

## YOU NEVER CALL

By Robert Lynn Asprin

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author's literary executor.*

THE two fleets maneuvered subtly as they drew ominously closer. The crowd would have held its breath in anticipation... if there had been a crowd to witness the spectacle... or if there were breath for it to hold in the vacuum of outer space.

On the bridge of the Terran flagship, the crew waited in nervous silence. Steely-eyed, with his jaw set in stern determination, the human commander's authoritative pose would have sent any artist scrambling for his or her sketch pad. Without unclenching his teeth, he nodded to his communications officer to open the hailing frequency.

An annoying shrill whistle sounded as the enemy's image swam into focus on the main view screen. While to the untutored human eye, it might look like just another huge reptile in a uniform, the commander was a seasoned space veteran and could readily recognize the individual differences of several alien races.

"Well, Zoltron?" he said harshly. "Have you reconsidered your position? This is your last chance to avoid needless bloodshed. Will you relinquish your claim on this sector and withdraw your forces?"

His rival's response was a sharp bark of laughter.

"Really, Raymond. I thought you knew us better, or at least that you knew me. Did you really expect me to back down from a threat?"

"That's 'Commander Stone,' under the circumstances," the commander spat back. "And I thought you knew us better, Zoltron. Did you think I was bluffing? You have five minutes to begin your withdrawal. Then we open fire."

On the screen, Zoltron stared back for several seconds in silence before speaking.

"We've been friends for a long time, Raymond," he said softly, his voice heavy with regret.

The Terran commander hesitated as years of memories flashed through his mind. Memories of happier days before the alliance fell apart...of shared holidays and family outings...of how he was first surprised, the friendship with this non-human counterpart. Then the moment passed.

“Times change, Zoltron,” he said firmly. “We aren’t the first friends that politics have set against each other, nor will we be the last. We used to kid about what would happen if someday we found ourselves on opposite sides. Well, it would seem that day has come. You have five minutes.”

Another curt nod and the screen reverted to its original display showing the opposing fleet hanging motionless in space.

“Well, that’s that,” the commander said, almost to himself. Then he hardened his tones to the firm voice of command.

“Pass the word! Battle stations!”

“Battle stations aye, sir!”

“Sir!” It was his communications officer again. “There’s a call coming in on subspace.”

A frown flashed across the commander’s face as he both felt and hid his irritation at this unexpected interruption.

What in heaven’s name could that be? A late change in orders from Command Central?

“Patch it through,” he said, trying to sound calm and unruffled.

Again came the annoying whistle.

“Commander Stone here,” he said, knowing that subspace communications did not allow visual exchanges.

There was a moment’s silence, then a tentative voice came from the speakers.

“Raymie? Is that you?”

The crew exchanged startled glances, then looked at their commander who was staring at the speakers in what could only be described as frozen horror.

“Mom?” he said, at last.

“There you are, Raymie.” The unseen voice was now confident. “I was just calling to see if everything was all right with you.”

“Mom, what are you doing calling me here?” The commander shot an uncomfortable look at his crew, who were now steadfastly ignoring the exchange. “It must be costing you a fortune to call me direct.”

“It’s not cheap, but I’ll manage.” The vast void of space was not sufficient to mask the martyrdom in his mother’s tones. “It’s worth it just to hear from you.”

“What do you want, Mom? I’m kind of busy right now.”

“I know, I know. My son, the big-shot fleet commander. I could grow old and die before you found time to call me on your own.”

“That’s right. I’m busy,” the commander grumbled. “And right now is a very bad time for me. So if you can just tell me what it is you want?”

“I just wanted to check to see if you were all right,” his mother said. “I mean, it’s Mother’s Day and I hadn’t heard from you. So I thought there might be something wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Mom. I’m fine. Really. It’s just been a very busy day...and it’s about to get busier in a few minutes.”

“I knew it had to be something important. I mean, after you didn’t call on my birthday... and couldn’t find time to come home for Christmas, I knew that you wouldn’t let Mother’s Day go by without calling unless something life or death came up.”

“As a matter of fact, it is a matter of life or death, Mom,” the commander said. “We’re about to go into battle in a few minutes, and I have a lot to do before we start. So if there’s nothing else...”

“You’re what? Going into battle?”

“That’s right, Mom. So...”

“On Mother’s Day??”

“Come on, Mom. It’s not like I planned it this way. It’s just how it happened. Okay?”

“NO, it’s not okay! And don’t take that tone with me, Raymond!”

“But Mom...”

“But Mom’ nothing! You listen to me, Raymond. I’ve accepted that you’re working in the fleet now, and that on any day you could get blown up or shot down or

whatever it is that you do to each other. I haven't liked it, but I've accepted it. A mother has to let her children make their own choices, however painful it may be."

"Mom ..."

"Now you tell me that you're going into battle, maybe get yourself killed, on the one day of the year set aside for mothers? I've never heard of anything so inconsiderate or heartless. You want me to spend the rest of my life remembering Mother's Day as the day my son got himself killed? I won't hear of it!"

"So what am I supposed to do? Call it off? Because it would make my mother unhappy?"

"Is that so much to ask? Oh, I suppose if making your mother happy isn't enough of a reason, you can say that you ran out of fuel or something. Just promise me that you'll postpone this war or whatever of yours until tomorrow or next week."

"But Mom ..."

"I don't ask you for much, Raymie, but I'm asking for this. I want your solemn promise...and I'll sit right here on this communicator until I get it."

I...I'll see what I can do."

"PROMISE!"

"ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT. I PROMISE!"

"There. Now that wasn't so hard, was it? Well, I've got to go now myself. Wish your mother a happy Mother's Day!"

"Happy Mother's Day, Mom."

The commander's voice and face were expressionless for this salutation, and remained so after the shrill whistle signaled the end of the exchange.

After a long silence, he turned to his communications officer.

"Get me Zoltron on the hailing frequency."

Again, the enemy commander's face swam in focus on the main screen.

"Commander Zoltron. I don't know how to say this, but ..."

"Let me help you, Commander Stone," Zoltron said. "Your mother has made you promise to postpone our engagement for a least one day."

Raymond joined his crew in staring at the screen in shock.

"How...how did you know that?" he managed at last.

“Simple, commander. I just received a similar call from my mother. It seems your mother called her to find out your ship code so that she could call you. To further shorten our exchange, allow me to inform you that my own mother exacted a similar promise from me

“Really? I didn’t know your empire celebrated Mother’s Day at all, much less that the days were identical

“We don’t,” Zoltron grimaced. “Apparently after your mother explained to my mother the reason for her call my mother thought it was such a good idea that she’s adopting the holiday personally.”

“Gee. I’m sorry about that.”

“It could be worse. I’m only afraid that she’ll pass it along to other mothers in the Empire. By this time next year, it could be a legitimate Empire holiday. In case you didn’t know it, our mothers hold no less sway than yours do.”

“Hmmm. Tell you what, Zollie. Did you and you ships have anything planned for the rest of the day... except this battle, I mean?”

“Not really. We had kind of figured this would be it. In fact, we left our schedules open in case it ran long.”

Tell you what. There’s a neutral refueling station not far from here, and I know the bar never closes. What say you and your crews join us in hoisting a few?”

“Sounds good to me. Just be sure everyone on your side joins you in swearing to the Mother’s Day truce, and I’ll do the same with mine.”

“No problem ... but why?”

“Well, I figure if nothing else, it will eliminate the chance of interservice brawls once the drinking gets serious. It will be hard enough to explain to our respective superiors why we don’t fight today without also having to explain to our mothers if we did end up squaring off.”

“Amen to that!”