

# Agent to the Stars

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From New York Times bestseller and Hugo Award-winner, John Scalzi, a gleeful mash-up of science fiction and Hollywood satire

The space-faring Yherajk have come to Earth to meet us and to begin humanity's first interstellar friendship. There's just one problem: They're hideously ugly and they smell like rotting fish.

So getting humanity's trust is a challenge. The Yherajk need someone who can help them close the deal.

Enter Thomas Stein, who knows something about closing deals. He's one of Hollywood's hottest young agents. But although Stein may have just concluded the biggest deal of his career, it's quite another thing to negotiate for an entire alien race. To earn his percentage this time, he's going to need all the smarts, skills, and wits he can muster.

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Agent to the Stars

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John Scalzi won the 2006 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and his debut novel *Old Man's War* was a finalist for science fiction's Hugo Award. His other books include *The Ghost Brigades*, *The Android's Dream* and *The Last Colony*. He has won the Hugo Award, the Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award for science-fiction, the Seiun, The Kurd Lasswitz and the Geffen awards. His weblog, *Whatever*, is one of the most widely-read web sites in modern SF. Born and raised in California, Scalzi studied at the University of Chicago. He lives in southern Ohio with his wife and daughter.

## Agent to the Stars

CHAPTER One "Fourteen million and fifteen percent of the gross? For Michelle Beck? You're out of your fucking mind, Tom." Headsets are a godsend; they allow you to speak on the phone while leaving your hands free for the truly important things. My hands were currently occupied with a blue rubber racquetball, which I was lightly bouncing off the pane of my office window. Each quiet thock left a tiny imprint on the glass. It looked like a litter of poodles had levitated six feet off the ground and schmooged their noses against the window. Someone would eventually have to wipe them all off. "I've had my medication for today, Brad," I said. "Believe me, fourteen million and fifteen points is a perfectly sane figure, from my client's point of view." "She's not worth anywhere near that much," Brad said. "A year ago she was paid \$375,000, flat. I know, I wrote the check." "A year ago, Summertime Blues hadn't hit the theaters, Brad. It's now \$220 million later. Not to mention your own Murdered Earth--\$85 million for perhaps the worst film in recent history. And that's before foreign, where no one will notice that there's no plot. I'd say you got your one cheap taste. Now you've gotta pay." "Murdered Earth wasn't that bad. And she wasn't the star." "I quote Variety," I said, catching the ball left-handed for the briefest of seconds before hurling it back against the glass. "Murdered Earth is the sort of film you hope never makes it to network television, because nearby aliens might pick up its broadcast signal and use it as an excuse to annihilate us all." That was one of the nicer comments. And if she wasn't the star, why did you plaster her all over the posters and give her second billing? "What are you all about?" Brad said. "I remember you practically doing me for that artwork and billing." "So you're saying you'll do anything I say? Great! Fourteen million and fifteen percent of the gross. Gee, that was easy." The door opened. I turned away from the window to face my desk. Miranda Escalon, my administrative assistant, entered my office and slipped me a note. Michelle just called, it read. Remember that you have to get them to pay for her hairdresser and makeup artist, it read. "Look, Tom," Brad said. "You know we want Michelle. But you're asking too much. Allen is getting \$20 million and twenty percent of the gross. If we give Michelle what she wants, that's \$35 million and a third of the gross right there. Where do you suggest we might make a profit?" "\$14 million, she can pay for her own damn hair, I wrote on the pad. Miranda read it and raised her eyebrows. She left the room. The odds of her actually giving that message to Michelle were unimaginably remote. She's not paid to do everything I say--she's paid to do everything I should say. There's a difference." "I have two points to make here," I said, turning my attention back to Brad. "First: Allen Green isn't my client. If he were, I'd be endlessly fascinated by the amount of money you're throwing to him. But he is not. Therefore, I could not possibly give two shits about what you're handing him. My responsibility is to my client and getting a fair deal for her. Second: \$20 million for Allen Green? You're an idiot." "Allen Green is a major star." "Allen Green was a major star," I said. "When I was in high school, I'm about to go back for my tenth-year reunion. He's been out in the wilderness for a long time, Brad. Michelle, on the other hand, is a major star. Right now, \$300 million in her last two films. Fourteen million is a bargain." The door opened. Miranda popped her head in. She's back, she mouthed. "Tom," Brad began. "Hold on a second, Brad. The woman herself is on the other line." I cut him off before he could say anything. "What?" I said to Miranda. "Miss Thing says she has to talk to you right now about something very important that can't wait." "Tell her I'm already working on the hairdresser." "No, it's even more important than that," Miranda said. "From the sound of it, it may be the most important thing ever in the history of mankind. Even more important

than the invention of liposuction." "Don't be mocking liposuction, Miranda. It has extended the career of many an actress, thus benefiting their agents, allowing them to pay your salary. Liposuction is your friend." "Line two," Miranda said. "Let me know if fat-sucking is toppled." I punched the button for line two. Ambient street noise filled my earphones. Michelle was undoubtedly careening along Santa Monica Boulevard. "Michelle," I said. "I'm trying to make you very rich. Whatever it is, make it quick." "Ellen Merlow got *Hard Memories*," Michelle said. "I thought I was in the running for that. I thought I had it." "Don't feel too bad about it, Michelle," I said. "Everyone was up for that one. If you didn't get it, that puts you in there with Cate Blanchett and Meryl Streep. You're in good company. Besides, the pay wasn't that good." I heard a short brake squeal, followed by a horn and some muffled yelling. Michelle had cut someone off. "Tom, I need roles like that, you know? I don't want to be doing *Summertime Blues* for the next ten years. This role would have helped me stretch. I want to work on my craft." At the word craft, I mimed stabbing myself in the eye. "Michelle, right now you're the biggest female star in Hollywood. Let's work with that for a couple of movies, okay? Get a nice nest egg. Your craft will still be there later." "I'm right for this role, Tom." "The role is a fortyish Jewish woman victimized in the Warsaw ghetto and Treblinka, who then fights racism in the United States," I said. "You're twenty-five. And you're blonde." And you think Treblinka is a shop on Melrose. I kept that last thought in my head. No point confusing her. "Cate Blanchett is blonde." "Cate Blanchett also has an Oscar," I said. "So does Ellen, for that matter. One in each acting category. And she's also not twenty-five, or blonde. Michelle, let it go. If you want to work on your craft, we can get you into some live theater. That's craft. Craft up the wazoo. They're doing *Doll's House* over at the Geffen. You'll love it." "Tom, I want that part." "We'll talk about it later, Michelle. I've got to get back to Brad. Gotta go. We'll talk soon." "Remember to tell him about the hair--" I clicked her off and switched Brad back on. "Sorry, Brad." "I hope she was telling you not to blow this offer by asking for too much," Brad said. "Actually, she was telling me about another project she's really passionate about," I said. "Hard Memories." "Oh, come on," Brad said. "She's a little young and blonde to be playing Yentl, isn't she? Anyway, Ellen Merlow just got that part. Read it in the Times today." "Since when does the Times get anything right? Michelle's a little young for the part, yes, but that's what makeup is for. She's a draw. Could get a whole other audience for serious drama." Brad snorted. "She won't be getting fourteen million for that," he said. "That's their entire budget." "No, but she'll be working on her craft," I said. I popped the ball up and down on my desk. "The academy eats that stuff up. It's a nomination, easy. Like Charlize Theron in *Monster*." Sometimes I can't believe what comes out of my own mouth. But it was working. I could hear Brad weighing the options in his mind. The project at hand was the sequel to *Murdered Earth*--called, in a burst of true creativity, *Earth Resurrected*. They had a problem: they killed off the hero in the first film. Which was just as well, since Mark Glavin, who played him, was a loser who was well on his way to replicating the career arc of Mickey Rourke. So when it came to the sequel, they had to build it around Michelle, whose character managed to survive. The script had been written, the casting completed, and the preproduction was rolling along under a full head of steam. Stopping now to recast or rewrite was not an option. They were over a barrel--they knew it and I knew it. What we were arguing about now was the size of the barrel. Miranda's head popped through the door again. I glared at her. She shook her head. Not her, she mouthed. Carl. I set the ball down. When? I mouthed. Three minutes, she mouthed. "Brad, listen," I said. "I've got to get--I've just been told I have a meeting with Carl. He's going to

want to know where we stand on this. Hard Memories has about wrapped up its casting. We have to tell them one thing or another. I have to tell Carl one thing or another." I could hear Brad counting in his head. "Fuck," he said, finally. "Ten million and ten percent." I glanced down at my watch "Brad, it's been a pleasure talking to you. I hope that my client can work with you again at some point in the future. In the meantime, I wish you and the other Murdered Earth producers the best of success. We're going to miss being a part of that family." "You bastard," Brad said. "Twelve five, salary and percentage. That's it. Take it or don't." "And you hire her hair and makeup people." Brad sighed. "Fine. Why the hell not. Allen's bringing his people. It'll be one big party. We'll all put on pancake together and then get a weave." "Well, then, we have a deal. Courier over the contract and we'll start picking at it. And remember we still need to wrangle about merchandising." "You know, Tom," Brad said, "I remember when you were a nice kid." "I'm still a...

#### Other Books

The Agent Runner, From the winner of an Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award, a spy who came in from the cold for today's wars. British by birth, foreign by descent, and agnostic by conviction, Edward Henry Malik is an MI6 handler—an agent runner. For four years he has been running an agent codenamed Nightingale inside Pakistan's notorious ISI, keeping watch on its links to Al Qaeda and the Taliban and its machinations in neighboring Afghanistan, but mostly monitoring for threats to the British homeland. Then, in the aftermath of Osama bin Laden's killing, Nightingale is exposed and Ed's world falls apart. Dismissed from MI6 and with his reputation in tatters, Ed returns to his roots in the immigrant enclave of Whitechapel in London's East End. He takes a job at a freight forwarding office and unexpectedly falls in love with the proprietor's daughter. It seems as if he has finally found respite from his demons. But you can't escape your past. Ed knows too much, and he has come to the attention of Major General Javid Aslam Khan—Pakistan's legendary spymaster, known as the Hidden Hand. This lean, propulsive thriller tells a classic story of love, trust, and betrayal set against today's Great Game, while in the background swirl rumors of a one-legged mullah and a shadowy militia with the means to detonate a dirty bomb.

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