

WANT GOLD

by James R. Hardin

Illiterate extraterrestrial extortionists! Not the way we'd hoped our first contact with an alien race would go.

The spacecraft had hung in geosynchronous orbit above the eastern United States for three weeks. Then one day the mayor of Brandenburg, Kentucky, reported that a large box had suddenly appeared about two feet above the surface of High Street and dropped to the ground. Something resembling a large, clunky laptop had fallen out of it before the box vanished. A message was displayed on its screen: "WE STUDY YOU KNOW MUCH KNOW GOLD FORT KNOX GOLD RARE WANT GOLD."

Brandenburg is about 13 miles from Fort Knox. Suddenly this first encounter looked more like a trade negotiation than a diplomatic mission. So four of us flew to Brandenburg: the president of the United States, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the head of NASA, and me, an experienced negotiator of trade deals with foreign governments.

Since I had the trade expertise, and was the lowest-ranking person among us and therefore the easiest to blame if anything went wrong, they set me down in front of the alien communications console. The device was large and heavy, its parts didn't fit together well, and there was a crack in the low-resolution, monochrome screen. The keyboard consisted only of the capital letters A through Z arranged alphabetically instead of in QWERTY order and the digits 0 through 9 below them. It looked like it had been cobbled together from spare parts. Not what I expected from a civilization with interstellar spacecraft.

But I'd let the scientists worry about that. My job was to get the best deal we could. I read the aliens' message and smiled. "Gold must really be rare where they come from, if they're willing to come all this way to get it," I said. "That puts us in a good bargaining position."

I typed, "HELLO FROM EARTH WE WOULD BE HAPPY TO DISCUSS TRADE" I really wished they had included punctuation on their console.

Words appeared on the screen below mine. "NOT TRADE GIVE"

I thought a moment and started typing. "WHY SHOULD"

Other words interrupted mine. "DEMONSTRATION WHAT WORD CITY YOU ARE"

I untangled that, then typed, "BRANDENBURG"

"WHAT WORD ALL GO AWAY"

Um ... "MAYBE EVACUATE"

"EVACUATE BRANDENBURG 100 MINUTE"

"WHY"

"DEMONSTRATION"

The mayor and police wasted no time. Sirens were wailing even before we made it to our waiting SUV. We drove about 30 miles from the city. Ninety-nine minutes later, the mayor called and said they'd cleared everyone except a few dozen conspiracy theorists downtown who were sure the messages and telescope images were part of some government hoax. I typed, "WAIT CITY IS NOT QUITE EMPTY"

"TOO BAD WATCH"

The nearby clouds flashed red for an instant. Smoke and debris sprayed into the air. A thunderclap, faint but ominous, reached us a couple of minutes later. Sally Sanchez, NASA, watching her satellite feeds, confirmed that Brandenburg was now just a ragged hole in the ground.

Joseph Davis, the military guy, clenched his fists. "I'd sure love to target a nuke on that little ship of theirs! But we don't have anything that can reach them clear up there."

I said, "Then our bargaining position doesn't look so great anymore." "HOW MUCH GOLD"

"WANT CUBE 100 100 100 WE KNOW 100 BIGGEST NUMBER YOU UNDERSTAND"

Davis spluttered, "What! Where'd they get that crazy idea? Tell them—"

I held up a hand. "I'm telling them nothing. This might be useful. Maybe they

learned our math from *Sesame Street* reruns."

I typed, "100 WHAT MILLIMETERS"

"LAUGH INCH"

"Darn," I muttered. "It was worth a try."

Sanchez typed furiously then looked up from her computer. "A solid gold cube 100 inches on each edge would take about 7 percent of what's in Fort Knox. And it would be worth around 20 billion dollars."

"Probably worth it just to get rid of them," President Darla Longer said.

"NEED GOLD NOW 100 LIMIT MASS BACK FOR MORE LATER"

Longer's face fell even further, Davis's became even redder, but mine turned thoughtful. "This doesn't read like a government operation, even a totalitarian one. I think these guys are pirates on the run. And something's happened to make them move before they were ready. Maybe their own law enforcement is closing in on them."

"Regardless," Longer said, "I guess we have to pay them. Every time."

"Maybe," I said slowly. I typed, "THAT IS A LOT OF GOLD WE NEED SOME TIME TO GATHER IT AND MAKE YOUR CUBE"

"100 HOURS WE SEND BOX FORT KNOX WE SET CONTROLS IT COME BACK TO US JUST PUSH BUTTON"

Interesting! "REQUEST YOU SEND TWO BOXES WE CAN LOAD YOUR NEXT SHIPMENT IN THE SECOND BOX BEFORE YOU RETURN"

"What!" exclaimed Longer. "Why are you being so helpful to them? What kind of negotiator are you?"

"A good one," I said. "General Davis, we need to talk."

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Four days and four hours later, two enormous crates materialized about two feet above the pavement at the main gate of Fort Knox and dropped to Earth with deafening thuds. The work crew opened the door on one and slowly drove the custom cart carrying the huge, shiny gold cube into it. After closing the door, a worker pressed the button on the side of the box. It vanished with a whoosh as air filled the suddenly empty

volume.

Longer looked at Davis. "So you think they won't find the tactical nuke in that cube before its timer runs out?"

"I gave them only a couple of minutes. Let's hope they aren't that quick."

Longer sighed. "Even with the cube being hollow, we're still out billions of dollars."

I waved at the other alien box. "Hey, I just bought you a working matter teleportation device to study for only a few billion dollars. I told you I was a good negotiator."

Sanchez watched her computer screen. "Thar she blows," she said.