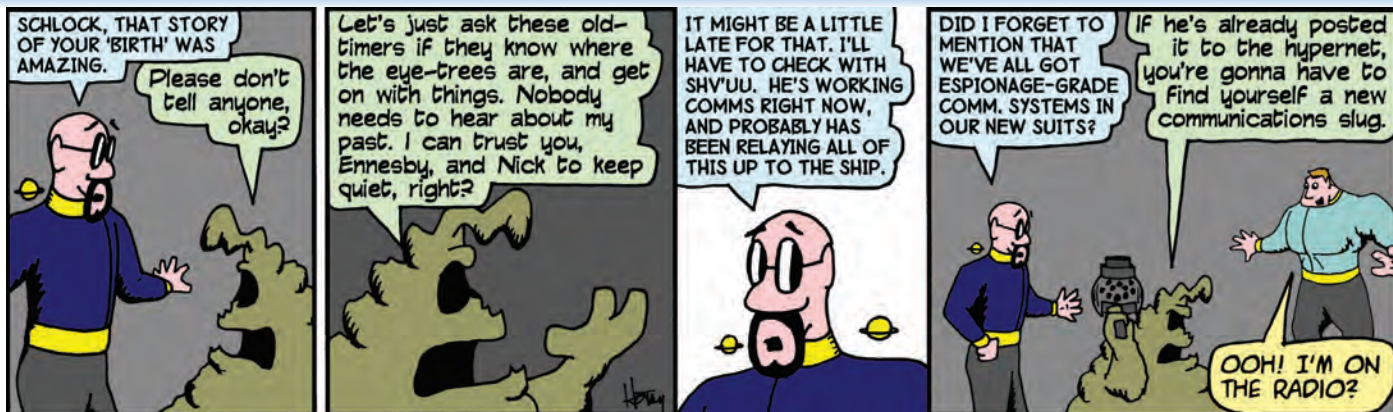
Christmas, unfortunately, stopped being a religious event long, long before the first unioc smuggler celebrated it. Those few religious purists remaining among the humans might claim that galactic culture corrupted the holiday, but most 31st century historians are confident that the fault can be squarely placed on the television producers responsible for 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.'

In most Galactic languages, the expression "Merry Christmas" differs in meaning from the phrase "Look at what I bought for you" in only one way. Idiomatically, it means "Look at what I bought for you" with the unspoken-but-fully-expressed sentiment "No, you may not have the receipt."



Ghanj-Rho, Tobir Spaceport







THUS FAR... OUR HEROES HAVE LEARNED WHERE SCHLOCK CAME FROM, AND HAVE BEEN TREATED TO A SURPRISINGLY TASTY CAVE-PORRIDGE. BUT THEY DON'T YET HAVE THE INFORMATION THEY CAME FOR: THE LOCATION OF A SURVIVING GROVE OF EYE-TREES. THE OLD GROVE HAS BEEN REDUCED TO A CHARRED WASTE, VOID OF PROPER CLUES.

IF YOU'VE BEEN WATCHING the amorph tribes remotely, then you must know where they are growing eyes now.

AH, YES. I COULDN'T HELP BUT NOTICE THAT YOU ARE MISSING YOUR OWN CHARMINGLY MISMATCHED PAIR.

I EXPECT THERE TO BE A GOOD STORY BEHIND HOW YOU LOST YOUR EYES. TELL IT TO ME, AND I'LL TELL YOU WHERE YOU CAN FIND MORE.

# Schlock Mercenary

OR IF YOU'D LIKE ME TO GO FIRST, I CAN DO THAT.

Good call.

OMMINOUS HUMMMMM

THE FOREIGNERS FROM THE SPACE-PORT UPROOTED AND TRANSPLANTED A FEW TREES, AND THEN BURNT EVERY EYE-FOREST THEY COULD FIND. THE ONLY TREES LEFT ARE HIDDEN SOMEWHERE IN THE CITY OF TOBIR.

TOBIR... THAT'S THE RUIN WITH THE SHINY SPACE-PORT IN THE MIDDLE?

RIGHT. AND I CAN JUST TAKE A RAIN-CHECK ON THAT STORY OF YOURS.

OKAY, EVERYBODY... BACK TO THE TRANSPORT.

When I find the guy who torched that forest, I'm going to eat him. And I'm only going to half-cook him first.

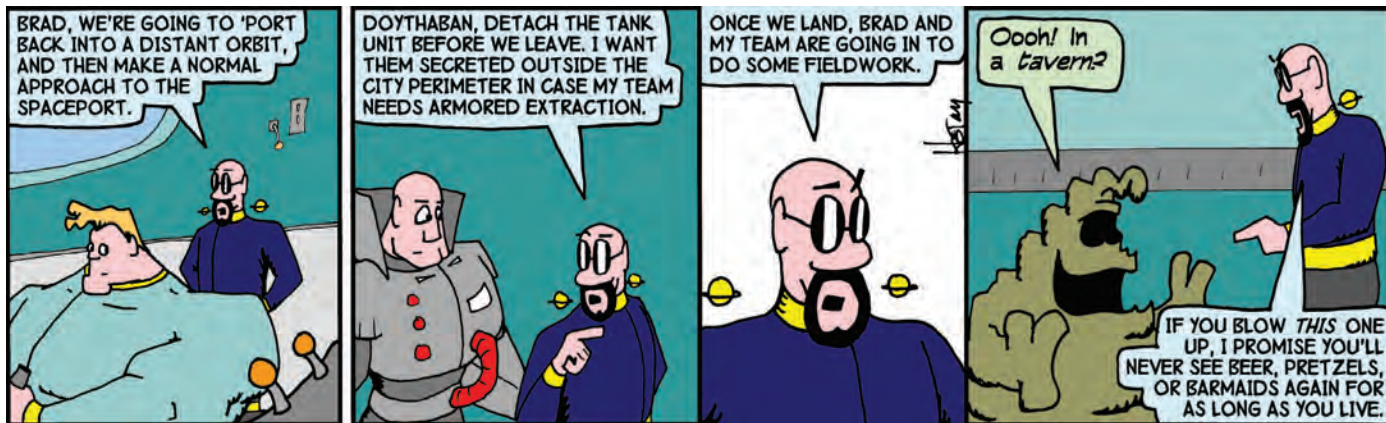
I WANTED TO HEAR HIS STORY. THEY PROBABLY WON'T COME BACK, YOU KNOW.

WHO NEEDS A CAMPFIRE STORY WHEN THERE'S AN ACTION MOVIE COMING ON?

IT'S BEEN AGES SINCE WE'VE GOTTEN TO WATCH A PROPER WAR.





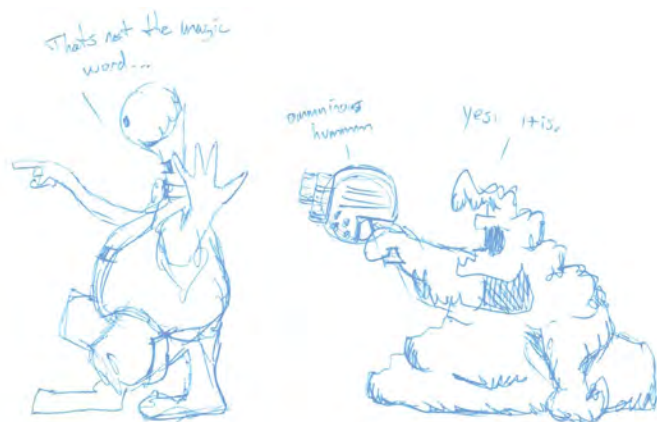
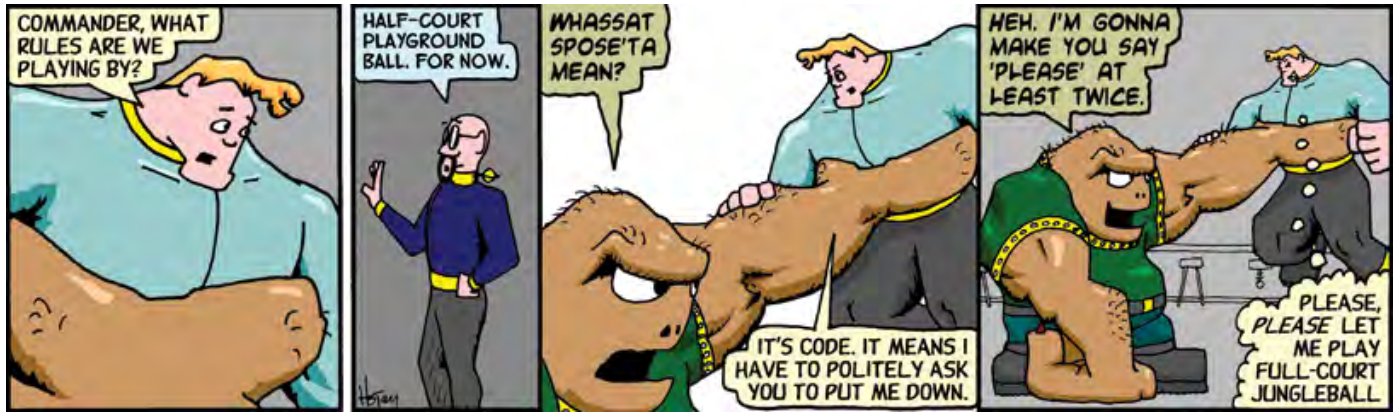


Note: For those of you who have not read Schlock Mercenary from the beginning, Kevyn is making reference to the time Schlock poured beer on his plasgun with catastrophic results.

The last tavern we visited in the strip suffered minor damage, and required some paint. Anyone who cares to wager that the next tavern will get off with just paint is likely to lose money faster than a venture capitalist in a dot-com gold rush.











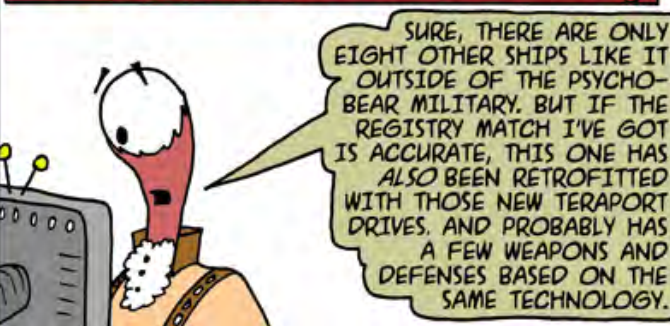
THERE ARE A FEW ODD CORNERS OF THE GALAXY WHERE A COMBINATION OF FACTORS WILL CONSPIRE TO CREATE A SPACE-BASED FACILITY AS DECIDEDLY UNATTRACTIVE AS THE ONE IN LAGRANGE ORBIT ABOVE GHANJ-RHO.

ONE MIGHT TAKE AESTHETIC PLEASURE AT A FUNCTIONAL ORBITAL CONSTRUCT WHOSE MATERIALS-BY-MASS GRAPH WOULD SHOW NIGH-OBSCENE QUANTITIES OF BALING WIRE, BONDO, AND DUCT TAPE. THEN AGAIN, ONE MIGHT ALSO FIND CULINARY THRILL IN A PLATE OF UNDERDONE SQUIRREL.



THAT TAUSENNIGAN SHIP IS RARER THAN YOU THOUGHT, SIR.

## Schlock Mercenary



SURE, THERE ARE ONLY EIGHT OTHER SHIPS LIKE IT OUTSIDE OF THE PSYCHO-BEAR MILITARY. BUT IF THE REGISTRY MATCH I'VE GOT IS ACCURATE, THIS ONE HAS ALSO BEEN RETROFITTED WITH THOSE NEW TERAPORT DRIVES. AND PROBABLY HAS A FEW WEAPONS AND DEFENSES BASED ON THE SAME TECHNOLOGY.



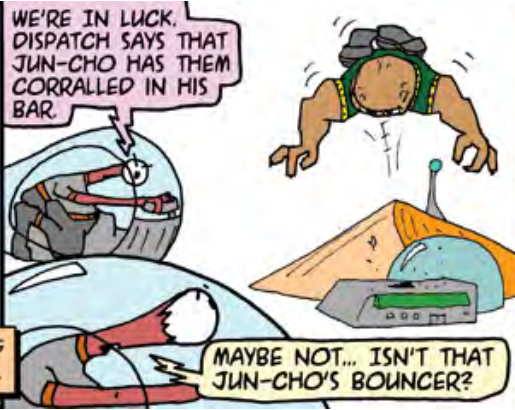
AND IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE SENT A LANDING TEAM DOWN TO JUN-CHO'S.

PICK 'EM UP. IF WE WANT THAT SHIP, WE CAN START BY TAKING A FEW HOSTAGES.



AND SO THE LOCAL ENFORCERS ARE DISPATCHED, FLYING THEIR SKYMOUNTS WITH AIR-TEARING HASTE.

AFTER ALL, IT'S BEST THAT THE WELCOMING COMMITTEE NOT BE LATE TO GREET GUESTS.



WE'RE IN LUCK. DISPATCH SAYS THAT JUN-CHO HAS THEM CORRALLED IN HIS BAR.

MAYBE NOT... ISN'T THAT JUN-CHO'S BOUNCER?



**WHUMP**

IT IS. AND IT'S UNFORTUNATE FOR HIM THAT HE DOES NOT BOUNCE BETTER.

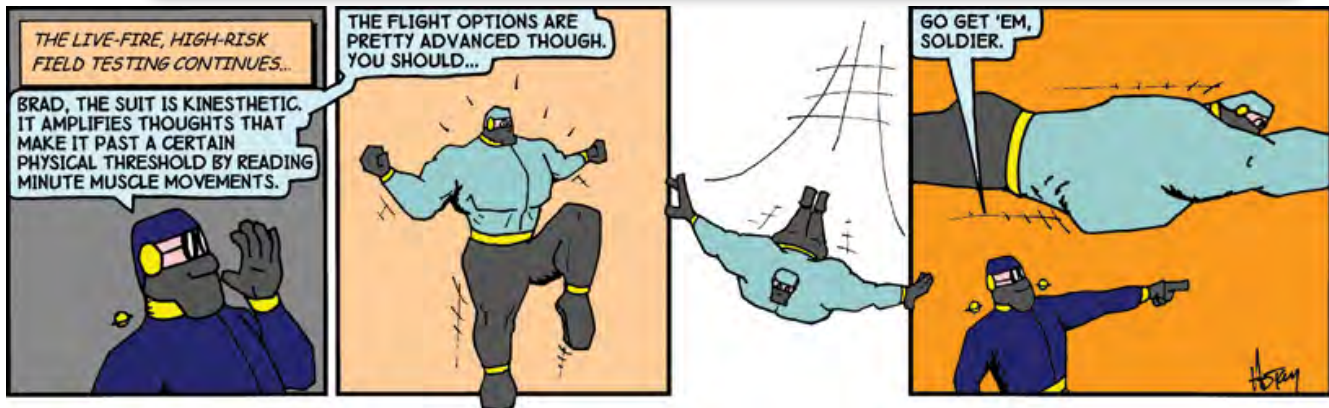
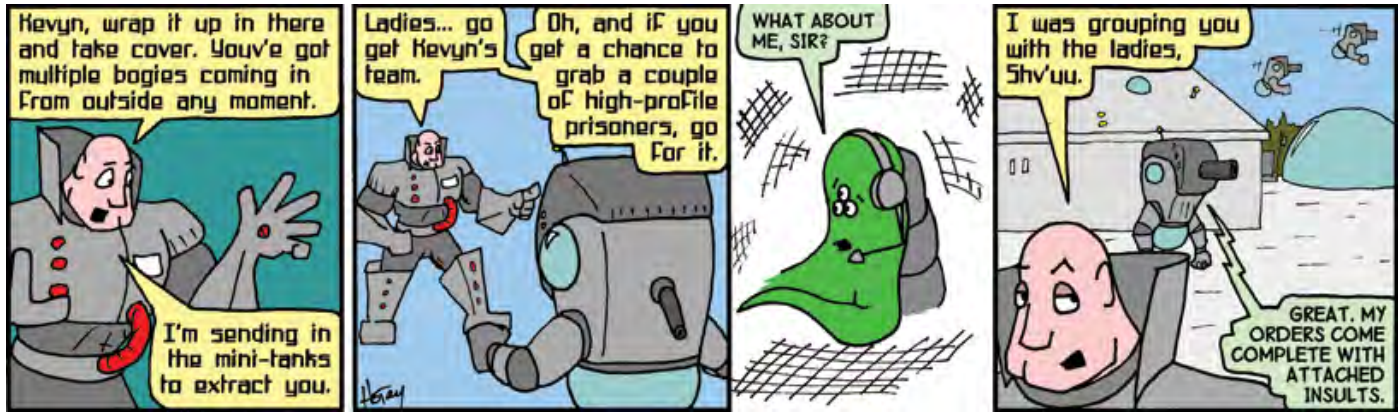
Note: The 21st century jury-rigger will no doubt be familiar with baling wire, bondo, and duct tape. By the 31st century, these materials have evolved significantly, but are still recognizable.

Baling wire, for instance, has largely been overshadowed by malleable carbonan/polymer superfilaments, which are at least ten times stronger and 100 times more expensive. For this reason, many 31st-century jury-riggers will choose the economical route and just use five times as much baling wire. The trick is finding it (there's a spool of it in the garage, underneath the hedge laser).

Bondo has seen many evolutionary iterations, the most popular being a nanomobile goop (brand name, 'NuBondo') that sets when you send the appropriate command to the nanobots. The 'bots are re-useable as long as you can keep them fed with the right nutrient solution. Unfortunately, by the time you realize you need the stuff you'll find that the kids have dumped all the 'bots in the aquarium for a 1/100,000,000th scale recreation of the European Rebellion, much to the dismay of the fish. You'll end up resorting to regular old Bondo, provided you've remembered to put the lid on it.

Duct Tape has actually seen the most change during the intervening centuries. For instance, it can now safely be used to fasten and seal duct-work. Just be sure to lose the handy-dandy spool with the built-in tape cutter before it trims the tape just above your first knuckle.









Artist commentary:

I've always been fascinated by the relative sizes of people. This may stem from the fact that I'm rather small of stature myself, but frequent the gym where people of much larger stature may be found. This particular sketch was an effort to juxtapose Elf's diminutive five-foot-two-inch height with Brad, who is seven feet tall. Of course then I had to stick somebody in the middle, so I picked Nick, who is a little over six-foot-three.





OUR HEROES HAVE SUCCESSFULLY BEATEN THE UNIOG ENFORCERS AT THEIR OWN GAME, BY SIMPLY BEING THE FIRST AND THE FASTEST TO 'DO UNTO OTHERS.'

GOOD WORK MEN. IT LOOKS LIKE YOU HELD UP UNDER FIRE AT LEAST AS WELL AS YOUR NEW ARMOR DID.

Kevyn, I think we've got a tank inbound. Not one of ours, either.

TAKE COVER. THE ARMOR WON'T HOLD UP UNDER THAT KIND OF FIRE.

COVER'S ALL BEEN BLOWN UP, SIR.

THE GAME, HOWEVER, HAS MORE THAN JUST THE ENFORCERS PLAYING ON THE UNIOG TEAM...

# Schlock Mercenary

NICE TIMING. IT WAS A LITTLE TIGHT, BUT NICE NONETHELESS.

HAPPY TO OBLIGE, SIR.

ELF, THANKS FOR SAVING OUR SKIN BACK THERE.

POP THE LID AND LEMME GIVE YOU A BIG KISS.

ALL I'M SAYING SIR, IS I THINK MAYBE WE COULD PAINT SOME NUMBERS ON THE MINI-TANKS.

FORTUNATELY, THE TOUGHS HAD ALREADY CALLED FOR AIR SUPPORT

IS THE BARKEEP STILL ALIVE?

YOU SOUND SO DISAPPOINTED.

IF I'D BEEN FASTER, I could have roasted him without feeling the least bit guilty.

YOUR CONSCIENCE IS GETTING FASTER ON THE UPTAKE, SERGEANT.

Yeah. He peeked down the barrel of my plasgun and passed out before I could shoot him.

Oh that's all I need. Quick-draw remorse.

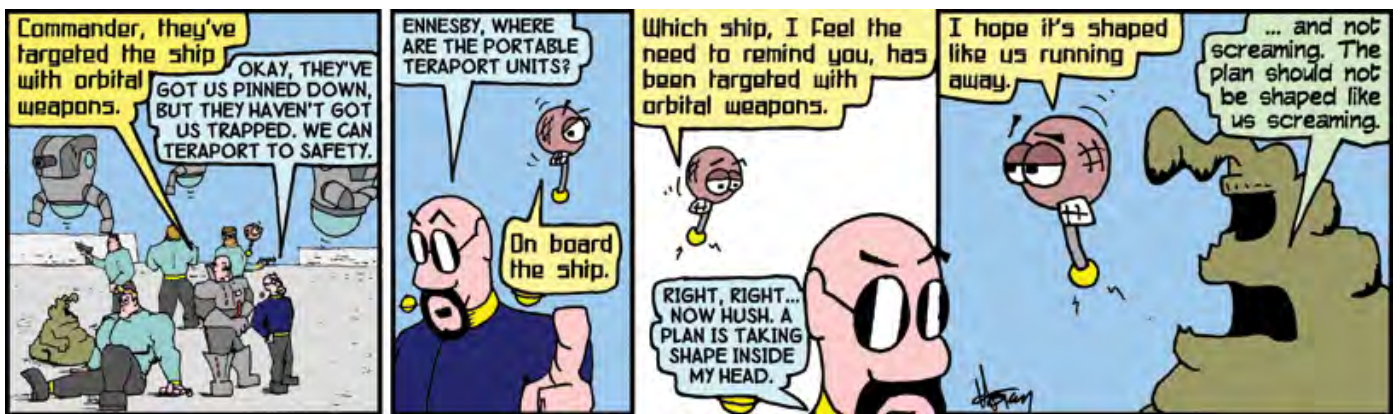




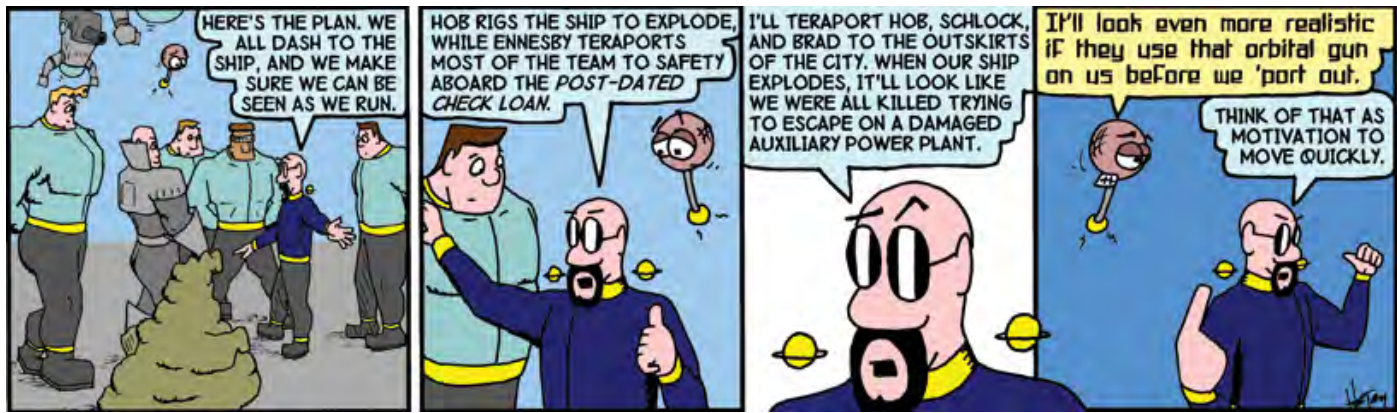
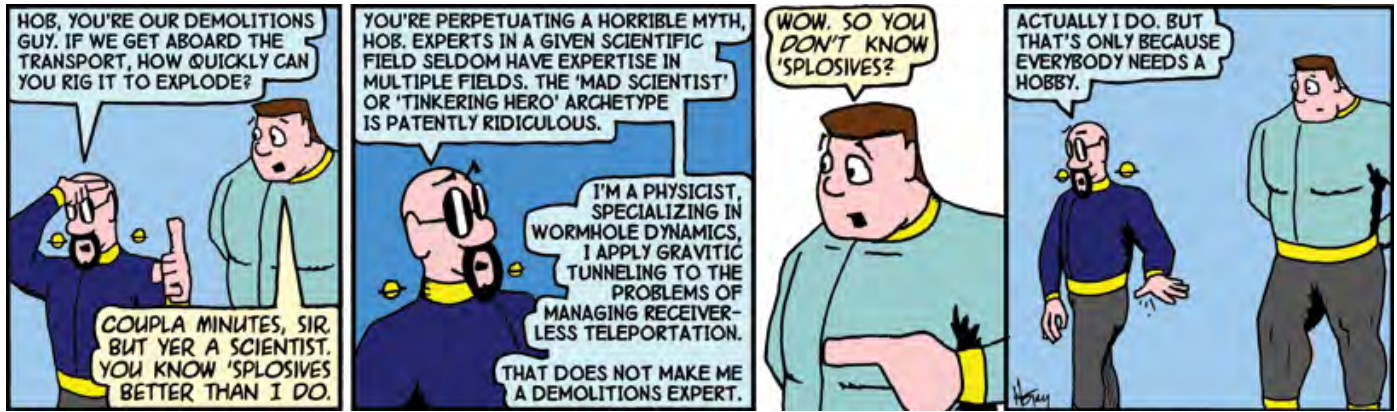
Note: The discriminating reader of science fiction will be well aware of the fact that many beam weapons available in the 21st century suffer from a small dispersal problem over long ranges. Specifically, from the L5 orbit provided by Ghanj-Rho's natural satellite, a simple laser could have a beam width comparable to that of a football field (assuming that the football field was a beam, which pretty well rules out any definition of the word 'football' that you care to use).

Bear in mind, though, that we are talking about 31st-century beam weapons. The orbital lance in use by the Gamm faction in today's strip does not suffer from appreciable dispersal problems, thanks in part to an extended gravitic tunnel that shapes the particle beam while imparting near-*c* velocity to the particles fired.

The non-discriminating reader of science fiction should look at today's strip and say "whoa... cool. I gotta get me some of that."









COMMANDER KEVYN ANDREYASIN PREPARES A DRAMATIC FEINT.

IF THEY WANTED US DEAD, THEY'D HAVE KEPT FIRING AFTER DISABLING OUR SHIP. THIS MISDIRECTION IS GOING TO WORK OUT JUST FINE.

...PROVIDED YOUR BOMB DOESN'T GO OFF TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE, HOB.

YEAH, I KNOW.

FIRST RULE OF TACTICAL 'SPLOSIVES: SOMEONE ALWAYS COMPLAINS 'BOUT THE LENGTH OF THE FUSE.

**Schlock Mercenary**

IN ORBIT, GAZING DOWN ON THE SCENE...

SIR, THEY'VE GONE FROM COWERING UNDER THEIR MINI-TANKS TO MADLY DASHING FOR THEIR SHIP.

THEY CAN'T FLY ANYWHERE IN IT, CAN THEY?

NOT WITHOUT ME BLOWING THEM OUT OF THE SKY, SIR.

I WANT PRISONERS. NOT SKEET. FIND A WAY TO KEEP THEM ON THE GROUND, AND MOSTLY ALIVE.

I COULD PUT A LOW-POWER LANCE THROUGH ANY AUXILIARY POWER SOURCES THEY BRING ONLINE.

THEY'RE ALL WEARING POWERED SUITS. COULDN'T THAT TARGET THE INDIVIDUALS AS WELL AS THEIR CRAFT?

WELL, YES, IT COULD.

DO YOU NEED AN OBJECT LESSON THAT ILLUSTRATES THE KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 'MOSTLY ALIVE' AND 'MOSTLY DEAD?'

OBJECT LESSONS ARE THOSE THINGS WHERE SOMEONE IN THE CLASS GETS USED AS AN EXAMPLE, RIGHT SIR?

OH, BY THE WAY SIR, IT LOOKS LIKE THEIR SHIP JUST LOST ANNIE CONTAINMENT. BIG CRATER.

**BLAM** THIS WOULD BE "MOSTLY ALIVE"

AAAUGH! SIR! I **BLAM BLAM**

AN EMERGENCY SESSION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF GHANJ-RHO STATION TENANTS IS CALLED TO ORDER...

COMMANDER GAMM, YOU LEVELLED HALF OF THE CHO DISTRICT WITH THAT FIRE-FIGHT OF YOURS.

I CAN EXPLAIN, IF IT PLEASE THE COUNCIL.

THERE IS A TAUSENNIGAN SUPERFORTRESS DOING COVERT RECONNAISSANCE IN THE SYSTEM. THE SHIP HAS TECHNOLOGY WE WISH TO ACQUIRE, AND WE WERE APPLYING PRESSURE TOWARD THOSE ENDS.

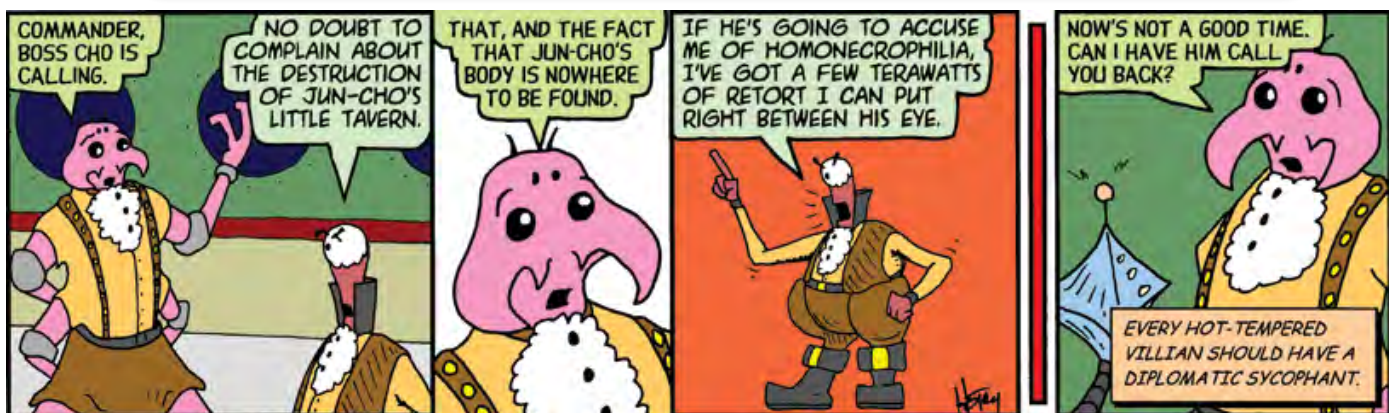
APPLYING PRESSURE? YOU USED YOUR ORBITAL LANCE ON SURFACE TARGETS!

GRIFE IF YOU MUST, BUT DON'T FORGET THAT I'M THE ONE WITH THE ORBITAL LANCE.

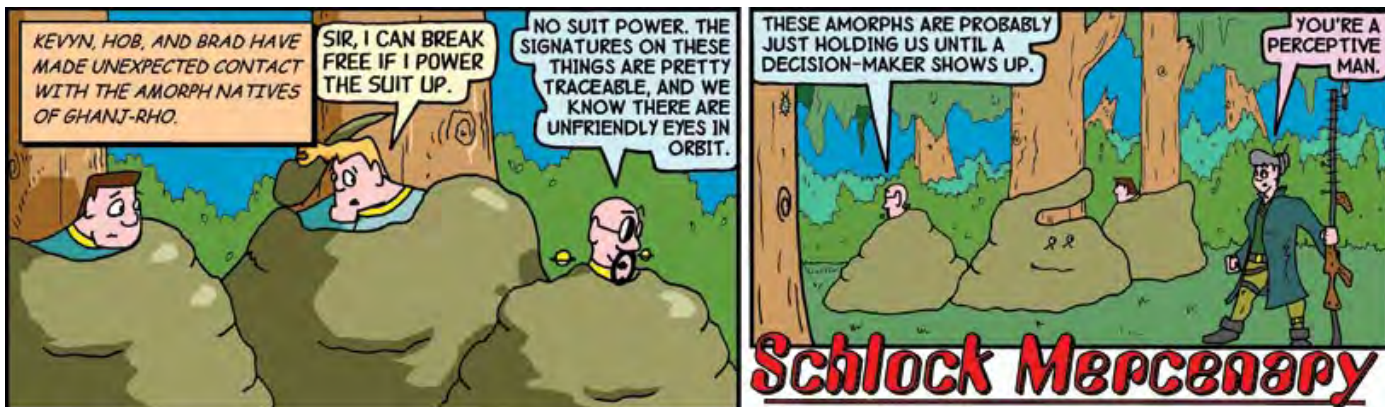
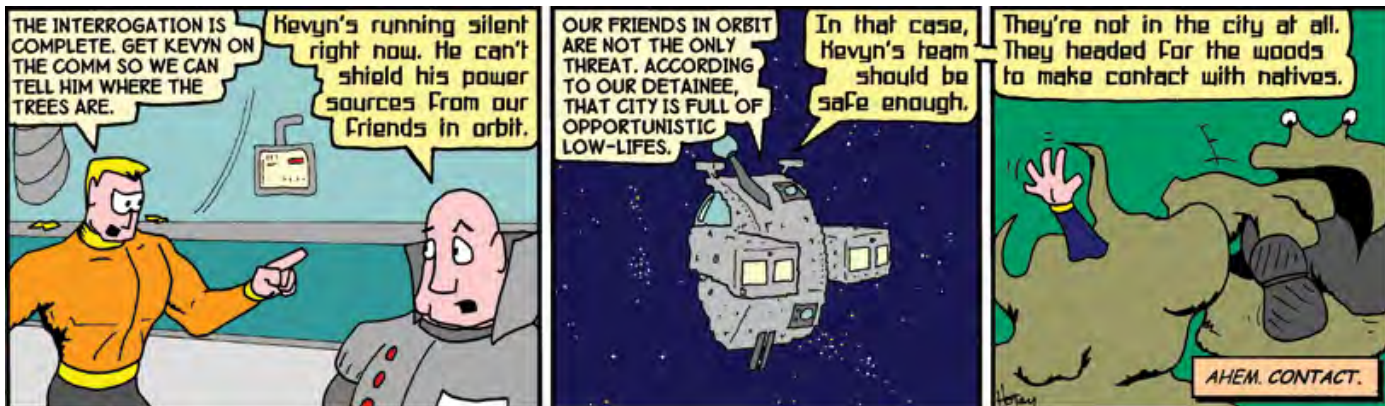
ORDER IN THESE MEETINGS NEVER LASTS LONG, NO MATTER HOW OFTEN YOU CALL IT.

Note: Many of you may be considering asking why the Metisoid in the third panel has two heads. Whatever you do, don't ask her. It would not be polite, and she's already in a bad mood.

















Artist commentary:

When I sat down to visually design the Emily Veldfontweg character (note: her last name can be roughly translated as "springfield") I didn't do an especially good job of differentiating her from the Admiral Brea character. Lots of readers emailed me or posted in the forums to ask if the two were somehow related. They're not, but I never could deny that they look a lot alike.

I suppose it's safe for me to confess now that the accidental similarity gave me some ideas for how the story would wrap up.





YOU SAY YOU'VE BEEN HIRED TO ACQUIRE A PAIR OF EYES FOR THIS EYELESS AMORPH HERE. WHY DON'T WE CONTACT YOUR WEALTHY, BENEVOLENT EMPLOYER, AND SEE IF HE'D BE WILLING TO COVER THE COSTS OF ACQUIRING EYES FOR ALL THE AMORPHS.

OKAY. THAT SOUNDS FAIR ENOUGH. SERGEANT, WILL YOU CONTACT OUR EMPLOYER FOR US AND REVIEW THIS OFFER?

AND NOW ALL THESE NICE FOLKS KNOW THAT YOU'RE RICH ENOUGH TO HIRE AN ENTIRE MERCENARY COMPANY ALL BY YOURSELF.

Oh. I mean, 'sure, I'll go ask him right now.'

What are you talking about? What employer? I'm the one footing the bill.

# Schlock Mercenary

WHILE SCHLOCK, KEVYN, AND THE AMORPH GUERRILLA COMMANDER DISCUSS PRICING, A COUPLE OF LOW-RANKING AMORPHS MAKE AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

I got real close. It smells like him. I don't know who else it could be.

We have to tell Lady Emily.

Milady commander, there's something you should know.

I'M BUSY NEGOTIATING HERE, FRAPP.

But this off-world amorph... he is the Abominable One... the one who escaped us years ago. He is an amoral killer.

HOW FITTING THAT HE HAS FALLEN IN WITH MERCENARIES, THEN.

Fitting or not, we cannot negotiate with them. He must be destroyed.

AS I RECALL, THIS AMORAL KILLER IS ALSO AT LEAST PART SELFLESS HERO.

I don't follow you, milady.

PERHAPS IN TIMES LIKE THESE, WE NEED HEROES WHO CAN KILL WITHOUT COMPUNCTION.

I heard that. I'll have you know that I only resort to violence when the situation calls for it.

OF COURSE, BY 'SITUATION' YOU MEAN 'VOICES IN YOUR HEAD,' RIGHT?

And you don't want to know what they're saying right now.

OKAY, EVERYONE. I'M GOING TO PLACE A HYPERCOMM CALL TO THE SHIP TO DISCUSS THIS LITTLE ALLIANCE.

Fine. But why are you making a big deal about it?

BECAUSE IF THE FOLKS WITH THAT ORBITAL WEAPON HAVE OUR POWER SIGNATURES ON FILE, I MAY BE GIVING AWAY OUR POSITION, AND CALLING DOWN FIRE FROM HEAVEN.

Well, be waiting for you way over there.

ACROSS THE RIVER.

...ON ANOTHER CONTINENT.





Note: Any grade-school student should be able to tell you that at a continuous rate of fire, fifty gauss-pistols would need to fire 8.3333[repeating] rounds per second in order to go through 50,000 rounds in two minutes. What a grade school student might not be able to tell you is that 8 rounds a second is sloooooow.

Unrelated Note: Some readers may be alarmed to see how willing Tagon is to culturally contaminate aboriginal aliens in order to achieve a military objective. Addressing those concerns, the author has this response:

It makes for a good science-fiction adventure to have the captain say something along the lines of "prime directive be damned." It makes for much better science-fiction, however, to have the captain able to say in frank honesty "I have no idea what this prime directive concept is, and it sounds like foolishness that belongs in another universe entirely. Go away. I have work to do." If you persisted in whining about native cultures, that captain would have no choice but to shoot you.



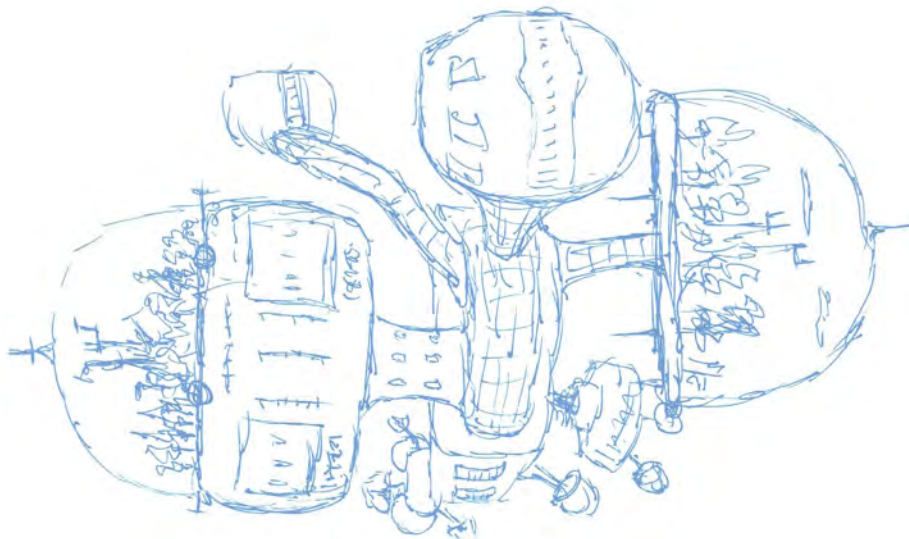




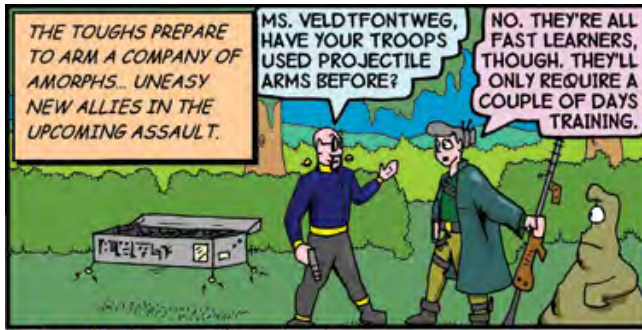
Note: The Hypernet Biblioversity Library Dictionary, 234th ed., defines "maimery" as follows:

Maimery: n. *Mayhem, conflagration, conflict, or applied force resulting in the loss of one or more limbs.*

It should not be confused with *mammary*. The two words have nothing to do with each other and have only appeared in adjacent context in those few publications low-brow enough to cover the Hefner Heir Wars of 2116 (and in this footnote, but that doesn't count.)







THE TOUGHS PREPARE TO ARM A COMPANY OF AMORPHS... UNEASY NEW ALLIES IN THE UPCOMING ASSAULT.

MS. VELDTFONTWEG, HAVE YOUR TROOPS USED PROJECTILE ARMS BEFORE?

NO. THEY'RE ALL FAST LEARNERS, THOUGH. THEY'LL ONLY REQUIRE A COUPLE OF DAYS TRAINING.

OKAY, THEN. THESE ARE FAIRLY STANDARD GAUSS-PISTOLS. I'LL LET YOU HANDLE THE TARGET PRACTICE.

MY MEN AND I WILL WAIT OVER HERE.



BEHIND THESE ROCKS. WITH OUR HELMETS ON.

# Schlock Mercenary



MEANWHILE, ABOARD THE TOUGHS' SUPERFORTRESS WARSHIP

SIR, I'D LIKE PERMISSION TO BE ON THE GROUND WITH COMMANDER ANDREYASN.

Corporal, we can't send your minitank down without giving away the team's position

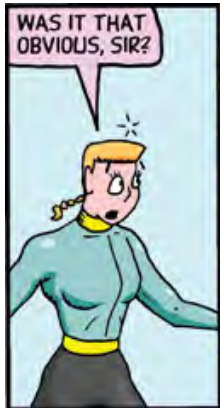


THEN I'LL GO DOWN WITHOUT IT. THEY CAN USE AN EXTRA WARM BODY ON THIS OP.



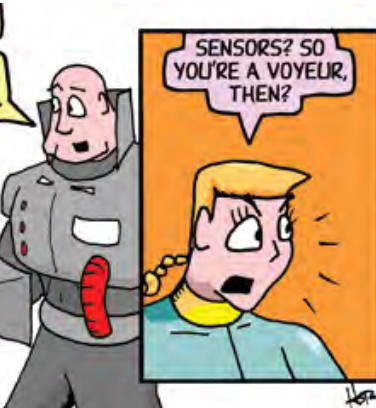
Unfortunately, we need you and your tank as backup, to prevent the warm bodies they've already got from becoming cold bodies.

And you can forget the pretense, EIF. I know you'd like to be down there on the ground with Hob.

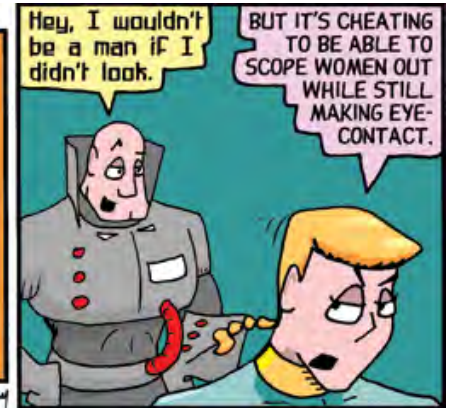


WAS IT THAT OBVIOUS, SIR?

I may be mostly machine up here, but the biological symptoms of human physical attraction are not lost on me. Indeed, with my sensor arrays, you might as well have been shouting "I'm in love with someone" the whole time we spoke.



SENSORS? SO YOU'RE A VOYEUR, THEN?



Hey, I wouldn't be a man if I didn't look.

BUT IT'S CHEATING TO BE ABLE TO SCOPE WOMEN OUT WHILE STILL MAKING EYE-CONTACT.



HOW'S THE TRAINING GOING DOWN THERE, KEVYN?

PRETTY WELL. THESE AMORPHS ARE ENTHUSIASTIC, THEY'RE FAST LEARNERS, AND THEY'VE TAKEN TO THE GAUSS-PISTOLS LIKE CHILDREN TO CANDY.

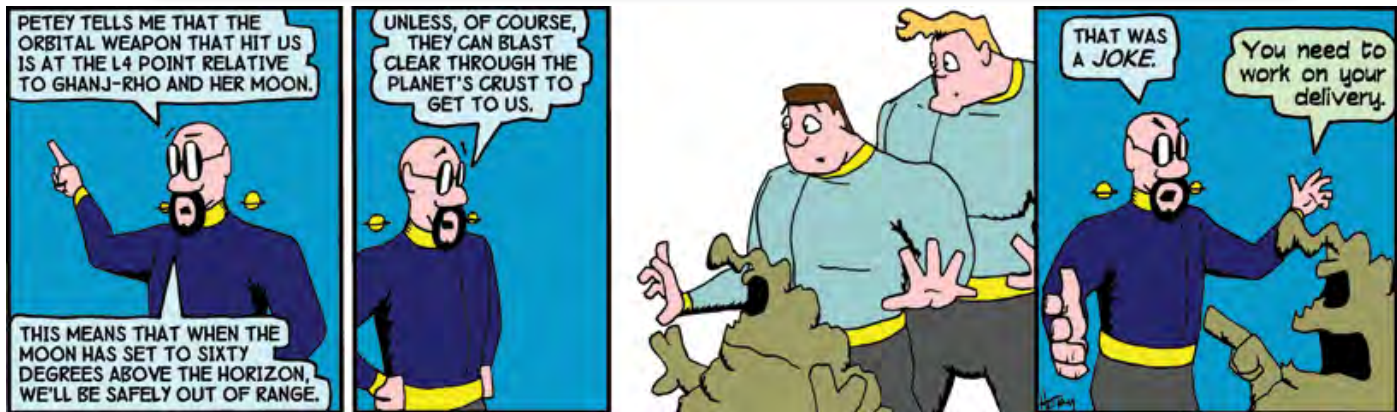
THE AMORPH ABILITY TO REGENERATE HAS MADE UP FOR OUR LACK OF POP-UP TARGETS, BUT IT'S ADDED SOME NEW CHALLENGES AS WELL.



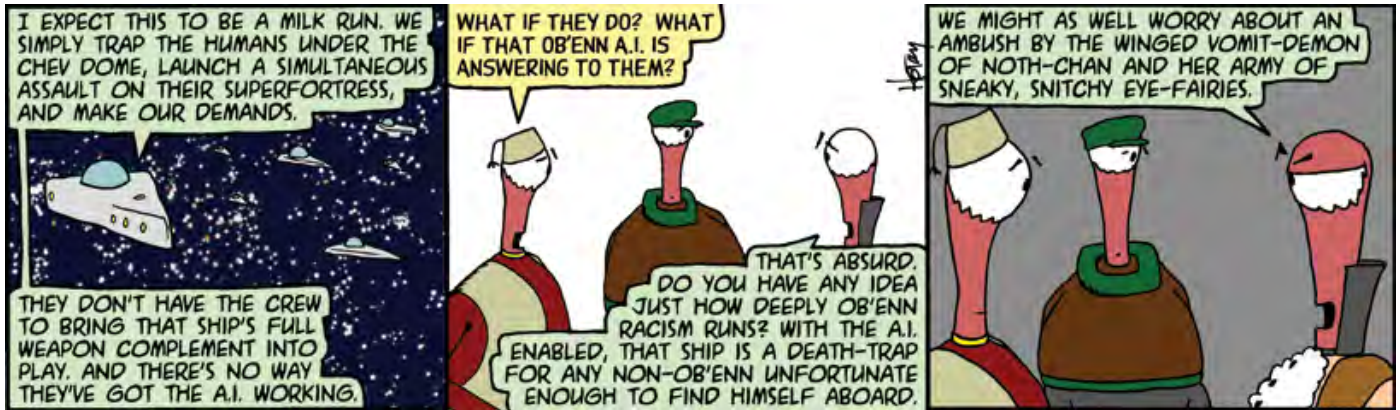
STOP USING EXPLOSIVE ROUNDS ON THE FIRING RANGE?

I'M WAY AHEAD OF YOU.









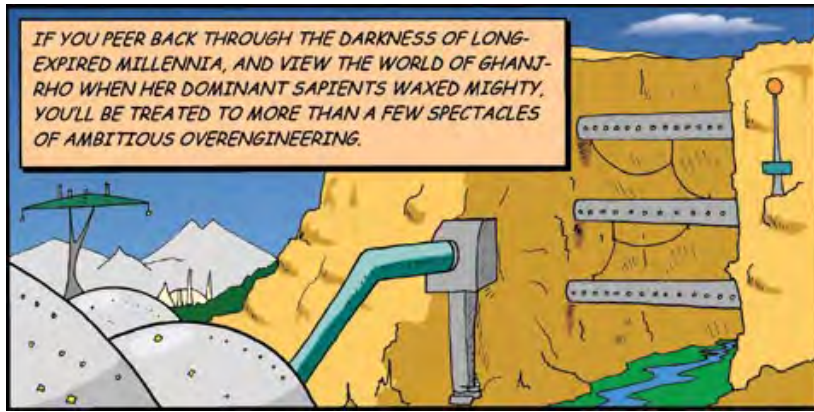
Note: For those of you wondering how Commander Gamm knows how many crew Tagon has, keep in mind that at one point Tagon's Toughs was publicly traded, and as such had to maintain a public crew manifest.

Another Note: Oh, and for those of you who are not versed in Unioc mythology, the eye-fairy is a blind hag who sneaks into the bedchambers of those who bear false witness, and plucks off their eye. Then she leaves them a nice, shiny coin. This story is used by Unioc parents to encourage honesty among their children. Naturally, their children delight in these tales of night-time violence and grow up to be honest, well-adjusted adults (who knowingly relate the fib to THEIR children, flying blind in the face of irony) ... another example of the fruits of solid parenting practices.

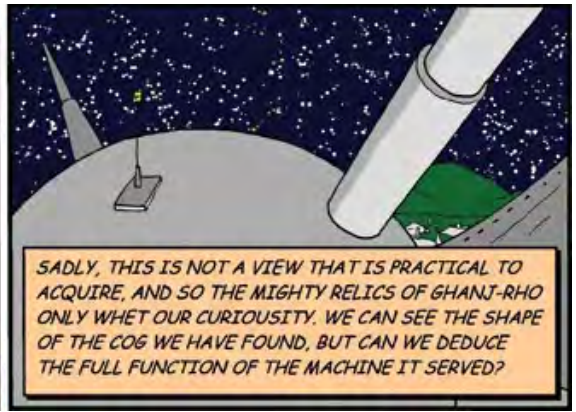
The vomit demon is a tale conjured up by the parents of fussy eaters and, without going into much detail about Unioc gastronomy, let's just say that it works for Unioc children. It most certainly would NOT work on me.







IF YOU PEER BACK THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF LONG-EXPIRED MILLENNIA, AND VIEW THE WORLD OF GHANJ-RHO WHEN HER DOMINANT SAPIENTS WAXED MIGHTY, YOU'LL BE TREATED TO MORE THAN A FEW SPECTACLES OF AMBITIOUS OVERENGINEERING.

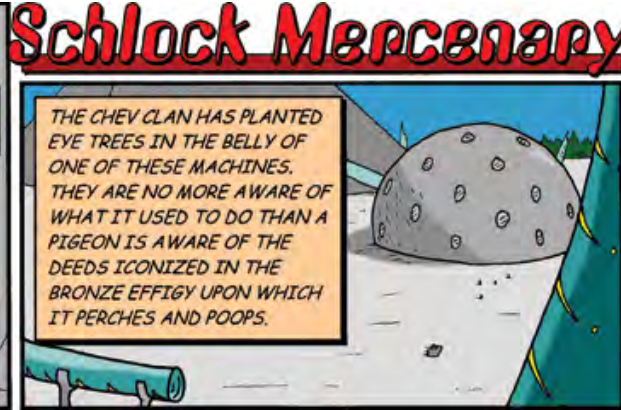


SADLY, THIS IS NOT A VIEW THAT IS PRACTICAL TO ACQUIRE, AND SO THE MIGHTY RELICS OF GHANJ-RHO ONLY WHET OUR CURIOSITY. WE CAN SEE THE SHAPE OF THE COG WE HAVE FOUND, BUT CAN WE DEDUCE THE FULL FUNCTION OF THE MACHINE IT SERVED?



YOU COULD ALWAYS JUST ASK ME. I WAS THERE, YOU KNOW.

HUSH, GRANDPA. WE'RE TRYING TO BE POETIC.



# Schlock Mercenary

THE CHEV CLAN HAS PLANTED EYE TREES IN THE BELLY OF ONE OF THESE MACHINES. THEY ARE NO MORE AWARE OF WHAT IT USED TO DO THAN A PIGEON IS AWARE OF THE DEEDS ICONIZED IN THE BRONZE EFFIGY UPON WHICH IT PERCHES AND POOPS.



IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE POETIC, YOU NEED TO AVOID WORDS LIKE 'POOP.'

OKAY, THAT'S IT. NO MORE EXPOSITION...



A SMALL SQUAD OF MERCENARIES TERAPORTS IN TO STEAL TREES.

IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE ALONE IN HERE, SIR. IT'S JUST US AND THE EYE-TREES.

ALONE FOR NOW. LET'S POT THOSE TREES AND GET OUT OF HERE.



Somebody pluck me a couple of those. I want to see.

You get two? You're greedy.



Two words Chuck... depth perception.



THEY'RE IN! SHUT THE TRAP, AND LAUNCH THE ASSAULT!

IN A ROOM FULL OF TREES WITH EYES, NO-ONE SHOULD BE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THE WALLS HAVE EARS...



CAPTAIN, IM PICKING UP MASSIVE SHIP MOVEMENT IN OUR VICINITY. TWENTY OR MORE.

GIVE ME A THREAT ASSESSMENT, PETEY.



THAT WILL REQUIRE ACTIVE SCANS, SIR. DO YOU WANT TO GIVE AWAY OUR POSITION?

THE ABRUPT MOVEMENT OF TWENTY SHIPS THIS CLOSE TO US CAN PROBABLY BE TAKEN AS A SIGN THAT THEY ALREADY HAVE OUR POSITION.

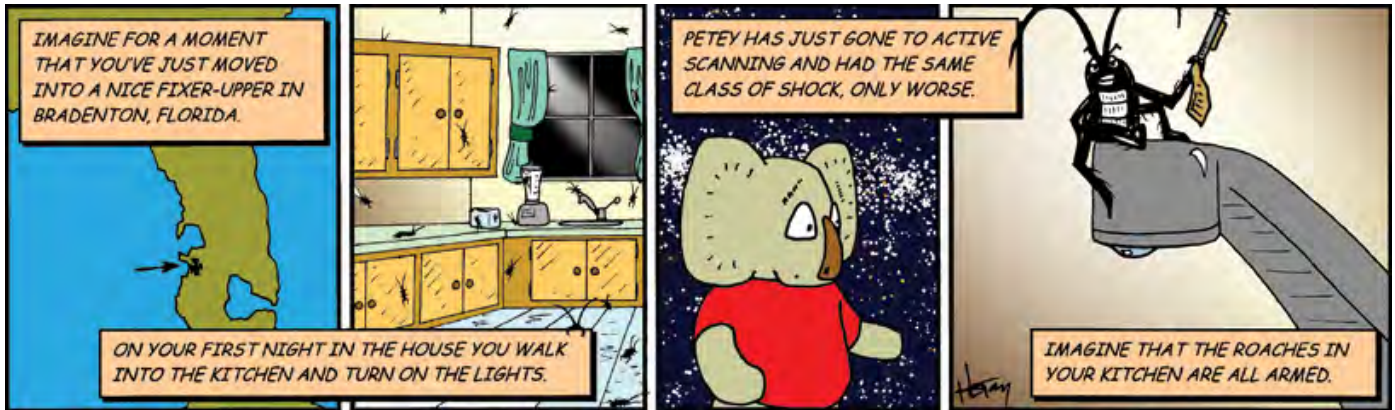


MY STEALTH ABILITIES ARE A MATTER OF NO SMALL PERSONAL PRIDE, CAPTAIN.

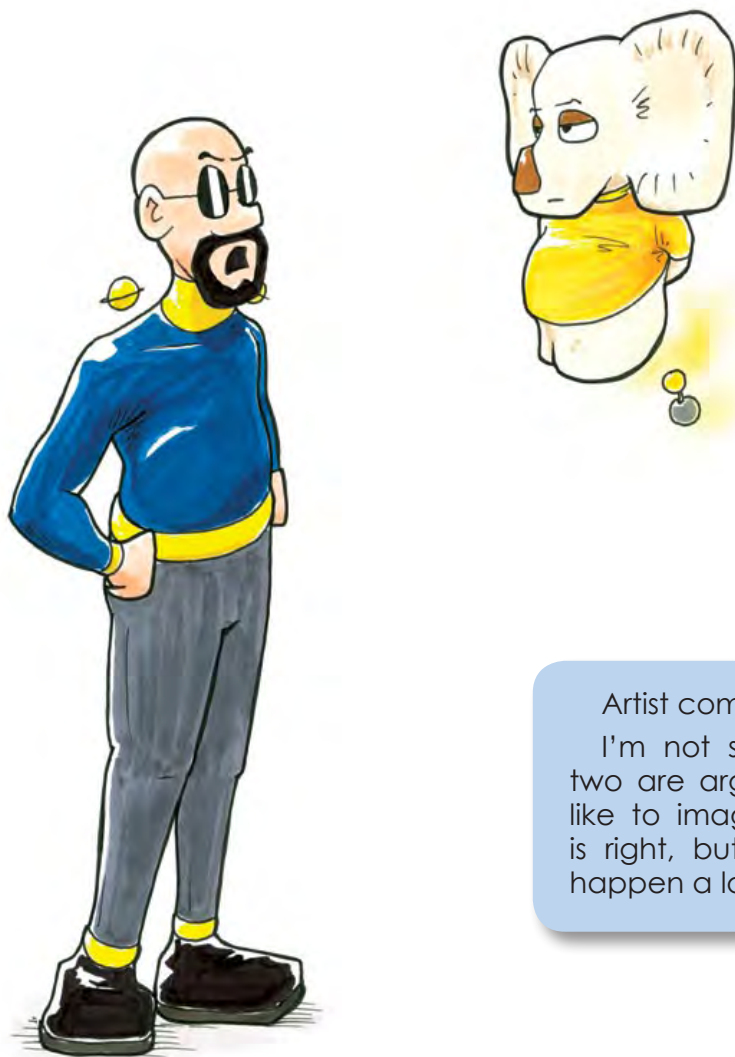


...AND PRIDE GOETH BEFORE THE FALL. GIVE ME ACTIVE SCANS NOW, AND GO EASY ON THE WOUNDED POUT.



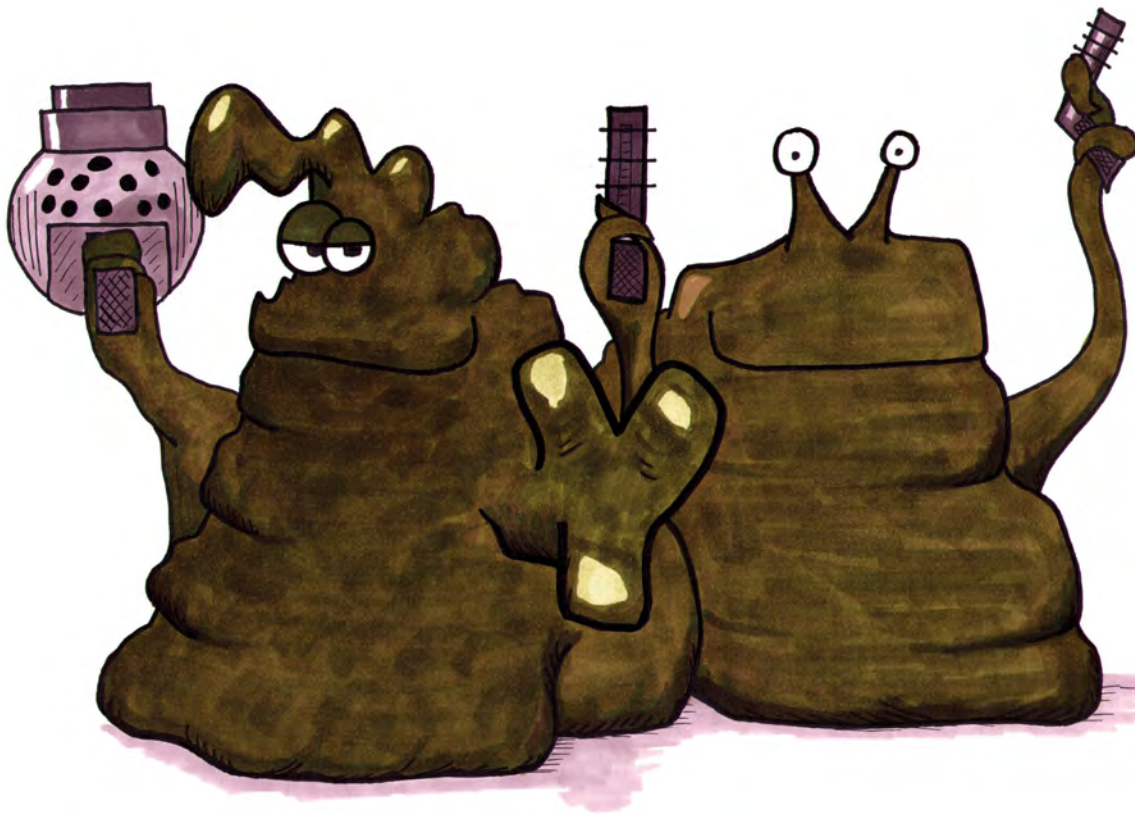


Note: Those readers familiar with the early 21st-century coastline of Florida may be concerned at the inaccuracy in the rendering of that fine isthmus in today's strip. (Yes, I said "isthmus" instead of "peninsula"). Suffice it to say that with the global warming and resulting superhurricanes of the late 21st century (not to mention Mother Nature's pendulum-effect and follow up ice-age in the early 22nd) the coastline changed a bit. And those are just the naturally induced changes. We won't go into the creation of Lake Yucatan by King Louis Castro XIV.



Artist commentary:  
 I'm not sure what these two are arguing about. I'd like to imagine that Kevyn is right, but that seems to happen a lot.









Note: Ornithologists might be hard-pressed to positively classify any of Ghanj-Rho's harblewheezzers (the common harblewheezzer, duffle-downy harblewheezzer, eastern harblewheezzer, puck-freckled harblewheezzer, or the elusive slandy-juicing harblewheezzer) as 'birds,' per se, given their complete lack of that peculiar cellular buckling structure that gives rise to proper feathers. Even the duffle-downy harblewheezzer is not so much 'downy' as it is 'hairy.' Still, as far as most of the rest of us are concerned, they lay eggs, fly, and defecate whilst airborne, so birds they must be.

Harblewheezzer eggs have a curious protein lining inside the shell that serves to make the harblewheezzer hatchling quite smelly and offensive to the taste of even the most indiscriminating of Ghanj-Rho's omnivores (that means amorphs). Thus, having a broken harblewheezzer egg in your mouth would lead you to hurl pretty much involuntarily (assuming you were an amorph, which some readers have expressed a wish to be [and this phenomenon continues to baffle the sociology staff here at Schlock Mercenary]). Yuck.

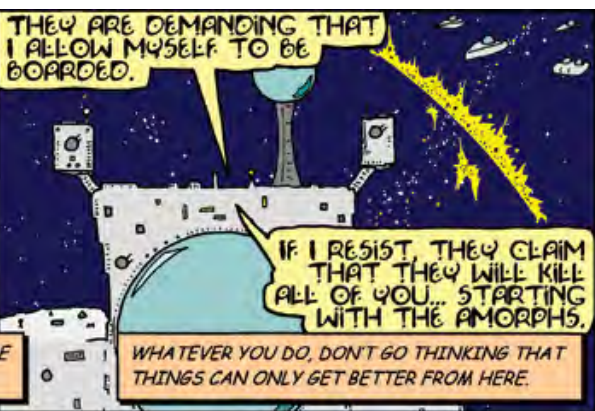
It's interesting to note that the names for the various (we'll go ahead and call them) birds of Ghanj-Rho have the same sort of absurd, 'did-you-sound-that-out-before-writing-it-down' naming as birds elsewhere in the galaxy (hairy woodpecker, or tufted titmouse, anyone?). This is easily explained. The sort of people who go out of their way to spot birds and draw pictures of them in fieldbooks are just plain bent.







# Schlock Mercenary





NOTE: Let's play a game of Superfortress Space Siege, shall we?

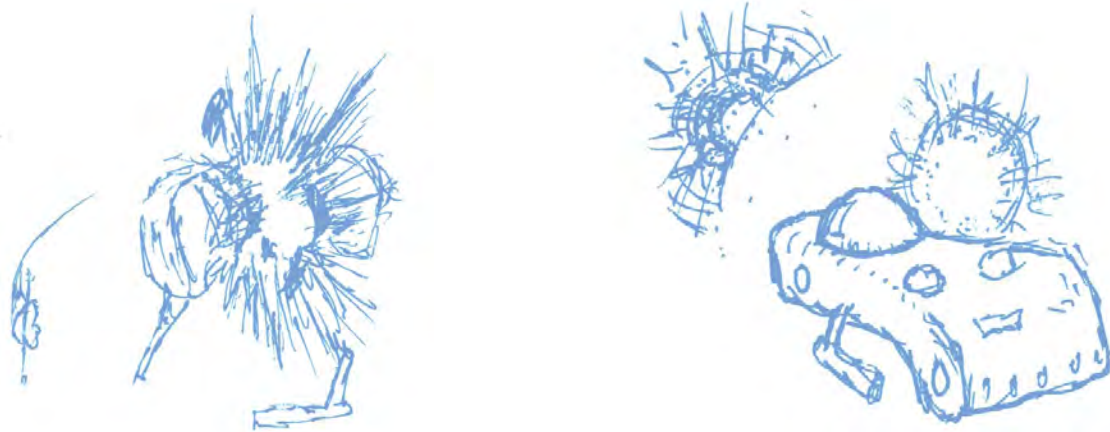
You Will Need: ONE (1) Tausennigan Ob'enn Thunderhead Superfortress, and an ARMADA (lots'n'lots) of smaller ships. All ships should have equally modern weapons and shielding, but the superfortress gets more of both.

To Play: The Superfortress starts out surrounded by the armada of smaller vessels. The cards are dealt by the Three Fates, Lady Luck, or your choice of destiny-deity. Play proceeds counter-clockwise to the dealer's left (which of course means that the players are upside-down in relation to the dealer. This is okay).

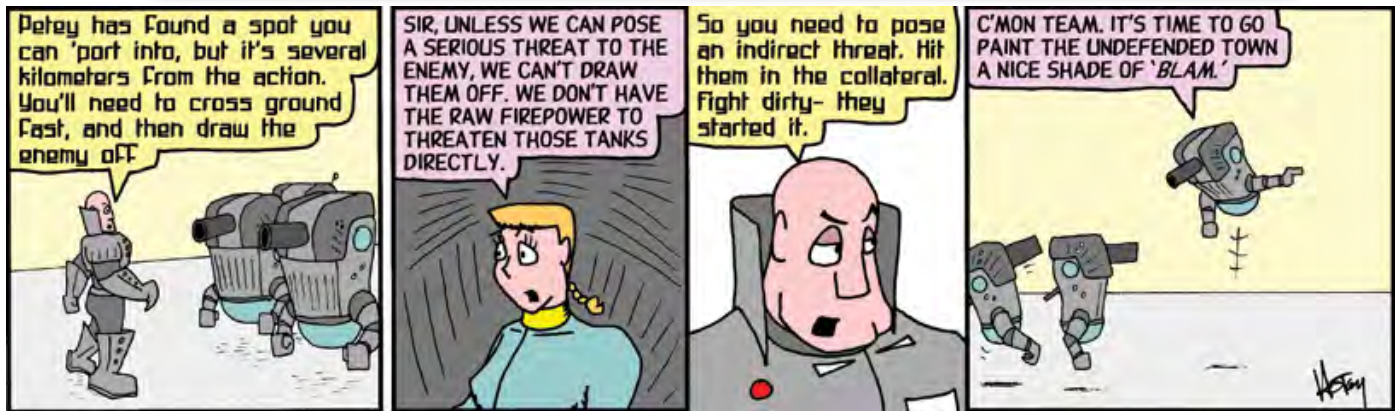
Strategy for the armada: Force the fortress to raise gravitic shielding by pressing it from all sides with heavy beam weapons. Clear away any hypernet drones it may have left outside its shield, thus leaving it blind to frequencies blocked by the shield (and if you've got a broad-spectrum of beam weapons on it, the shield will be quite opaque.) Then move in with a coordinated assault of small torpedoes with gravitic breachers.

Strategy for the Superfortress: Push your shield out as far as you can, while still retaining enough power to swat incoming torpedoes. Hope you get them all before they get too close. Push shielded drones through your shields so you can see. Push shielded, guided torpedoes through your shields in hopes of keeping the armada on its proverbial toes. Fly around half-blind, forcing individual armada ships into range of your gravitic weapons (your gravy-gun range is longer than theirs is).

The game ends when the armada runs out of torpedoes, or when the superfortress drops its shields. The winner is the player who can walk away from the game under his own power and find something safer to do.









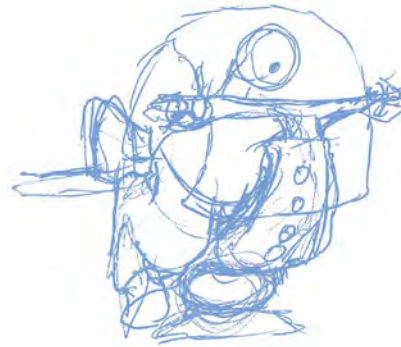


IT WOULD APPEAR THAT SOMEONE IS ABOUT TO DO SOMETHING EITHER VERY SELFLESS OR VERY STUPID WITH A BIG PILE OF EXPLOSIVES...

# Schlock Mercenary PRESENTS FAMOUS LAST WORDS







EIF takes prisoners

ELF, CHELLE, AND SHV'UU HAVE A DIRTY JOB TO DO.

WE GOTTA DRAW OFF THOSE TANKS, BUT WE CAN'T TAKE 'EM IN A FAIR FIGHT.

I'VE GOT A MAP OF THE CHO, CHEV, AND GAMM INTERESTS DOWN HERE IN THE CITY. WE HAVE TO HIT UNDEFENDED TARGETS.

OH, NO... WHAT ABOUT INNOCENT CIVILIANS?

DOYTHABAN TELLS ME THAT THEY'RE ALL GUILTY OF SOMETHING...

BUT I'M TELLING YOU THAT I WANT TO BE ABLE TO SLEEP TONIGHT.

SO I FOUND US A BIG, EXPENSIVE, FULLY AUTOMATED REFINERY TO BLOW UP.

IT'S THE ULTIMATE LOW-CALORIE HIT—TWICE THE *BLAM*, AND NOT A SHRED OF THAT PESKY *REMORSE*.

PETEY, WE'RE GONNA BLOW THE DOME DOWN HERE. NO MORE STALLING. JUST GET HERE AS FAST AS YOU CAN.

ROGER THAT, COMMANDER. I'M MOVING ALREADY.

CAPTAIN, SHALL I GIVE THE ARMADA NOTICE? YOU KNOW, THE STANDARD CLEAR OUT OR BE DESTROYED?

SURE. BUT DON'T USE STANDARD HAILING PROTOCOLS.

WHAT PROTOCOL DID YOU HAVE IN MIND, SIR?

OH, I DON'T KNOW. LET'S JUST SAY THAT ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS.

IN ORDER FOR THE READER TO UNDERSTAND THE TACTICAL SITUATION, IT IS NECESSARY TO EMPLOY AN ANALOGY.

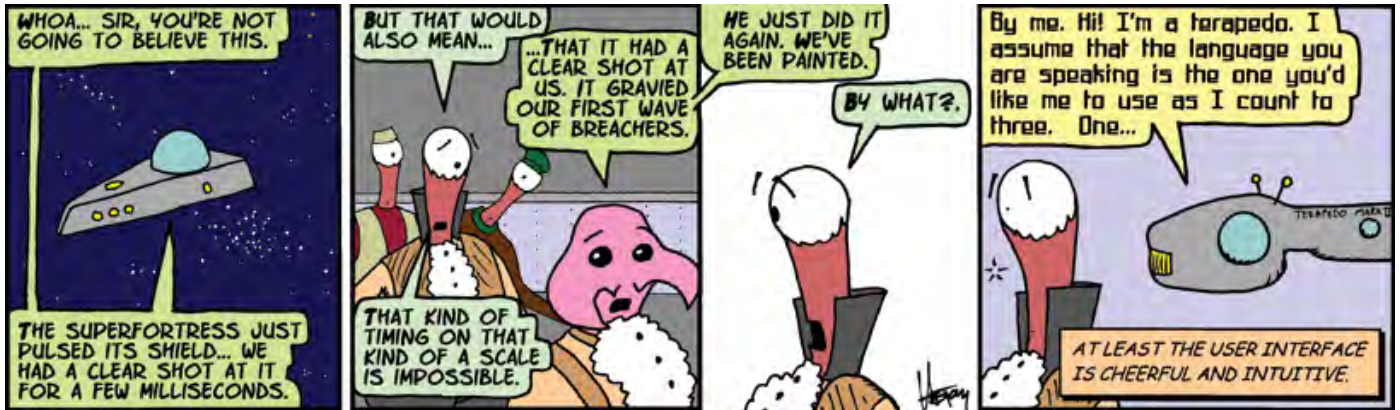
COMMANDER GAMM THINKS HIS LITTLE ARMADA IS ATTACKING AN UNDER-STAFFED WARSHIP... ONE WITHOUT A PROPER A.I. TO COORDINATE THE MANY WEAPON SYSTEMS. PICTURE A MAN WITH A STACK OF FLYSWATTERS FENDING OFF A SWARM OF BEES.

GAMM IS RATHER FATALLY MISTAKEN. HIS ARMADA IS UP AGAINST A STATE OF THE ART A.I. ONE CAPABLE OF DRIVING EVERY SINGLE WEAPON ABOARD THE SUPERFORTRESS WITH FULL EFFICIENCY, AND TO MAXIMUM EFFECT.

THIS IS THE POINT AT WHICH THE ANALOGY FALLS APART...

AAAIIIEEE... IT BURNS!

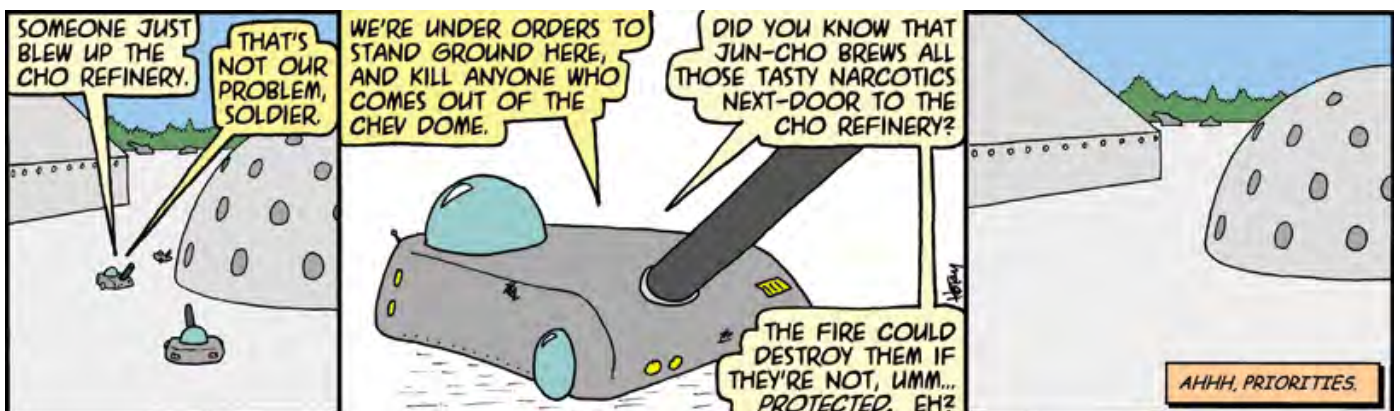
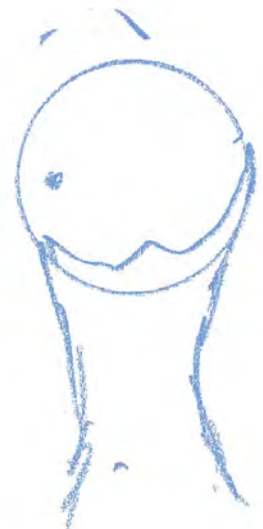




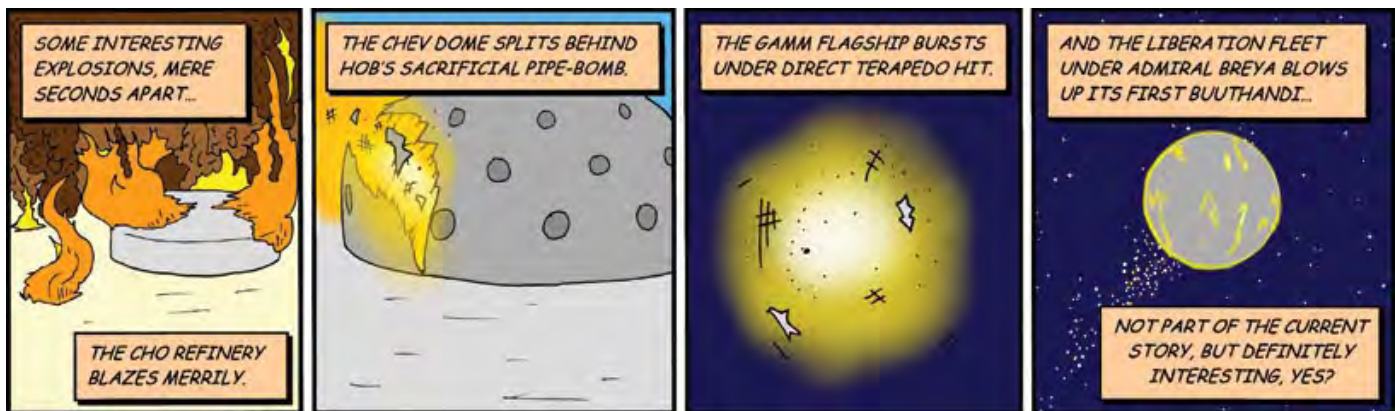
Note: Commander Gamm has three seconds on his hands (he may actually have more, but right now those three seconds are all he has confidence in). You might think that he wastes the first second on an expression of surprise and shock, but you'd be overlooking the intense metabolic activity during that period. His blood pressure leaps up, forcing more oxygen through the semipermeable membranes of his brain cells, (for those of you who are wondering, Gamm's brain sits in his pelvic cradle, about fifteen centimeters below his heart, and just four centimeters above the lower end of his digestive tract) and large quantities of endorphine-analogues are released into his system. Were he being attacked by a togrun (think "scaly tiger"), he'd be in prime condition to leap, kick, throw a spear, climb a tree, and then die screaming.

In the second second (not the same as second<sup>2</sup>) Gamm quickly discards the primal urges of leaping, kicking, or tree climbing, spins to make eye-contact with the terapedo (okay, okay... the 'pedo has no eyes, per se), and feels the familiar, sickening push of a gravitic shield, telling him that this device is not going to fall prey to a sidearm.

Before the third second begins, Gamm's life starts to flash backwards before his eye. His consciousness expands, consuming the bounteous metabolic resources at its disposal, and for a one-point-four second eternity he is able to analyze everything he has ever said or done. In particular he considers the rather poor decision to have minions of his steal a Strohl T.A.D. III system (Teraport Area Denial Mark Three) from a passing sales rep, rather than simply buying a whole case of the stupid things.







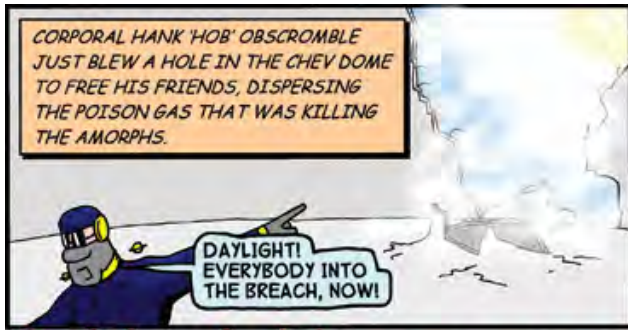
Note: Regular readers no doubt know that “buuthandi” can be idiomatically translated to mean “Dyson sphere.” Literally, it’s the shortened form of the F’sherl-Ganni phrase “Buut go buut-buut nnaa-nnaa cho handi,” or “this was expensive to build.” (Transliterated, for the linguist: <Expensive and expensive-expensive [expletive] we built.>)

Regular readers may NOT know, however, that a buuthandi has more in common with a solar sail than with the conventional (and decidedly impractical) concept of a rigid Dyson sphere (Freeman Dyson’s concept is not the conventionally impractical one, mind you. His idea will work). You see, the buuthandi does not support its own weight: it is essentially a balloon around a star, with power-collecting substations and giant habitats dangling from the inner surface. Control cables, millions of square kilometers of slack sail material, and some very clever engineering allow the ‘balloon’ to compensate for (and in some cases mitigate) the mood swings of the contained star.

This naturally begs the question: how do you blow one of these up? If it can stand up to a solar flare, it can certainly take a few planet-busting missiles.

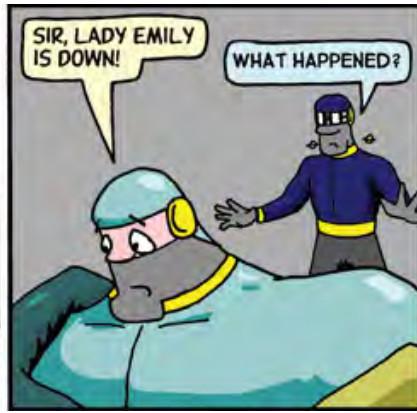
There are a couple of ways to do this. The first involves convincing the contained star to go nova. The second involves using far, far more missiles than anyone thinks you can reasonably come up with. Either way, Admiral Breya has been busy.





CORPORAL HANK 'HOB' OBSCROMBLE JUST BLEW A HOLE IN THE CHEV DOME TO FREE HIS FRIENDS, DISPERSING THE POISON GAS THAT WAS KILLING THE AMORPHS.

DAYLIGHT! EVERYBODY INTO THE BREACH, NOW!



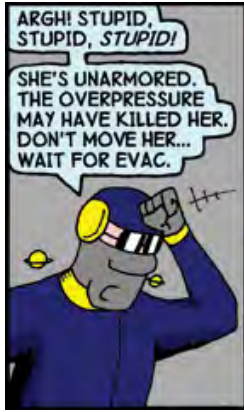
SIR, LADY EMILY IS DOWN!

WHAT HAPPENED?



DUNNO. SHE JUST COLLAPSED WHEN THE PIPE BLEW.

# Schlock Mercenary



ARGH! STUPID, STUPID, STUPID!

SHE'S UNARMORED. THE OVERPRESSURE MAY HAVE KILLED HER. DON'T MOVE HER... WAIT FOR EVAC.



WE OUGHT TO GET THESE AMORPHS INTO THE OPEN. WHERE'S HOB?

I THOUGHT HE WAS WITH YOU.



NO, THAT WAS BEFORE HIS PRIMER DUDED. HE WENT BACK TO THE BOMB TO...



TO...



OH NO.



SIR, WE'VE GOT TANKS INBOUND!

THE GOOD NEWS JUST KEEPS ROLLING IN. HOW MANY?



SIX. NO, WAIT... FOUR.

HANG ON, UM... TWO?

NO, I DON'T SEE ANY NOW.



WHAT IS IT? ACTIVE CAMOUFLAGE?

UMM... NO. CLOSE AIR SUPPORT.



CAPTAIN, IF PETEY HAS THE AREA SECURE, I NEED A MEDICAL DETACHMENT DOWN HERE A.S.A.P.



I'D SAY WE'RE SECURE NOW. HOW MANY CASUALTIES DO YOU HAVE?



ONE PRESUMED FATALITY. FIFTY-ONE STRETCHER-CASES.



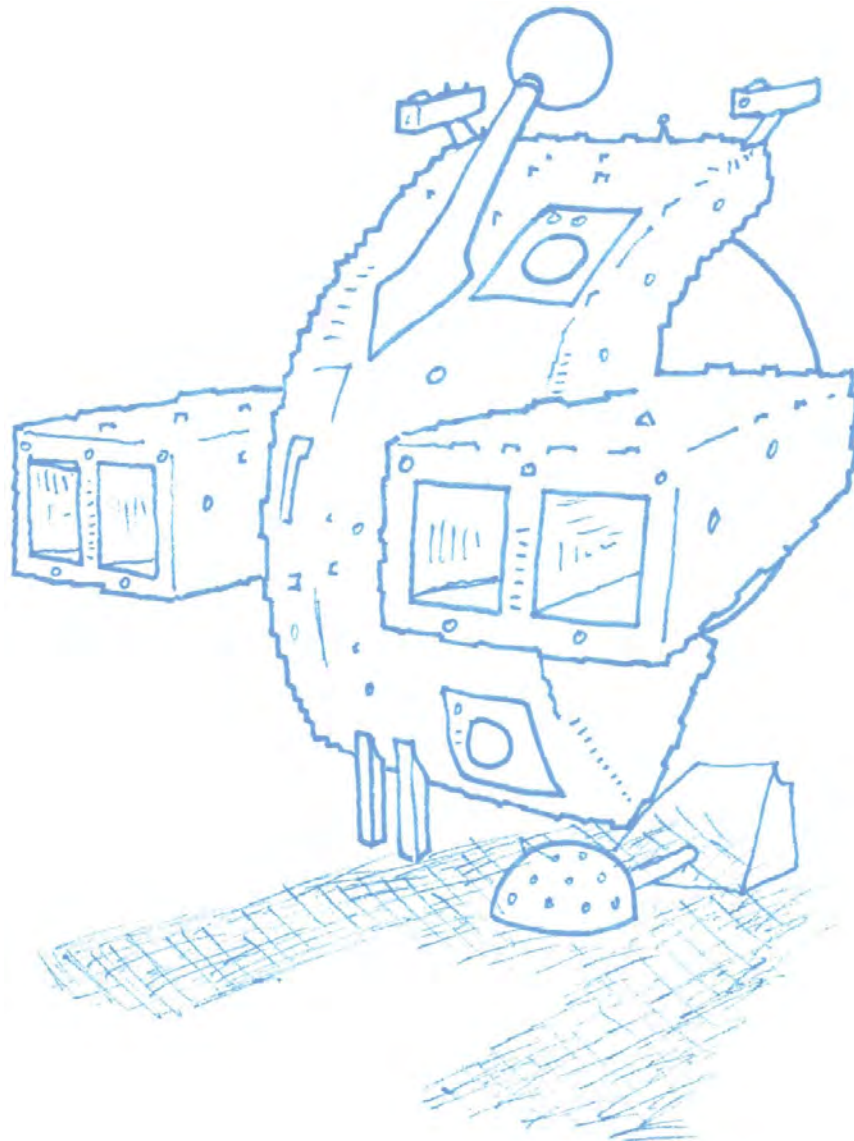
YOU WENT IN WITH WHAT, FIFTY-FOUR? INCLUDING YOURSELF?

I'D RESPOND WITH "YOU SHOULD SEE THE OTHER GUY," BUT I DON'T THINK WE EVER ACTUALLY ENGAGED THE ENEMY.









CLOSE AIR SUPPORT

Hotay  
Feb 10, 2002





THE PATIENT REGAINS CONSCIOUSNESS...

Lady Emily, are you alive?

YES. UGH... YES.



Good. We want you alive while we kill you.



AAAUGH! WHAT? HELP!

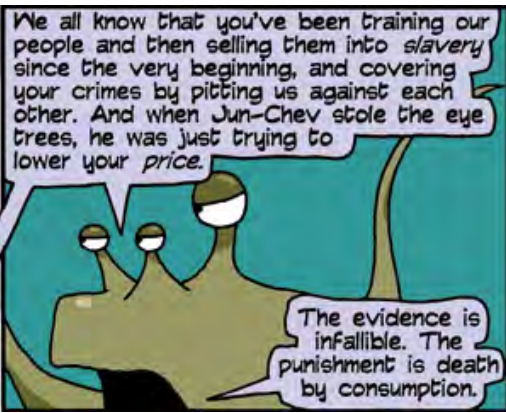
Don't play innocent. Chuck told us everything.

# Schlock Mercenary



WHERE IS HE? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HIM?

Schlock and I ate him. And then we passed around his most incriminating memories.



We all know that you've been training our people and then selling them into slavery since the very beginning, and covering your crimes by pitting us against each other. And when Jun-Chev stole the eye trees, he was just trying to lower your price.

The evidence is infallible. The punishment is death by consumption.



AS A HUMAN, I CLAIM MY RIGHT TO HUMAN JUSTICE.



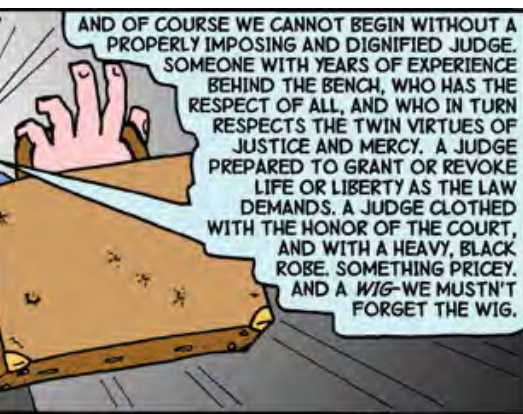
We have a human attorney on staff. He has offered to represent you.



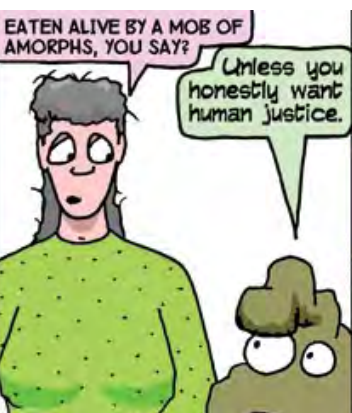
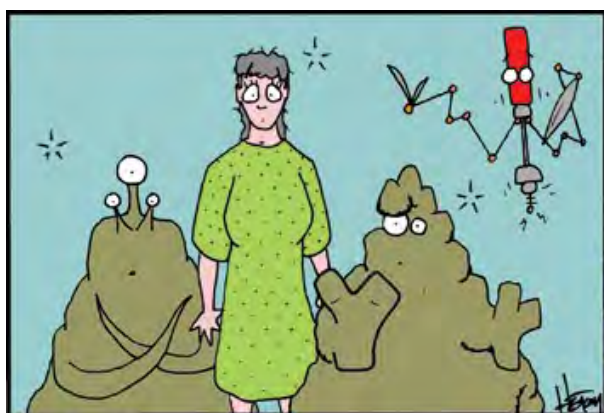
NOT SO FAST, SERGEANT. I AGREED TO DEFEND MS. VELDTFONTWEG, BUT NOT BEFORE A KANGAROO COURT OF HER ENEMIES.



WE MUST BRING IN A JURY OF HER PEERS, PREFERABLY OF SEVERAL SPECIES, AND FROM SEVERAL STAR SYSTEMS. THERE MUST BE A HANDSOMELY STERN PROSECUTING ATTORNEY, AND A FULL DEPOSITION OF WITNESSES AND EVIDENCE, INCLUDING THESE SO-CALLED 'MEME FRAGMENTS.' THERE MUST BE A DECENTLY FORMAL COURTROOM, WITH A GALLERY, AND A UNIFORMED BAILIFF.



AND OF COURSE WE CANNOT BEGIN WITHOUT A PROPERLY IMPOSING AND DIGNIFIED JUDGE. SOMEONE WITH YEARS OF EXPERIENCE BEHIND THE BENCH, WHO HAS THE RESPECT OF ALL, AND WHO IN TURN RESPECTS THE TWIN VIRTUES OF JUSTICE AND MERCY. A JUDGE PREPARED TO GRANT OR REVOKE LIFE OR LIBERTY AS THE LAW DEMANDS. A JUDGE CLOTHED WITH THE HONOR OF THE COURT, AND WITH A HEAVY, BLACK ROBE. SOMETHING PRICEY. AND A WIG- WE MUSTN'T FORGET THE WIG.



EATEN ALIVE BY A MOB OF AMORPHS, YOU SAY?

Unless you honestly want human justice.



WELL, IF YOU'RE GOING TO OFFER ME THE CHOICE...

THIS IS HOW PLEA-BARGAINING REALLY SHOULD BE DONE.