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# CARTHAGO DELENDA EST

*Eric Flint*

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What is the point of this?" demanded Agayan. The Guild Voivode emphasized his irritation by flexing the finger-clusters of his midlimbs.

Yuaw Khta ignored both the question and the cluster-flex. The Guild Investigator was immune to the Voivode's displeasure. The Guild's Office of Investigation had a separate command structure from that of the Trade Web. Although Agayan was its nominal superior in their current mission, Yuaw Khta's career in no way depended on the Voivode's goodwill.

"Again."

The Gha sepoy it commanded twisted the native's arm further. Gobbling with pain, the native struggled furiously.

Its efforts were futile, despite the fact that the orange-skinned biped was not much smaller than its Gha tormentor. It was more slender, true—although much of the Gha's squat bulk was the product of its heavy armor. Still, the native was every bit as tall as the Gha. But the real difference lay beneath the surface. For all the near-equivalence of size, the native was a child in the hands of an ogre.

The Gha were a heavy-planet species. Due in large part to that gravity, theirs was the most inhospitable world that had ever produced an intelligent race. The Gha were few in numbers, but all the great trading Guilds and Combines favored them as bodyguards for their strength and physical prowess.

The native's gabbles reached a crescendo, but they still expressed nothing more than pain—and curses.

"Again," commanded the Guild Investigator. The Gha twisted; the native howled.

Guild Voivode Agayan ceased his finger-flexing. He transformed his mid-limbs into legs and stalked off in disgust. While the native continued to screech, the Voivode stared out at the landscape.

The scene was as barren as their investigation had thus far proven to be. The sun—a green-colored dot in the sky—cast a sickly hue over the gravelly terrain. The land was almost flat, broken only by a scattering of squat gray-skinned plants with long, trailing leaves.

And the bones. Gha bones, and the skeletal remains of the huge carnivores which served as mounts for the sepoys. The bones were picked clean, now, and bleached white by the sun. Every other relic of the battle which had raged across this plain was gone. The natives had buried their own dead, and scavenged all the discarded weapons and armor.

Behind him, Agayan heard a cracking noise. The native shrieked and fell suddenly silent. The Voivode twisted his body, caterpillarlike, and examined the situation. As he had expected, the Gha had finally broken the native's arm. And, still, without the Investigator learning anything they didn't already know.

"Are you quite finished?" he demanded.

Again, Yuaw Khta ignored him. But, after a moment, the Investigator made a gesture to the Gha. The sepoy released its grip. The native, now unconscious, collapsed to the ground.

Satisfied that the charade was at an end, Agayan transformed his forelimbs into arms and reached for his communicator. After summoning the shuttle, he amused himself by watching

the Investigator scampering about the area, looking for some last-minute clue.

As always, the Voivode found Yuaw Khta's movements both comical and unsettling. The Investigator, like all members of his species, was a tall and gangling creature. Its long, ungainly head hung forward from its neck like certain draft animals Agayan had observed on various primitive planets. That much was amusing. Yet there was a quick, jerky nature to the Investigator's movements which created a certain sense of anxiety in Agayan's mind. His own species, supple but slow-moving, retained a primordial fear of predators.

He shook the uneasiness off. Ridiculous, really. Even a bit embarrassing. Such atavistic fears had no basis in reality. Agayan's race—like that of the Investigator—was counted among the Doge Species which dominated both the Federation and the great trading Guilds and Combines.

The Doge Species numbered only twenty-three. All other races were subordinate, to one degree or another. Some, like the species which provided the Pilots and Medics for the great trading ships, were ranked Class One. Class One species were privy to the highest technology of galactic civilization, and enjoyed many privileges. But they were still subordinates. Others, specialized laborers like the Gha, were ranked Class Two. Below Class Two species came nothing but indentured servant races, like the quasi-reptilian Ossa whose flexible phenotypes made them useful, or outright slaves like—

The shuttle swept in for a landing. The Investigator joined Agayan as they marched up the ramp.

"I told you the humans did it," he hissed, knotting the finger-clusters of his forelimbs in satisfaction.

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## II

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After their ship left the planet, Agayan pressed the advantage.

"It is the *only* possibility," he announced firmly. "Ridiculous to think those natives were responsible!"

He and the Investigator were in that chamber of the vessel which combined the functions of a lounge and a meeting room. In deference to its multispecies use, the room was bathed with soft indirect light and bare of any furnishings beyond those of use to its current occupants. Each of those two occupants, in his or its own way, was relaxing. For Agayan, that involved nothing more elaborate than draping his body over a sawhorse-shaped piece of furniture and enjoying a tumbler of a mildly intoxicating liquor.

For the Investigator, relaxation was more intense. Yuaw Khta was also positioned on its preferred furniture, in that posture which almost all bipeds adopted when resting. (In their different languages, it was called *sitting*. As always, it seemed peculiar to Agayan—as if a person would deliberately choose to break his body in half.) Yuaw Khta was also sipping at a beverage.

A different one, of course. The liquor in Agayan's tumbler would poison the Investigator; and, while Agayan would survive drinking the blue liquid in Yuaw Khta's cup, he would certainly not enjoy the experience.

In addition, however, the Investigator enjoyed the ministrations of a personal attendant. As it leaned forward in its chair, the Ossa behind it subjected Yuaw Khta's long neck to a vigorous massage.

Between grunts of pleasure, the Investigator said:

"No variant explanation can be discounted in advance, Voivode Agayan. Proper investigatory technique is primarily a process of eliminating possibilities, one by one, until the solution finally emerges."

Agayan's forelimb finger-cluster flexed sarcastically. "And are you *now* satisfied? Can we *finally* lay to rest the—variant explanation!—that primitives somehow seized a Guild vessel? *After* they had already been decisively defeated in battle?"

"Your own explanation would also have primitives seizing the ship," pointed out the Investigator.

Agayan restrained his anger. The self-control was difficult, but allowances had to be made. Yuaw Khta, after all, had never personally witnessed the humans in action.

"There is no comparison," he said forcefully. "It is true that the humans were also iron-age barbarians. But their discipline and social coordination were many levels beyond those of any other primitives you may have encountered."

"So you say," grunted the Investigator. Its long, bony face was twisted into an expression which combined pain and pleasure.

To Agayan, watching, the whole process—what Yuaw Khta called a *massage*—seemed as grotesque as the Investigator's seated posture. To the Voivode's soft-bodied species, pain was pain and pleasure was pleasure, and never the twain shall meet. Not for the first time, Agayan concluded that the vertebrate structure which was by far the most common *Bauplan* of the galaxy's intelligent races was a curse on its possessors. A preposterous structure, really. Contradictory to the core.

Still, mused Agayan, it had its advantages.

Strength, for one. The Voivode glanced at the nearest of the sepoy's standing silently against the wall of the chamber. Now unencumbered by armor, the Gha's bronze-colored, rangy body was fully visible. Quite impressive, in its own crude way.

*Especially this one,* thought the Voivode. *He's the commander of the squad, I believe.*

For a moment, Agayan's gaze met the bulging eyes of the sepoy. As always, the Gha's face was utterly expressionless. To humans, that face would seem froglike in its shape. To the Voivode, it simply seemed inanimate.

Gha, he reflected, were the most uninteresting species he had ever encountered. Barely sentient, in his opinion, based on his long experience with the sepoy's. The creatures never expressed any sentiments in their faces, and they were as indistinguishable as so many pebbles.

This one, for instance—the one he supposed to be the sepoy commander. Agayan thought that the Gha was the same one which had been in his service when he was a mere Guild Cacique. But he was not certain.

He looked back at Yuaw Khta. The Investigator was now practically writhing in the pain/pleasure from its massage. For a moment, Agayan felt genuine envy. The ubiquity of the vertebrate structure, whatever its limitations, meant that vertebrate Guildmasters could enjoy more in the way of personal and intimate service than could members of his own species.

While Yuaw Khta grunted its pain/pleasure, Agayan took the time to examine its personal attendant. Ossa were particularly favored for that purpose by genetic engineers. The quasi-reptiles lent themselves as easily to phenotype surgery as they did to genetic manipulation. And there was always a large supply of the things. Their sexual and procreative energy was notorious, in their natural state as well as the multitude of bodily forms into which they were shaped by Doge engineers.

Idly, Agayan wondered if this particular Ossa regretted its transformation. It was neutered, now, to match Yuaw Khta's current sexual stage. The Investigator kept two other Ossa on the ship, one male and one female, to serve it/her/him as Yuaw Khta progressed through the cycle.

Agayan did not ponder the matter for more than a few seconds. Ossa, for him, were not much more interesting than Gha.

He decided that he had been polite enough. "Are you going to be distracted by this exercise in self-torture for much longer?" he demanded. "The affairs of the Guild press heavily."

Yuaw Khta's grunt combined satisfaction with irritation. The Investigator made a snapping sound with its fingers and the Ossa attendant immediately departed the chamber.

After taking a long draught from its cup, Yuaw Khta said: "I fail to see your point, Voivode Agayan. Regardless of their social discipline and cohesion, the humans are still primitives."

He made a small waving gesture, which encompassed the entirety of the ship. "Even if they managed—somehow—to seize the ship, they would have no way to fly it anywhere."

"Unless they coerced the Pilot," retorted Agayan. The Voivode spread both his forelimb clusters, to give emphasis to his next words. "Unlike you, Yuaw Khta, I have personal experience with the humans. I was their Commander, for a time, before my promotion to Voivode. As you may or may not know, I passed through the Cacique ranks faster than any Guildmaster on the record. Some of that unprecedented speed in climbing through the ranks, of course, was due—"

He interlaced his finger-clusters modestly.

"—to my own ability. But *every* Commander of the human sepoys enjoyed rapid promotion. The humans were, far and away, the best sepoy troops the Guild has ever had. They were invariably successful in their campaigns, and did not even suffer heavy casualties."

He took a drink from his tumbler. "As these things go," he concluded. "In time, of course, their numbers would have declined to the point where they would have been useless. But there were many, many campaigns which the Guild would have profited from before their liquidation was necessary."

“So?” demanded Yuaw Khta.

Agayan could not control the agitated flexing of his hindlimb clusters, he was so aggravated. But he managed to maintain a calm voice.

“So? What do you think accounts for the human success, Investigator? It was not simple physical prowess, I can assure you!”

The Voivode pointed to the Gha commander. “This one—or any of its fellows—could easily defeat a human in single combat. Several of them at once, in fact. But I have no doubt whatsoever that on a field of battle, matched with equivalent weapons, the humans could have defeated a Gha army.”

The Investigator was still not convinced.

“Gha are stupid,” it grumbled. “Everyone knows that. I am prepared to admit that the humans were unusually intelligent, for a slave race, but—”

The Voivode had had enough. “Do you have any alternative explanation?” he demanded.

The Investigator was silent.

“In that case,” stated Agayan firmly, “I now exercise my command prerogatives. If the humans seized their transport vessel, and coerced the Pilot into operating the craft, their most likely destination would have been their original home. Their native planet. Accordingly, this ship will proceed to that same planet. If the humans are there, we will destroy them. This vessel is far better armed than any troop transport.”

“*Their native planet?*” exploded the Investigator. “That’s ridiculous! The humans were in Guild service longer—*far longer*—than any other sepoy troops. They underwent tens and tens of Stasis episodes. It must be hundreds—thousands—of years since their initial recruitment. I doubt if we even have a record of—”

“The record will exist,” stated Agayan firmly. “I have instructed the Pilot to check. You underestimate the care with which the Guild—”

He was interrupted by the appearance of the Pilot herself in the chamber.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “I presume you have finished your examination of the records?”

“Yes, Guild Voivode.” The Pilot belonged to a spindle-shaped species which found bowing impossible, so she indicated her respect by darkening her purple skin.

“The results?”

“The human planet—there is no name for it, beyond the catalog number—is only two hundred and twelve light years distant. The humans were recruited slightly over two thousand Guild years ago.”

Agayan turned triumphantly to Yuaw Khta.

“You see, Investigator?” He waved a finger-cluster at the Pilot, dismissing her. To his surprise, the Pilot remained planted on her footskirt.

“There is something else, Guild Voivode.”

"Yes?"

"I used a broad-range program in my search, and it brought up all information concerning this planet. In addition to the original sepoj records, there is also a significant—*perhaps* significant—item of meteorological data."

Agayan's finger-clusters began to flex. "What is the point of this?" he demanded.

The Pilot turned a very dark purple, in her attempt to placate the Voivode's rising irritation.

"The Federation's Meteorological Survey has been paying close attention to that region of the galaxy. A Transit storm has been moving down that spiral arm for many thousands of Guild years. The human planet and its environs were cut off from all Transport nodes shortly after the sepoys were recruited. The nodes were only reestablished two hundred Guild years ago."

"Has a Guild vessel returned to that planet since Transit possibility was renewed?"

"No, Guild Voivode. Nor has any Federation ship. But shortly after the nodes re-formed, the Meteorological Survey began detecting oddities in the region, which they eventually pinpointed to that planet's solar system. They didn't know what to make of the peculiar data, until they thought to consult with the Federation's Historiographic Bureau."

Seeing the Voivode's increasingly rapid finger-flexing, the Pilot hurried to her conclusion.

"The data indicate that the natives of that planet have recently developed the capacity to manipulate the electromagnetic spectrum. Radio waves, to be precise."

Agayan's clusters spread wide with puzzlement.

"Radio? Of what possible use—"

"It is a primitive technique, Guild Voivode. No advanced civilization bothers with radio, but—according to the Historiographic Bureau, at least—the radio portion of the electromagnetic spectrum is typically the first point of entry for civilizations which—"

The significance of the information finally penetrated. Agayan lurched erect.

"*Civilization?*" he screeched. "Are you trying to claim that these—these human *savages* have reached the point of industrial chain reaction?"

The Pilot scuttled back on her footskirt. Her color was now so deep a purple as to be almost black.

"I'm not claiming *anything*, Guild Voivode! I'm just relaying what the—"

"Ridiculous! I know these humans, you fool! They served under me. There is no—no—"

Agayan's indignation overwhelmed him. He fell silent, fiercely trying to bring his fury under control.

The Investigator interjected itself. "No species in the historical record has reached industrial chain reaction in less than two hundred thousand years since initial habitat domestication," it stated ponderously. "And none has done so since the last of the Doge Species."

The Pilot said nothing. She was tempted to point out that the policies of both the Federation and the Guilds were precisely designed to *prevent* such occurrences, but suppressed the whimsy ruthlessly. Foolish, she was not.

Agayan finally restored his calm enough to speak. Icily:

“That is quite enough, Pilot. You may go. This information—this preposterous twaddle, I should say—will be corrected as soon as we reach that planet. Set the course.”

“Yes, Guild Voivode. I have already done so. Your instructions, as always, were very clear and precise.”

Agayan spread his clusters in acknowledgement of the praise. “Send a message to Guild Headquarters informing them that we are Transiting to the human planet.”

The Pilot scuttled out of the chamber as fast as her ungainly form of locomotion permitted.

Agayan resumed his position of rest. “I cannot believe how incompetent some of the Federation’s—”

*“Ptatti gattokot poi toi rhuch du! Ptatti gatt!”*

All six of Agayan’s clusters knotted in shock. The sheer volume of the Gha commander’s voice had been almost like a physical blow.

The shock deepened. *Deepened.*

Dazed, the Voivode watched one of the Gha sepoy stride forward from its position against the wall and shatter the Investigator’s spinal cord with a single blow of its fist. Shatter it again. Seize Yuaw Khta’s lolling head and practically twist it in a full circle.

The Voivode could *hear* the bones break.

Ancestral reflex coiled Agayan into a soft ball. He heard the Gha commander bellowing more phrases in the sepoy language. Two of the Gha immediately left the chamber.

Agayan was utterly paralyzed. He could not even speak. Only watch.

His soft-bodied species, some distant part of his brain noted, did not respond well to physical danger.

Standing in front of him, now, he recognized the figure of the Gha commander.

The Gha spoke to him. He did not understand the words.

The sepoy spoke again. The meaning of the words finally penetrated. Oddly, Agayan was surprised more by the *fact* of those words than their actual content. He had not realized that Gha could speak Galactic beyond a few crude and simple phrases.

“I said,” repeated the Gha, “do you know my name?”

Paralyzed. Only watch.

The sepoy repeated its question: “Do you know my name, Guild Voivode Agayan?”

The Gha towered above him like an ogre. Immense, heavy-planet muscles coiled over that



rangy, vertebrate body. Strength. Leverage. Power.

The other Gha spoke now, also in fluent Galactic: "Just kill him and be done with it."

The sepoy commander: "Soon enough." To the Voivode: "Do you know my—ah! No use."

The monster reached down a huge hand and seized the Voivode by one of his forelimb clusters. A moment later, still curled into a ball, Agayan found himself suspended in midair. The Gha commander's bulging eyes were right before him.

Paralyzed. Only watch.

"My name," said the Gha softly, "is Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te. Since I have served you for more years than I wish to remember—a second time, now, when the first was bad enough—I feel that it is only proper that you should know my name."

Paralyzed. Only watch.

"I will even educate you in the subtleties. Some of them, at least. Fludenoc is the familiar. Nomo the family name, with the 'te-suffix to indicate that we are affiliated to the Na clan. Hu'tut is an honorific. It indicates that my clan considers my poetry good enough for minstrel status."

Paralyzed. Only watch.

"I will not bother explaining the fine distinctions which we Gha make between poets. They would be quite beyond your comprehension, Guild Voivode. Even if you were still alive."

The Gha's other hand seized Agayan's head. Began to squeeze. Stopped.

"On second thought, I'd better not crush your wormface beyond recognition. The Romans are probably holding a grudge against us. If they can recognize your corpse, it may help."

Paralyzed. Only watch. The Voivode saw the two Gha who had left the chamber return. Dragging the Pilot and the Medic with them.

The Gha commander's clawed hand plunged into Agayan's mid-section. Pushing the soft flesh aside until it gripped the vital organs at the center.

"I'm sure you never knew the names of the three Romans you executed, either. To my own shame, I only know one of them. Helvius, he was called."

Squeezed. *Squeezed.*

Paralyzed, even at his death. Only watch.

The Guild Voivode's last thought was perhaps inappropriate. It seemed outrageous to him that there was still no expression on the Gha's face.

The Guild official's body made a soft plopping sound when Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te finally let it fall to the deck. Around the corpse, a pool of pink blood spread slowly from the Voivode's alimentary and excretory orifices. The Gha commander's incredibly powerful grip had ruptured half of Agayan's internal organs.

"I am *not* cleaning up that mess," announced the Gha who had killed Yuaw Khta. He pointed to the body of the Investigator. "Notice. Clean as a sand-scoured rock. Finesse."

Fludenoc barked humor. "The worm didn't *have* a neck to break. And I meant what I said, Uddumac. His corpse—if they recognize it—may be our passkey with the Romans."

Uddumac made the sudden exhalation of breath which served Gha for a facial grimace. "All right, Fludenoc. *Explain.*"

The other two Gha in the room flexed their shoulders, indicating their full agreement with that sentiment. The gesture was the equivalent of vigorous head nodding among humans.

Before answering, Fludenoc examined the Pilot and the Medic. The Pilot was utterly motionless. Much like the species which had produced Agayan, the Pilot's race also responded to sudden danger by instinctive immobility. Only her color—pale violet, now—indicated her terror.

There would be no problems with her, Fludenoc decided. He did not think she would recover for some time.

The Medic, on the other hand—

The Medic belonged to a species which would have seemed vaguely avian to humans. *His* instinctive reaction to shock was rapid flight. Yet, aside from an initial attempt to struggle free from the iron grip of the Gha who had captured him, the Medic seemed almost tranquil. His Gha captor still held him by the arm, but the Medic was making no attempt to escape.

Fludenoc stared down at him. The Medic's flat, golden eyes stared back.

"Do not not mind me," the Medic suddenly trilled. "I am just just a bystander. *Interested* bystander."

The Medic gazed down at the corpse of the Voivode. "I always always wondered what the worm's blood looked like." He trilled pure pleasure. "Never never thought I'd find out."

Uddumac interrupted.

"*Explain, Fludenoc.* I obeyed your command because you are the *flarragun* of our Poct'on cartouche. But now that the action is finished, I have a full right to demand an accounting."

Fludenoc decided the Medic was no immediate problem, either. He turned to face Uddumac and the other Gha in the chamber.

"I gave the command because our opportunity has finally arrived."

"*What* opportunity?" asked the Gha holding the Medic.

Fludenoc's whole upper torso swiveled to face his questioner. For all its immense strength,

the Gha physique was not limber. Evolved on a heavy-gravity planet, Gha necks were almost completely rigid.

“You know perfectly well *what* opportunity, Oltomar. The same opportunity the Poct'on has been searching for since it was founded.”

Oltomar's response was a quick, wavering hiss.

Fludenoc, understanding the subtleties in that hiss, felt a sudden surge of bitter anger. His anger, and his bitterness, were not directed toward Oltomar. They were directed at the universe, in general; and galactic civilization, in particular.

The same evolutionary necessities which had produced the rigid upper vertebra of the Gha species, had also produced their stiff, unmoving faces. The bleak, wind-scoured, heavy planet where Gha had originated was merciless. No soft, supple, flexible animals could survive there—only creatures which presented a hard shield to the world, and thereby withstood its heavy lashes.

Intelligence, when it came to that planet, came in a suitable form. A form which, when other intelligences discovered them—more technologically advanced intelligences, but not smarter ones—could see nothing beyond the stiff shield of Gha faces. And the immense strength of Gha bodies.

The Gha were famed—notorious—among all the intelligent races of the galaxy. They were the epitome of the stolid dullwit. Only the Gha themselves knew of their inner life. Of the subtle ways in which their breath transmitted meaning; their voices, undertones of sentiment.

Only the Gha knew of their poetry. To galactic civilization—to the Doge Species which ruled that civilization—the Gha were nothing more than splendid thugs. The galaxy's premier goons.

Fludenoc shook off the anger. (Literally. His fellows, watching, understood the nuances of that shoulder movement as perfectly as he had understood the skepticism in Oltomar's hiss.)

“I'm quite serious, Oltomar. Even before this incident, I thought the Romans were the best possibility we had ever encountered.”

“Too primitive,” interjected Uddumac. “We talked it about, you and I, long ago.”

Uddumac gestured to the Voivode's corpse on the floor. “The first time we had the misfortune of being assigned to this worm. We talked about it, then, and we reached a common conclusion. For all their astonishing competence, the Romans were simply too primitive. Barbarians, to all intents and purposes.”

Oltomar chimed in. Again, literally. The chime-syllable which prefaced his words was a Gha way of expressing agreement.

“Yes. Nothing's changed simply because they managed to seize their troop transport. *If* they seized it. I'm not sure the worm's theory was correct, but even if it is—so what? The Romans are still barbarians. The Poct'on has always known that—”

Fludenoc silenced him with a gesture. Left hand before his face, palm outward, fingers spread. *Stop—I must interrupt.*

"You're missing the significance of the new data," he said. "That's why I gave the order to kill them." His next gesture—right hand turned aside, waist high, fingers curled against the thumb—was the Gha expression of apology.

"That's also why I didn't wait until we had an opportunity to discuss the matter, as a Pocht'on cartouche would normally do. I had to stop the Pilot from transmitting anything to Guild Headquarters. I'm hoping the Federation itself doesn't understand the significance of the meteorological report. The Guilds may still not know of it at all."

The other three Gha in the room were silent. Their stiff postures, to anyone but Gha, would have made them seem like statues. But Fludenoc understood their confusion and puzzlement.

To his surprise, the Pilot suddenly spoke. Fludenoc had almost forgotten her presence.

"Are you talking about the radio signals?" she asked.

Fludenoc swiveled to face her. The Pilot froze with instinctive fear, but her color remained close to purple. "I'm s-sorry," she stammered, in Gha. "I didn't mean—"

"I did not realize you spoke our language," said Fludenoc.

Then, sadly (though only a Gha would have sensed it in his tone):

"I am not angry at you for interrupting me, Pilot. Among ourselves, we consider conversation a fine art. Interruption is part of its pleasure."

The Pilot's shade developed a pinkish undertone. "I know. I have listened to you, sometimes, when you versified each other in your chamber. I thought the poetry was quite good. Although I'm sure I missed most of the nuances."

Now, all four Gha were staring at the Pilot. And it took no Gha subtlety to realize that they were all absolutely astonished.

"You are not the only people in the galaxy," the Pilot said softly, "who mourn for what might have been."

She shifted her footskirt, turning away from Fludenoc to face the other Gha. "I do not think you grasp the importance of those radio signals. The reason the Voivode was so indignant was because he understood that, if the data is accurate, it means that the Romans—or, at least, the human species which produced them—are no longer barbarians. They have reached industrial chain reaction."

"What in Creation are *radio*?" demanded Oltomar. "And why is it important?"

The Pilot hesitated. Again, Fludenoc barked humor.

"He is not actually an ignoramus, Pilot, appearances to the contrary. It's just that, like most Gha, his education was oriented toward practical matters. His knowledge of history is sadly deficient."

Beyond a mildly irritated inhalation, Oltomar did not argue the point. Fludenoc made a gesturing motion to the Pilot. *Continue.*

"Radio is a part of the electromagnetic spectrum," she explained. "Very far toward the low

frequency end. Modern civilization doesn't have any real use for those bands. But in the early stages of industrial chain reaction, it is always the first avenue by which rising civilizations conquer electromagnetism. For a short period of time, such planets project radio waves into the galaxy. The waves are very weak, of course, and undirected, so they are quickly lost in the galaxy's background noise. If the Federation Meteorological Survey hadn't been keeping that portion of the galaxy under close observation because of the Transit storm, those signals would never have been noticed."

Uddumac interrupted. "You are saying that humans have achieved *civilization*?"

"Yes. There can be no natural explanation for such radio signals. And only a civilized species can project radio signals powerful enough to be picked up at interstellar distances."

"What level of civilization?" demanded Oltomar. "Class One or Two? Or even—Doge?"

"There's no way to tell without—"

"The distinction is critical!" Oltomar's statement was almost a shout. "*It's absolutely critical*."

The Pilot froze. Fludenoc interposed himself between her and Oltomar. She was actually in no physical danger at all, but her species tended to panic quickly. His protective presence would enable her to relax.

"Stop bullying her, Oltomar," he said quietly. "She has no way of answering your question—without us making the journey to that planet. Which is precisely what I propose to do."

He gestured to the dead bodies of the Voivode and the Investigator. "*Our* journey, not theirs."

Oltomar subsided, but Uddumac was still unsatisfied.

"This could easily be a complete waste of effort, Fludenoc. We need to find a suitable species which can claim Doge status. *Legally*. If the humans are already Class One—*advanced* Class One—we might be able to nudge them over the edge. As long as we could keep hidden the fact that their Transit capability was stolen from already established Doge technology. But if they're only Class Two, there's no way—"

He broke off, shivering his shoulders in that Gha gesture which corresponded to a human headshake.

Fludenoc hesitated before responding. Uddumac's reservations, after all, were quite reasonable. In order for a species to claim Doge status under Federation law, they had to demonstrate a capacity for interstellar travel and commerce. In technological terms, Transit; in socio-political terms, a mercantile orientation. An *independent* capacity, developed by their own efforts, not simply a capacity acquired from already existing Doges.

Civilized species which lacked that capacity were considered Class One if they had managed to depart the confines of their own planet before being discovered by galactic civilization. Class Two, if they were a society still bound to their world of origin.

As Uddumac had rightly said, it *might* be possible to give humans a false Doge identity by

surreptitiously handing them Transit technology. Transit technology, by its nature, was fairly invariant. All the existing Doge Species used essentially the same method. But the subterfuge would only work if humans had already achieved a very high level of Class One civilization. Nobody would believe that human Transit was self-developed if the species was still pulling wagons with draft animals.

“The decision has already been made,” Fludenoc stated, firmly but not belligerently. Again, he pointed to the Doge corpses. “We have no choice now, brothers. Let us make Transit to the human planet. The answer can only be found there.”

There was no further opposition. Fludenoc swiveled to the Pilot.

“Take us there,” he commanded.

The Pilot left the chamber immediately. Fludenoc turned to examine the Medic.

“Do not not mind me,” the Medic immediately trilled. “I am just just a bystander.”

All the Gha, now, barked their humor.

“But are you still *interested?*” asked Oltomar.

“Oh, yes yes! Very interested interested!”

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## IV

« ^ »

Not so many days later, after Transit was made, the Medic was still interested. Fascinated, in fact.

“What what in the name of Creation is *that that that?*”

There was no answer. Everyone in the control chamber was staring at the viewscreen.

Staring at *that*.

The Pilot finally broke the silence. “I think it’s a boat,” she whispered.

“What is a—a *boat?*” asked Oltomar. He, also, spoke in a whisper.

“I think she’s right,” muttered Fludenoc. “I saw a hologram of a boat, once. It looked quite a bit like—that. Except *that’s* a lot bigger. A whole lot bigger.”

“I say it again!” hissed Oltomar. “What in Creation is a *boat?*”

“It’s a vessel that floats on water,” replied Fludenoc. “Very large bodies of water, such as don’t exist on our planet.”

Oltomar stared at the screen. “*Water?*” he demanded. “*What* water? We’re still in the outer fringes of this solar system!”

A hum from the communication console announced an incoming message.

"I think we're about to find out," said the Pilot. She shuffled toward the console. "Let's hope they speak some language the computer can translate."

Fludenoc was suddenly filled with confidence. *That* was the strangest-looking spacecraft he had ever seen. But, then again, he had thought the Romans were the strangest-looking soldiers he had ever seen, too.

"The computer will be able to translate," he predicted. "Latin has been programmed into it for over two thousand years."

He was not wrong. The Latin phrases which the computer received were spoken in a very odd accent, it was true. Quite unlike the original input. But the phrases were simple enough:

*"Unknown spacecraft: you are ordered to hold position. Any movement toward the inner planets will be construed as a hostile act."*

"There are more of those—*boats*—coming," said Uddumac. "Lots of them. Very *big* boats."

*"We repeat—hold your position. We are sending a boarding party. Any resistance will be construed as a hostile act."*

Fludenoc instructed the Pilot: "Send a message indicating that the boarding party will be allowed ingress without obstruction. And tell them we seek a parley."

"These are Romans?" queried Oltomar. His tone wavered pure confusion.

"Pilot," said Fludenoc. "Ask them to identify themselves as well."

The reply came quickly:

*"This is Craig Trumbull speaking. I am the Commodore of this fleet and the Captain commanding this vessel. The CSS Scipio Africanus."*

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## V

« ^ »

I feel like an idiot," muttered Commodore Trumbull. His eyes, fixed on the huge viewscreen, shifted back and forth from the sleek, gleaming Guild vessel to the nearest of the newly arrived ships of his flotilla.

The Confederation Space Ship *Quinctius Flaminius*, that was. As she was now called.

Standing next to him, his executive officer grinned. "You mean you feel like the guy who shows up at a formal ball wearing a clown suit? Thought he'd been invited to a costume party?"

Trumbull grunted. Again, he stared at the CSS *Quinctius Flaminius*. As she was now called.

The USS *Missouri*, in her former life.

"I can't believe I'm trying to intimidate a Guild vessel with these *antiques*."

Commander Stephen Tambo shrugged. "So what if it's a World War Two craft dragged out of mothballs?" He pointed at the ancient battleship on the viewscreen. "Those aren't sixteen-inch guns anymore, Commodore. They're lasers. Eight times as powerful as any the Guild uses, according to the transport's computer. And the *Quinctius*' force-screens carry the same magnitude of superiority."

"I know that!" snapped the commodore. "I still feel like an idiot."

The executive officer, eyeing his superior with a sideways glance, decided against any further attempt at humor. The North American seemed bound and determined to wallow in self-pity.

Commander Tambo shared none of that mortification. True, the Confederation's newly created naval force was—from the standpoint of appearance—the most absurd-looking fleet imaginable. It had only been a few years, after all, since the arrival of the Romans had alerted humanity to the fact that it was a very big and very dangerous galaxy. Proper military spacecraft were only just starting to be constructed. In the meantime, the Earth had needed protection. *Now*.

So—

The Romans had brought the technology. Their captured troop transport's computer had carried full theoretical and design criteria in its data banks. The quickest and simplest way to create an instant fleet had been to refit the Earth's old warships.

By galactic standards, the resulting spacecraft were grotesque in every way. Nor was that simply a matter of appearance. They were not airtight, for instance. Because of the force-screens, of course, they did not need to be. But no proper galactic vessel would have taken the chance of relying on force-screens to maintain atmospheric integrity.

But Tambo did not mind in the least. As a South African, he was accustomed to the whimsies of history.

And besides, there were advantages.

He turned away from the viewscreen and gazed through the window of the bridge. A real window, that was—just plain, ordinary glass—looking down onto the vast, flat expanse where Tambo enjoyed his daily jogging. No galactic spaceship ever built—ever conceived—would have provided him with that opportunity.

The huge flight deck of the CSS *Scipio Africanus*.

Formerly, the USS *Enterprise*.

"The boarding party's leaving," he announced.

Commodore Trumbull turned away from the viewscreen and joined him at the window. The two men watched as the boarding craft lifted off from the flight deck—no hurtling steam catapults here; just the easy grace of galactic drives—and surged toward the force-screen. There



was a momentary occultation of the starfield as the boarding craft's screen melded with that of the *Africanus*. A moment later, the boarding craft was lost to sight.

"Jesus H. Christ," muttered the commodore. "A *complete* idiot."

Tambo could not resist. He did a quick little dance step and sang, to the tune from *Fiddler on the Roof*: "Tradition!"

Trumbull scowled and glared at the viewscreen. The boarding craft was already halfway to the Guild vessel.

The CSS *Livy*, as she was now called. Naming her after a historian, thought the commodore darkly, was appropriate. He had protested bitterly. *Bitterly*. But the Naval Commissioning Board had been seized by the rampant historical romanticism which seemed to have engulfed the entire human race since the return of the Roman exiles.

The CSS *Livy*. Formerly, the prize exhibit at the Berlin Museum of Ancient Technology. A full-size reproduction—faithful in every detail—of one of the Roman Empire's quinqueremes.

The commodore could restrain himself no longer.

"*They could at least stop rowing the damned oars!*"

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## VI



Gaius Vibulenus shook his head firmly, and turned to Trumbull.

"No, Commodore," he said in his heavily accented English. "I do not recognize them. Not specifically. They *are* the same species as the—we just called them the 'frogs.' Or the 'toads.' "

The Roman looked back at the viewscreen. His eyes were now focused on the corpse of the Voivode. A Confederation Marine lieutenant was holding the creature's head up.

"And I cannot say that I recognize him, either. He is the same type as the Guild Commander who murdered Helvius and the others, yes. But whether he is the same individual—"

Gaius shrugged. "You must understand, Commodore, that we saw many intelligent species while we served the trading guild. But never very many different individuals of any one species. So they all looked much the same to us. Bizarre."

From behind them, Quartilla spoke. "I recognize *him*. The dead one, I mean."

Everyone on the bridge turned toward her.

"You're sure?" asked the Commodore.

Quartilla nodded. "Oh, yes. His species call themselves *Rassiqua*. Their body shapes and—call them 'faces'—are difficult for others to distinguish between, but each of them has a

quite distinct pattern of skin mottling.” She pointed at the corpse being held up before the viewscreen. “This one has a—”

She leaned over to the historian standing next to her, gesturing with her agile plump hands. “What do you call this, Robert—a thing with six sides?”

Robert Ainsley frowned for a moment, tugging at his gray-streaked professorial beard, before he understood her question.

“Hexagon.”

“*Hex-a-gon*,” she murmured, memorizing the word. The executive officer, watching, was impressed by the—*woman’s*?—obvious facility and experienced ease at learning languages. She and Vibulenus had arrived at the *Scipio Africanus* aboard a special courier vessel less than an hour before. But even in that short time, Tambo had been struck by the difference between Quartilla’s fluent, almost unaccented English and the stiff speech of her Roman companion.

“If you turn him around,” said Quartilla, “you’ll see a hexagon pattern on his left rear flank. Three hexagons, if I remember correctly. All of them shaded a sort of blue-green.”

Commodore Trumbull began to give the order, but the Marine lieutenant was already moving the body. A moment later, grunting slightly, he held the Voivode’s left rear flank up to the screen.

Three small hexagons. Shaded a sort of blue-green.

Gaius Vibulenus hissed. “That stinking *bastard*.”

Tambo stared down at the Roman. The former tribune’s fists were clenched. The steel-hard muscles in his forearms stood out like cables. For all the man’s short size—and Vibulenus was tall, for a Roman—Tambo was glad that rage wasn’t directed at him.

By current physical standards, the Romans were not much bigger than boys. The appearance was deceiving. Small they might be, and slightly built, compared to modern men, but the returned exiles’ ancient customs were unbelievably ferocious, by those same modern standards. Tambo knew of at least one college fraternity, full of bravado, which had been hospitalized in its entirety after making the mistake of challenging four Roman veterans to a barroom brawl.

“But you don’t recognize the frogs?” asked Trumbull. “The—what do they call themselves? The Gha?”

Quartilla shook her head. “No, Commodore. The Gha never demanded service from us Ossa pleasure creatures. We had almost no contact with them.”

Her voice was icy with old bitterness. Tambo watched Vibulenus give her hand a little squeeze.

The commodore frowned deeply. Quartilla took a breath and added:

“I can verify everything else the Gha have said, however. I think they must be telling the truth here also. How else could they have known that the Voivode had once been the Roman commander? For that matter, how else could they have learned Latin?”

"He knew Helvius's name, too," muttered Vibulenus. The Roman was frowning very deeply himself, now. Almost scowling, in fact.

Seeing the expression on his face, the commodore stated: "Yet you still seem very suspicious, Tribune."

Vibulenus gave a little start of surprise. "Suspicious?" His face cleared. "You do not understand, Commodore. I was just thinking—It is hard to explain."

The Roman gestured toward the Gha on the viewscreen. They were standing toward the rear of the Guild vessel's command chamber, closely guarded by armed Marines. "*Guilty*, perhaps. These—Gha—were never anything to us but our masters' goons. It never occurred to me that they might have names. It certainly never occurred to me that they might know *our* names."

The Gha commander in the viewscreen suddenly spoke. His Latin was crude, but quite understandable.

"You Gaius Vibulenus. During period was I assigned guard Cacique, while was your Guildmaster, you tribune command Tenth Cohort."

Gaius winced. "Your name is Fludenoc, am I right?" Quickly, with the easy familiarity of a man accustomed to elaborate ancient nomenclature, he added: "Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te?"

The Gha bent forward stiffly.

"I believe him," said Gaius abruptly. The tone of his voice carried the absolutism of a hardened, experienced commanding officer. The Roman returned the bow, and spoke again in Latin.

"I thank you, Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te, and your comrades, for finally giving justice to Helvius. And Grumio and Augens."

When he straightened, his face was rigid. "I also declare, on behalf of myself and all Romans, that any quarrel between us and Gha is a thing of the past."

Tambo translated the exchange for the commodore. Like most North Americans, with the creaky linguistic skills of a people whose native language was the world's *lingua franca*, Trumbull had not picked up more than a few phrases of the Latin tongue which had been enjoying such an incredible renaissance the past few years.

The commodore scratched under his jaw. "All right," he muttered. "I'm satisfied these people are who they say they are. But what about their other claims? And their weird proposal?"

Before anyone could respond, the communication console hummed vigorously. The com officer, Lieutenant Olga Sanchez, took the call.

"You'd better look at this yourself, Commodore," she said, standing aside.

Trumbull marched over to the screen and quickly read the message. "Wonderful," he muttered. "Just perfect." He turned back, facing the small crowd on the bridge.

“Well, folks, after two hundred years—and God only knows how much money poured down that sinkhole—the SETI maniacs have finally picked up a signal from intelligent extra-solarians. Wasn’t hard, actually. The radio signals are being beamed directly at the Earth from a source which just crossed Neptune’s orbit.”

He took a breath and squared his stocky shoulders.

“Their findings have been confirmed by Operation Spaceguard, using the radar net set up to watch for asteroids. And Naval Intelligence has spotted them also, with modern equipment. The source is a fleet of spacecraft.”

He stared at the Gha in the viewscreen. “It seems they were wrong. About this, at least. Somebody else also realized the significance of the radio signals.”

“The Guilds!” exclaimed Quartilla.

Trumbull nodded. “One of them, anyway. They’re identifying themselves—in Latin—as the Ty’uct Trading Guild.”

Quartilla pointed to the body of the Voivode, still visible in the viewscreen. “That’s his guild. The one which bought and used the Romans.”

“What do they want?” snarled Vibulenus. His fists were clenched again.

“What do you think?” snorted the commodore. “They say that by right of first contact they are claiming exclusive trading privileges with this solar system. A Federation naval vessel is accompanying them to ensure the correct protocols. Whatever that means.”

Tambo translated this recent exchange for the benefit of the Gha. As soon as he finished, the Gha commander spoke.

“What it mean,” stated Fludenoc, “is they have right hammer in to the submission anybody objects. But must restrict theyselfs this system existing technology. Federation vessel is watchdog make sure they follow rules.”

Again, Tambo translated. The commodore’s gloom vanished.

“Is that so?” he demanded. “Is that so, indeed?”

He and his executive officer exchanged grins. The North American often exasperated Tambo with his quirks and foibles. But the South African was glad, now, that he was in command. There was a long, long tradition behind that wicked grin on Trumbull’s face.

Trumbull turned back to Lieutenant Sanchez. “Tell Naval Command that I’m deploying to meet this threat. If they have any new instructions, tell them they’d better get ‘em off quickly. Otherwise, I will follow my own best judgment.”

She bent over the console. Trumbull glanced up at the viewscreen. “Bring that ship aboard the *Africanus*,” he commanded the Marine lieutenant. “I want to get it below decks before the Guild vessels arrive.”

Seeing Tambo’s raised eyebrow, he asked:

“Any suggestions? Criticisms?”

Tambo shook his head. "I agree with you."

The South African waved at the viewscreen, now blank. "We can decide later what we think about the Gha proposal. It sounds crazy to me, frankly. But who knows, in this strange new universe? In the meantime, by keeping them hidden we leave all our options open."

The sight of the viewscreen flickering back into life drew his eyes that way. Within seconds, a starfield filled the screen. Against that glorious background, little lights could be seen, moving slowly across the stars. The ships were far too small to be seen at that distance, by any optical means. The lights were computer simulations based on information derived from a variation of Transit technology which was quite analogous to radar.

There were fourteen of those lights, Tambo saw. One of them—presumably the Federation observer—was hanging well back from the others. The thirteen ships of the Guild force itself were arrayed in a dodecahedron, with a single ship located at the very center.

"That's a fancy-looking formation," mused Trumbull. "But I don't see where it's worth much. Except for parades."

From the corner of the bridge, where he stood next to Quartilla, Robert Ainsley spoke up.

"Excuse me, Commodore."

Trumbull cocked his head around.

The historian pointed at the screen. "Judging from what I've learned since I was assigned to help the Romans orient themselves after their return—and everything we've just heard today fits in perfectly—I don't—" He hesitated, fumbling for words.

"Go on," said the commodore.

"Well, this isn't my field, really. Not in practice, at least. But—I don't think these Guilds have fought a real battle in—in—Jesus, who knows? Millennia. *Many* millennia."

Trumbull smiled thinly and looked back at the formation marching across the starfield.

"Funny you should say that," he murmured. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Tambo cleared his throat. "According to the computer, sir, there are three classes of warships in that fleet. Eight small ones—about the size of the vessel the Gha seized—four mediums, and the big one in the center."

He issued a modest little cough. "Naval procedure, as you know, recommends that we give enemy vessels a nomenclature. Since we don't know what the Guild calls their own ships, we'll have to come up with our own names."

Trumbull's smile widened. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Oh, yes," replied Tambo, solemn-faced. "I believe we should name them as follows: small ones, *Bismarcks*; the mediums, *Yamatos*; and the big one—"

He could not restrain his grin.

"—is a *Titanic*."

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## VII

« ^ »

The bridge was crowded, now, with the addition of the aliens. The Pilot and the Medic huddled against a wall, out of the way. But the four Gha, by virtue of their size alone, seemed to fill half the room.

“Do any of you know the rules of engagement?” Trumbull asked the Gha. Tambo translated his question into Latin.

The Gha were stiff as statues.

“We understand do not,” said Fludenoc. “What are—engagement regulations?”

Before Tambo could explain, the Gha commander turned to the Pilot and motioned. Fearfully, creeping on her footskirt, she shuffled forward. Tambo waited while Fludenoc spoke some rapid phrases in a language he didn’t recognize.

“That’s Galactic,” whispered Quartilla. “It’s an artificial language, with several dialects designed for the vocal apparatus of different Doge Species. This one is called Galactic Three.”

She began to add something else, but fell silent when Fludenoc turned back to the humans.

“Now I understand,” said the Gha. “Pilot say she not certain. Doges not fought each other many thousands—*many* thousands—years. But she think there no rules between Guild fight Guild. She—what is word?—strongly says you must not attack Federation vessel.”

“Will it attack us?” asked Tambo.

The Gha did not bother to check with the pilot before answering. “No. Federation ship will watch only.” He waved a huge, clawed hand at the viewscreen. “This is Guild business. Federation not interfere.”

After Tambo explained to his superior, Trumbull nodded. “It’s a straight-up fight, then.” To the com officer: “How good’s your Latin?”

She smiled. “Well, sir—it’s just about perfect.”

Trumbull grimaced. “Christ,” he muttered. “I’m going to have to learn that damned archaic tongue, after all.”

Then, with an irritated shrug: “Contact that fleet and warn them off.”

“Yes sir. How should I identify us?”

Trumbull hesitated, before turning to the historian.

“Give me some good old Roman term,” he ordered. “Something vague, mind you—I don’t—”

Ainsley understood immediately. Smiling, he replied: "Just use *SPQR*."

Tambo chuckled. Trumbull said to the com officer:

"Use it. Tell them we're the—the *SPQR Guild*—and *we* have already established prior rights to all trade and commerce with this system." Growling: "Way, way prior rights."

The com officer followed his orders. Three minutes later, a burst of Latin phrases appeared on the com screen.

Lieutenant Sanchez clucked disapprovingly. "Their Latin's really pretty bad. That's a ridiculous declension of the verb 'to copulate,' for one thing. And—"

"Just give me the message!" bellowed the commodore.

The com officer straightened. "The gist of it, sir, is that our claim is preposterous and we are ordered to surrender."

Trumbull grunted. "I was hoping they'd say that. I've never even met these people, and already I hate their guts." He leaned toward his executive officer. "Any recommendations?"

"Yes, sir. I'd send the *Quinctius*. With an escort of SSBNs."

Trumbull nodded. "I was thinking the same way. We may as well find out now if our lasers are as good as they're cracked up to be. And I'll be interested to see how the missiles work. The galactic computer claims kinetic weapons are obsolete, but I think it's full of crap."

Trumbull began giving the necessary orders to his operations staff. Tambo, seeing the Gha commander's stiffness out of the corner of his eye, turned to face him.

He wasn't sure—Gha were as hard to read as the Romans said they were—but he thought Fludenoc was worried.

"Are you concerned?" he asked.

The Gha exhaled explosively. "Yes! You must careful be. These very powerful Guildmaster craft."

Tambo shook his head. "I think you are wrong, Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te. I think these are simply arrogant bullies, who haven't been in a real fight for so long they've forgotten what it's like."

He did not add the thought which came to him. It would have meant nothing to the Gha. But he smiled, thinking of a college fraternity which had once tried to bully four small Romans in a bar.

*Don't fuck with real veterans.*

"We've been doing this a long time, Fludenoc," he murmured. "All those centuries—millennia—while we were out of contact with the galaxy, we've been fighting each other. While these Doges—God, what a perfect name!—got fat like hogs."

## VIII



The battle lasted two minutes.

Seeing the huge ancient battleship sweeping toward them, with its accompanying escort of three resurrected Trident missile submarines, the Guild dodecahedron opened up like a flower. Ten laser beams centered on the *Quinctius* itself, including a powerful laser from the “Titanic” at the center of the Doge fleet. The three remaining Guild vessels each fired a laser at the escorts—the *Pydna*, the *Magnesia*, and the *Chaeronea*.

Powered by their gigantic engines, the shields of the human vessels shrugged off the lasers. Those shields, like the engines, were based on galactic technology. But the Doge Species, with the inveterate habit of merchants, had designed their equipment with a cheeseparating attitude. The human adaptations—robust; even exuberant—were based on millennia of combat experience.

The *Pydna*-class escorts responded first. The hatches on their upper decks opened. Dozens of missiles popped out—driven, here, by old technology—and then immediately went into a highly modified version of Transit drive. To the watching eye, they simply disappeared.

“Yes!” cried Trumbull, clenching his fist triumphantly. Not three seconds later, the Guild fleet was staggered by the impact of those missiles. As the commodore had suspected, the Doge Species’ long neglect of missile warfare was costing them heavily. Human electronic countermeasure technology was vastly superior to anything the Guild vessels possessed in the way of tracking equipment. Most of the incoming missiles were destroyed by laser fire, but many of them penetrated to the shield walls.

Even galactic shields were hard-pressed against fifteen-megaton nuclear charges. Four of those shields collapsed completely, leaving nothing but plasma to mark where spacecraft had formerly been. The others survived. But, in the case of three of them, the stress on their engines had been great enough to cause the engines themselves to collapse. Their shields and drives failed, leaving the three ships to drift helplessly.

Now the *Quinctius* went into action. Again, there was an exotic combination of old and new technology. The three great turrets of the ancient battleship swiveled, just as if it were still sailing the Pacific. But the guidance mechanisms were state-of-the-art Doge technology. And the incredible laser beams which pulsed out of each turret’s three retrofitted barrels were something new to the galaxy. Human engineers and physicists, studying the data in the Roman-captured Guild vessel, had decided not to copy the Doge lasers. Instead, they combined some of that dazzling new technology with a revived daydream from humanity’s bloody past.

Only a ship as enormous as the old *Missouri* could use these lasers. It took an immense hull capacity to hold the magnetic fusion bottles. In each of those three bottles—one for each turret—five-megaton thermonuclear devices were ignited. The bottles trapped the energy, contained it, channeled it.

Nine X-ray lasers fired. Three Guild ships flickered briefly, their shields coruscating. Then—vaporized.



Thirty seconds elapsed, as the fusion bottles recharged. The Guild ships which were still under power were now veering off sharply. Again, the turrets tracked. Again, ignition. Again, three Doge vessels vaporized.

More seconds elapsed, while the *Quinctius*' fusion bottles recharged.

The communication console on the bridge of the *Scipio Africanus* began humming. "Sir," reported Lieutenant Sanchez, "it's the Guild flagship. They're asking to negotiate."

"Screw 'em," snarled the commodore. "They're nothing but pirates and slavers, as far as I'm concerned."

Tambo grinned. "You want me to see if I can dig up a black flag somewhere?"

Trumbull snorted. "Why not? We're resurrecting everything else."

The operations officer spoke: "The *Quinctius* reports fusion bottles fully recharged, sir."

Trumbull glared at the surviving Guild ships. "*No quarter*," he growled. "Fire."

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## IX

« ^ »

The World Confederation's Chamber of Deputies reminded Robert Ainsley of nothing so much as a circus. He even glanced at the ceiling, expecting to see a trapeze artist swinging through the air.

"Is this way always?" Fludenoc asked quietly. The Gha, towering next to the historian, was staring down from the vantage point of the spectators' gallery. His bulging eyes were drawn to a knot of Venezuelan delegates shaking their angry fists in the face of a representative from the Great Realm of the Chinese People.

The Chinese delegate was imperturbable. As he could well afford to be, representing the world's largest single nationality.

*Largest by far*, thought Ainsley sardonically, *even if you limit the count to the actual residents of China*.

He watched the bellicose Venezuelans stalk off angrily. Most likely, the historian guessed, they were furious with the Chinese for interfering in what they considered internal Venezuelan affairs. That was the usual bone of contention between most countries and the Great Realm. The Chinese claimed a special relationship—almost semi-sovereignty—with everyone in the world of Chinese descent, official citizenship be damned. Given the global nature of the Han diaspora, that kept the Chinese sticking their thumbs into everybody's eye.

The Gha repeated his question. Ainsley sighed.

"No, Fludenoc. This is worse than usual. A bit."

The historian gestured toward the crowded chamber below. "Mind you, the Chamber of Deputies is notorious for being raucous. At the best of times."

Somehow—he was not quite sure how it had happened—Ainsley had become the unofficial liaison between humanity and the Gha. He suspected that his long and successful work reintegrating the Romans into their human kinfolk had given him, in the eyes of the world at large, the reputation of being a wizard diplomat with weird people from the sky. Which, he thought wryly, was the last thing a man who had spent a lifetime engrossed in the history of classical society had ever expected to become.

On the other hand—Ainsley was not a man given to complaining over his fate. And, fortunately, he *did* have a good sense of humor. He eyed the huge figure standing next to him. From his weeks of close contact with the Gha, Ainsley was now able to interpret—to some degree, at least—the body language of the stiff giants.

"You are concerned," he stated.

Fludenoc exhaled sharply, indicating his assent. "I think—thought—*had thought*"—the Gha struggled for the correct Latin tense—"that you would be more—" His thought drifted off in a vague gesture.

"United?" asked Ainsley, cocking an eyebrow. "Coherent? Rational? Organized?"

Again, the Gha exhaled assent. "Yes. All those."

Ainsley chuckled. "More *Guild*-like, in other words."

The Gha giant swiveled, staring down at the old historian next to him. Suddenly, he barked humor.

Ainsley waved at the madding crowd below. "This is what a real world looks like, Fludenoc. A world which, because of its lucky isolation, was able to grow and mature without the interference of the Guilds and the Federation. It's messy, I admit. But I wouldn't trade it for anything else. Not in a million years."

He stared down at the chaos. The Venezuelans were now squabbling with representatives from the Caribbean League. The Caribs, quite unlike the Chinese delegate, were far from imperturbable. One of them shook his dreadlocks fiercely. Another blew ganga-smoke into the Venezuelans' faces. A third luxuriated in the marvelously inventive *patois* of the islanders, serene in his confidence that the frustrated Venezuelans could neither follow his words nor begin to comprehend the insults couched therein.

"Never fear, Fludenoc hu'tut-Na Nomo'te," he murmured. "Never fear. This planet is as fresh and alive as a basket full of puppies. *Wolf* puppies. The Guilds'll never know what hit 'em."

He turned away from the rail. "Let's go get some ice cream. The important business is going to take place later anyway, in the closed session of the Special Joint Committee."

The Gha followed him readily enough. Eagerly, in fact.

"I want cherry vanilla," announced Fludenoc.

"You *always* want cherry vanilla," grumbled Ainsley.

The Gha's exhalation was extremely emphatic. "Of course. Best thing your insane species produces. Except Romans."

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## X

« ^ »

After the first hour of the Special Joint Committee's session, Ainsley could sense Fludenoc finally begin to relax. The Gha even managed to lean back into the huge chair which had been specially provided for him toward the back of the chamber.

"Feeling better?" he whispered.

The Gha exhaled vigorously. "Yes. This is much more—" He groped for words.

"United?" asked Ainsley, cocking a whimsical eyebrow. "Coherent? Rational? Organized?"

"Yes. All those."

Ainsley turned in his seat, facing forward. Behind the long table which fronted the chamber sat the fifteen most powerful legislators of the human race. The Special Joint Committee had been formed with no regard for hallowed seniority or any of the other arcane rituals which the Confederation's governing body seemed to have adopted, over the past century, from every quirk of every single legislative body ever created by the inventive human mind.

*This* committee was dealing with the fate of humanity—and a number of other species, for that matter. Those men and women with real power and influence had made sure they were sitting at that table. Hallowed rituals be damned.

*Not that all rituals and ceremony have been discarded,* thought Ainsley, smiling wryly.

He was particularly amused by the veil worn by the Muslim Federation's representative—who had spent thirty years ramming the world's stiffest sexual discrimination laws down her countrymen's throats; and the splendiferous traditional ostrich-plume headdress worn by the South African representative—who was seven-eighths Boer in his actual descent, and looked every inch the blond-haired part; and the conservative grey suit worn by the representative from North America's United States and Provinces, suitable for the soberest Church-going occasions—who was a vociferous atheist and the author of four scholarly books on the historical iniquities of mixing Church and State.

The Chairperson of the Special Joint Committee rose to announce the next speaker, and Ainsley's smile turned into a veritable grin.

*And here she is, my favorite. Speaking of preposterous rituals and ceremonies.*

The representative from the Great Realm of the Chinese People, Chairperson of the Special Joint Committee—all four feet, nine inches of her—clasped her hands demurely and bobbed her head in modest recognition of her fellow legislators.

*Everybody's favorite humble little woman.*

"If the representative from the European Union will finally shut his trap," she said, in a voice like steel—

*Mai the Merciless.*

"—maybe we can get down to the serious business."

Silence fell instantly over the chamber.

"We call her the Dragon Lady," whispered Ainsley.

"She good," hissed Fludenoc approvingly. "What is 'dragon'?"

"Watch," replied the historian.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, Fludenoc was almost at ease. Watching Mai the Merciless hack her bloody way through every puffed-up dignitary who had managed to force himself or herself onto the Committee's agenda had produced that effect.

"She *very* good," the Gha whispered. "Could eat one of those stupid carnivores we ride in a single meal."

"—and what other asinine proposition does the august Secretary wish us to consider?" the Chairperson was demanding.

The Secretary from the International Trade Commission hunched his shoulders. "I must protest your use of ridicule, Madame Chairperson," he whined. "We in the Trade Commission do not feel that our concerns are either picayune or asinine! The project which is being proposed, even if it is successful—which, by the way, we believe to be *very* unlikely—will inevitably have the result, among others, of our planet being subjected to a wave of immigration by—by—"

The Chairperson finished his sentence. The tone of her voice was icy: "By *coolies*."

The Trade Commission's Secretary hunched lower. "I would not choose that particular—"

"That is *precisely* the term you would choose," snapped Mai the Merciless, "if you had the balls."

Ainsley had to fight not to laugh, watching the wincing faces of several of the legislators. From the ripple in her veil, he thought the Muslim Federation's representative was undergoing the same struggle.

"What are 'balls'?" asked Fludenoc.

"Later," he whispered. "It is a term which is considered very politically incorrect."

"What is 'politically incorrect'?"

"Something which people who don't have to deal with real oppression worry about,"

replied the historian. Ainsley spent the next few minutes gleefully watching the world's most powerful woman finish her political castration of the world's most influential regulator of trade.

After the Secretary slunk away from the witness table, the Chairperson rose to introduce the next speaker.

"Before I do so, however, I wish to make an announcement." She held up several sheets of paper. "The Central Committee of the Great Realm of the Chinese People adopted a resolution this morning. The text was just transmitted to me, along with the request that I read the resolution into the records of this Committee's session."

A small groan went up. The Chairperson smiled, ever so slightly, and dropped the sheets onto the podium.

"However, I will not do so, inasmuch as the resolution is very long and repetitive. There is one single human characteristic, if no other, which recognizes neither border, breed, nor birth. That is the long-windedness of legislators."

The chamber was swept by a laugh. But the laughter was brief. The Chairperson's smile vanished soon enough, replaced by a steely glare.

"But I will report the gist of the resolution. *The Chinese people of the world have made their decision.* The so-called galactic civilization of the Guilds and the Federation is nothing but a consortium of imperialist bandits and thieves. All other species, beyond those favored as so-called 'Doges,' are relegated to the status of *coolies*."

Her voice was low, hissing: "It is not to be tolerated. It *will* not be tolerated. The Great Realm strongly urges the World Confederation to adopt whole-heartedly the proposal put forward by our Gha fellow-toilers. Failing that, the Great Realm will do it alone."

Ainsley sucked in his breath. "Well," he muttered, "there's an old-fashioned ultimatum for you."

"What does this mean?" asked Fludenoc.

Ainsley rose from his seat. "What it means, my fine froggy friend, is that you and I don't have to spend the rest of the afternoon watching the proceedings. It's what they call a done deal."

As they walked quietly out of the chamber, Ainsley heard the Chairperson saying:

"—to Commodore Craig Trumbull, for his unflinching courage in the face of barbaric tyranny, the Great Realm awards the Star of China. To all of the men and women of his flotilla who are not Chinese, in addition to he himself, honorary citizenship in the Great Realm. To the crew of the heroic *Quinctius Flaminius*, which obliterated the running dogs of the brutal Doge—"

When the door closed behind them, Fludenoc asked: "What is a 'done deal'?"

"It's what happens when a bunch of arrogant, stupid galactics not only poke a stick at the martial pride of North Americans, but also manage to stir up the bitterest memories of the human race's biggest nation."

He walked down the steps of the Confederation Parliament with a very light stride, for a man his age. Almost gaily. "I'll explain it more fully later. Right now, I'm hungry."

"Ice cream?" asked Fludenoc eagerly.

"Not a chance," came the historian's reply. "Today, we're having Chinese food."

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## XI



*And now, thought Ainsley, the real work begins. Convincing the Romans.*

He leaned back on his couch, patting his belly. As always, Gaius Vibulenus had put on a real feast. Whatever else had changed in the boy who left his father's estate in Capua over two thousand years ago, his sense of equestrian *dignitas* remained. A feast was a feast, by the gods, and no shirking the duty.

Quartilla appeared by his side, a platter in her hand.

"God, no," moaned Ainsley. "I can't move as it is."

He patted the couch next to him. "Sit, sweet lady. Talk to me. I've seen hardly anything of you these past few weeks."

Quartilla, smiling, put down the platter and took a seat on the couch.

"Did Gaius tell you that we're going to have children?"

Ainsley's eyes widened. "It's definite, then? The Genetic Institute thinks they can do it?"

Quartilla's little laugh had more than a trace of sarcasm in it. "Oh, Robert! They've known for months that they *could* do it. The silly farts have been fretting over the *ethics* of the idea."

Ainsley stroked his beard, studying her. Quartilla seemed so completely human—not only in her appearance but in her behavior—that he tended to forget she belonged to a species that was, technically speaking, more remote from humanity than anything alive on Earth. More remote than crabs, or trees—even bacteria, for that matter.

And even more remote, he often thought, in some of her *Ossa attitudes*.

The *Ossa*—whether from their innate psychology or simply their internalized acceptance of millennia of physical and genetic manipulation by their Doge masters—had absolutely no attachment to their own natural phenotype. They truly didn't seem to *care* what they looked like.

To some humans, that attitude was repellent—ultimate servility. Ainsley did not agree. To him, the *Ossa* he had met—and he had met most of the "women" whom the Guild had provided for the Roman soldiers' pleasure—were simply *unprejudiced*, in a way that not even the most tolerant and open-minded human ever was. *Ossa* did not recognize species, or races.

Only *persons* were real to them.

He admired them, deeply, for that trait. Still—Ossa were by no means immune to hurt feelings.

“What phenotype will you select?” he asked.

Quartilla shrugged. “Human, essentially. The genotype will be fundamentally mine, of course. The human genome is so different from that of Ossa that only a few of Gaius’s traits can be spliced into the embryo. And they can only do that because, luckily, the chemical base for both of our species’ DNA is the same. You know, those four—”

She fluttered her hands, as if shaping the words with her fingers.

“Adenine, guanine, cytosine, thymine,” intoned Ainsley.

“—yes, them! Anyway, our DNA is the same, chemically, but it’s put together in a completely different manner. We Ossa don’t have those—”

Again, her hands wiggled around forgotten words.

“Chromosomes?”

“Yes. *Chromosomes*. Ossa DNA is organized differently. I forget how, exactly. The geneticist explained but I couldn’t understand a word he said after five seconds.”

Ainsley laughed. “Specialists are all the same, my dear! You should hear Latinists, sometimes, in a bull session. My ex-wife—my *second* ex-wife—divorced me after one of them. Said she’d rather live with a toadstool. Better conversation.”

Quartilla smiled archly. “Why did your *first* ex-wife divorce you?”

Ainsley scowled. “That was a different story altogether. *She* was a Latinist herself—the foul creature!—with the most preposterous theories you can imagine. We got divorced after an exchange of articles in the *Journal of*—”

He broke off, chuckling. “Speaking of specialists and their follies! Never mind, dear.”

He gestured at Quartilla’s ample figure. “But you’re going to stick with your human form?”

“Not quite. The children will have a human shape, in every respect. They’ll be living in a human world, after all. Human hair, even. But their skins will be Ossa. Well—almost. They’ll have the scales, but we’ll make sure they aren’t dry and raspy. Gaius says people won’t mind how the skin looks, as long as it feels good”—she giggled—“in what he calls ‘the clutch.’ ”

Ainsley raised his eyebrow. “*Gaius* doesn’t object to this? I thought—you once told me—”

Quartilla shrugged. “That was a long time ago, Robert. It’s his idea, actually. He says modern humans aren’t superstitious the way he was. And he doesn’t give a damn about their other prejudices.”

The last sentence was spoken a bit stiffly. Ainsley, watching her closely, decided not to press the matter. By and large, the Ossa “women” had shared in the general hero worship with which humanity had greeted the Roman exiles. Most of them, in fact, had quickly found

themselves deluged by romantic advances. But there had been some incidents—

It was odd, really, he mused. Years after their return from exile, the Roman legionnaires still exhibited superstitions and notions which seemed absurd—outrageous, even—to modern people. Yet, at the same time, they shared none of the racial prejudices which so often lurked beneath the surface of the most urbane moderns. The ancient world of the Greeks and Romans had its prejudices and bigotries, of course. Plenty of them. But those prejudices were not tied to skin color and facial features. The Greeks considered the Persians *barbarians* because they didn't speak Greek and didn't share Greek culture. It never would have occurred to them, on the other hand, that the Medes who dominated their world were *racially* inferior. The very notion of "races" was a modern invention.

It had often struck Ainsley, listening to the tales of the legionnaires, how easily they had adapted to their sudden plunge into galactic society. No modern human, he thought, would have managed half as well. Their very ignorance had, in a sense, protected them. The world, to ancient Romans, was full of bizarre things anyway. Every Roman knew that there lived—somewhere south of Egypt, maybe—people with tails and heads in their bellies. A modern human, dropped onto a battlefield against aliens, would have probably been paralyzed with shock and horror. To the Romans, those aliens had just seemed like weird men—and nowhere near as dangerous as Parthians.

Ainsley, catching a glimpse of Pompilius Niger across the room, smiled. Only an ancient Roman would have so doggedly tried to make mead by following something that might be a funny-looking bee. A modern human would have understood the biological impossibility of the task.

And, in that wisdom, died in the hands of the Guild.

He looked back at Quartilla.

*And so it had been with her and Gaius. The ancient Roman had been frightened and repelled by her scaly reptilian skin, when he first met her. But he had never thought she was anything but a—person.*

"I am glad," he said quietly. "I approve of that decision. You understand, of course, that your children will face some difficulties, because of it."

Quartilla shrugged. It was a serene gesture.

"Some, yes. But not many, I think. If other children get too rough on them, Gaius says he will put a stop to it by simply crucifying a couple of the little bastards."

Ainsley started to laugh; then choked on his own humor.

He stared across the room at Vibulenus. The tribune was standing in a corner of his villa's huge salon, wine glass in hand, in a cluster of veterans who were having a vigorous and friendly exchange of war stories. With him were Clodius Afer, Julius Rusticanus—and all four of the Gha.

*Good Lord. That's probably not a joke.*

He caught Quartilla watching him closely.



“No, Robert,” she murmured. “He is a Roman. He is not joking at all.”

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## XII

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An hour later, Gaius Vibulenus called the meeting to order.

There were almost sixty former legionnaires sprawled everywhere in the great salon. Fortunately, Gaius owned an enormous villa. The entire estate—not far from Capua, to his delight—had been a historical museum before it was turned over to him by the Italian regional government, following the dictates of popular demand.

Many more legionnaires had offered to come, but Gaius had kept the invitations reasonably small. Too many people would make decisions impossible. Besides, the men in the room were, almost without exception, the surviving leaders of the Roman legion. All of the centurions were there, and almost all of the file-closers. Whatever decision they made would be accepted by the rest of the legionnaires.

“All right,” began Vibulenus, “you’ve all heard the Gha proposal. In its basic outline, anyway.”

He waved his hand airily. “I have it on the best authority that the Confederation government will give its backing to the scheme. Unofficially, of course.”

Clodius Afer sneered. “Those *politicians*? Be serious, Gaius! They’re even worse than that sorry lot of senators we left behind.”

Several other legionnaires grunted their agreement with that sentiment. Ainsley, watching, was amused. With few exceptions—Vibulenus, for one; and, oddly enough, Julius Rusticanus—the Romans had never been able to make sense out of modern politics. They tended to dismiss all of it as so much silly nonsense, which could be settled quick enough with just a few crucifixions.

Much as the historian admired—even loved—the Romans, he was glad not to have lived in *their* political world. True, much of modern politics was “so much silly nonsense.” But, much of it wasn’t, appearances to the contrary. And, modern man that he ultimately was, Ainsley thoroughly approved of the world-wide ban on capital punishment—much less torture.

“You’re wrong, Clodius,” rumbled Julius Rusticanus. The first centurion set down his wine goblet, almost ceremoniously, and stood up. Trained in the rhetorical traditions of the ancient world, he struck a solemn pose. His audience—just as well trained—assumed the solemn stance of listeners.

“Listen to me, Romans. Unlike most of you, I have paid careful attention to modern politics. And I do not share your contempt for it. Nor do I have any desire to listen to puling nonsense about the ‘glories of Rome.’ I remember the old politics, too. It was stupid Roman politics—the worst kind of personal ambition—that marched us all into that damned Parthian desert. Whatever folly there is in modern men—and there’s plenty of it—they are a better lot

than we were.”

He glared around the room, as if daring anyone to argue with him. No one, of course, was foolish enough to do so. Not with the *first centurion*.

“No children starve, in this modern world. No old people die from neglect. No rich man takes a poor man’s farm by bribing a judge. No master beats his slave for some trifling offense. There *are* no slaves.”

Again, the sweeping glare. The silence, this time, came from more than respect. Whatever their crude attitudes, the legionnaires all knew that in this, at least, Julius Rusticanus spoke nothing but the plain and simple truth.

“So I’ll hear no sneering about ‘politicians.’ We humans have always had politicians. Our old ones were never any better—and usually a lot worse. I know why Gaius is confident that the Confederation will support the proposal. I don’t even need to know who his ‘best authority’ is. All I have to do is observe what’s in front of my nose.”

He laughed heartily. Theatrically, to Ainsley; but the historian knew that was an accepted part of the rhetoric. The ancients had none of the modern liking for subtle poses.

“The simple political reality is this, legionnaires,” continued Rusticanus. “The people, in their great majority, are now filled with anti-Galactic fervor.” Again, that theatrical laugh. “I think most of them are a bit bored with their peaceful modern world, to tell you the truth. They haven’t had a war—not a real one, anyway—in almost a hundred years. And this is what they call a *crusade*.”

“Won’t be able to fight, then,” grumbled one of the file-closers. “They’re all a pack of civilians.”

“Really?” sneered Rusticanus. “I’ll tell you what, Appuleius—why don’t you explain that to the Guild fleet? You know—the one that’s nothing more than gas drifting in space?”

The jibe was met with raucous laughter. Joyful, savage laughter, thought Ainsley. For all their frequent grumbling about “modern sissies,” the historian knew the fierce pride which the Romans had taken in Trumbull’s destruction of the Guild fleet.

The first centurion pressed home the advantage. He gestured—again, theatrically—to one of the Medics standing toward the side of the salon. This was the “old” Medic, not the “new” one—the stocky, mauve-skinned, three-fingered crewman from the ship the Romans had captured years earlier. A few months after their arrival on Earth, the troop transport’s Pilot had committed suicide. But the Medic had adjusted rather well to his new reality. He had even, over time, grown quite friendly with many of the legionnaires. Vibulenus had invited him to this meeting in order to take advantage of his Galactic knowledge.

“Tell them, Medic!” commanded Rusticanus. “Tell them how long it’s been since an entire Guild fleet was annihilated.”

The Medic stepped forward a pace or two. All the Romans were watching him intently, with the interest of veterans hearing the story of an unfamiliar campaign.

“As far as I know, it’s never happened.”

The legionnaires stared.

“What do you mean?” croaked one of them. “What do you mean—*never*?”

The Medic shook his head, a gesture he had picked up from his long immersion among humans. “Not that I know of. I’m not saying it *never* happened—way, way back toward the beginning of the Federation, sixty or seventy thousand years ago. But I know it hasn’t happened in a very long time.”

The Romans were practically goggling, now.

Again, the Medic shook his head. “You don’t understand. You all think like—like *Romans*. All humans seem to think that way—even modern ones like Trumbull. The Guilds—and their Federation—are *merchants*. Profit and loss, that’s what sets their field of vision. The Guilds fight each other, now and then, but it’s never anything like that—that *massacre* Trumbull ordered. After one or two of their ships gets banged around—they hardly ever actually lose a ship—the Guild that’s getting the worst of it just offers a better deal. And that’s it.”

The room was silent, for over a minute, as the Roman veterans tried to absorb this fantastical information. Ainsley was reminded of nothing so much as a pack of wolves trying to imagine how lapdogs think.

Suddenly, one of the legionnaires erupted in laughter. “Gods!” he cried. “Maybe this crazy Gha scheme will work after all!” He beamed approvingly at the huge figure of Fludenoc. “And at least we’ll have these damned giant toads on *our* side, this time.”

Fludenoc barked, in the Gha way of humor.

“Only some of us, you damned monkey shrimp,” he retorted. “In the beginning, at least. All the members of the Poct’on will join, once they learn. But most Gha do not belong to the secret society, and it will take time to win them over.”

“That doesn’t matter,” interjected Gaius. “The new legions are the heart of the plan. They’ll have to be human, of course. There aren’t very many Gha to begin with, and half of them are scattered all over the galaxy. Whereas we—!”

He grinned and glanced at his watch. “Let’s stop for a moment, comrades. I want you to watch something.”

He nodded at Rusticanus. The first centurion picked up the remote control lying on a nearby table and turned on the television. The huge screen on the far wall suddenly bloomed with color—and sound.

*Lots of sound.*

Wincing, Rusticanus hastily turned down the volume. In collusion with Gaius, he had already set the right channel, but he hadn’t tested the sound.

The legionnaires were transfixed. Gaping, many of them.

“This scene is from Beijing,” said Vibulenus. “The small square—the one that *looks* small, from the camera’s height—is called Tien-an-Men.”

The scene on the television suddenly shifted to another city. "This is Shanghai," he said.

Another scene. "Guangzhou."

Another. Another. Another.

"Nanjing. Hangzhou. Chongqing."

China was on the march. Every one of those great cities was packed with millions of people, marching through its streets and squares, chanting slogans, holding banners aloft.

"It's not just China," said Rusticanus. His voice, like that of Gaius, was soft.

Another city. More millions, marching, chanting, holding banners aloft.

"Bombay."

Another. "Paris."

Another. Another. More and more and more.

*Sao Paolo. Moscow. Los Angeles. Lagos. Ciudad de Mexico.*

On and on and on.

A different scene came on the screen. Not a city, now, but a hillside in farm country. The hillside itself—and everywhere the camera panned—was covered with an enormous throng of people. Speeches were being given from a stand atop the ridge.

"That is called Cemetery Ridge," announced Rusticanus. "It is near the small town of Gettysburg in the North American province called Pennsylvania. These people have gathered here to participate in what they are calling the Rededication."

Harshly: "Most of you ignorant sods won't understand why they are calling it that. But you can find out easily enough by reading a short speech which a man named Lincoln gave there not so very long ago. He was a 'stinking politician,' of course."

None of the legionnaires, Ainsley noted, even responded to the jibe. They were still utterly mesmerized by the scenes on the television.

The historian glanced around the room. Its other occupants, mostly aliens, were equally mesmerized—the Gha, Quartilla, the two Medics and the Pilot.

But only on the faces of the legionnaires did tears begin to fall.

They, like the others, were transfixed by the unforgettable images of sheer, raw, massive human *power*. But it was not the sight of those millions upon millions of determined people which brought tears to Roman eyes. It was the sudden, final knowledge that the world's most long-lost exiles had never been forgotten.

One thing was common, in all those scenes. The people varied, in their shape and color and manner of dress. The slogans were chanted in a hundred languages, and the words written on a multitude of banners came in a dozen scripts.

But everywhere—on a hillside in Pennsylvania; a huge square in China—the same

standards were held aloft, dominating the banners surrounding them. Many of those standards had been mass-produced for the occasion; many—probably most—crafted by hand.

The eagle standard of the legions.

Gaius rose. Like Rusticanus, he also adopted a theatrical pose, pointing dramatically at the screen.

“There are twelve *billion* people alive in the world today,” he said. “And all of them, as one, have chosen that standard as the symbol of their new crusade.”

The tribune’s eyes swept the room, finally settling on the scarred face of Clodius Afer.

“*Will history record that the first Romans failed the last?*” he demanded.

Rusticanus switched off the screen. For a moment, the room was silent. Then, Clodius Afer rose and (theatrically) drained his goblet.

Theatrically, belched.

“I never said I wouldn’t do it,” he announced. With a dramatic wave at the screen:

“Besides, I couldn’t face my ancestors, knowing that all those innocent lads went off to war without proper training from”—dramatic scowl—“*proper legionnaires.*”

Very dramatic scowl: “The poor sorry bastards.”

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## XIII

« ^ »

Is this where you died?” asked Ainsley.

For a moment, he thought Gaius hadn’t heard him. Then, with no expression on his face, the former tribune shrugged. “I don’t think so, Robert. I think we pretty much razed that fortress after we took it. I don’t remember, of course, since I was dead when it happened.”

Gaius turned his head, examining the walls and crenellations of the castle they were standing on. “It was much like this one, though. Probably not far from here.” He gestured toward the native notables standing respectfully a few yards away. “You could ask them. I’m sure they remember where it was.”

Ainsley glanced at the short, furry beings. “They wouldn’t remember. It was so long ago. Almost two thousand years, now. That was one of your first campaigns.”

“They’ll know,” stated Gaius firmly. “They’re a very intelligent species, Robert. They have written records going back well before then. And that was the battle that sealed their fate.”

He scanned the fortress more carefully, now, urging Ainsley to join him in that inspection with a little hand gesture.

"You see how well built this is, Robert? These people are not barbarians. They weren't then, either. It was a bit of a shock to us, at the time, coming up against them. We'd forgotten how tough smart and civilized soldiers can be, even when they're as small as these folk."

His face grew bleak. "*Two thousand years*, Robert. For two thousand years these poor bastards have been frozen solid by the stinking Doges. The ruinous trade relations the Guild forced down their throat have kept them there."

"It wasn't your fault, Gaius," murmured Ainsley.

"I didn't say it was. I'm not feeling any guilt over the thing, Robert. We were just as much victims as they were. I'm just sorry, that's all. Sorry for them. Sorry for us."

Suddenly, he chuckled. "Gods, I'm being gloomy! I'm probably just feeling sorry for myself." With a grimace: "Dying *hurts*, Robert. I still have nightmares about it, sometimes."

Ainsley pointed down the wooded slope below them.

"Look! Isn't that Clodius Afer?"

Gaius turned and squinted at the tiny figure of the horseman riding up the stone road which led to the castle. After a moment, he chuckled again.

"Yes it is, by the gods. I will be damned. I never thought he'd let the legion fight its first real battle without him there to mother his chicks."

Ainsley raised his eyes, looking at a greater distance. In the valley far below, the legion was forming its battle lines against the still more distant enemy.

"How soon?" he asked.

Gaius glanced at the valley. His experienced eye took only seconds to gauge the matter. "Half an hour, at the earliest. We've got time, before we have to go in."

The horseman was now close enough for Ainsley to see him clearly. It was definitely Clodius Afer.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, the former centurion stamped his way up the narrow staircase leading to the crenellated wall where Vibulenus and Ainsley were waiting. His scarred face was scowling fiercely.

"I couldn't bear to watch!" he snarled. He shot the historian a black, black look. "I hold you responsible, Ainsley. I know this whole crack-brained scheme was your idea."

The centurion strode to the battlements and pointed theatrically toward the valley. "In less than an hour, thousands of witless boys—and girls, so help me!—will lie dying on that field. Crushed under the heels of their pitiless conquerors. *And it will all be your fault.*"

He spit (theatrically) over the wall.

Ainsley's reply was mild. "It was the Poct'on's idea, Clodius Afer, not mine."

*"Bullshit.* Fludenoc and the other Gha just had a general plan. *You're* the one put flesh and bones on it—I know you were!"

There was just enough truth in that last charge to keep Ainsley's mouth shut. Vibulenus filled the silence.

"So we've no chance, Clodius Afer? None at all?" The placid calmness of his voice seemed utterly at variance with the words themselves.

"None," came the gloomy reply. "Might as well put sheep—*lamb*s—up against wolves. You should see those frightful brutes, Gaius! Fearsome, fearsome. Ten feet tall, at least, maybe twelve. Every one of them a hardened veteran. I could tell at a glance."

Gaius shook his head sadly. "Such a pity," he murmured. "Throwing away all those young lives for nothing."

He pushed himself away from the wall, shrugging with resignation. "Well, there's nothing for it, then, but to watch the hideous slaughter. Come on, Robert. They should have the scanners in the keep set up and running by now. We can get a much better view of the battle from there."

As he strode toward the stairs, he held up a hand toward the centurion. "You stay here, Clodius Afer! I know you won't want to watch."

The centurion sputtered. Ainsley stepped hastily aside to keep from being trampled as Clodius Afer charged past him.

\* \* \*

The room in the keep where the viewscanners had been set up was the banquet hall where the local clan chiefs held their ceremonial feasts. It was the largest room in the entire castle, but, even for Romans, the ceiling was so low that they had to stoop slightly to walk through it. Ainsley, with the height of a modern human, felt like he was inside a wide tunnel.

The poor lighting added to his claustrophobia. The natives normally lighted the interior of the castle with a type of wax candles which human eyes found extremely irritating. So, for the occasion, they had decided to forgo all lighting beyond what little sunlight came through the narrow window-slits in the thick walls.

"I still say we could have put in modern lighting," grumbled Vibulenus, groping his way forward. "Temporarily, at least. The Guild command posts always used their own lighting."

"We already went through this, Gaius," replied Ainsley. "The Federation observers are going to watch us like hawks. Especially here, in our new Guild's first campaign. They'll jump on any violation of the regulations, no matter how minor—on our part, that is. They'll let the *established* Guilds cut every corner they can."

"You can say that again," came a growling voice from ahead.

Peering forward, Ainsley saw Captain Tambo's face raising up from the viewscreen.

"Come here and take a look," grumbled the South African. "The Ty'uct are already

deploying their Gha. The battle hasn't even started yet, for Christ's sake—and they've got plenty of native auxiliaries to begin with. They don't need Gha flankers."

Gaius reached the viewscreen and bent over.

"That's it!" cried Clodius Afer. "Gha flankers? *The legion's doomed!*"

Vibulenus ignored the former centurion's dark prediction. Silently, he watched the formations unfolding on the large screen in front of him.

After a minute or so, he looked up and smiled. "Speaking of Gha flankers, you might want to take a look at this, Clodius Afer. After all, it was your idea in the first place."

The centurion crowded forward eagerly. "Did Fludenoc and his lads move up?"

He stared at the screen for a moment. Then, began cackling with glee. "See? See? I told you those stinking hyenas were just a bunch of turbo-charged jackals! Ha! Look at 'em cringe! They finally ran into something bigger than they are. A *lot* bigger!"

Ainsley managed to shove his head through the small crowd and get a view of the screen.

"I will be good God-damned," he whispered. He patted the former centurion on the shoulder. "You're a genius, Clodius Afer. I'll admit, I had my doubts."

Clodius Afer snorted. "That's because you modern sissies never faced war elephants in a battle. The great brutes are purely terrifying, I'm telling you."

"As long as they don't panic," muttered Gaius.

"They won't," replied Clodius Afer confidently. "These are that new strain the geneticists came up with. They're really more like ancient mammoths than modern elephants. And they've been bred for the right temperament, too."

He pointed to the screen. "Besides, the Gha know just how to handle the damn things. Watch!"

The scene in the viewscreen was quite striking, thought Ainsley. The main body of the Ty'uct army was still milling around in the center of the field, whipping themselves into a frenzy. On the flanks, Gha bodyguards had pushed forward on their "turbo-charged" giant quasi-hyenas. But they were already falling back before Fludenoc and the other Poct'on members who were serving the legion as a special force. There were thirty-two of those Gha, all mounted on gigantic war elephants, all wielding the modified halberds which human armorers had designed to replace the traditional Gha maces.

The Poct'on warriors loomed over their counterparts like moving cliffs. The giant "hyenas" looked like so many puppies before the elephants. Bad-tempered, nasty, snarling puppies, true. But thoroughly intimidated, for all that. Despite the best efforts of their Gha riders, the hyenas were slinking back toward their lines.

Ainsley could hardly blame them. Even from the remoteness of his televised view, the war elephants were—as Clodius Afer had rightly said—"purely terrifying." These were no friendly circus elephants. They didn't even *look* like elephants. To Ainsley, they seemed a perfect reincarnation of mammoths or mastodons. The beasts were fourteen feet high at the shoulders,



weighed several tons, and had ten-foot-long tusks.

They also had a temperament to match. The elephants were bugling great blasts of fury with their upraised trunks, and advancing on the hyenas remorselessly.

"Jesus," whispered Tambo, "even the Gha look like midgets on top of those things. They seem to have them under control, though."

"I'm telling you," insisted Clodius Afer, "the Gha are wizards at handling the brutes." He snorted. "They always did hate those stinking hyenas, you know. But with elephants and Gha, it was love at first sight."

Tambo glanced up. "Whatever happened to their own—uh, 'hyenas'? The ones they had on the ship they seized?"

Gaius whistled soundlessly. Clodius Afer coughed, looked away.

"Don't rightly know," he muttered. "But Pompilius Niger—he raises bees now, you know, on his farm—told me that Uddumac asked him for a couple of barrels of his home-brewed mead. For a private Gha party, he said."

Tambo winced. "Don't let the SPCA find out."

The centurion mumbled something under his breath. Ainsley wasn't sure, but it sounded like "*modern sissies*."

"The hyenas are breaking," announced Gaius. "Look at them—they're completely cowed."

Tambo slapped the heavy wooden table under the viewscreen. The gesture expressed his great satisfaction.

"It'll be a straight-up fight, now! Between the legion and those—what in the *hell* are they, anyway? Have you ever seen them before, Gaius?"

The tribune grinned. So did Clodius Afer.

"Oh, yes," he murmured. "These boys were the opposition in our very first Guild campaign."

"Sorry clowns!" barked the centurion. "Look at 'em, Gaius—I swear, I think those are the same wagons they were using two thousand years ago."

The Ty'uct mercenaries started their wagon charge. Clodius Afer watched them on the screen for a few seconds before sneering: "Same stupid tactics, too. Watch this, professor! These galloping idiots are about to—"

He scowled. "Well, if they were facing a *real* Roman legion."

Deep scowl. "As it is—against these puling babes—?" Low moan of despair. "It'll be a massacre. A *massacre*, I tell you."

"Actually," murmured Gaius, "I think the puling babes are going to do better than we did."

He glanced over at Tambo, who was sitting to one side of the big screen. The naval officer's eyes were on a complex communication console attached to the viewscanner. "Are we secure?"

asked Gaius.

Tambo nodded. "Yeah, we are. Our ECM has got the Federation's long-distance spotters scrambled. Everything in the castle is out of their viewing capability."

He sat up, sneering. "And, naturally, the lazy galactics never bothered to send a personal observer. Even if they shuttle one down now, it'll be too late. The battle'll be over before they get here."

"Good." Gaius turned and whistled sharply. A moment later, several natives appeared in the main doorway to the great hall. Gaius gestured, motioning for them to enter.

Somewhat gingerly, the natives advanced into the room and approached the small knot of humans at the viewscreen.

"You watch now," said Gaius, in simple Latin.

"Is safe from Federation?" asked one of the natives, also in Latin. Ainsley recognized him. The Fourth-of-Five, that one was called. He was a member of the clan's central leadership body, as well as the clan's warchief.

"Safe," assured Gaius. "They can not see you here with"—he groped for a moment, in the limits of the simplified language—"high-raised arts. But must keep this secret. Not tell them. Not tell anyone."

"Secret be keep," said the Fourth-of-Five. Still a bit gingerly, the warchief leaned forward to examine the scene on the scanner.

"Battle start?"

"Yes," replied Gaius. "Now you watch. I explain what we do. Why we do."

\* \* \*

Two minutes later, the battle was joined in earnest. As it unfolded, Gaius followed the action with a running commentary for the benefit of the Fourth-of-Five, explaining the methods and principles of Roman tactics. The warchief was an attentive student. A very knowledgeable one, too, who asked many pointed and well-aimed questions. His own people had never been slouches, when it came to warfare; and now, hidden miles away in a forest camp, the warchief's own native *legion* had already begun its training.

Commander Tambo watched some of the battle, but not much. He was a naval officer, after all, for whom the tactics of iron-age land warfare were of largely academic interest. He was much more concerned with keeping a careful eye on the ECM monitors. By allowing the natives to follow the battle with the help of modern technology, the humans were breaking the letter of Federation law.

The *spirit* of that law, of course, they were trampling underfoot with hobnailed boots.

Ainsley simply watched the battle. Quite transfixed, he was; oblivious to everything else.

Ironically, *his* interest was purely academic. But it was the monomaniacal interest of a man

who had spent all but the last few years of his adult life studying something which he was now able to see unfold before his own eyes. *A Roman legion in action.*

A purist, of course, would have been outraged.

Such a purist, in his own way, was the legion's expert consultant and field trainer, the former centurion Clodius Afer. Throughout the course of the battle, Clodius Afer danced back and forth between the viewscreen and the far wall, to whose unfeeling stones he wailed his black despair.

*Roman legion, indeed!*

Smiling, Ainsley leaned over and whispered to Gaius: "Is the rumor true? Did Clodius Afer really call Colonel Tsiang a 'slant-eyed bastard'?"

Gaius grinned, though his eyes never left the screen. He was keeping a close watch on the legate commanding the legion, in order to provide him with expert consultation after the battle.

That legate was a former colonel in the Chinese Army. Of the ten tribunes commanding the legion's cohorts, four were Chinese, three North American, one German, one South African and one Pakistani. True, there was one Italian centurion, and three Italian file-closers. But the overall national and racial composition of the legion was a fair reflection of modern Earth's demographics, except that it was skewed toward Chinese and North Americans. This, for the simple reason that all the legionnaires were former soldiers, and only the North Americans and Chinese still maintained relatively large standing armies.

"Oh, yes," murmured Gaius. "Fortunately, Tsiang's a phlegmatic kind of guy. Good thing for Clodius. The colonel has a black belt in at least five of the martial arts."

He turned his head. "You might want to watch this, Clodius Afer! They're getting ready for the first volley of javelins!"

Two seconds later, the former centurion's face was almost pressed to the screen. "They'll screw it up," he groaned. "Damned amateurs think they're throwing darts in a tavern."

Silence ensued, for a few seconds. Then:

Gaius grinned. Clodius Afer scowled and stalked off. Robert Ainsley hissed, face pale.

"God in Heaven," he whispered shakily. "I had no idea."

The former tribune's grin faded. "A good javelin volley is like the scythe of death, Robert. It's pure butchery."

"Was this one good?"

"As good as you'll ever see. I knew it would be."

Ainsley studied Gaius for a moment.

"You've never shared Clodius Afer's skepticism. Why?"

Gaius snorted. "The old bastard's just jealous, that's all."

The former tribune jabbed his forefinger at the screen. "Every single one of those legionnaires, from the legate down to the last man in the ranks, is a hand-picked volunteer. The cream of the crop—and it was a huge crop of volunteers. Every one's a soldier, and every one's dedicated to this cause. Not to mention the fact that, on average, they're probably half again as strong and twice as fast as the average Roman legionnaire of our time. So why shouldn't they do well?"

Ainsley rubbed his chin. "It's still their first real battle."

Gaius shrugged. "True. And it shows." He nodded at the screen.

"They're sluggish, right now. They're not reacting as quickly as they should to the success of their javelin volley. That's inexperience. A blooded legion would already be down the enemy's throat. But—*see?* Tsiang's already bringing the line forward. Good formations, too. The spacing's excellent."

He glanced over his shoulder at the figure of Clodius Afer, wailing against the wall.

"Clodius forgets. How good do you think *we* were in the beginning? A bunch of ignorant kids, half of us. Marched off to slaughter in the desert and then sold to aliens. I had no idea what I was doing, at first. *This* legion's already doing well. Give them three more campaigns and they could have chopped us up for horse meat."

He turned back to the screen. "Trust me, Robert. There's never been a better Roman legion than the one down there on that field today."

Again, he cocked his head and bellowed at Clodius Afer. "They've almost closed with the enemy! Oh—*and look!* The Tenth Cohort's going to bear the brunt of it!"

"*That bitch!*" shrieked Clodius Afer, charging back to the screen. "She's going to get 'em all killed!"

Silence, for two full minutes. Then:

Gaius laughed. Clodius Afer spit on the floor and stalked back to the wall. Spit on the wall. Ainsley wiped his face.

"I thought the Tenth Cohort was supposed to be the legion's shield, not its sword arm," he muttered.

Gaius's grin was cold, cold. "Yeah, that's the tradition. But traditions are meant to be broken, you know. And Tribune Lemont is *not* the phlegmatic type."

"Is it true?" whispered Ainsley. "Did Clodius Afer really call Shirley Lemont a—"

Gaius laughed. "Oh, yes! Then, after he woke up, he insisted on a formal rematch. He didn't quit until she threw him six times running, and told him she was going to start breaking his puny little bones."

Ainsley stared at Clodius Afer. The former centurion was studying the stone wall with a deep interest which seemed entirely inappropriate to its bare, rough-hewn nature.

"I guess it took him by surprise, seeing women in the legion's ranks."

Gaius started to reply but broke off suddenly, rising halfway out of his seat. “Gods, look at them rolling up the flank! This battle’s already won, Robert.” Turning his head, he bellowed:

“Hey, Clodius Afer! You might want to see this! The enemy’s pouring off the field! The legion’s hammering ‘em into mash! And—guess what?—*great news!* It’s our old Tenth Cohort that turned their flank! God, what a maneuver! I’m telling you, Clodius Afer—*that Shirley Lemont’s the best tribune I’ve ever seen!* Come here! You don’t want to miss it!”

In the next five minutes, Gaius Vibulenus went over the battle with the Fourth-of-Five, patiently answering the native warleader’s many questions. Robert Ainsley simply sat, recovering from the experience—simultaneously exhilarating and horrifying—of finally seeing the Roman war machine in action.

Clodius Afer leaned his head against the stone wall. Banged it once or twice. Wept bitter tears for the lost legacy of ancient Rome.

Ruined—*ruined*—by modern sissies. *Girls.*

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## XIV

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As he watched the troop transport settle its enormous bulk into the valley, Ainsley found it impossible not to grin.

“Travelling in style, I see,” he chuckled.

Gaius gave him a stern look. “I beg your pardon? The *Cato* is an official SPQR Guild transport vessel, properly registered as such with the Federation authorities.”

Ainsley snorted. “She’s also the former *Queen Elizabeth*, luxury liner.”

Gaius grinned. “So? It could be worse, you know. They’re already talking about raising the *Titanic* and retrofitting her.”

A voice from behind them: “It’s already been decided. Damn fools are going to do it.”

The two men turned to face Tambo. The naval officer was just climbing off the stairs onto the stone ramp behind the castle’s crenellations. A few steps behind him came the Second-of-Five.

The South African and the native clan leader joined them at the battlements. Tambo scowled.

“I think it’s pure foolishness, myself. The whole point of refitting old naval vessels is to re-arm the Earth as fast as possible. *Stupid.* It’ll take twice as long—and twice the money—to fix up that shipwreck than it would to build a brand-new transport.”

Ainsley’s reply was mild. “Humans are a bit swept up in historical sentiment, you know. All things considered, I have to say I’m rather in favor of it.”

Tambo grimaced but didn't argue the point. Instead he went straight to his business.

"I've just gotten word from the escort vessels. The Federation ship and the Guild transport have left the system, so there are no observers left. The colonists can debark before the legion boards the transport."

"Any threats?" asked Gaius.

"From the *Ty'uct*?" sneered Tambo. "Not likely—not after we smeared their second invasion fleet in less time than the first. No, no threats. But they are definitely in a foul mood after yesterday's whipping. They're complaining about the elephants."

Gaius shrugged. "Let 'em! Elephants were a regular feature of Roman warfare."

"Not genetically engineered semi-mastodons," pointed out Ainsley.

Again, Gaius shrugged. "So what? The Guild can hardly complain—not when *their* Gharide mounts that have to be turbocharged to even breathe the air."

Tambo smiled. "They're still going to complain about it. Demand a full Federation hearing, they say." His smile broadened. "God, would I love to be there! Did you hear? Mai the Merciless has been appointed Earth's official representative to the Federation."

"Heaven help them," murmured Ainsley. Then:

"I thought you *were* going to be there."

Tambo's smile was now an outright grin. "Change of orders." He squared his shoulders. Struck a solemn pose.

"You have the honor of being in the presence of the newly appointed commodore in charge of Flotilla Seven."

The false pomposity vanished, replaced by a cheerful rubbing of his hands. "The campaign against the Ssrange is on! And I'm in command!"

Ainsley's eyes widened. "They decided to do it? I thought—"

Tambo shook his head. "No, it seems good sense won out over timidity, after all. Christ, I should hope so! We've got a tiger by the tail. Last thing we can afford to do is let go. If the Guilds and the Federation ever figure out how vulnerable we are—will be, for at least twenty years—they could slaughter us. *Keep the bastards cowed*—that's the trick!"

Gaius nodded. "I agree. Bloodying the *Ty'uct* Guild's nose in a couple of small ship battles will only win us a couple of years. Before one of the bolder guilds decides to mount a real armada."

"Unless we show the galaxy how rough we are—by wiping out the nest of pirates that the whole Federation's whined about for thirty millennia." The South African's voice took on a whimpering tone. "*What can we do? Best to reach an accommodation with the Ssrange. They're businessmen, too, after all, in their own way.*"

Gaius's eyes were icy. "They held Quartilla, for a time. Did you know that?"

Both Tambo and Ainsley nodded.

“What’s your plan, Stephen?” asked the historian. “You’re the commander.”

For a moment, Tambo’s eyes were as cold as the Roman’s. “It’s been named Operation Pompey. That should give you the idea.”

Ainsley sucked in his breath. Gaius grinned like a wolf.

As well he could. In 67 B.C.—just fourteen years before Crassus’s ill-fated expedition against the Parthians had resulted in Gaius’s enslavement to the Guild—the Roman republic finally lost patience with the pirates who had plagued the Mediterranean for centuries. Pompey the Great—one of the three members, along with Caesar and Crassus, of the First Triumvirate—was charged with the task of exterminating piracy.

He did it. In exactly three months.

“The *Roman way*,” growled Gaius.

“Here come the colonists,” murmured Tambo. He raised the binoculars hanging around his neck and studied the small crowd of people filing from the *Cato*. Then, after a minute or so, passed them to the Second-of-Five. The native clan leader immediately—and with obvious familiarity with the eyeglasses—began examining the scene in the valley below.

Ainsley spent the time studying the binoculars themselves. He was rather fascinated by the simple, obsolete device. Modern humans, when they wanted to view something at a distance, used computer-enhanced optical technology. But such technology would be far beyond the capacity of the natives who had just entered a new trading agreement with the galaxy’s newest guild.

The *SPQR Guild*, as it was formally known—and so registered, officially, with the Federation.

The “guild” had other, unofficial names. Many of them, in many human languages. The names varied, depending on each human subculture’s own traditions. Some called it the Tea Party, others the Long March. Others, Francophones, *la Resistance*. Most people, though, simply called it the Liberation.

Ainsley’s attention shuttled back and forth between the binoculars and the small, furred figure of the native holding them.

*They’ve started their first lens-grinding works, Tambo tells me. They already knew how to make good glass.*

He looked away, smiling. The occasional Federation observer who scanned from orbit, now and then, would have no way of seeing the technological and social revolution that was exploding across the surface below. This planet—and its people—were frozen no longer.

The “SPQR Guild” had set up quite different trade relations than the ones which had dominated here for two millennia. The Doge guilds, had they known, would have been utterly shocked.

*These trade treaties would not bleed the natives dry. Quite the opposite.*

Ainsley looked down into the valley. He could not see the individual faces of the colonists who were now making their way toward the castle, escorted by elephant-mounted Gha. But he knew what those faces would look like. Human faces, in their big majority—although some of those faces concealed Ossa. But there would be a few unreconstructed Ossa among them, the first contingents of what was already being called the Underground Railroad. And, here and there, a few members of other species. Freed slaves, some. Others, people from Class One planets—like the Pilot and the Medic—who had decided to throw in their lot with the rising new human “Doge Species.”

On every planet which the SPQR Guild’s legions cleared of their former guild masters, such small colonies would be set up. Scattered like seeds across the starfields, to intermingle with the natives and create a multitude of new, vibrant societies.

He caught Tambo’s warm eyes watching him.

“Twenty years, Robert,” said the naval officer softly. “Twenty years. By then, Earth’s navy will be too strong for the Guilds—even the Federation—to defeat us.”

He made a sweeping gesture which encompassed the valley and, by implication, the entire universe. “And, by then, we’ll have created an army of allies. A *host*, Robert, like this galaxy’s never seen.”

Ainsley smiled crookedly. “You’re not worried, Stephen? Not at all?”

Before answering, Tambo studied him.

Then, he shook his head. “God, I’d hate to be a historian,” he muttered. “Worry about everything.” Again, he made the sweeping gesture.

“You’re concerned, I assume, that we’ll screw it up, too? Set up a new tyranny?”

Ainsley nodded. Tambo chuckled.

“Don’t worry about it, Robert. I’m *sure* we’ll screw it up. Some. Badly, even, here and there. So what? It’ll sort itself out, soon enough.”

He grinned widely. “We humans have always been good at sorting out that kind of thing, you know.”

Tambo stretched out his muscular, light-brown arm.

“*Look at it, historian.* There’s all of Africa—half the world—in that arm. Bantu, Boer, Khoisan, English. A fair chunk of India, too.” He lowered the arm. “When I was a boy, growing up, I was thrilled as much by the Trek as I was by Isandhlwana, Moshoeshoe and Mandela. It’s all part of me. Now that it’s been sorted out.”

Tambo pointed his finger at the great banner flying above the castle. The banner of the new guild, proudly announcing its trade dominance of the planet.

“We’ll sort it out. And wherever we screw up, there’ll be others to kick us in the ass. We humans are just as good at learning from a butt-kicking as we are at delivering one. Better, probably.”

Ainsley stared at the banner. Then, smiled as broadly as Tambo. “Poor Doges,” he



murmured. “Merchants have never been worth a damn, you know, historically speaking. Not, at least, when they try to run an empire.”

Emblazoned atop the banner, above the eagle standard, were the simple letters: *S.P.Q.R.*

Below, the Guild’s motto:

*Carthago delenda est.*

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## XV



Some years later, a great crowd filled the villa near Capua owned by Gaius Vibulenus. The occasion was the ninth birthday of Gaius and Quartilla’s first child. The boy they had named Ulysses, but called simply Sam.

Clodius Afer, one of the boy’s four godfathers, had been disgruntled by the name. “Sissy Greek name,” he’d muttered, speaking of the official cognomen. And he had even less use for the nickname.

Pompilius Niger, the second of the godfathers, also thought the name was a bit odd, for a Roman. But, unlike Clodius Afer, the simple farmer rather liked the simple “Sam.”

Julius Rusticanus, the third godfather, was delighted by the name. As well he should be—it was his suggestion in the first place. Unlike his two fellow legionnaires, Rusticanus knew that the boy had not been named after an ancient Greek adventurer. No, Rusticanus had become quite the student of world history—as befitted a man who had recently been elected, by an overwhelming majority of Italians, to the Confederation’s most august legislative body. The former first centurion, born a peasant, was now—what would his father have thought, he often wondered?—a senator.

Ulysses had been named after another, much later man. The man who led the armies which destroyed chattel slavery. Ulysses “Sam” Grant. Rusticanus had great hopes for the boy. Especially now, watching the child bouncing in the lap of his fourth godfather, demanding an explanation for the new toys.

The boy, though large for his age, was almost lost in that huge Gha lap.

“What do you do with them, Fludenoc?” demanded Sam. “How do you play with them?”

Rusticanus grinned. Fludenoc hu’tut—*No*. He was now Fludenoc *hu-lu-tut*-Na Nomo’té. His epic poem—the first epic poem ever written by a Gha—had won him that new accolade, from his clan. Fludenoc now belonged to that most select of Gha poets, those considered “bards.”

The epic had been entitled the *Ghaiad*. Rusticanus had read it, twice. The first time with awe, at the Gha’s great poetic skill, which came through even in the Latin translation. The second time with amusement, at the Gha’s wry sense of humor. It was all about a small band of Gha, long ago, who had been driven into exile by rapacious conquerors. Wandering the

galaxy—having many adventures—until they finally settled on a new planet and founded Rome. (With, admittedly, a bit of help from the local natives.)

Fludenoc, like Rusticanus, had also become an avid student of human history.

“Tell me, Uncle Fludenoc, tell me!” demanded the boy. The child pointed at the new toys which the Gha had brought him for his birthday. “How do you play with them?”

Fludenoc’s huge, bulging eyes stared down at the tiny Ossa/human child in his lap. As always, there was no expression in the giant’s face. But the boy had long since learned to read the subtleties of Gha breathing.

“Stop laughing at me!” shrilled Sam. “I want to know! How do you play with them?”

“I was not laughing at *you*, Sam,” rumbled Fludenoc. “I was laughing at the Doges.”

Sam’s slightly iridescent, softly scaled face crinkled into a frown.

“When you grow up,” said the Gha, gently, “you will know how to use them.”

Sam twisted in Fludenoc’s lap, staring down at the peculiar toys sitting on the floor.

A small plow.

A bag of salt.

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