Daniel X: Watch the Skies

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and
Ned Rust
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For Jack, who completes me
— JP

For Ruth, for being proud of me
— NR
Prologue

NIGHT’S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR SIDE OF THE PLANET IS POINTED AT OUTER SPACE
One

IT WAS A pretty regular early-summer night at 72 Little Lane. The crickets and katydids were making that soothing racket they do on warm, still, small-town evenings. The back porch light was on, but otherwise the tidy brown house was happily, sleepily dark.

At least it was until about eleven thirty, when the dark night in Holliswood became a whole lot darker.

It’s hard to exactly translate the command that triggered it—it couldn’t be heard by human ears, and the language of insects isn’t one that can easily be put into words anyhow—but every six-legged creature in the area instantly hid under rocks, wedged into tree bark, or dug down into the dirt… and became very, very quiet.

And then, inside the small brown house, it became very, very loud.
James Patterson

Every speaker — on the computers, on the cell phones, on the iPods, on the radios, on the telephones, on the brand-new Sony flat screen with THX surround sound and every other TV set in the house, even on the “intelligent” microwave — began to blast a dance song from a popular old movie.

A song that just happened to be the favorite of a very powerful alien.
The boy fumbled for his clock radio. It was blaring some superlame old seventies song by one of those awful disco bands his mom sometimes played in the car. His sister must have changed the station and turned the volume up full blast as a prank. He'd get her back—later, in the morning, when he'd had some sleep.

He punched the snooze button, but it didn't shut off. He flicked the switch on the side, but it didn't shut off. He picked up the clock from his bedside table and saw that it was just past eleven thirty. She was going to pay for this.

He reached down and pulled the cord out of the socket…but it still didn't shut off.

“What the—?!?” he said, and rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

The clock's glowing display now read, “DANCE.”
And then the disco song started over, and a voice loud and screechy enough to cut through all the noise said: “DO THE DANCE!”

“Now that’s freaky,” said the boy, and just as he started to get really scared, a blue spark leaped out of the alarm clock and up his arm — and he bolted out of his room.

He knew what he had to do.

In the hallway he collided with his father but didn’t say a word. And now his mom and sister were pushing at him from behind, and the entire family tumbled down the front stairs to the living room.

It was weird, thought the boy, because he was pretty sure he hated dancing.

But now he couldn’t stop himself. He strode to the center of the living room and somehow knew exactly what moves to make, and — except for the look of terror in his eyes — he boogied his heart out like a pimply, pajama-wearing John Travolta.

His mom, dad, and sister didn’t look like they were having too much fun, either.

In fact, the only fun in the house was being had by the five grotesque alien beings filming the family from behind the eerie lights, high-tech microphones, and multilens video cameras set up in the adjoining dining room.

They were laughing their slimy heads off. Not literally, but if one of these horrific creatures had actually knocked its own block off, picked it up from the floor, and eaten it, the boy wouldn’t have been surprised.

“By Antares, they’re good,” one of the monsters said,
slapping one of its six scaly knees. “It’s just like Saturday Night Fever!”

And then the fat one in charge—cradling the bullhorn in his left tentacle, nearly crushing the cheap folding canvas chair with his weight—replied with a sigh.

“Yes, it’s almost a shame we have to terminate them.”
THE FIVE ALIENS were still hungry even after their fresh kill. They scuttled and hovered out of the news van they’d swiped from the local TV station and pressed their ugly wet noses against the windows of the Holliswood Diner. A young waitress with wavy black hair was reading a Sherman Alexie paperback at the counter.

“Business is about to pick up a lot,” said the boss alien, who had a thousand-pound intergalactic champion sumo wrestler’s body and the head of a catfish. No ears, no neck, no legs—and no manners.

He reached out to his personal assistant—a big-nosed space ape—grabbed its cell phone, and punched in a number. The three other henchbeasts twitched with anticipation. This was looking to turn into a pretty exciting Saturday night.
When the girl leaned across the counter to pick up the diner’s phone, a little spark leaped out of the receiver, arcing straight into her ear. Her eyes turned glassy as she put down the phone and went to open the door for them.

“What did the Zen Buddhist say to the hot-dog vendor?” asked the lead alien as the waitress showed them to their booths, already chuckling to himself at the coming punch line.

“Make me one with everything” said the girl, robotically.

The creatures burst into laughter.

“Actually, on second thought, sweetie,” he added, “Why don’t you go and make us everything with everything. Chop-chop!”

“Good one, boss!” said his assistant, stealthily snatching his cell phone back from where his employer had rested it on the table. He carefully wiped it down with a napkin before putting it back in his purple fanny pack.

The waitress, in the meantime, had flown into motion as if somebody had hit the ×2 button on her remote control. She prepared and delivered to the aliens heaping stacks of eggs, bacon, sausage, waffles, coffee, Cokes, bagels, burgers, turkey platters, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, onion rings, cheesesteaks, cheesecakes, clam chowder, gravy fries, banana cream pies, root-beer floats, and chicken-fried steaks. And several mugs of fryer oil.

“Careful or you’ll burn her out, boss,” advised one of the henchbeasts.

“Like I care,” said the boss. “We got about six billion of
them to get rid of. And, come to think of it,” he said with a laugh that sounded like somebody blowing bubbles in turkey gravy, “there are plenty more where you came from too.”

And, with that, he grabbed the henchbeast and pummeled it against the linoleum floor. The sound that filled the diner was like a roach getting crushed by a hard-soled shoe—only much louder.
“THERE’S YOUR DESSERT.” The lead alien, who happened to be number five on The List of Alien Outlaws on Terra Firma, gestured at the henchbeast’s remains.

The other aliens shared an uncomfortable silence as they slowly converged on the carcass. Number 5 rolled his gooey eyes and continued shoveling fried food into his extrawide mouth.

“Looks like we got company,” said the personal assistant, nodding at the flashing red and blue lights in the parking lot. A moment later the front door to the diner flew open, and a sheriff and deputy burst in with their guns drawn.

“Hands u—” the sheriff started to shout, but Number 5 fired a wide-angle ray gun that instantly turned both officers into puddles of something resembling swamp mud.
“Clean that up. I’m eating here,” said Number 5.
The two henchbeasts eagerly turned away from the carcass of their fallen comrade and with long, rubbery tongues devoured the human sludge.
“Speaking of annoying law-enforcement types,” said Number 5, smacking his lips and sipping a scalding mug of fryer oil, “my spider senses tell me somebody even more pesky is on his way here.”
“Not him?” asked his assistant.
“The same,” said Number 5.
A collective, defensive growl rose up from the alien crew.
“That pipsqueak is almost enough to turn me off my Caesar salad,” the personal assistant complained, downing an entire bowl of lettuce.
“Let’s just remember what’s most important here,” Number 5 said. “First, keep to the schedule. This is our biggest production yet, and we can’t miss a beat.
“And second—ugly as he is—little Danny could very well be our lead man. So let’s not kill him. . . right away.”
Part One

ACTUALLY, ALIENS *SHOULD* FEAR THE REAPER
YOU KNOW THE second-coolest of all my superpowers? It’s the one that lets me hear any song I’ve ever heard as loud as I want, as often as I want, and anytime I want. It’s like I have an iPod implanted in my head. Only it holds, like, terabytes more songs, and the sound quality’s better. And it never needs to be docked or recharged.

The song I was playing over and over again right then, as I motorcycled down I-80, was “Don’t Fear the Reaper” by Blue Oyster Cult. I know it kinda puts the K in Klassic Rock, but it’s a good one. And it was going along real well with my thoughts and plans—wherein I am the Grim Reaper . . . of very, very bad aliens.

I leave the good ones alone, of course. But, honestly—not to bum you out—I’ve only bumped into a couple other “good” aliens here on your Big Blue Marble.
So what’s the coolest of my superpowers, you ask? The way I can smell alien sweat from ten miles away even while speeding along a highway with my helmet on? The way I’ve recently learned to make high-performance, hybrid-engine racing bikes that can travel three thousand miles at seventy-five miles per hour on a tank of gas? The way I can pop a wheelie… on my front tire?

Well, that’s almost untopable, but, no, the coolest of my superpowers is the one with which I can create my best friends—Willy, Joe, Emma, and Dana—out of my imagination.

It takes some concentration, and I have to be rested and not taking any allergy medicine, but, really, being able to shoot fireballs or outrace locomotives is nothing next to being able to make friends out of thin air.

And they’re not bottom-of-the-barrel specimens, either. Joe is great with video games and computers, and otherwise is basically a life-support device for the world’s fastest-moving mouth. He’s either chewing his way through some mountain of food that weighs twice as much as his skinny butt, or he’s talking a blue—and totally hilarious—streak.

Emma is our moral compass. The part that gets her worked up about Alien Outlaws is that they’re on Terra Firma and doing harm not just to people but to Nature. Mother Earth has no better advocate than her Birkenstock-wearing self.

Emma’s older brother is Willy. He’s the ultimate wing man, built like a brick and slightly harder to scare than
one too. He’s our go-to guy when it comes to weapons and engines and stuff like that. Plus, he’s more loyal than, like, Batman’s butler Alfred, Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*, Wesley in *The Princess Bride*, and King Arthur’s horse combined.

Finally, Dana is, well . . . I guess you could say she’s my dream girl. She manages to be both the most attractive and the most grounded person I’ve ever encountered. In the *universe*. Remember, I haven’t exactly been operating out of a Montana shack all these years.

Oh, and all four of them happen to be outstanding at don’t-try-this-at-home motorcycle stunts. Which we were thoroughly enjoying on this particular night, chasing after an eighteen-wheeler. Keep in mind that aliens don’t necessarily abide by the same rules humans do when it comes to minimum driving age.

“Slalom!” Willy, who was in the lead, called out. One of our favorite tricks.

We leaned the bikes almost on their sides and—get this—zipped *under* the trailer . . . behind wheels seven, eight, nine, and ten, and in front of wheels eleven through eighteen . . . and came out safely on the other side.

Finally we pulled up to a small-town diner.

“Sorry about this,” I said to my friends, climbing off my bike. I was about to face off with the most powerful alien I’d ever engaged in mortal combat.

“Sorry for what?” asked Joe.

“Number 5,” I told them, furrowing my brow. “You smell that?”
There was a terrible smell in the air, like somebody had left a herring-salad sandwich in a hot car... for a week.

“Ugh!” Emma wrinkled her nose. “I’m catching it too. Seriously bad news.”

“Yeah, Daniel,” Willy echoed. “This guy must be more evil than the stink in your sneakers. We better get ready to rumble.”

“My sneakers don’t smell, Willy,” I said. “And I can’t put you guys at risk. This is between me... and Number 5.”

“You’re such a boy,” said Dana, hand on her hip, a look of concerned disapproval on her face. “Are you sure you’re ready to go that high up The List? No offense, Daniel, but you got pretty lucky with Number 6.”

“Always with the pep talks, Dana. Thanks a lot.”

Then I clapped my hands, and she and the rest of them flickered out of existence. (I actually don’t need to clap, but it looks cool.)

And then I cleared my head for battle.