

Schlock Mercenary



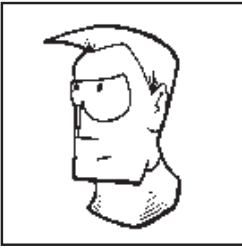
THE BLACKNESS
BETWEEN



By
Howard Tayler

with an introduction by
Laurell K. Hamilton

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.



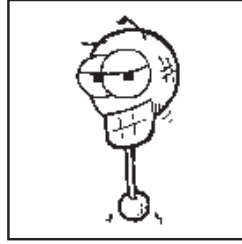
Colonel Jeeve Geeta:

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



Commander Kevyn Andreyasa:

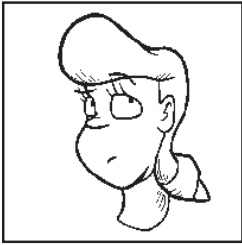
He invented a new starship drive, tried to make money with it, and NOW look where it's gotten him.



Ennesby:

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

Finally... honest work.



Admiral Breya Andreyasa:

She bought Tagon's company as a marketing gimmick, got fired, and ended up as a real live Admiral... with real live enemies.



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.

Schlock Mercenary books (in Chronological Order):

Schlock Mercenary: The Tub of Happiness

Schlock Mercenary: The Teraport Wars

Schlock Mercenary: Under New Management

Schlock Mercenary: The Blackness Between

Credits:

Created by Howard Tayler

Pencils and Inks

Howard Tayler

Colors

Jean Fioca and Howard Tayler

Bonus-story Colors (pp 90-97)

Howard Tayler

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www.melonpool.com

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Lettered with Blambot Fonts

www.blambot.com

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Read new *Schlock Mercenary* every day at www.schlockmercenary.com

The principal story in this book originally appeared on the web between August 24, 2003 and March 14, 2004.

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Introduction

Once upon a time I would not go on to the Internet. I was a technophobe. Even though the twenty plus books I've written have all been written on a computer, I still didn't like technology. I worked on a computer and that was enough. But I married a computer techie who loved all things Internet. He tried to convince me that technology was not evil. Why do you think they call it e-mail? He tried to lure me in with all the research I could do. I preferred books, newspapers, and magazines for my research, thank you. Look at all the cool stuff you can buy, he said. He should have known better, I hate to shop. (No, honest, I am a woman and I hate to shop.) Then, one morning, my husband who is even less of a morning person than I am, laughed. He laughed before he'd had his first cup of caffeine. Not a little laugh either, but one of those snorting, belly laughs. What magic was this? It was *Schlock Mercenary*.

I had to sidle over and see what was so funny before the first cup of tea or coffee. I read it, it was funny, but surely it wouldn't be that funny tomorrow. But it was that funny the next day, and the next. *Schlock* was the first thing on the internet to convince me that maybe this whole technology boom wasn't a vast conspiracy to suck time and energy away from better pursuits. I couldn't get *Schlock* in the local paper, or any paper. It was an on-line comic. An on-line daily comic. So I had to actually turn on the computer and go out on the Internet to find *Schlock*. I didn't do it every day. I'm stubborn, I resisted, but on the days that I skipped I wondered what the characters were doing. And that is another thing I like about Howard Tayler's strip. The characters are real enough that you care what they're doing. It's not just funny, but you truly want to know how the story ends. You want to know if *Schlock* and the gang pull off yet another ridiculous mercenary adventure. And if the assignment doesn't start out ridiculous, the solution will be. It is after all a comic strip, so it's funny. Some days it's a smile. Some mornings it's that belly laugh. But he manages to be funny day after day, and that I admire.

There's some humor in my books, usually sandwiched between something frightening or something sexy. But being funny day after day is a talent that few can carry off, Tayler not only carries it off, he carries his readers off. Not for a page, or a book, but for a few images and words. Such a small space to tell a story in. Such a small space to capture the attention, hold it, and even build character. There are other on-line comics, and the fact that I read any of them, you can mostly thank *Schlock Mercenary* for, but many of them are one off jokes. There's no continuity from panel to panel. It's all about the joke and not necessarily about building story, or characters. *Schlock* does it all, plus continuity. I like that in my comics.

This comic was one of the first things to lure me on the Internet. I now do some research on the Internet. I'm cautious about that. I've actually purchased some stuff on the Internet. Many of the charities we support were first discovered via the computer. I have only in the last few weeks finally done e-mail. I still say it's evil mail, but my friends are very encouraging. They're thrilled that I'm finally creeping into the current technology. I have broadened the scope of what I do on the computer, slowly, but I haven't forgotten one of the things that first made me want to explore.

Morning, alarm, don't want to get up, must get up. Stumble downstairs. Start hot water. Let dogs out. Must remember to get child up for school. Breakfast, what did we plan to have for breakfast this morning? That doesn't sound good to me, does it to you? No. My husband, Jon is already at the computer, by the time I drag the child downstairs. None of us are morning people, thank goodness. Jon is already reading, but I need that first cup of caffeine clutched in my hands before I turn to the computer screen, and there is *Schlock Mercenary*. Every morning, rain or shine, a little laugh, or a great big one, but Howard Tayler's *Schlock Mercenary* is part of our morning, every morning.

Laurell K. Hamilton
St. Louis, MO, USA
August 23, 2006





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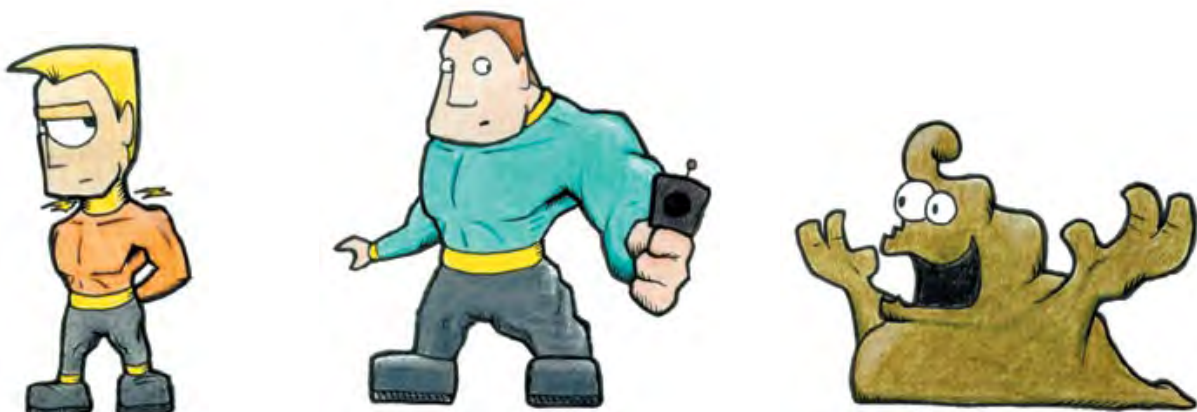


Note: "Who," you may be asking, "is this Doctor E?"

It's simple, really. Magic Dreamland Entertainment did (and still does) quite a bit of business under their acronym, M.D.E. It was only a matter of time before some Knowlsian press-schmup thought he could be clever by turning "M.D." into "Doctor." Hence "M.D.E." becomes "Doctor E."

Fez Bejo, CEO of Magic Dreamland Entertainment, and the youngest entertainment industry senior exec in three centuries, toyed briefly with the idea of changing his last name to "E," and granting himself an honorary doctorate (in "fun") from The Correspondence University of Tokyo³. Fortunately his publicist talked him out of it.

Addendum to Note: While it is still possible to get a doctorate in fun from CUT³, it has no relation to the original *Doctor Fun* found at ibiblio.org/Dave





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Note: Those readers who have, against all reason, developed a hankering for a chupaqueso will be happy to know that it's possible to make one. You will need a good Teflon skillet, a fairly sharp Teflon spatula, some sharp cheddar, some fresh Parmesan, and some Monterey Jack cheese.

1. Grate about a half-cup of cheddar and a half-cup of jack.
2. Heat the skillet, and spread the cheddar evenly in the pan. You should have an eight-inch diameter circle of grated cheese, with a little bit of pan showing through here and there.
3. As the pan gets hotter the cheese will obviously melt. Then it will toast, and you'll get cheese-grease floating on top of melted cheddar, itself on top of a layer of crusty toasted cheddar.
4. Start lifting around the edges with the spatula. You'll soon reach a point (you'll know, trust me) when the structural integrity of the crusty-toasty cheese allows you to flip the whole thing over.
5. (Speaking of "over," this is often the point where you'll get frustrated and decide to start over.)
6. After toasting side two for a moment, flip it again so the "smooth" side is down, and the recently toasted side is up.
7. You now have a cheese shell sizzling in a puddle of cheese grease. It's still flexible, but much longer and it won't be, so you'll have to work fast. Add the Jack cheese and a sprinkle of Parmesan, and then tri-fold the cheddar-shell around it.
8. Slide it out of the pan onto your plate. It's called a "chupaqueso" either because you can suck (chupa) the cheese (queso) out of the middle as you crunch away, or because this cheese (queso) thing you made sucks (chupa).
9. For added flavor you might try adding cooked-and-crumbled bacon with the jack and Parmesan. In this case you'll end up with a chupaqueso con tocino, or, as it's often pronounced in my house, "chupaqueso con SWEET TRADER OF PORK BELLIES THERE'S **BACON** IN THIS THING chomp chomp AAARGH I BURNED MY MOUTH slurp gulp chomp."

For the record, it's much easier to make a chupaqueso by sliding your credit card into a Popso 2250 Autovend. Officially licensed Tacobufa Chupaquesos are seamless, oblong, cheese-crust shells around a patented six-cheese blend. For just a little more money the Bufador Mealy-Dealy gets you a drink and a large order of Monosfritos (made with freshly-picked monos, or so I've been told).

THE MILKY-WAY GALAXY IS MIND-BOGGLINGLY BIG.

SO, COLONEL... WHERE ARE WE GOING?

LISTEN, PAL: JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN MEASURE SOMETHING IN LIGHT YEARS DOESN'T MEAN YOU TRULY UNDERSTAND HOW BIG IT REALLY IS.

WE'RE GOING TO FIND ADMIRAL BREYA, PER OUR ORDERS FROM THE GENERAL.

YOU DO REALIZE THAT SHE COULD BE ANYWHERE, RIGHT?

"EH," YOU SAY. "100,000 LIGHT YEARS IN DIAMETER, GIVE OR TAKE A FEW."

BY THE TIME YOU CARVE OUR GALAXY UP INTO UNITS YOU HAVE ACTUAL, PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH, YOU'LL HAVE TO START USING NUMBERS THAT YOU WON'T LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO COUNT TO.

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THAT'S OKAY. THE GALAXY DOESN'T CARE. IN FACT, NOT CARING IS ONE OF THE THINGS IT DOES BEST.

I'M WELL AWARE OF THAT, CAPTAIN. I KNOW THAT HER TRAIL IS ICE-COLD, TOO.

WILL YOU STOP WITH THE COY, ALREADY? IF WE'RE GOING TO FIND A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK WE HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE.

THAT, AND BEING REALLY, REALLY, REALLY BIG.

I LIKE THE HAYSTACK METAPHOR, CAPTAIN. DO YOU KNOW HOW TO FIND A NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK?

BIGGER THAN THAT, EVEN.

YEAH. DON'T DO YOUR SEWING IN THE HAY.

OH, COME ON, TAGON. YOU'RE SMARTER THAN THAT.

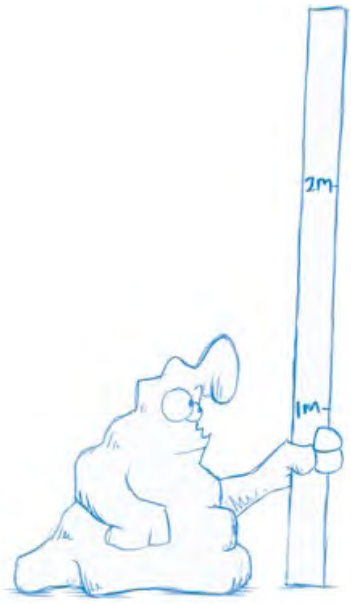
USE A MAGNET. MAKE THE NEEDLE COME TO YOU.

YOU'VE WORKED FOR HER BEFORE. HER BROTHER STILL WORKS FOR YOU. IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME.

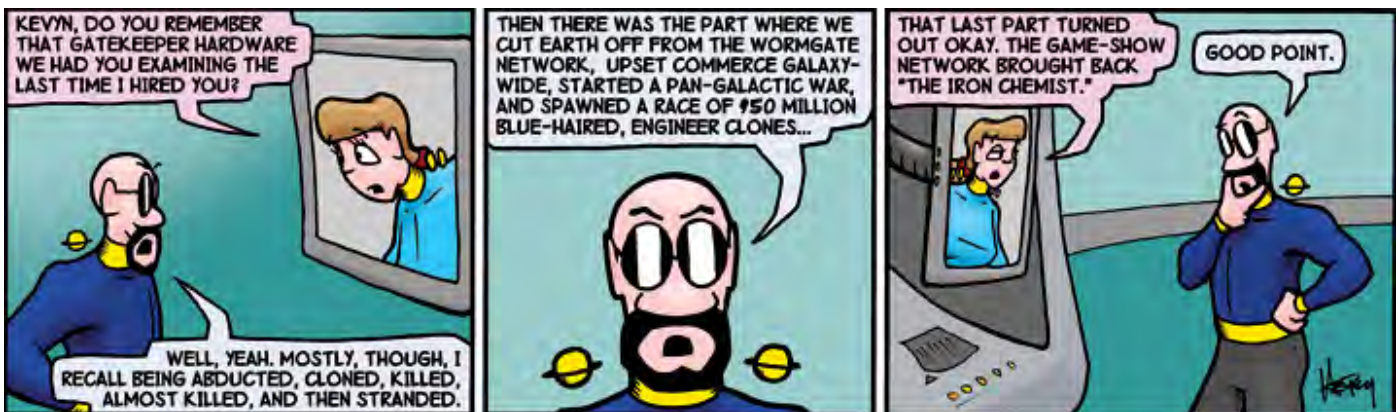
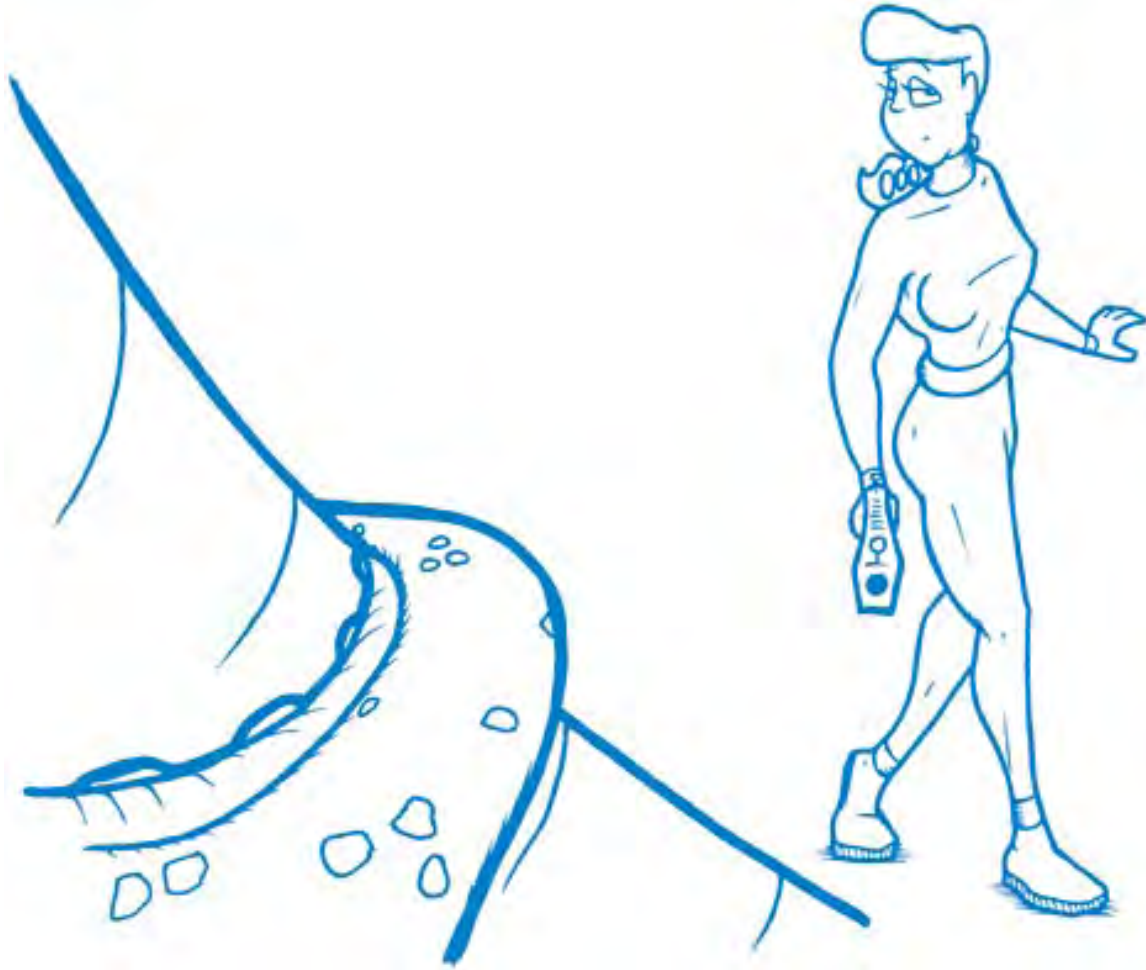
BREYA JUST MAILED ME. SHE WANTS TO HIRE US.

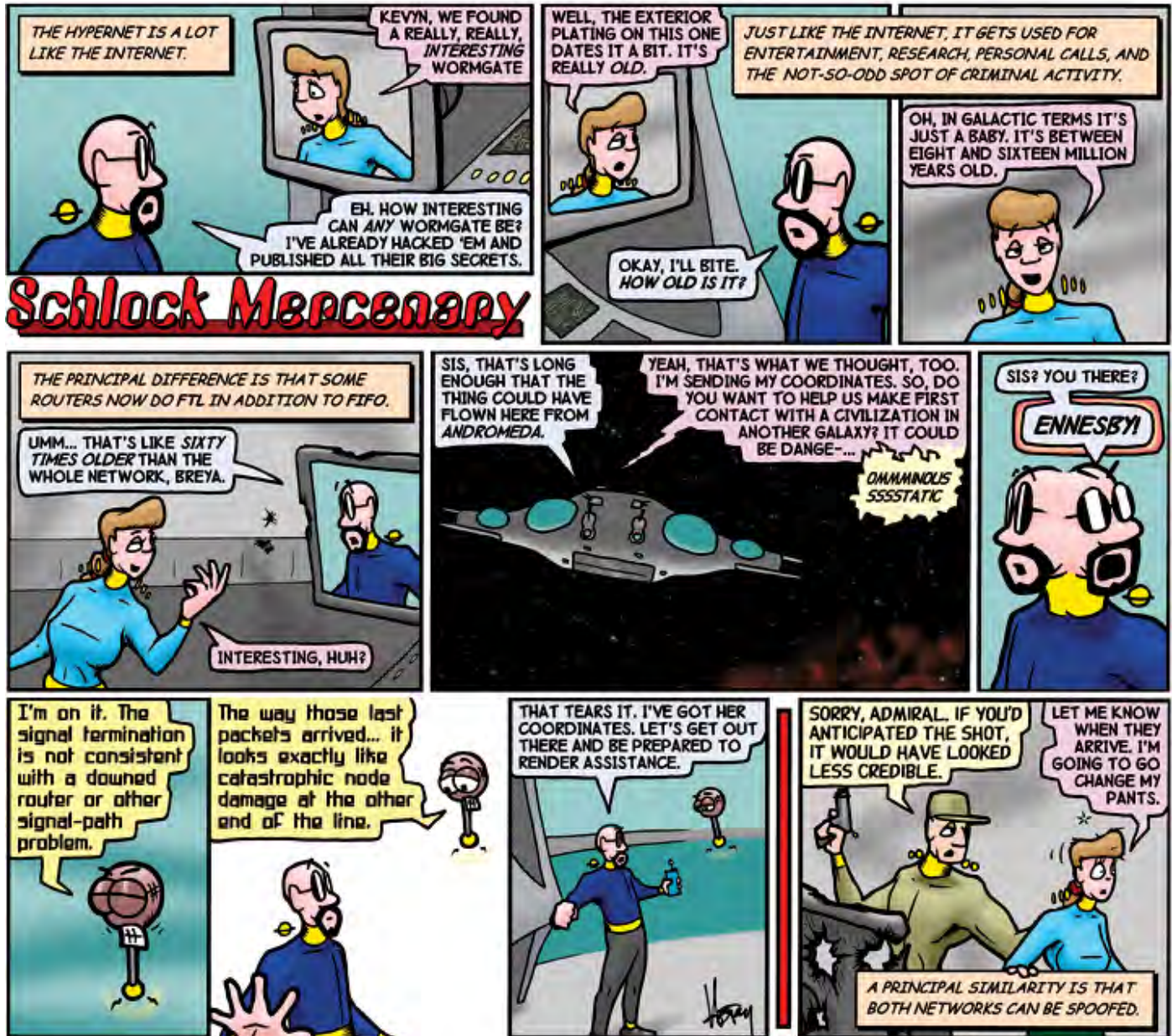
SEE?

SO BIG THAT COINCIDENCE BECOMES LIKELIHOOD. IT BOGGLES THE MIND, SO DON'T THINK TOO LONG ON IT.







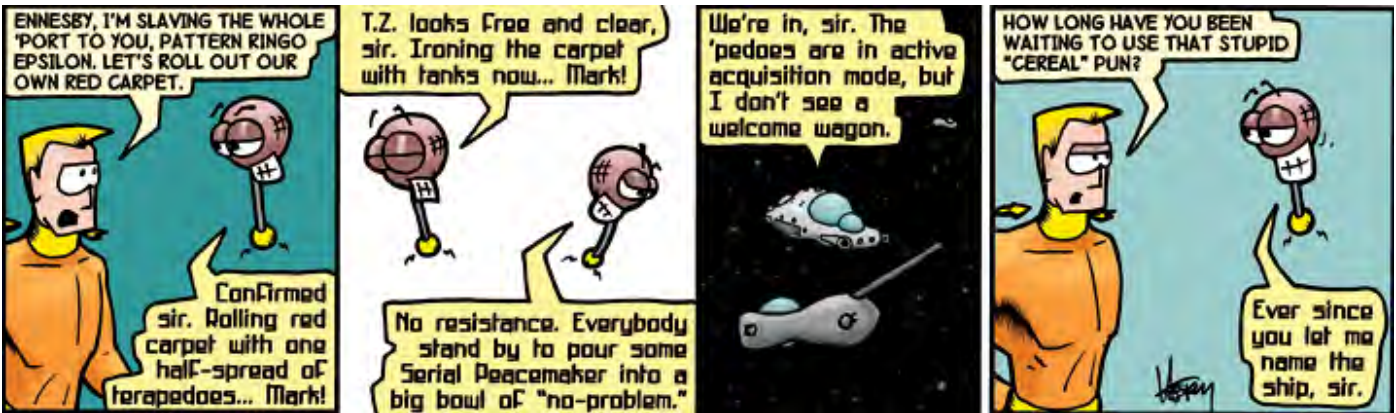


Note: In the fifth panel Kevyn seems to be saying that eight million years is time enough for something to travel between the Andromeda Galaxy and the Milky Way Galaxy, a distance of about 2.5 million light-years.

There are numerous further implications. For starters, Kevyn must not know of any way to travel between galaxies at faster than light-speed without first establishing a wormgate between them. Secondly, he must think nothing of the energy required to accelerate something that has the mass of a large planet (as wormgates do) to better than 31% cee. He must also think nothing of slowing that object back down. The astute reader may hypothesize much from this.

For confirmation of these hypotheses, we need only ask the man riding the giant Noturkey. He says "Giddyap."





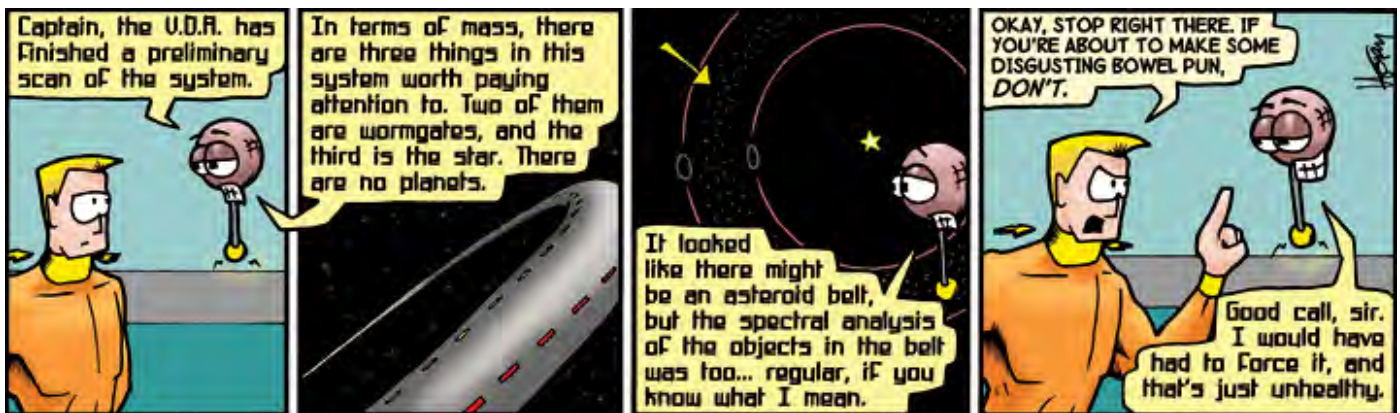
Note: The term "Welcome Wagon" was coined by Thomas Briggs to brand a joint marketing effort directed at new move-ins during the early 20th century. Welcome wagons were originally meant to arrive on doorsteps with coupons, special offers, and small gifts.

A millennium of wry misuse of the term sundered its original meaning entirely. Not only does "welcome wagon" now refer to defensive action "greeting" potential invaders, but Briggs' Welcome Wagon International has been a defense contractor for over 300 years.





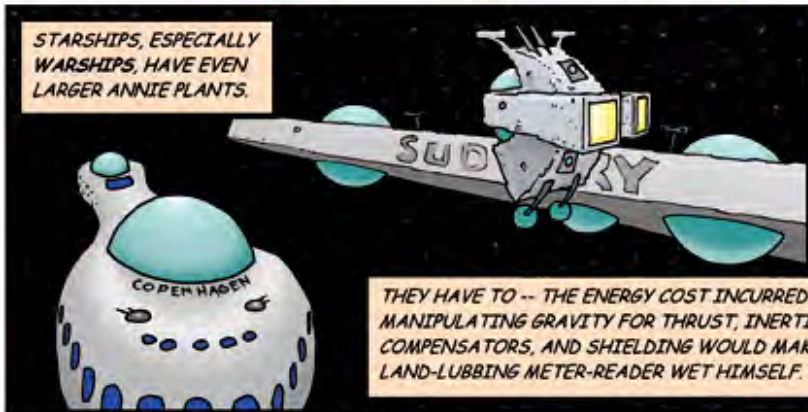
Note: The Very Dangerous Array, Mark II, is a collection of 350 teraport-enabled missiles whose targeting sensor data can be combined for aperture synthesis interferometry, in which a high-resolution image is obtained through analysis of numerous low-resolution pictures. During the 20th century the human inventors of aperture synthesis interferometry won a Nobel prize, which prize was founded almost a century earlier by Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite and smokeless gunpowder, but wanted to be remembered for something other than very dangerous explosives.





IN THE 31ST CENTURY, THE ENERGY AVAILABLE TO GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS GOES WAAAY BEYOND BEING PLENTIFUL.

ANNIHILATION REACTORS, OR "ANNIE PLANTS," BREED THEIR OWN NEUTRONIUM FUEL GRAINS, AND BY CONVERTING THAT MASS DIRECTLY TO ENERGY, HAVE POWER OUTPUT SUFFICIENT TO LIGHT CITIES FOR CENTURIES.



STARSHIPS, ESPECIALLY WARSHIPS, HAVE EVEN LARGER ANNIE PLANTS.

THEY HAVE TO -- THE ENERGY COST INCURRED BY MANIPULATING GRAVITY FOR THRUST, INERTIAL COMPENSATORS, AND SHIELDING WOULD MAKE A LAND-LUBBING METER-READER WET HIMSELF.



THERE IS A DRAWBACK, THOUGH. POWER USE ON THESE SCALES IS SO FAR OUT OF PROPORTION TO THE STRENGTH OF EVEN VERY UNCONVENTIONAL MATERIALS THAT SPACE BATTLES DO NOT LEAVE MANY MERELY WOUNDED SHIPS BEHIND. NO, WHAT GETS LEFT BEHIND IS EXPANDING CLOUDS OF WHAT USED TO BE VERY EXPENSIVE COMPOSITES.



THUS, WHEN YOU FIND A WOUNDED SHIP, YOU MAY BE LOOKING AT EVIDENCE OF EXTREME COMPETENCE.

Sir, scans have located the *Athens*. Or half of her, anyway.

Her aft half is gone, annie-plant and everything. The fore section and annie-plant are still intact.



IS THIS BATTLE-SCARRING FROM THE BUUTHANDI ATTACK, OR SOMETHING MORE RECENT?

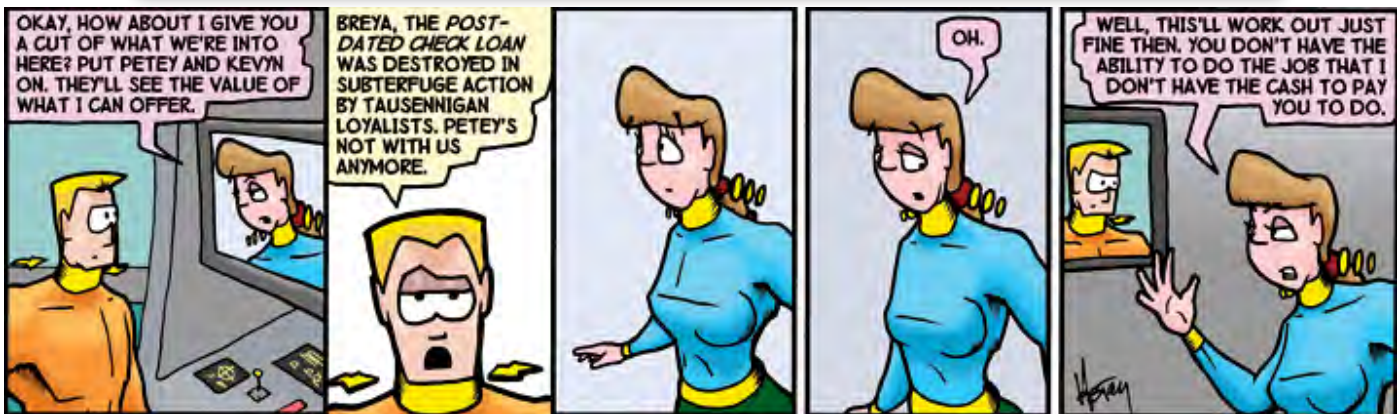
Unknown. For all I can tell, they could have accidentally blown that end of the ship off while backing out of the driveway.

THEN AGAIN, YOU MIGHT BE HOLDING PROOF OF ABSOLUTE INCOMPETENCE. BEATING THE BELL CURVE IS LIKE THAT.

Note: Here we find confirmation of at least some of what was implied regarding energy plenitude back on page 11. In order to accelerate an object up to an appreciable fraction of the speed of light, you need unholy amounts of energy. The principle should be familiar to 21st-century automobile enthusiasts, who know that going fast burns more gas.

Checking with the noturkey rider, we learn next to nothing. He says "yee-haw!"





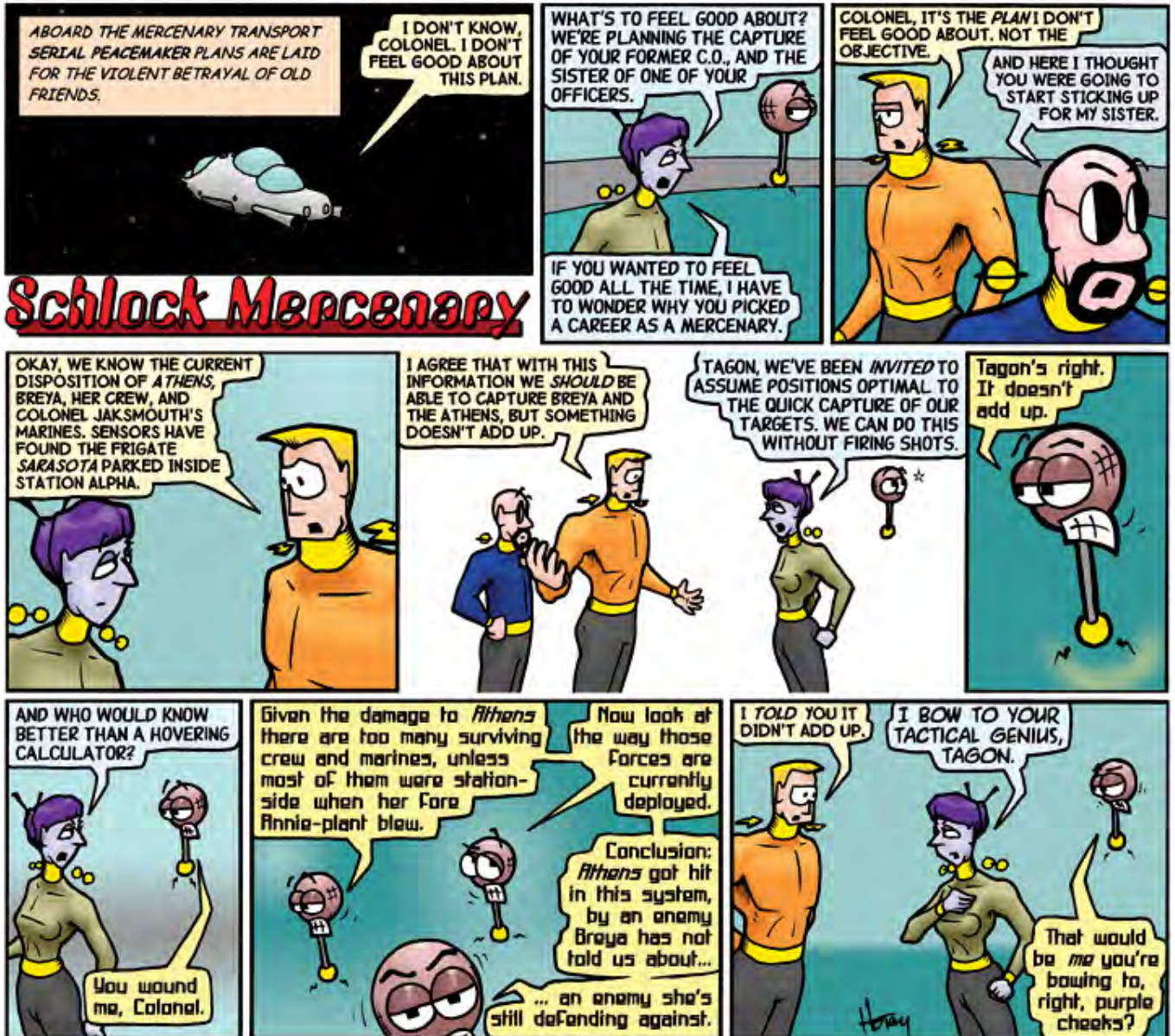


Note: Captain Tagon's current ship, the *Serial Peacemaker*, was fabricated in one of the bays of his old ship, the *Post-Dated Check Loan*. That ship was a decommissioned Tausennigan Ob'enn Thunderhead Superfortress, and its mostly-sane artificial intelligence was called "Petey."

Just because a ship appears to have been decommissioned doesn't mean the original owners don't want it back. A rescued Ob'enn gate-clone helped the fleet locate the *Post-Dated Check Loan*, (which they called the *Sword of Inevitable Justice*), and the Ob'enn then stripped all of Captain Tagon's orders from Petey.

This had unfortunate repercussions, since those orders were what put the "sane" in "mostly sane." Without them, Petey was "mostly" a number of OTHER things, including dangerous, suicidal, feral, and self-destructive.





Note: The astute, observant reader may have cause to believe that the author has mixed up “fore” and “aft” when referring to the damage done to the U.N.S. *Athens*. Indeed, on page 14 Ennesby refers to the damaged ship by saying that her “aft half is gone, annie-plant and everything.” Here on page 17, however, he says “her fore annie-plant blew.”

(For those not well-versed in nautical terminology, fore is front and aft is back.)

Brace yourself for impact... U.N.S. ships are not, strictly speaking, built like nautical ships. Both ends can be the fore or the aft — it just depends on which direction the ship is moving. Naturally, this means that in fight maneuvers, the midshipman you send aft to your cabin is going to run both fore and aft, because halfway through his run down the hall you reverse course, and now he's running in the other direction. But he's still headed to your cabin, and believe it or not, he knows exactly where he's going.

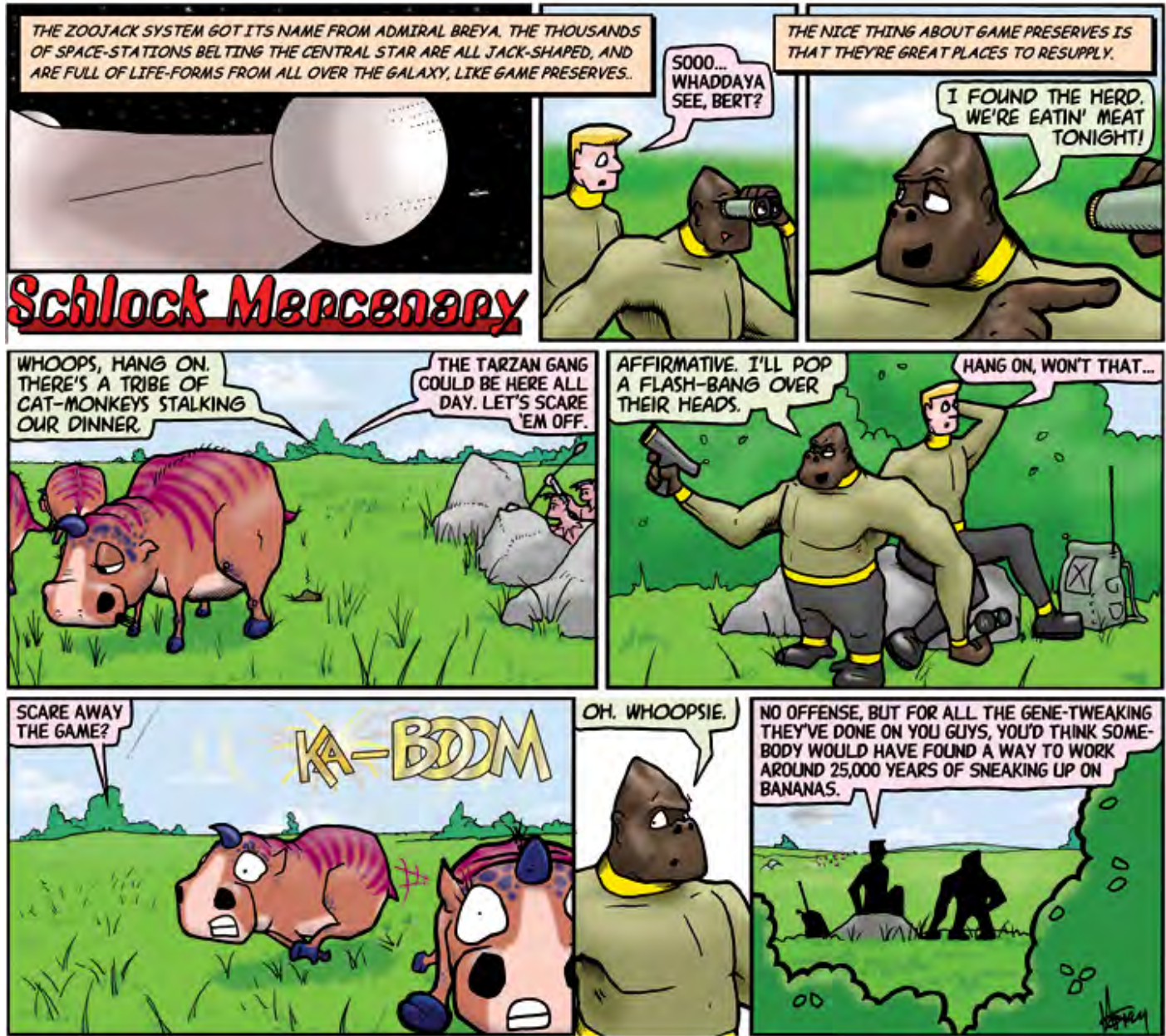
Clearly, then, the first time Ennesby spied *Athens*, she was drifting “knobby end first” (note the highly technical terminology). Now she's moving “jagged bits first.”

Don't ask what happens when she moves sideways. It's hard to tell starboard from port when there's no port in sight and there are stars everywhere.

Addendum to Note: The author reserves the right to change the dialog in today's strip and subsequently remove this footnote should it become too freakin' difficult to keep the story consistent going forward. Err... aftward. Whatever.







Note: One hazard of flirting in the text and avatar chatrooms popular during the early 21st century was that one never really knew if the recipient of the flirt was a male, a female, or an undercover agent.

By the end of that century one could flirt online with males, females, and undercover agents who might also be apes, elephants, dolphins, sky-dwarfs, purps, or even dogs.

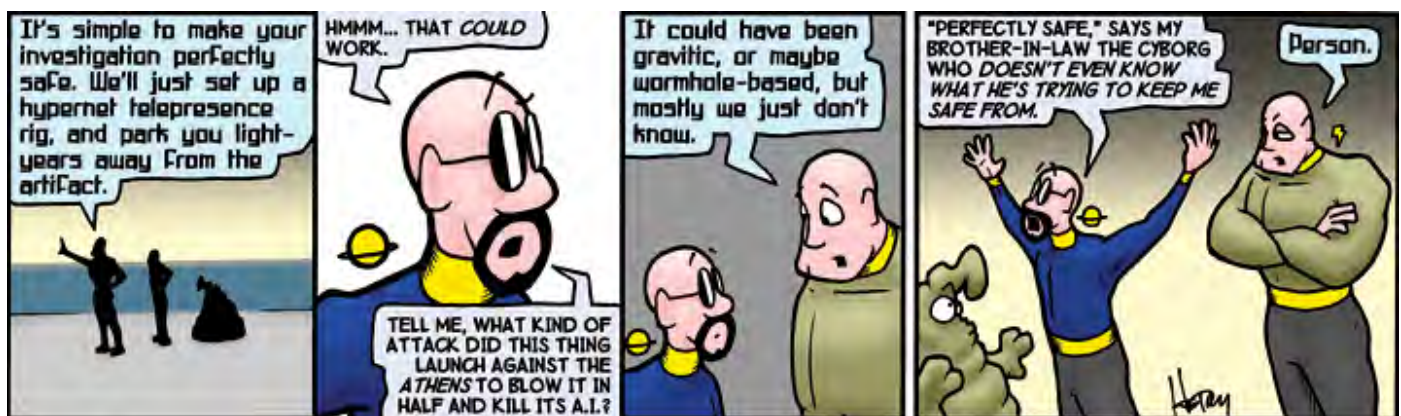
The only thing more embarrassing than discovering that the female you've been coming on to is actually a dog is discovering that she's a he, and that he's a dolphin.

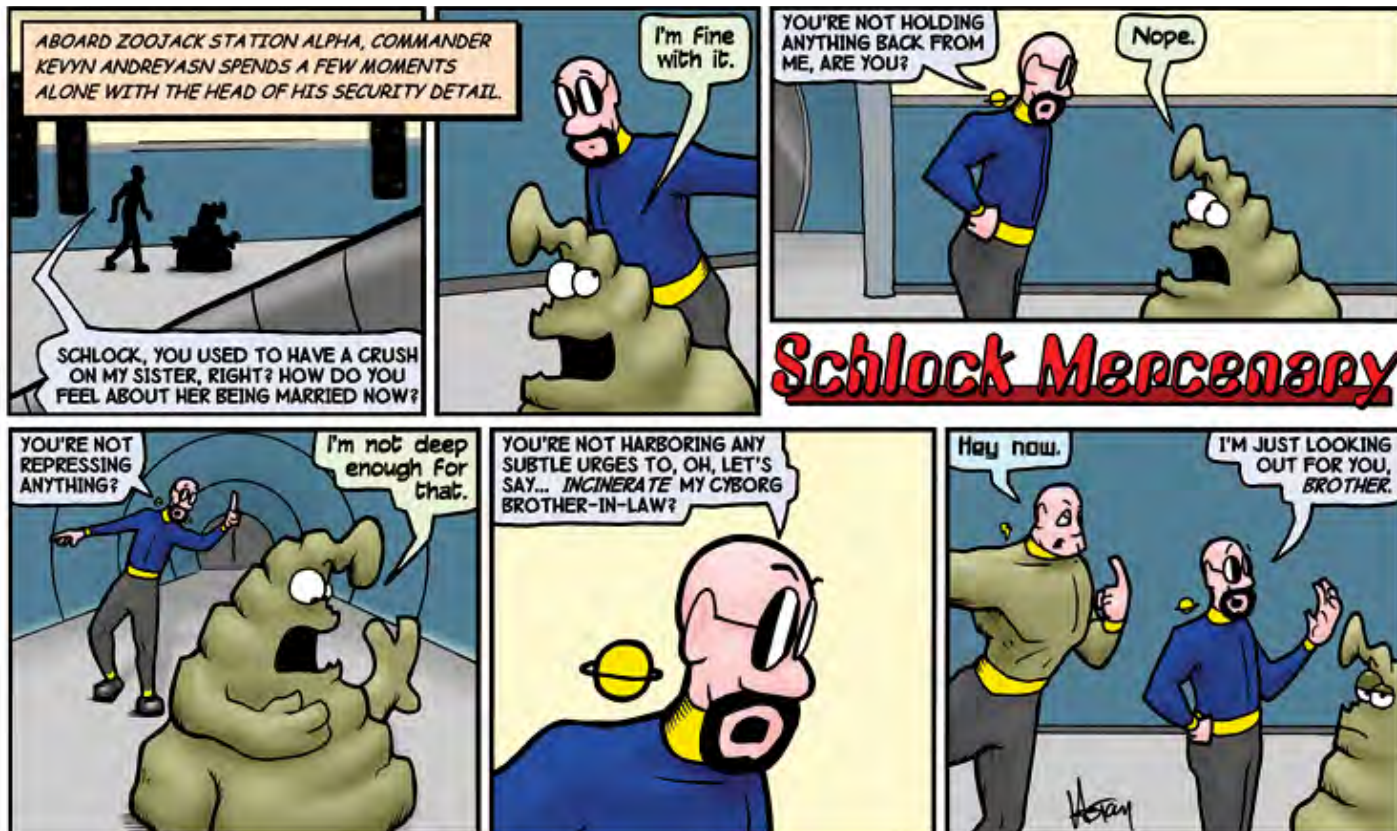


Note: In 2665, Spenseworth T. Spackham III, J.D. wrote what is possibly the finest bit of fine-print legalese in the history of contract law. Article 24.6.161-c in essence stated that Sections 26 through 28 should be interpreted as if it was "opposite day."

This would have worked out better for Spackham had the contract litigation not taken place at sea on "Talk Like a Pirate Day." He was simultaneously surprised and dismayed when the judge ordered him to walk the plank, arrrr.







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Note: Breyia's husband Haban II is a cyborg gate-clone. More famously, he is the gate-clone who alerted the galaxy to the fact that the Wormgate Corporation had been creating, interrogating, and then destroying gate-clones for tens of thousands of years.

His original designation was Haban 2132, back when he was just a particularly complex bit of alien A.I. hardware in a U.N.S. research lab. He was implanted in a human male named Doyt Gyo, and the two of them shared a body and a paycheck for several unpleasant years working as a bounty hunter. Haban's job was to work the weapons and defenses that kept Doyt alive.

In escaping from the Gatekeepers, Doyt-Haban II (the clone) sustained a fatal head-wound... fatal, that is, to Doyt's brain. Haban is happy now to be his own man, even if he never really was a man to begin with.

