

Rescue Me

Rescue Me

By Steve Bates

steve.bates.writer@gmail.com

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“Buckle up, Ginsberg. The chase is on.”

The passenger offered no acknowledgment of the captain’s directive. Having spent the past few minutes examining what passed for food in the spaceship’s galley, Ginsberg decided that hunger was preferable. Turning, he picked out a convenient target forward on the bridge and pushed off. Despite his rotund physique, he pivoted 180 degrees in midair and positioned both legs perfectly in order to cushion his impact and release into a neat bank shot. His silhouette eclipsed pale blue starlight as he sailed past the forward view screen on a direct line toward his seat. He settled in next to the captain and affixed his retaining straps.

Captain Richard Tolleson nodded in appreciation of the man’s performance. Harsh interior lighting emphasized scattered wrinkles and deepening laugh lines on the captain’s face. But his Hawaiian shirt, cutoff shorts, slender build, piercing blue eyes and breezy smile belied his age. Throw in a three-day stubble and a dense mane of curly brown hair spilling every which way, and he could easily be mistaken for a surfer dude. That was just fine with Tolleson. With no boss and no crew, he had no one to impress. Except, perhaps, Janie.

Neither Tolleson nor Interpol Officer Janie Peralta could abide the *Star Wars Cantinas*--with their genetically modified, imitation alien characters and vastly overpriced cocktails--found on every space station and tourist trap among the Inner Planets. During breaks from the solitude

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of spaceflight, the two pilots crossed paths often at the Bottom of the Barrel, a spacer dive tucked away in a corner of a Mars orbital station. As the drinks flowed, they exchanged information-- and, eventually, much more. Tolleson wasn't sure where the personal side of the relationship was going, but the tips Janie shared were always gold.

Tapping worn keys on a vintage control panel, Tolleson locked in new coordinates, boosted his engines to full power and spoke softly into his comm unit, which dangled from his left ear. "Thanks, Janie. That is, Officer Peralta. I owe you."

He tilted his head toward his passenger. "I'm tracking three Interpol cruisers and one additional craft. Interpol believes that the bogey is Hughes."

"The most wanted man in the solar system," said Ginsberg with a double dose of sarcasm. "What I can't understand is how he could escape from a supermax prison buried deep in a Brazilian rain forest."

"You're the journalist; you tell me," said the captain. "All I know is that the guy has a twenty-million-dollar price on his head."

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Eighteen months earlier, Collin Hughes, a veteran diplomat representing the Alliance of North and South America, arrived at a point beyond the asteroid belt for a much-anticipated rendezvous. Awaiting him was a modest-sized, oblong spacecraft with a surface that shimmered like a river of mercury. The Earth diplomat was welcomed aboard by graceful beings with large, nearly hairless heads and rubbery, light-gray skin. The aliens ranged in height from just over one meter to more than two, and each walked on three legs, though Hughes soon realized that one leg doubled as an arm. Over the course of 90 minutes, the aliens' translation computer enabled a pleasant but vapid conversation. By the time he departed, Hughes had not even learned the name

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that the aliens called themselves, though the media quickly filled that vacuum with the moniker “Tripods”. Hughes informed President Ortega that the visitors’ technology was far beyond anything that humanity could comprehend.

###

In the decades prior to First Contact, billions on Earth had been excited, yet somewhat unnerved, by the discovery of invertebrate fossils on Mars and then living, squid-like creatures in a sea on Jupiter’s moon Europa. No one was prepared for an encounter with an advanced civilization. Fear, anger and hatred gripped Earth. Fueled by bloggers like Ginsberg, the rumors multiplied: The aliens could impersonate humans, could live forever, could disintegrate a planet just by looking at it cross-eyed. They might even have a flotilla of warships prepared to invade. Politicians attempted to one-up each other with pledges to launch pre-emptive strikes against the intruders.

Amid the hysteria, Hughes was branded a traitor for not compelling the aliens to share their technology. He was charged with treason, convicted, and given a life sentence. After his astonishing escape, the Alliance was assailed by unrelenting protests at home and condemnation from every foreign government. Yet the stakes were far greater than mere humiliation: Hughes had every incentive to seek asylum from the aliens and to assist them if they chose to wage war against Earth.

News headlines scrolled across the lower portion of Ginsberg’s field of view, courtesy of the latest implanted chips. He was attired in the black, body-molded suit that was all the rage back on Earth, even though it accentuated his excessive weight. Dark, dispassionate eyes were sunken in a flabby, round face. Maybe it was his displeasing appearance, or perhaps it was his often-controversial reporting, that made him notoriously reluctant to leave his cabin on an

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isolated Idaho mountaintop. Regardless, the writer had a huge following on Earth and the settlements on Luna and Mars.

The latest-generation fusion ion engines sent a faint purring through the spacecraft. The captain had not slept since picking up Ginsberg from a station in Earth orbit 28 hours earlier, so he popped another stimulant. Before long, he was buzzing in sync with the engines, willing them to a higher gear. Catching up with the Interpol cruisers wouldn't take long. *Reliant One* was the fastest rescue ship around, despite its hulking, old bridge and body. Tolleson had spent his last dime making sure of that.

“You know, I rarely pick up passengers at space stations. But business is slow, and your offer was too generous to turn down,” said Tolleson. He paused to verify that he was trimming the distance to the Interpol ships and their prey. “It seems like every month some pilot advertises a new space tourist rescue service. These guys are undercutting my prices, making false claims and ganging up against me.”

“And you certainly can't be everywhere at once,” the journalist observed, with no pretense of sympathy.

“Not unless I steal the aliens' ship and get my hands on the jump drive you wrote about in your blog,” Tolleson said with a wry smile.

Ginsberg offered no rejoinder.

The jump drive, the holy grail of space travel, was the stuff of countless sci-fi yarns, graduate student dissertations and research grants. There was still no proof that anything could move faster than light. Yet attaining one-tenth or even one-hundredth of that speed would be a spectacular advancement. Ginsberg's dubious blog posting on the subject featured a little-known

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scientist warning that the aliens might employ a jump drive to sneak up on Earth and wreak unspeakable havoc.

A crackle heralded an incoming message.

“... trying to reach Deep Space Rescue Services. Do you read? Over. Do you read?”

Tolleson’s computer identified the source of the signal. One Federico Martin, a Texan and part owner of a diamond mine in South Africa. He was flying his own ship, not a rental.

Tolleson activated his comm. “Mr. Martin, aloha. This is Captain Tolleson of Deep Space Rescue Services.”

“Oh, thank God. I need immediate rescue. Do you read me? Immediate.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“My fuel and oxygen levels were fine when I left Mars. I took a little detour to get a close look at the comet everyone’s talking about, and it nearly dragged me out to oblivion. I’m stranded, and I’ll be out of air in, like, 24 hours. Maybe less.”

“Mr. Martin, everything’s going to be fine. I’m checking your policy now and ... oh dear, it seems that you purchased the Silver Rescue Service Plan. Did you know that?”

“Uh, well, I guess so. But you have to rescue me. That’s what you do, right?”

“Correct. But understand that you will be my lowest priority. Now, if you would like to upgrade to the Gold or Platinum Plan, I can move you to the top of my list.”

Martin’s tone changed. “I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to be blackmailed by some hustler in a space junker. I should have bought a policy from a legitimate rescue service.”

“I understand, sir. For now, I recommend that you move to your airlock and cut off oxygen to the rest of the ship. That should buy you another couple days. For your next journey,

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may I suggest one of the Disney or Marriott resorts on Luna or Mars? I'm partial to the *Cthulhu's Caves* theme park on the back side of Luna, myself."

Martin said some very bad words, so the captain killed the connection on his wearable. The device was rapidly approaching antique status, but he still resisted implants. Chips had obvious appeal: identification, communications, money and entertainment systems all linked directly to one's neurons. But Tolleson was old school.

"We're about 1,500 kilometers out and closing fast on the Interpol cruisers, with the fugitive another 500 clicks or so beyond," he told Ginsberg. "Soon we'll have a vid connection."

"I would like to monitor the situation from a safe distance," said the writer. "Please get just close enough for the vid, then drop me off at the nearest station."

"As you wish. Remember, you promised not to disclose anything about me or my business--other than to credit Deep Space Rescue Services for your transportation."

"The agreement is indelibly etched upon my mind."

Ginsberg wasn't a likable person; no journalist was. Tolleson was grateful that, at least so far, the blogger had not spoken a word about Tolleson's own day of infamy.

The Second Manhattan Project, begun in 2041 amid great fanfare, had been designed to wall off, drain and reclaim lower Manhattan from the risen sea. Never mind that Tolleson, as project manager, had fought resolutely against budget cuts and was cleared of wrongdoing after a temporary wall failed, whereas two public officials served time for their culpability in the deaths of 78 workers. Tolleson's rising star had flamed out. With no career or family to fall back on, he invested in an aging cruiser and launched the first space tourist rescue business. He had never returned to the surface of his native planet, but he had never outrun the pain, either.

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A grainy image of three spaceships appeared; the captain projected it onto the forward view screen. The two large ships in the foreground were Interpol cruisers; the third craft likely bore Hughes. As the vid gained clarity, a shuttle could be seen detaching from one of the Interpol ships. A female voice demanded that the fugitive shut down his engines and surrender. That was Janie Peralta aboard the shuttle.

Tolleson noticed that Ginsberg was gripping his armrests tightly. His face was pallid, as if he had left all of his blood back in Earth orbit.

“Space sickness?” the captain inquired.

“N-no, I don’t think so. Just, ah, wondering if Hughes’s ship is armed.”

“We’ll find out soon enough, won’t we?”

The bridge of Tolleson’s ship was lit up by rotating orange strobe lights.

“This isn’t good,” said Tolleson. “Engine two is starting to overheat.”

He throttled back power, studied readings for a long minute, then let out a deep breath.

“Okay, the coolant system became overtaxed, but it should be fine.”

Interpol chatter indicated that the fugitive’s engines had shut down.

“Prepare to be boarded,” Officer Peralta broadcast.

As the shuttle advanced to about 300 meters from its target, Hughes fired up his engines and headed directly toward Peralta. She began to maneuver, but it was obvious that she would not get clear in time.

A fierce explosion illuminated *Reliant One’s* view screen and reflected mercilessly throughout the interior. When the captain and his passenger recovered their vision, they could make out the shuttle tumbling in the distance. The fugitive’s craft had been vaporized.

“Shuttle returning to bay,” Peralta reported, her voice cracking.

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Tolleson whistled, adding: “Those Interpol boys sure can shoot.”

His passenger seemed to have recovered from his discomfort. “Now that the fugitive ship has been destroyed, we’ll never know with certainty whether Hughes was on it,” he said. “Will the authorities continue to search for him?”

“No. The Alliance--and, of course, your blog--will announce that the traitor has been killed after a thrilling chase. End of story. Everyone lives happily ever after.”

Ginsberg returned his attention to his news feed, not bothering to record anything about the battle for what surely would be his career-defining blog posting.

Presently, blaring klaxons and flashing red lights pierced the calm. Tolleson cursed as he scanned readings and mashed buttons. A bank of controls lit up in front of Ginsberg.

“You’re in command of the bridge,” the captain announced. “I’ve got to determine what’s wrong with the coolant system. If it’s a leak, well, it damn well better not be. Keep your comm open, and don’t touch anything unless I tell you to.”

Tolleson vaulted through the rear hatch and raced toward the engine room. He was less than 30 meters from it when his comm buzzed.

“Deep Space Rescue Services, I demand that you rescue me immediately.” It was a much-too-familiar voice.

“Mr. Martin? Are you in your airlock?”

“Yes, but I’m claustrophobic, and I can’t put up with this nonsense much longer. How long before you get here?”

“Look, Mr. Martin, I’ve got a situation, so you’re going to have to make do.”

“That’s it. I’m calling Interpol.”

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“Interpol ignores private pilots unless they commit a serious crime. If you don’t upgrade your policy and your oxygen runs out, you’ll have to use your ship’s cryogenic suspension unit until I arrive.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Those things have only an 80 percent survival rate.”

“Actually, it’s closer to 60 percent.”

“Sixty!”

“Your choice,” said the captain before he terminated the connection again and stood before the massive, pulsating monster that was his ship’s engine complex.

“Ginsberg, this is Tolleson. Do you copy?”

“Loud and clear, Captain.”

“Good. Now listen carefully and do exactly what I tell you. On the console in front of your seat there are two blue lights. Beneath the one on the left is a dial. Turn it to “Preset 3”. Then find the button beneath the second light. Press it firmly.”

“What does it do?”

“It saves our asses, that’s what it does. This is the jump drive that the Tripods developed. It will take us almost instantaneously to Mars Orbital Base Four, which has the closest repair bay that can prevent a catastrophic coolant system rupture. We have literally no time. Activate the drive now.”

“But--but we can’t. This will cause an unknown amount of collateral damage--if not here, surely at our destination. We might kill everyone on the Mars base.”

“Just press the button, Ginsberg! Press the goddamn button right now!”

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After a few heartbeats, the passenger responded: “I am very sorry. I cannot.” He clambered over his seat and made his way to the rear of the cabin, where he located the hatch to the shuttle bay. He braced himself, gripped the latch and turned it hard.

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The captain found Ginsberg seated in the shuttle, attempting frantically to separate it from *Reliant One*.

“The shuttle is keyed to my brainwave pattern,” Tolleson said calmly. “Please join me back on the bridge.”

The captain located the twin blue lights. He turned the dial to “Preset 3”. He pressed the adjacent button. Instead of traveling instantaneously to the Mars station, the ship filled with the sounds of an ancient recording.

*Wasting away again in Margaritaville
Searching for my lost shaker of salt...*

The blogger appeared utterly confused.

“The engines and coolant system are fine. No problem that a little duct tape can’t handle for a few days,” said Tolleson.

His passenger looked at him askance.

“I suppose I owe you a better explanation,” Tolleson continued. “About two years ago, I detected a strange transmission. Some sort of repeating message; no language I could recognize; unusual frequency; very low power. I traced it to a dense region of the asteroid belt and came upon a small, heavily damaged ship. A ship like none I had ever seen.

“I linked my airlock to it, but the pilot resisted coming aboard. I guess he--I think it was a he--wasn’t sure that he could breathe our air. We traded gestures, and he moved tentatively into my ship. Once he reached the bridge, he sent a brief transmission. Then he just stood there, like

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he was asleep or in suspended animation. This went on for a few minutes. Then suddenly the mother ship arrived, in all of its glory.”

The blogger listened intently.

“Apparently, the juvenile Tripod had taken the family shuttle out for an unauthorized spin and crashed it all to hell in a region of ricocheting rocks that few sober human pilots would dare approach. The aliens were very grateful that I had rescued him, so I asked them to meet with an official representative of our planet. I thought: What a great opportunity for Earth to establish relations with this species and to learn from them. And I hoped that my small role in fostering this relationship would help make amends for....” Tolleson dropped his eyes momentarily.

“Anyway, I used a contact from my days in the business world to notify the Alliance government that I had encountered an alien ship and that a parlay was possible. About two weeks later, the infamous meeting between Hughes and the Tripods occurred.”

The captain came almost nose to nose with his passenger.

“Fast forward to the present,” Tolleson said. “Maybe I’m paranoid about spies working for my competitors, but from the minute you came onboard I sensed that something was not right. You seemed surprisingly familiar with space travel for a person who rarely leaves his home. You appeared quite agile for a man of your size. Your speech and clothes were rather sophisticated and formal for a blogger. You looked unusually tense when it appeared that Officer Peralta was about to confirm the identity of the occupant of the fugitive ship. And you were overly concerned about proof of Hughes’s death and whether there would be any further pursuit of him. So I concocted a little experiment.

“Back when I met the Tripods, I asked them how they were able reach my ship so quickly after Junior phoned home. Their computer got tripped up on several words that probably have no

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equivalent in English; I could make out terms such as ‘space-time’ and ‘fissure’ and “temporary’. I understood them to say that they have two drives--a conventional propulsion system and one that is highly advanced but can damage anything near their ship while it is engaged. That seemed odd to me, as I had detected no anomalies when they came to recover their young shuttle pilot. I suspected that they were testing me in some way.

“When I contacted the Alliance government, I told them that the Tripods claimed to have a jump drive that poses a danger to populated areas. Only a small number of Alliance officials--including Hughes--know about this supposed side effect. None of the rumors and blog posts even hinted about it. Your stated reason for refusing to activate what you believed to be a jump drive--while noble--told me exactly what I needed to know.”

The passenger floated slowly toward the forward view screen and gazed longingly at the heavens. “I had so little time,” he said. “After some influential friends of mine lavished gifts on certain prison officials, I slipped out and made my way to Hong Kong. I had come up through the intelligence community, so I had a habit of stashing hard currency and ID chips in strategic locations in case of something unforeseen like ... that witch hunt.

“Because he is a recluse, Ginsberg seemed like a safe person to impersonate for a brief interval. I paid substantial bribes to have a new ID chip programmed and implanted and for prosthetics making me appear to gain 120 kilos. When I hired you, I was hoping for an uneventful journey to some remote outpost where I could alter my identity yet again and vanish forever. It nearly worked.”

He spun slowly, found a handhold, and raised his chin.

“Twenty million dollars. That’s some reward, captain. How do you plan to spend it?”

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“Yes, that’s some reward. Enough to settle on a private, terraformed asteroid without a care for the rest of my life. But that’s not me, Mr. Hughes. I might be pushing 80, but I would be bored to death if I retired.

“I have a much greater need than money,” Tolleson continued. “I need a partner. One I can trust. I figure that a man with a price on his head is one who would be supremely motivated to cooperate in all matters. Don’t you agree?”

For the first time since they met, something approaching a sincere smile formed on the passenger’s face.

“Let me determine whether I understand you correctly,” he said. “You are willing to keep my identity secret and employ me in your business?”

“Yes. But only if you ditch that awful suit for something more appropriate. Once we can afford a second ship, you’ll be its captain. You don’t happen to have any money left from that stash of yours?”

“Not enough to purchase a spaceship. But perhaps it will be adequate for a down payment.”

Tolleson shook Hughes’s hand vigorously and exclaimed: “Welcome to the company.”

“Just one question,” Hughes said. “With all of Earth stirred up about the aliens, aren’t you concerned that there will be a war? That would severely restrict space tourism.”

“There isn’t going to be a war. The Tripods had entered our solar system on a little vacation. They had heard great things about Saturn’s rings and the vapor geyser emanating from its moon, Enceladus, in particular. Once they had recovered their misbehaving family member, seen the sights and left you heading back to Earth awe-struck, they were anxious to push on to their next destination. They are long gone.”

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“Shouldn’t leaders on Earth be informed that the danger is past?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, there have been no serious threats of war among adversaries on Earth since we learned of our three-legged visitors. And, preparing for possible confrontation with an external foe is good for the global economy.”

“Have you ever considered running for office?” inquired Hughes.

Tolleson laughed heartily.

Hughes frowned. “Obviously, I was not aboard the craft that Interpol blasted to atoms. Who was?”

“The ship was empty and remote controlled. It made for a hell of a show, though, didn’t it?”

“And of course you knew all along.”

“I have a close relationship with Interpol. The Alliance feared that you had left Earth and would never be caught, so they decided to save face by manufacturing a heroic end to the saga. The fact that you were nearby to witness it was simply fortuitous.”

“With all due respect, captain, what else aren’t you telling me?” asked Hughes.

A crackle commenced once again.

“Hold on,” said Tolleson.

“... decided to pay your outrageous extortion demand, but only if you rescue me right now. Are you coming or not?”

The captain manipulated controls. A pale violet haze enveloped the ship. A cluster of stars directly ahead danced, then dimmed, then all but disappeared.

With a wink to Hughes, Tolleson assured his customer:

“We’ll be there in no time at all.”

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END