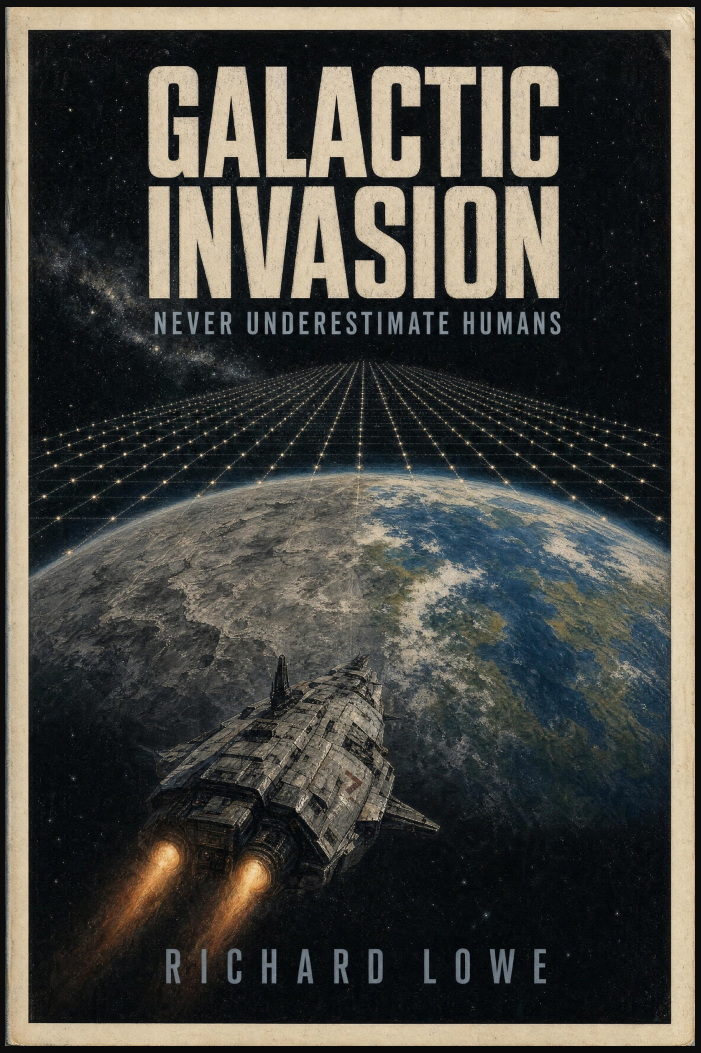
A FREE COMPANION TO GALACTIC INVASION

Heavy Weather

The Durnholt Line is dying, the lane is emptying, and the slowest hauler in the convoy is carrying two hundred and thirty-one people.



RICHARD LOWE

Heavy Weather

Frontier Authority, Outer Arm. Evacuation charter, Durnholt worlds.

Vessel: Wet Bargain, hauler, Drevani registry. Master: Hesk. Mate: Oss.

Licensed passenger capacity: sixty. Rate: per head delivered. Insurance: hull only.

* * *

The Authority field on Durnholt Prime had been a grain terminal until six days ago, and it still smelled of grain. The silos stood along the north edge of the pads with their hatches open and nobody working them. A hot wind came across the plain and lifted the chaff off the concrete in little twisting columns. Hesk had been on the ramp of the Wet Bargain for two hours, and his collar had gone dry in the first twenty minutes.

He soaked it again from the bottle on his belt. The water ran down inside his shirt and was warm before it reached his belly.

"One hundred and ninety," he said into the throat mic.

"I've got one ninety-one," Oss said from the hold.

"Then somebody walked past me."

"A Pallin kid. Under your elbow. She's on the dry end with her mother."

He let it stand. The line in front of the ramp ran back across the pad to the Authority fence, and past the fence it didn't end, it turned into the crowd. There were people out there from every species on the Durnholt worlds, standing in the heat with their bags and their children and the numbers the Authority had chalked on the backs of their hands that morning.

The numbers had stopped meaning anything around midday. The Authority officers at the fence had stopped checking them a little after that.

* * *

The loading officer came up the ramp at two hundred. She was a Pallin with an Authority band on her arm and a slate she had stopped writing on, and her ear-fronds were flat to her skull and had probably been that way for days.

"You're licensed for sixty," she said.

"I'm licensed for a lot of things."

"The charter pays per head delivered." She looked past him into the hold, at the hammocks Oss had strung three high and the water lines running along the walls, sweating in the heat. "Delivered, not loaded. If you go up too heavy and come out in pieces, the Authority pays nobody."

"Then the Authority saves money."

She showed him her teeth, which on a Pallin meant nothing friendly. Then she turned and went back down the ramp without arguing. She had been having that same conversation on every pad on the field since dawn, and she had stopped expecting to win it.

* * *

The Wet Bargain had been carrying people for most of a year now. Hesk had stopped counting the runs.

He had stripped the hold to the deck plates after the first one and run the lines along the walls so the Drevani could breathe, and put the old humidity tanks back into service, thirty tons of water in a double bank under the hold floor that the ship had not carried full since his father's time. It made the hold feel like home. It made the ship fly like a barge.

The broker's crate was still back there in the corner, lashed down with the rest. It held forty kilos of Pallin paste from Teshra High that he had never paid for and never sold. Every run he meant to throw it out, and every run he lashed it down again.

"Two hundred and twenty," Oss said. "Drive's going to hate us."

"The drive always hates us."

"It's going to hate us more."

He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. The chaff got in everything. At the far end of the line a Vashk woman was coming across the pad with a boy beside her and a crate on her shoulder, and the people around her were moving out of her way without being asked, the way people moved out of the way of a cargo sled.

* * *

She was big even for a Vashk. Her hide was the gray of wet slate, and she carried the crate as though it weighed nothing, though from the way the concrete took her footsteps Hesk guessed it weighed about what he did. The boy was half her size and still twice Hesk's.

"Two," she said at the foot of the ramp, and held out a heavy hand with a number on the back of it that nobody had read in hours.

"That's a ton of Vashk," Oss said in his ear. "Maybe more. Hesk."

He knew what Oss was saying. He could have said full. The woman would have turned around and walked back to the fence, the line behind her would have closed up, and the Wet Bargain would have lifted a ton lighter. The people at the fence would never know what he had decided, and neither would anybody else.

He had done it before. He had done it at Teshra High, with a boy at a lift on deck four and the charges under the board.

"Two," he said. "Leave the crate."

The Vashk woman looked at him. Her small eyes went from him to the hold and back.

"It's my assay kit," she said. "I test ore. It's what I do."

"You can test ore somewhere else. You can't test it in pieces."

She stood there a moment longer with the crate on her shoulder. Then she bent and set it down on the concrete at the foot of the ramp, carefully, the way you set down a thing you mean to come back for, and put her hand on the boy's back and walked him up into the Wet Bargain.

Her name was Grathe. She gave it to him on the way past without being asked, as if she wanted it written somewhere.

* * *

At two hundred and thirty-one Oss said, "That's it."

She said it in the other voice, the one she had used maybe three times in twenty-three years.

He looked at the line. It ran back to the fence and into the crowd, exactly as long as it had been two hours ago.

"That's it," he said into the mic, and keyed the ramp.

The people at the front of the line saw it start to rise. A Drevani man with a girl on his shoulders took a step forward and then stopped, and the girl on his shoulders waved at Hesk, because she was too small to know what a ramp going up meant.

Hesk raised his hand back. He hated himself for it and kept it up until the ramp closed between them.

* * *

The Prime lane ran from the field straight up into the sky and out to the jump point at the edge of the system, where the Authority said a hauler could jump without coming out inside somebody else. Sixty thousand ships were climbing it that morning. From the cockpit of the Wet Bargain they looked like a string of lights going up a well.

The Wet Bargain climbed it last.

She had not been last when they lifted. She was last within the hour, because everything in the lane was faster than a squat Drevani hauler carrying two hundred and thirty-one people, a ton of Vashk, thirty tons of water and a crate of fish paste. Hesk watched the transponder tags ahead of them draw away one at a time, without hurry, the way the tags of other haulers drew away on any run where he was carrying too much.

“Drive's at twenty-two,” Oss said.

“It was at twenty-two ten minutes ago.”

“It was at twenty-one.” She had her hands on the board and her eyes on the spool curve, and the scar on her left gill fan had gone dark, which it did when she was working a sum she didn't like. “It spools on the mass. You know that. We're heavy, so it's slow.”

“How slow?”

“At this rate we make a hundred at the jump point in seven hours. Maybe seven and a half.”

“And the lane?”

“The lane clears in six. Everybody else makes it in six.”

Hesk sat back. The cockpit was hot and wet, the way he liked it, and water beaded on the console and ran down the face of the clamp board. He looked at the tin on the console beside the board, a little round chandler's tin with a screw lid that had sat there unopened for most of a year, and then he looked at the lane.

* * *

He went down into the hold because he couldn't sit still.

It smelled of wet rope and too many species, and it was louder than any hold he had ever carried. The Drevani families had the wall lines, packed shoulder to shoulder with their gill fans open to the damp. The Pallin and the dry-skinned peoples had taken the far end, near the cargo lock, where Oss had rigged a fan to push the wet air the other way, and they sat with their ear-fronds tight and their coats wrapped around them as if the damp were cold.

A Thel family sat folded into a corner with their long gray hands around their knees, singing low, with no words in it. An Ithrane boy was being sick into a bag. Somebody had already started a card game on an upturned water drum.

Grathe sat against the forward bulkhead with her son. The deck plates under her had settled a little, or Hesk imagined they had. She had her eyes on the small passenger screen bolted over the hold hatch, where Oss had put the convoy plot so people would have a picture to look at instead of each other.

“Your ship is slow,” Grathe said.

“She's careful.”

“She's slow.” Grathe didn't look away from the screen. “I watched from the pad. Everything else went up like a stone off a sling.”

He didn't answer. There was nothing to answer it with.

An old Drevani woman was mending a hammock at the end of the wall line. Her gill fans had gone white at the edges, the way they went when a Drevani got old enough to stop counting.

She had a needle of bone and a twist of line, and she worked by feel. She looked up at him now.

"You're Hesk," she said. "Saro's brother. From the blue door in Lammas."

He stared at her.

"I knew your mother," she said. "I bought fish off her boat for forty years. Neth. You won't remember."

He didn't. He said he did.

"You were the one who ran," Neth said. She went back to the hammock. "Your mother used to say so. Every time something broke, she'd find your sister standing next to it."

The card players on the water drum had stopped to listen. Hesk felt it on the back of his neck. Somebody laughed, a Pallin laugh, sharp and not unkind, and the game went on.

A little Drevani girl tugged at his sleeve. She was perhaps five, with her gill fans not yet grown out, and she had a toy in one hand made of folded paper.

"Are you the captain?" she said.

"I'm the captain."

"Are we going to the core?"

"We're going to the core."

"Mother says it's dry at the core." She looked up at him with her fans held tight. "Is it dry on the ship?"

"Not on this ship," Hesk said. "This ship is never dry."

* * *

The traffic band changed before the first hour was out.

He heard it from the hold, because Oss had the cockpit speaker loud enough to carry. The convoy controller had been reading out spacing corrections all morning in the flat Authority voice, every hauler's tag and its correction, and nobody had been listening. Now the voice paused, and when it came back it was the same voice, flat as ever, saying different words.

"All vessels in the Prime lane. Invader left flank projected to cross the lane in four hours. All vessels maintain maximum and continue to the jump point. Vessels unable to maintain maximum report."

The hold went quiet. Even the Thel stopped singing.

Hesk went up the ladder to the cockpit. He didn't run. Running made people look at you, and two hundred and thirty-one people were already looking at him.

* * *

"Four hours," he said.

"I heard." Oss had the spool curve on the main screen and the lane on the side board. "We need seven. Seven and a half."

"Are we going to report?"

"Report to who?" She turned her head and looked at him. "Wet Bargain, unable to maintain. They know. They can see our tag. They'll write it in the log after."

On the side board the lane was a long bright string of tags, and the Wet Bargain was the last bead on it. Off to one side of the string, a long way off and closer than it had been an hour ago, were the thin dark lines.

They didn't show as tags because they didn't have any. They showed as smears on the scope, and every time the scope refreshed it gave them a different shape.

Hesk sat down in the right seat. His hands were shaking, and he put them flat on his knees to stop them.

"What's heavy?" he said.

Oss didn't answer at once.

"Them," she said. "Them first. Two hundred and thirty-one, and the Vashk. Then the water."

"How much does the water buy us?"

She ran it. He watched her lips move.

"Thirty tons out, the spool steepens." She ran it again, because she always ran it twice. "Six hours and five minutes, if nothing breaks. That's still past the four, and we're still the last ship."

"Better than seven and a half."

"It's better." She didn't look away from him. "It's four days to the core, Hesk. With no humidity reserve, this ship goes dry by the second day. Dry like a Pallin station."

He knew what that meant. He had the scar on his throat to tell him.

There were eighty-eight Drevani in the hold. Some of them were small children with their fans not yet grown, and some were old. One of them had bought fish off his mother's boat for forty years.

He had stood on a hot pad two hours ago and decided he could carry a ton of Vashk. He had decided he could carry two hundred and thirty-one. The arithmetic had been his, every line of it.

"Dump it," he said.

* * *

He told them over the speaker. He sat in the right seat with the mic in his hand and told the hold what the controller had said and what he was going to do about it, in the fewest words he could find. Then he said that the drinking water stayed and nobody would go thirsty.

He said there were spare collars in the lockers by the hatch. He said it would be dry for four days and then it would be over.

Then he put the mic down.

The hold didn't make a sound he could hear from the cockpit. Oss's hand was already on the dump valves.

"You could go down," she said.

"I told them."

"You told the speaker."

He looked at her, and she looked back, and neither of them said Teshra.

She opened the valves.

The Wet Bargain shuddered once along her whole length, like a big animal shaking off water, and on the rear camera a white fan came out of the dump vents under her belly. It froze as soon as it hit the dark and hung behind them in a long glittering wake, thirty tons of it, spreading out across the lane. The glitter caught the light of Durnholt's sun and broke it into colors.

It looked like the torn umbilical at Teshra High. He had watched that freeze too.

The spool curve on the main screen bent upward. It was not much, but he could see it.

"Twenty-six," Oss said. "Twenty-seven."

* * *

He went back down the ladder afterward because he could not stand the cockpit.

The air in the hold was still wet. It would be wet for hours yet, until the lines ran out and the ship's own heat drew the damp out of everything. The Drevani along the walls sat without moving, their fans open wide, as if they could store it.

Nobody spoke to him. A Drevani man near the hatch, the father of the small girl with the paper toy, stood up as Hesk came off the ladder. He was younger than Hesk and taller, and his gill fans were flared out wide and red at the edges.

"You could have left the Vashk," he said.

Grathe heard it. Everybody heard it. She didn't move from the bulkhead, and her son pressed against her side.

"I could have," Hesk said.

"A ton. She said so on the pad. I heard your mate say it."

"I heard her too."

The man stood there with his fans flared, waiting for more. Hesk didn't have more. After a while the man's fans came down and he sat back against the wall beside his daughter, who was looking from one of them to the other with the paper toy held tight.

Hesk went to the corner by the cargo lock and unlashed the broker's crate.

He dragged it to the lock himself. It was heavier than it looked, and it smelled through the seams the way it had smelled at Teshra, a year ago, when the broker had sat behind her desk telling him thirty a crate. He shoved it into the lock and closed the inner door and blew the outer one.

The crate went out end over end into the glitter. Hesk watched it through the lock port until he couldn't find it.

"That was forty kilos," Oss said in his ear.

"I know."

"The spool won't notice."

"I know," he said again, and stayed at the port.

* * *

Near the end of the third hour the line came across the lane.

Oss saw it first. She said, "Hesk," on the channel in the voice for things she couldn't do arithmetic on, and he came back up the ladder.

On the side board the thin dark smears were closer to the lane now, close enough that the gap between the last of them and the Wet Bargain's tag was a thing he could put his thumb across. And in the gap, new tags were coming in.

They were warship tags, thousands and then tens of thousands of them, coming in from the direction of the Durnholt Line in a long ragged wall and turning, all of them, to put themselves across the flank between the dark smears and the lane.

The Authority voice came on the band. It said, "All vessels in the Prime lane. Line elements are moving to cover the lane. All vessels maintain maximum." Then it read out the next spacing correction in the same flat voice, as if it had said nothing at all.

Hesk sat down. Oss didn't say anything.

He had watched patrol cutters chase smugglers all his life. He had been one of the smugglers, twice. He had never once watched a warship of the Confederation go out of its way for a hauler, and here were tens of thousands of them, going out of their way for a lane full of haulers, for sixty thousand ships of people who could not go any faster.

“Who's in charge of that?” he said.

“The band doesn't say.” Oss's voice wasn't working right. “Some admiral.”

* * *

Grathe came up the ladder in the fourth hour.

She couldn't fit through the cockpit hatch. Nobody of her size could; the Wet Bargain had been built by Drevani for Drevani. She stood on the ladder with her head and her shoulders in the hatch and her heavy hands on the rim, and the ladder made a sound Hesk had never heard it make.

“The screen in the hold is too small,” she said. “I can't read the tags.”

Oss looked at Hesk. He nodded at the side board.

Grathe studied it for a long time. Her small eyes went along the wall of warship tags one at a time, the way his own eyes went down a manifest.

“Eleventh squadron,” she said. “Vashk heavy. Is it there?”

Oss found it and put a ring around it with her stylus. It was a cluster of a few hundred tags near the middle of the wall, all of them green, all of them holding their positions across the flank.

“The Granite Word,” Grathe said. “My daughter. She's a gunnery officer.”

Oss found that one too. The tag was green. It sat in its place in the cluster, steady as a lamp.

“She's there,” Oss said.

“The board says she's there.”

Hesk knew what Grathe meant, and so did Oss. He had read the Durnholt broadcasts on the run in, the same as everyone.

A ship that took a hit from the invader went on flying. It held its station with its lights on and its transponder green, and nobody aboard it ever spoke again. The board couldn't tell the difference, because the people who built it had never needed it to.

The three of them watched the eleventh squadron.

For a while it moved. The whole wall shifted and tightened as the dark smears came against it, and the eleventh shifted with it.

Then part of the eleventh stopped. The tags stayed green, and they stayed exactly where they were while the rest of the wall moved on around them. More of the cluster stopped, and more, until it was a little patch of steady green lights that the line flowed past like water around stones.

The Granite Word was in the patch.

Grathe didn't make a sound. Her heavy hands were on the rim of the hatch, and Hesk saw the metal of the rim bend a little under them.

“She held still when she was small,” Grathe said. “When she was frightened. Her father used to say she was the only child on the mountain who could hide in plain sight.”

Nobody said anything.

“Thank you,” Grathe said. She backed down the ladder, one rung at a time, and the ladder made its noise all the way down.

* * *

The wall got thinner.

Hesk watched it get thinner. He didn't want to and couldn't stop, the way he hadn't been able to stop at Teshra.

The tags didn't go out. They didn't flash or tumble or break up. They stopped moving with the others, one patch after another, until the wall across the flank was a field of steady green lights with a

narrow band of moving ones still fighting at its edge.

He had always thought the Navy talked. The Navy talked to haulers all the time, about permits and inspections and where you could park.

This Navy wasn't talking to anybody. It was getting in the way, and it was staying in the way, and it was dying in the way at a rate he could have timed with a clock.

“Five hours,” Oss said. “Drive's at eighty-two.”

The lane ahead of them was almost empty. The last of the big passenger liners had reached the jump point and gone. The ore barges had gone after them, and then a scatter of small haulers like the Wet Bargain, every one of them faster than she was.

On the side board the string of tags shrank to a dozen, and then to six, and then to two. Then the Wet Bargain's tag was the only one left on it.

“We're the last ship in the lane,” Oss said.

“I know.”

“I mean there's nothing behind us. If anything's watching the lane, we're all it can see.”

“I know what you mean.”

* * *

At ninety percent, one of the dark lines came loose from the fight.

It came out of the back of the flank where the green wall had gone thin, and it slid along the lane toward them in a long slow curve. The scope gave it a shape and then another shape. Ahead, the jump point sat at the end of the lane, a set of Authority beacons blinking in a ring, closer every minute and not close enough.

“Ninety-two,” Oss said.

He thought of the ring at Teshra High going dark one section at a time, like someone walking through a house at night turning off the lamps.

“Ninety-four,” Oss said.

She looked at him. They had jumped at ninety-four from Teshra.

She had done the jumping, and he had done the deciding, and they had come out whole by luck and nothing else. He had known it and she had known it and neither of them had ever said so.

“Hesk,” she said.

“How many in the hold?”

“You know how many.”

“Say it.”

“Two hundred and thirty-one.”

“At Teshra there were two of us.” He watched the curve on the main screen. “We don't go under a hundred with two hundred and thirty-one in the hold. Not today.”

“It's coming down the lane.”

“I can see it.” He looked at the side board, at the field of green tags across the flank, steady and silent, and the thin bright band still moving at its edge. “They're paying for this. All of that. They're paying for us to get to a hundred.”

Oss held his eyes. Then she turned back to the board.

“Ninety-six,” she said.

* * *

The line was close enough now to see through the forward glass, if he looked in the right place. He looked.

It was thin and dark and the color of nothing. It was turning toward them, and the scope still couldn't decide what shape it was.

“Ninety-eight.”

The jump point beacons were around them. They had been around them for a minute. The Wet Bargain sat in the middle of the ring with nothing in the lane behind her, and the thing coming down the lane at her, and the spool curve climbing.

“Ninety-nine.”

He put his hand flat on the console beside the tin. He didn't know why.

“A hundred,” Oss said. Her voice cracked on it.

“Go.”

She jumped.

The screen went white and then black. The cockpit filled with the low hum of the drive holding them in the long dark between, and Hesk sat in the right seat with his hand on the console and his gills pulling at the wet air.

Behind them, he supposed, the lane was clear.

* * *

The ship went dry on the second day, as Oss had said it would.

It went slowly at first. The beads of water on the deck plates and the rails stopped forming, and then the ones that were there dried off and didn't come back.

The wall lines ran empty and hung slack along the hold. The air lost its weight, the hot wet weight that had pressed on Hesk's skin every hour he had spent on this ship since he was younger than Pell. What was left felt thin and sharp and clean.

The Pallin at the far end of the hold took their coats off. A Pallin dockhand laughed, a short sharp sound, and stopped laughing when nobody joined him.

Grathe sat against the forward bulkhead with her son and said the air was good now. She said it once, to nobody, in a flat voice. She didn't say it again.

The Drevani soaked their collars in their drinking ration and wore them until they went stiff, then soaked them again. Hesk wore one, and so did Oss in the cockpit, with her scarred gill fan clamped half shut.

By the end of the second day his throat had split along the old scar from Teshra High. He could feel it open when he swallowed.

* * *

On the third day the little girl's throat split.

Her father brought her up the ladder to the cockpit hatch, because he didn't know where else to bring her. She had a split under her jaw the length of Hesk's finger, and a second one starting, and she wasn't crying. She was holding the paper toy, and her fans were clamped so tight against her neck that they had gone pale.

Hesk looked at her for a long time.

Then he reached over to the console and picked up the tin.

It had sat there for most of a year. He had put it there the day he came back from the blue door in Lammas, and he had never opened it. Opening it meant using it, and using it meant it would be gone.

He unscrewed the lid. The salve inside was green and smooth and smelled of kelp and resin, and nobody had ever put a finger in it.

He put a finger in it. He smoothed it along the split under the girl's jaw and along the second one, the way his mother had done for him and Saro on the boat when the wind came off the land.

The girl held still. Her fans loosened a little against her neck.

"It's the good kind," he said to her father. "Take it down. Give it to whoever needs it."

The man took the tin. He looked at Hesk's own throat, at the old scar and the new split along it, and opened his mouth.

"Take it down," Hesk said.

* * *

Neth died on the third night.

She had given her place on the wall line to a young mother on the first day, before the lines went empty. On the second day she gave her drinking ration to the same young mother's son, and said the old didn't need much.

She sat against the bulkhead mending hammocks by feel while her gill fans went from white at the edges to white all the way through. When the tin came down the hold she didn't ask for it. The father offered it to her twice, and she sent him on.

Oss found her in the morning. She was sitting against the bulkhead with the bone needle in one hand and a twist of line in the other, and her eyes were closed. She looked as if she had stopped to rest.

Hesk went down. This time he went down.

He knelt beside her in the dry air. He didn't remember her. He had told her he did.

The hold watched him. Grathe watched him from the forward bulkhead with her son against her side. The father with the little girl watched him, and the girl watched him, with a stripe of green salve under her jaw.

He took the needle out of Neth's hand and the line out of the other, and put them in his pocket. Then he picked her up himself, because nobody else would while he was standing there, and carried her forward to the cold locker.

She weighed almost nothing. He had carried crates that weighed more.

* * *

Frontier Authority, Outer Arm. Reception statement, convoy arrivals from Durnholt Prime.

Witness: Hesk, Drevani, master of the hauler Wet Bargain.

Q: Your charter lists a licensed capacity of sixty.

A: Yes.

Q: Your loading record from Durnholt Prime lists two hundred and thirty-one.

A: Yes.

Q: How many are you delivering?

A: Write two hundred and thirty.

Q: Cause?

A: Dry air. I dumped the humidity reserve in the lane to make the spool.

Q: The Authority does not pay for heads not delivered.

A: I know what the Authority pays for.

Q: Your vessel was the last to clear the Prime lane. Did you observe the engagement on the invader's left flank?

A: I watched it the whole way.

Q: Describe it.

A: They got in the way.

The World of Galactic Invasion

Who's Who

The people of the novel, as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Hesk	Drevani master of the hauler Wet Bargain. A former smuggler, twice, with a throat that splits on dry stations.
Oss	His mate. Older and broader than he is, with a scar across her left gill fan from a cargo winch. She has flown with him for twenty-two years and runs every number twice.
Pell	Hesk's nephew, eighteen, who takes his time with everything.
Saro	Hesk's sister and Pell's mother. She lives behind a blue door on the canals of Lammas, on the Drevani homeworld of Varrow.
Vesh-Taal	An Oruun surveyor with six limbs and neat handwriting. He writes in the margins and tells records offices when they are wrong, in writing.
Tibbe	A Lessari scout who flies an orange boat the Survey Office keeps asking her to repaint. She is always eating.
Orsevane	The Thel delegate to the Assembly, ancient and patient, who seeded the colony world of Hessarine nine thousand years ago.
Teyel and Aun	Thel bud-siblings on Hessarine. Teyel works the kelp terraces. Aun reads the weather for the northern hemisphere twice a day.
Kurro of the Vashk	The Vashk delegate, loud and certain, who makes speeches the way other people breathe.
Admiral Varrak	Kurro's son, commanding three hundred and ten thousand warships on the Durnholt Line from the flag deck of the Stone Oath.
Sefani	Varrak's Ithrane executive officer, young for her rank.
The Destroyer	A small man in a plain coat from a backwater world called Earth. He walks into the Long Hall carrying nothing at all. Aboard his ship sits a paper book he will not explain.
The Iron Claw	His cruiser. Nine hundred meters, old-fashioned, battered at the bow, and a great deal more than it looks.
Kynthia	Kynthia, with a K. She builds ships from a comet four light-months out from the Sun and keeps a hot spring melted into the ice.
Grong	The partner sent to work with her. His expressions arrive a quarter second before whatever caused them, and he is reading a terrible novel for the fourth time.

Foundry	The voice that runs the factories. It talks like a bill of lading, in capitals, and makes about one joke a century.

In this story only: Grathe, a Vashk ore assayer from Durnholt Prime, and Neth, an old Drevani woman from Lammas who bought fish off Hesk's mother's boat.

Timeline

From the far past to the Long Hall, where the novel's first act turns.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
A million years ago and more	On Earth, a war between people and the minds they made runs so long nobody remembers the start. It ends when one hungry man walks down a mine shaft in the Andes, knocks on the council's door and asks for something to eat. Earth still bakes the burned bread every Peace Day.
About 1.02 million years ago	Someone in the Confederation flags a few hundred stars of the Orion Spur: no routing. The reason is later allowed to lapse. Earth goes quiet behind a shell of listening buoys twenty-five light-years out, and the galaxy forgets it.
Three hundred years before the invasion	Seven Terran picket ships take station at the edge of the Velis system. Nobody asked them to come.
Year one	A lattice of ships crosses the rim of the galaxy beyond the Orion Spur. Teshra goes gray. Hesk blows his clamps at Teshra High and gets out with Oss. Pell does not.
Sixty-one days later	Vesh-Taal lands in the market at Sennet and finds nothing alive and nothing rotting. He asks the Survey Office to stop calling these worlds dead and call them sterilized.
Forty days after Teshra	Hesk knocks on the blue door. Then he signs the Wet Bargain up for the Frontier Authority's evacuation runs.
Durnholt	The invader goes around the Durnholt Line to reach thirty billion people behind it. Admiral Varrak pulls the line across its flank and holds the Prime convoy lane for two hours and six minutes. About four hundred million people get out in six days. *Heavy Weather* takes place in the last of those hours.
The next day	The buoys pick up Varrak's last message. The Destroyer walks out onto the ice of Anvil Nine to tell Kynthia it is coming this way.
Eight days before the session	Hessarine goes silent in the middle of a weather report.
The Long Hall	Two hundred and thirty-one thousand worlds sterilized. A small man walks nine kilometers down the Long Hall, says his name is the Destroyer, and offers to win the war if the Confederation gives him everything. The Assembly laughs. One Thel delegate does not.

Places

- **Aurem.** The Confederation's capital, under the hard white star called the Lantern.
- **The Approach.** Forty kilometers of white road to the petitioners' doors. Halfway along stands the Interdict, a black stone cut with the same four words in every script the Confederation has ever used.
- **The Long Hall.** Nine kilometers from the doors to the Presiding Dais, built that long so petitioners walk two hours past the gathered powers of the galaxy before they may speak.
- **Teshra and Teshra High.** An ocean world in the outer arm with four hundred million people, and the station ring above it with twelve thousand more.
- **Sennet.** A harbor city on Teshra, known for fried shellfish and a records office that miscounted the boat families.
- **Tannock Relay.** The Frontier Authority's relay in the outer arm, where statements get taken and casualty lists get read.
- **Varrow and Lammas.** The Drevani homeworld, and its old harbor quarter where the houses stand half in the canals.
- **Hessarine.** A soft wet Thel colony with seven moons and kelp drying on every roof.
- **The Durnholt worlds and the Durnholt Line.** Thirty billion people in the Perseus arm, and the wall of warships from thirty-eight species drawn up fourteen light-years across in front of them.
- **The Orion Spur and Sol.** A backwater region the registry marks in amber. Earth is there.
- **Anvil Nine.** A comet four light-months from the Sun, cut through with factories, with a hot spring in its ice.
- **The buoys.** A shell of listening posts twenty-five light-years out from Sol in every direction, which have listened to the Confederation talk to itself for a million years.

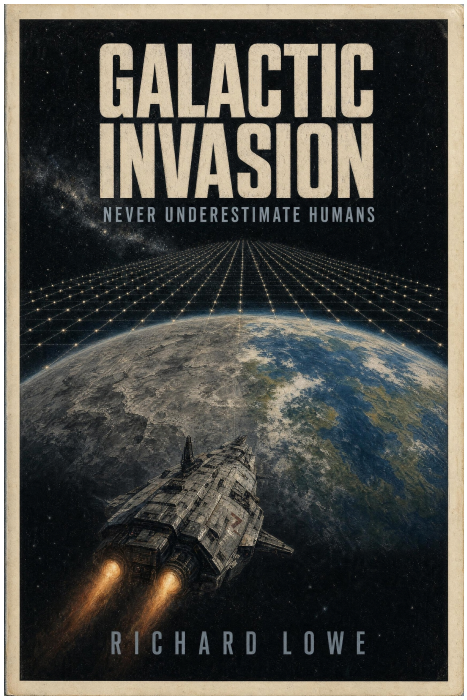
Glossary

- **The lattice.** The invader as it arrives above a world: ships in lines so regular they look drawn with a rule. It does not hail and it does not answer, and no scope can decide what shape its ships are.
- **Sterilized.** Vesh-Taal's word for a world after the invader leaves. Every living cell is gone, down to the bacteria, so nothing on it will ever rot.
- **The Confederation.** Millions of worlds, governed for longer than most of its members can remember.
- **The Assembly.** The Confederation's governing body. It meets in the Long Hall and refers things to committee.
- **The Presiding Voice.** The bronze interpreter drone that speaks for the Sarrakh delegate, which lives in a tank far below the hall and has not attended in person in two hundred thousand years.
- **The Interdict.** Four words every species in the Confederation learns as a child: Make nothing that thinks.
- **The Frontier Authority.** The outer arm's administration. It hires haulers for evacuation runs at bad rates with worse insurance.
- **The Survey Office.** The office that sends surveyors to look and files their reports in trays.

- **Spooling.** Bringing a ship's drive up to jump. A hauler that jumps under a hundred percent might come out in pieces.
- **Collar.** A soaked cloth a Drevani wraps around the throat to keep the gills wet on dry stations.
- **Drevani.** A gilled people born on ocean worlds who live on hot, wet ships.
- **Pallin.** A dry-air people with ear-fronds. When a Pallin shows you her teeth, it means nothing friendly.
- **Oruun.** A six-limbed people who put everything in writing.
- **Thel.** A slow, long-lived, budding people with long gray hands.
- **Vashk.** A heavy gray people whose benches groan under them and whose ships run cold.
- **Ithrane, Mnemar, Ulmeri, Sarrakh.** Powers of the Assembly: the Ithrane with their fronds and resin, the Mnemar in tanks of cloudy water that show their moods in color, the Ulmeri shipbuilders who whistle through their neck vents, and the Sarrakh, the oldest delegation in the hall.

Read the Novel

On the flag deck of the Stone Oath, an admiral watched the Wet Bargain crawl to the jump point and decided someone aboard her was a terrible pilot. Galactic Invasion tells the whole war: the silent lattice eating the galaxy, the small man from Earth the Assembly laughed at, and what humans are willing to pay to win.



Galactic Invasion:
Never Underestimate Humans

Get the full book

thewritingking.com/library/galactic-invasion/

More free books: free.coolauthor.com

Copyright © 2026 by Richard Lowe. You may print and share this story for personal, noncommercial use.