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Introduction

Here is a set of swashbuckling, breathtaking adventures among the stars, in the future yet to come. Sir Dominic Flandry, captain in Earth's Imperial Naval Intelligence Corps, schemes and fights his way through a clutch of enemies, human and nonhuman.

At the same time, these stories deal with more than wild battles, hairbreadth escapes, and escapades involving some of the galaxy's most enticing young ladies. Beneath all the swashbuckling there is a view of history, as it has been and as it perhaps always will be.

The wildest adventures seem to come at two different stages in the life of a civilization. First the adventures come when the civilization is fresh, vigorous, and aggressively expanding. But there is also the time when the civilization is old, when it wants nothing but to be left in peace. Then the ruthless new peoples arise, beyond the imperial borders or even within them. It happened to Egypt, Persia, India, China, Greece, Rome. Someday it may happen to all Earth.

In those eras, someone must man the ramparts. He may be a Roman legionnaire, or he may be an intelligence agent of Terra's empire among the stars. But he is always a lonely man. Sir Dominic, no grim and humorless professional hero, can crack a joke, hoist a bottle, or kiss a girl with the best of them. But he sees the barbarians pressing inward through the stellar marches. He sees the purpose of the powerful, nonhuman Merseian Empire—to end the uneasy peace with mankind by sweeping mankind aside. And he sees corruption and cowardice at home. If the Long Night is not to come in his own lifetime, if the things he cares about are to be saved, he must do what he can.

And he does it very well—often lethally well. When a gang of atomic-powered savages are unwise enough to kidnap him, they find they have a tiger by the tail. When a traitor begins to intrigue with the enemy, that creature finds himself up against an agent who can out-intrigue him in cards and spades. From world to world Flandry goes, risking his neck time after time, that Earth may live.

—To Ted Cogswell and the ITFCS

Tiger by the Tail

Captain Flandry opened his eyes and saw a metal ceiling. Simultaneously, he grew aware of the thrum and quiver which meant he was aboard a spaceship running on ultradrive.

He sat up with a violence that sent the dregs of alcohol swirling through his head. He'd gone to sleep in a room somewhere in the stews of Catawrayannis, with no prospect or intention of leaving the city for an indefinite time—let alone the planet! Now—

The chilling realization came that he was not aboard a human ship. Humanoid, yes, from the size and design of things, but no vessel ever built within the borders of the Empire, and no foreign make that he knew of.

Even from looking at this one small cabin, he could tell. There were bunks, into one of which he had fitted pretty well, but the sheets and blankets weren't of plastic weave. They seemed—he looked more closely—the sheets seemed to be of some vegetable fiber, the blankets of long bluish-gray hair. There were a couple of chairs and a table in the middle of the room, wooden, and they must have seen better days for they were elaborately handcarved in an intricate interwoven design new to Flandry—and planetary art-forms were a hobby of his. The way and manner in which the metal plating had been laid was another indication, and—

He sat down again, buried his whirling head in his hands, and tried to think. There was a thumping in his head and a vile taste in his mouth which liquor didn't ordinarily leave—at least not the stuff he'd been drinking—and now that he remembered, he'd gotten sleepy much earlier than one would have expected when the girl was so good-looking—Drugged—oh, no! Tell me I'm not as stupid as a stereofilm hero! Anything but that!

But who'd have thought it, who'd have looked for it? Certainly the people and beings on whom he'd been trying to get a lead would never try such a stunt. Besides, none of them had been around, he was sure of it. He'd simply been out building part of the elaborate structure of demimonde acquaintances and information which would eventually, by exceedingly indirect routes, lead him to those he was seeking. He'd simply been out having a good time—quite a good time, in fact—and—

And now someone from outside the Empire had him. And now what?

He got up, a little unsteadily, and looked around for his clothes. No sign of them. And he'd paid three hundred credits for that outfit, too. He stamped savagely over to the door. It didn't have a photocell attachment; he jerked it open and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster.

It was of different design from any he knew, but it was quite unmistakable. Captain Flandry sighed, relaxed his taut muscles, and looked more closely at the guard who held it.

He was humanoid to a high degree, perhaps somewhat stockier than Terrestrial average—and come to think of it, the artificial gravity was a little higher than one gee—and with very white skin, long tawny hair and beard, and oblique violet eyes. His ears were pointed and two small horns grew above his heavy eyebrow ridges, but otherwise he was manlike enough. With civilized clothes and a hooded cloak he could easily pass himself off for human.

Not in the getup he wore, of course, which consisted of a kilt and tunic, shining beryllium-copper cuirass and helmet, buskins over bare legs, and a murderous-looking dirk. As well as a couple of scalps hanging at his belt.

He gestured the prisoner back, and blew a long hollow blast on a horn slung at his side. The wild echoes chased each other down the long corridor, hooting and howling with a primitive clamor that tingled faintly along Captain Flandry's spine.

He thought slowly, while he waited: No intercom, apparently not even speaking tubes laid the whole

length of the ship. And household articles of wood and animal and vegetable fibres, and that archaic costume there—They were barbarians, all right. But no tribe that he knew about.

That wasn't too surprising, since the Terrestrial Empire and the half-dozen other civilized states in the known Galaxy ruled over several thousands of intelligent races and had some contact with nobody knew how many thousands more. Many of the others were, of course, still planet-bound, but quite a few tribes along the Imperial borders had mastered a lot of human technology without changing their fundamental outlook on things. Which is what comes of hiring barbarian mercenaries.

The peripheral tribes were still raiders, menaces to the border planets and merely nuisances to the Empire as a whole. Periodically they were bought off, or played off against each other—or the Empire might even send a punitive expedition out. But if one day a strong barbarian race under a strong leader should form a reliable coalition—then *vae victis!*

A party of Flandry's captors, apparently officers, guardsmen, and a few slaves, came down the corridor. Their leader was tall and powerfully built, with a cold arrogance in his pale-blue eyes that did not hide a calculating intelligence. There was a golden coronet on his head, and the robes that swirled around his big body were rainbow-gorgeous. Flandry recognized some items as having been manufactured within the Empire. Looted, probably.

They came to a halt before him and the leader looked him up and down with a deliberately insulting gaze. To be thus surveyed in the nude could have been badly disconcerting, but Flandry was immune to embarrassment and his answering stare was bland.

The leader spoke at last, in strongly accented but fluent Anglic: "You may as well accept the fact that you are a prisoner, Captain Flandry."

They'd have gone through his pockets, of course. He asked levelly, "Just to satisfy my own curiosity, was that girl in your pay?"

"Of course. I assure you that the Scothani are not the brainless barbarians of popular Terrestrial superstition, though—" a bleak smile—"it is useful to be thought so."

"The Scothani? I don't believe I've had the pleasure—"

"You have probably not heard of us, though we have had some contact with the Empire. We have found it convenient to remain in obscurity, as far as Terra is concerned, until the time is ripe. But—what do you think caused the Alarri to invade you, fifteen years ago?"

Flandry thought back. He had been a boy then, but he had, of course, avidly followed the news accounts of the terrible fleets that swept in over the marches and attacked Vega itself. Only the hardest fighting at the Battle of Mirzan had broken the Alarri. Yet it turned out that they'd been fleeing still another tribe, a wild and mighty race who had invaded their own system with fire and ruin. It was a common enough occurrence in the turbulent barbarian stars; this one incident had come to the Empire's notice only because the refugees had tried to conquer it in turn. A political upheaval within the Terrestrial domain had prevented closer investigation before the matter had been all but forgotten.

"So you were driving the Alarri before you?" asked Flandry with as close an approximation to the

right note of polite interest as he could manage in his present condition.

"Aye. And others. The Scothani have quite a little empire now, out there in the wilderness of the Galaxy. But, since we were never originally contacted by Terrestrials, we have, as I say, remained little known to them."

So—the Scothani had learned their technology from some other race, possibly other barbarians. It was a familiar pattern, Flandry could trace it out in his mind. Spaceships landed on the primitive world, the initial awe of the natives gave way to the realization that the skymen weren't so very different after all—they could be killed like anyone else; traders, students, laborers, mercenary warriors visited the more advanced worlds, brought back knowledge of their science and technology; factories were built, machines produced, and some local king used the new power to impose his rule on all his planet; and then, to unite his restless subjects, he had to turn their faces outward, promise plunder and glory if they followed him out to the stars—Only the Scothani had carried it farther than most. And lying as far from the Imperial border as they did, they could build up a terrible power without the complacent, politics-ridden Empire being more than dimly aware of the fact—until the day when—*Vae victis!*

II

"Let us have a clear understanding," said the barbarian chief. "You are a prisoner on a warship already light years from Llynathawr, well into the Imperial marches and bound for Scotha itself. You have no chance of rescue, and mercy depends entirely on your own conduct. Adjust it accordingly."

"May I ask why you picked me up?" Flandry's tone was mild.

"You are of noble blood, and a highranking officer in the Imperial intelligence service. You may be worth something as a hostage. But primarily we want information."

"But I—"

"I know." The reply was disgusted. "You're very typical of your miserable kind. I've studied the Empire and its decadence long enough to know that. You're just another worthless younger son, given a high-paying sinecure so you can wear a fancy uniform and play soldier. You don't amount to anything."

Flandry let an angry flush go up his cheek. "Look here—"

"It's perfectly obvious," said the barbarian. "You come to Llynathawr to track down certain dangerous conspirators. So you register yourself in the biggest hotel in Catawrayannis as Captain Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Service, you strut around in your expensive uniform dropping dark hints about your leads and your activities—and these consist of drinking and gambling and wenching the whole night and sleeping the whole day!" A cold humor gleamed in the blue eyes. "Unless it is your intention that the Empire's enemies shall laugh themselves to death at the spectacle."

"If that's so," began Flandry thinly, "then why—"

"You will know something. You can't help picking up a lot of miscellaneous information in your circles, no matter how hard you try not to. Certainly you know specific things about the organization and activities of your own corps which we would find useful information. We'll squeeze all you know out of you! Then there will be other services you can perform, people within the Empire you can contact, documents you can translate for us, perhaps various liaisons you can make—eventually, you may even earn your freedom." The barbarian lifted one big fist. "And in case you wish to hold anything back, remember that the torturers of Scotha know their trade."

"You needn't make melodramatic threats," said Flandry sullenly.

The fist shot out, and Flandry fell to the floor with darkness whirling and roaring through his head. He crawled to hands and knees, blood dripping from his face, and vaguely he heard the voice: "From here on, little man, you are to address me as befits a slave speaking to a crown prince of Scotha."

The Terrestrial staggered to his feet. For a moment his fists clenched. The prince smiled grimly and knocked him down again. Looking up, Flandry saw brawny hands resting on blaster butts. Not a chance, not a chance.

Besides, the prince was hardly a sadist. Such brutality was the normal order among the barbarians—and come to think of it, slaves within the Empire could be treated similarly.

And there was the problem of staying alive.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled.

The prince turned on his heel and walked away.

They gave him back his clothes, though someone had stripped the gold braid and the medals away. Flandry looked at the soiled, ripped garments and sighed. Tailor-made—!

He surveyed himself in the mirror as he washed and shaved. The face that looked back was wide across the cheekbones, straight-nosed and square-jawed, with carefully waved reddish-brown hair and a mustache trimmed with equal attention. Probably too handsome, he reflected, wiping the blood from under his nose, but he'd been young when he had the plasti-cosmetician work on him. Maybe when he got out of this mess he should have the face made over to a slightly more rugged pattern to fit his years. He was in his thirties now, after all—getting to be a big boy, Dominic.

The fundamental bone structure of head and face was his own, however, and so were the eyes: large and bright, with a hint of obliquity, the iris of that curious gray which can seem any color, blue or green or black or gold. And the trim, medium-tall body was genuine too. He hated exercises, but went through a dutiful daily ritual since he needed sinews and coordination for his work. And, too, a man in condition was something to look at among the usually flabby nobles of Terra; he'd found his figure near the end of help in making his home leaves pleasant.

Well, can't stand here admiring yourself all day, old fellow. He slipped blouse, pants, and jacket over his silkite undergarments, pulled on the sheening boots, tilted his officer's cap at an angle of we

gauged rakishness, and walked out to meet his new owners.

The Scothani weren't such bad fellows, he soon learned. They were big brawling lusty barbarians, out for adventure and loot and fame as warriors; they had courage and loyalty and a wild streak of sentiment that he liked. But they could also fly into deadly rages, they were casually cruel to anyone that stood in their way, and Flandry acquired a not too high respect for their brains. It would have helped if they'd washed oftener, too.

This warship was one of a dozen which Cerdic, the crown prince, had taken out on a plundering cruise. They'd sacked a good many towns, even some on nominally Imperial planets, and on the way back had sent down a man in a lifeboat to contact Cerdic's agents on Llynathawr, which was notoriously the listening post of this sector of the Empire. Learning that there was something going on which a special agent from Terra had been investigating, Cerdic had ordered him picked up. And that was that.

Now they were homeward bound, their holds stuffed with loot and their heads stuffed with plans for further inroads. It might not have meant much, but—well—Cerdic and his father Penda didn't seem to be just ordinary barbarian chiefs, nor Scothania an ordinary barbarian nation.

Could it be that somewhere out there among the many stars someone had finally organized a might that could break the Empire? Could the Long Night really be at hand?

Flandry shoved the thought aside. He had too much to do right now. Even his own job at Llynathawr, important as it was, could and would be handled by someone else—though not, he thought a little sadly, with the Flandry touch—and his own immediate worry was here and now. He had to find out the extent of power and ambition of the Scothani; he had to learn their plans and get the information to Terra, and somehow spike them even a little. After that there might be time to save his own hide.

Cerdic had him brought to the captain's cabin. The place was a typical barbarian chief's den, with the heads of wild beasts on the walls and their hides on the floors, old shields and swords hung up in places of honor, a magnificent golden vase stolen from some planet of artists shining in a corner. But there were incongruous modern touches, a microprint reader and many bookrolls from the Empire, astrographic tables and computer, a vodograph. The prince sat in a massive carven chair, a silkite robe flung carelessly over his broad shoulders. He nodded with a certain affability.

"Your first task will be to learn Scothanian," he said without preliminary. "As yet almost none of our people, even nobles, speak Anglic, and there are many who will want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Flandry. It was what he would most have desired.

"You had better also start organizing all you know so you can present it coherently," said the prince. "And I, who have lived in the Empire, will be able to check enough of your statements to tell whether you are likely speaking the truth." He smiled mirthlessly. "If there is reason to suspect you are lying, you will be put to the torture. And one of our Sensitives will then get at the truth."

So they had Sensitives, too. Telepaths who could tell whether a being was lying when pain had sufficiently disorganized his mind were as bad as the Empire's hypnoprobes.

"I'll tell the truth, sir," he said.

"I suppose so. If you cooperate, you'll find us not an ungrateful people. There will be more wealth than was ever dreamed of when we go into the Empire. There will also be considerable power for such humans as are our liaison with their race."

"Sir," began Flandry, in a tone of weak self-righteousness, "I couldn't think of—"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Cerdic glumly. "I know you humans. I traveled incognito throughout your whole Empire, I was on Terra itself. I posed as one of you, or when convenient as just another of the subject races. I know the Empire—its utter decadence, its self-seeking politicians and pleasure-loving mobs, corruption and intrigue everywhere you go, collapse of morals and duty-sense, decline of art into craft and science into stagnancy—you were a great race once, you humans, you were among the first to aspire to the stars and we owe you something for that, I suppose. But you're not the race you once were."

The viewpoint was biased, but enough truth lay in it to make Flandry wince. Cerdic went on, his voice rising: "There is a new power growing out beyond your borders, young peoples with the strength and courage and hopefulness of youth, and they'll sweep the rotten fragments of the Empire before them and build something new and better."

Only, thought Flandry, only first comes the Long Night, darkness and death and the end of civilization, the howling peoples in the ruins of our temples and a myriad petty tyrants holding their dreary courts in the shards of the Empire. To say nothing of the decline of good music and good cuisine, taste in clothes and taste in women and conversation as a fine art.

"We've one thing you've lost," said Cerdic, "and I think ultimately that will be the deciding factor. Honesty. Flandry, the Scothani are a race of honest warriors."

"No doubt, sir," said Flandry.

"Oh, we have our evil characters, but they are few and the custom of private challenges soon eliminates them," said Cerdic. "And even their evil is an open and clean thing, greed or lawlessness or something like that; it isn't the bribery and conspiracy and betrayal of your rotten politicians. And most of us live by our code. It wouldn't occur to a true Scothani to do a dishonorable thing, to break an oath or desert a comrade or lie on his word of honor. Our women aren't running loose making eyes at every man they come across; they're kept properly at home till time for marriage and then they know their place as mothers and houseguiders. Our boys are raised to respect the gods and the king, to fight and to speak truth. Death is a little thing, Flandry, it comes to everyone in his time and he cannot stay it, but honor lives forever.

"We don't corrupt ourselves. We keep honor at home and root out disgrace with death and torture. We live our code. And that is really why we will win."

Battleships help, thought Flandry. And then, looking into the cold bright eyes: He's fanatic. But a hell of a smart one. And that kind makes the most dangerous enemy.

Aloud he asked, humbly: "Isn't any stratagem a lie, sir? Your own disguised travels within the

Empire—"

"Naturally, certain maneuvers are necessary," said the prince stiffly. "Nor does it matter what one does with regard to alien races. Especially when they have as little honor as Terrestrials."

The good old race-superiority complex, too. Oh, well.

"I tell you this," said Cerdic earnestly, "in the hope that you may think it over and see our cause is just and be with us. We will need many foreigners, especially humans, for liaison and intelligence and other services. You may still accomplish something in a hitherto wasted life."

"I'll think about it, sir," said Flandry.

"Then go."

Flandry got.

The ship was a good three weeks en route to Scotha. It took Flandry about two of them to acquire an excellent working knowledge of the language, but he preferred to simulate difficulty and complained that he got lost when talk was too rapid. It was surprising how much odd information you picked up when you were thought not to understand what was being said. Not anything of great military significance, of course, but general background, stray bits of personal history, attitudes and beliefs—all went into the neat filing system which was Flandry's memory, to be correlated with whatever else he knew or learned into an astonishingly complete picture.

The Scothani themselves were quite friendly, eager to hear about the fabulous Imperial civilization and to brag of their own wonderful past and future exploits. Since there was obviously nothing he could do, Flandry was under the loosest guard and had virtually the freedom of the ship. He slept and messed with the warriors, swapped bawdy songs and dirty jokes, joined their rough-and-tumble wrestling matches to win surprised respect for his skill, and even became the close friend and confidant of some of the younger males.

The race was addicted to gambling. Flandry learned their games, taught them some of the Empire's and before the trip's end had won back his stolen finery plus several other outfits and a pleasantly jingling purse. It was—well—he almost hated to take his winnings from these overgrown babies. It just never occurred to them that dice and cards could be made to do tricks.

The picture grew. The barbarian tribes of Scotha were firmly united under the leadership of the Frithian kings, had been for several generations. Theoretically it was an absolute monarchy, though actually all classes except the slaves were free. They had conquered at least a hundred systems outright, contenting themselves with exacting tribute and levies from most of these, and dominated all others within reach. Under Penda's leadership, a dozen similar, smaller barbarian states had already formed a coalition with the avowed purpose of invading the Empire, capturing Terra, destroying the Imperial military forces, and making themselves masters. Few of them thought beyond the plunder to be had, though apparently some of them, like Cerdic, dreamed of maintaining and extending the Imperial domain under their own rule.

They had a formidable fleet—Flandry couldn't find out its exact size—and its organization and technology seemed far superior to that of most barbarian forces. They had a great industry, mostly slave-manned with the Scothan overlords supervising. They had shrewd leaders, who would wait till one of the Empire's recurring political crises had reduced its fighting strength, and who were extremely well informed about their enemy. It looked—bad!

Especially since they couldn't wait too long. Despite the unequalled prosperity created by industry, tribute, and piracy, all Scotha was straining at the leash, nobles and warriors in the whole coalition foaming to be at the Empire's throat; a whole Galactic sector had been seized by the same savage dream. When they came roaring in—well, you never could tell. The Empire's fighting strength was undoubtedly greater, but could it be mobilized in time? Wouldn't Penda get gleeful help from two or three rival imperia? Couldn't a gang of utterly fearless fanatics plow through the mass of self-seeking officers and indifferent mercenaries that made up most of the Imperial power today?

Might not the Long Night really be at hand?

III

Scotha was not unlike Terra—a little larger, a little farther from its sun, the seas made turbulent by three small close moons. Flandry had a chance to observe it telescopically—the ship didn't have magniscreens—and as they swept in, he saw the mighty disc roll grandly against the Galactic star-blaze and studied the continents with more care than he showed.

The planet was still relatively thinly populated, with great forests and plains standing empty, archaic cities and villages huddled about the steep-walled castles of the nobles. Most of its industry was on other worlds, though the huge military bases were all on Scotha and its moons. There couldn't be more than a billion Scothani all told, estimated Flandry, probably less, and many of them would live elsewhere as overlords of the interstellar domain. Which didn't make them less formidable. The witless hordes of humankind were more hindrance than help to the Empire.

Cerdic's fleet broke up, the captains bound for their estates. He took his own vessel to the capital, Iuthagaar, and brought it down in the great yards. After the usual pomp and ceremony of homecoming he sent for Flandry.

"What is your attitude toward us now?" he asked.

"You are a very likeable people, sir," said the Terrestrial, "and it is as you say—you are a strong and honest race."

"Then you have decided to help us actively?" The voice was cold.

"I really have little choice, sir," shrugged Flandry. "I'll be a prisoner in any case, unless I get to the point of being trusted. The only way to achieve that is to give you my willing assistance."

"And what of your own nation?"

"A man must stay alive, sir. These are turbulent times."

Contempt curled Cerdic's lip. "Somehow I thought better of you," he said. "But you're a human. Yo

could only be expected to betray your oaths for your own gain."

Surprise shook Flandry's voice. "Wasn't this what you wanted, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Now come along. But not too close—you make me feel a little sick."

They went up to the great gray castle which lifted its windy spires over the city, and presently Flandry found himself granted an audience with the King of Scothania.

It was a huge and dimly lit hall, hung with the banners and shields of old wars and chill despite the fires that blazed along its length. Penda sat on one end, wrapped in furs against the cold, his big body dwarfed by the dragon-carved throne. He had his eldest son's stern manner and bleak eyes, without the prince's bitter intensity—a strong man, thought Flandry, hard and ruthless and able—but perhaps not too bright.

Cerdic had mounted to a seat on his father's right. The queen stood on his left, shivering a little in the damp draft, and down either wall reached a row of guardsmen. The fire shimmered on their breastplates and helmets and halberds; they seemed figures of legend, but Flandry noticed that each warrior carried a blaster too.

There were others in evidence, several of the younger sons of Penda, grizzled generals and councillors, nobles come for a visit. A few of the latter were of non-Scothan race and did not seem to be meeting exceptional politeness. Then there were the hangers-on, bards and dancers and the rest, and slaves scurrying about. Except for its size—and its menace—it was a typical barbarian court.

Flandry bowed the knee as required, but thereafter stood erect and met the king's eye. His position was anomalous, officially Cerdic's captured slave, actually—well, what was he? Or what could he become in time?

Penda asked a few of the more obvious questions, then said slowly: "You will confer with General Nartheof here, head of our intelligence section, and tell him what you know. You may also make suggestions if you like, but remember that false intentions will soon be discovered and punished."

"I will be honest, your majesty."

"Is any Terrestrial honest?" snapped Cerdic.

"I am," said Flandry cheerfully. "As long as I'm paid, I serve faithfully. Since I'm no longer in the Empire's pay, I must perforce look about for a new master."

"I doubt you can be much use," said Penda.

"I think I can, your majesty," answered Flandry boldly. "Even in little things. For instance, this admirably decorated hall is so cold one must wear furs within it, and still the hands are numb. I could easily show a few technicians how to install a radiant heating unit that would make it like summer in here."

Penda lifted his bushy brows. Cerdic fairly snarled: "A Terrestrial trick, that. Shall we become as soft and luxurious as the Imperials, we who hunt vorgari on ski?"

Flandry's eyes, flitting around the room, caught dissatisfied expressions on many faces. Inside, he grinned. ~~The prince's austere ideals weren't very popular with these noble savages. If they only had the~~ nerve to—it was the queen who spoke. Her soft voice was timid: "Sire, is there any harm in being warm? I—I am always cold these days."

Flandry gave her an appreciative look. He'd already picked up the background of Queen Gunli. She was young, Penda's third wife, and she came from more southerly Scothan lands than Iuthagaar; her folk were somewhat more civilized than the dominant Frithians. She was certainly a knockout, with that dark rippling hair and those huge violet eyes in her pert face. And that figure too—there was a suppressed liveliness in her; he wondered if she had ever cursed the fate that gave her noble blood and thus a political marriage.

For just an instant their eyes crossed. "Be still," said Cerdic.

Gunli's hand fell lightly on Penda's. The king flushed. "Speak not to your queen thus, Cerdic," he said. "In truth this Imperial trick is but a better form of fire, which no one calls unmanly. We will let the Terrestrial make one."

Flandry bowed his most ironical bow. Cocking an eye up at the queen, he caught a twinkle. She knew.

Nartheof made a great show of blustering honesty, but there was a shrewd brain behind the hard little eyes that glittered in his hairy face. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head and gave Flandry a quizzical stare.

"If it is as you say—" he began.

"It is," said the Terrestrial.

"Quite probably. Your statements so far check with what we already know, and we can soon verify much of the rest. If, then, you speak truth, the Imperial organization is fantastically good." He smiled. "As it should be—it conquered the stars, in the old days. But it's no better than the beings who man it and everyone knows how venial and cowardly the Imperials are today."

Flandry said nothing, but he remembered the gallantry of the Sirian units at Garrapoli and the dogged courage of the Valatian Legion and—well, why go on? The haughty Scothani just didn't seem able to realize that a state as absolutely decadent as they imagined the Empire to be wouldn't have endured long enough to be their own enemy.

"We'll have to reorganize everything," said Nartheof. "I don't care whether what you say is true or not, it makes good sense. Our whole setup is outmoded. It's ridiculous, for instance, to give command according to nobility and blind courage instead of proven intelligence."

"And you assume that the best enlisted man will make the best officer," said Flandry. "It doesn't necessarily follow. A strong and hardy warrior may expect more of his men than they can give. You can't all be supermen."

"Another good point. And we should eliminate swordplay as a requirement; swords are useless today. ~~And we have to train mathematicians to compute trajectories and everything else.~~" Nartheof grimaced. "I hate to think what would have happened if we'd invaded three years ago, as many hotheads wanted to do. We would have inflicted great damage, but that's all."

"You should wait at least another ten or twenty years and really get prepared."

"Can't. The great nobles wouldn't stand for it. Who wants to be duke of a planet when he could be viceroy of a sector? But we have a year or two yet." Nartheof scowled. "I can get my own service whipped into shape, with your help and advice. I have most of the bright lads. But as for some of the other forces—gods, the dunderheads they have in command! I've argued myself hoarse with Nornagast, to no use. The fool just isn't able to see that a space fleet the size of ours must have a special coordinating division equipped with semantic calculators and—The worst of it is, he's a cousin to the king, he ranks me. Not much I can do."

"An accident could happen to Nornagast," murmured Flandry.

"Eh?" Nartheof gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Flandry lightly. "But just for argument's sake, suppose—well, suppose some good swordsman should pick a quarrel with Nornagast. I don't doubt he has many enemies. If he should unfortunately be killed in the duel, you might be able to get to his majesty immediately after, before anyone else, and persuade him to appoint a more reasonable successor. Of course, you'd have to know in advance that there'd be a duel."

"Of all the treacherous, underhanded—!"

"I haven't done anything but speculate," said Flandry mildly. "However, I might remind you of your own remarks. It's hardly fair that a fool should have command and honor and riches instead of better men who simply happen to be of lower degree. Nor, as you yourself said, is it good for Scothania as a whole."

"I won't hear of any such Terrestrial vileness."

"Of course not. I was just—well, speculating. I can't help it. All Terrestrials have dirty minds. But we did conquer the stars once."

"A man might go far, if only—no!" Nartheof shook himself. "A warrior doesn't bury his hands in muck."

"No. But he might use a pitchfork. Tools don't mind dirt. The man who wields them doesn't even have to know the details ... But let's get back to business." Flandry relaxed even more lazily. "Here's a nice little bit of information which only highly placed Imperials know. The Empire has a lot of arsenals and munitions dumps which are guarded by nothing but secrecy. The Emperor doesn't dare trust certain units to guard such sources of power, and he can't spare enough reliable legions to watch them all. So obscure, uninhabited planets are used." Nartheof's eyes were utterly intent now. "I know of only one, but it's a good prospect. An uninhabited, barren system not many parsecs inside the border, the second planet honeycombed with underground works that are crammed with spaceships,

atomic bombs, fuel—power enough to wreck a world. A small, swift fleet could get there, take most the stores, and destroy the rest before the nearest garrison could ever arrive in defense."

"Is that true?"

"You can easily find out. If I'm lying, it'll cost you that small unit, that's all—and I assure you I've no desire to be tortured to death."

"Holy gods!" Nartheof quivered. "I've got to tell Cerdic now, right away—"

"You could. Or you might simply go there yourself without telling anyone. If Cerdic knows, he'll be the one to lead the raid. If you went, you'd get the honor—and the power—"

"Cerdic would not like it."

"Too late then. He could hardly challenge you for so bold and successful a stroke."

"And he is getting too proud of himself. He could stand a little taking down." Nartheof chuckled, a deep vibration in his shaggy breast. "Aye, by Valtam's beard, I'll do it! Give me the figures now—"

Presently the general looked up from the papers and gave Flandry a puzzled stare. "If this is the case and I believe it is," he said slowly, "it'll be a first-rate catastrophe for the Empire. Why are you with us, human?"

"Maybe I've decided I like your cause a little better," shrugged Flandry. "Maybe I simply want to make the best of my own situation. We Terrestrials are adaptable beasts. But I have enemies here, Nartheof, and I expect to make a few more. I'll need a powerful friend."

"You have one," promised the barbarian. "You're much too useful to me to be killed. And—and—damn it, human, somehow I can't help liking you."

IV

The dice rattled down onto the table and came to a halt. Prince Torric swore good-naturedly and shoved the pile of coins toward Flandry. "I just can't win," he laughed. "You have the gods with you, human."

For a slave, I'm not doing so badly, thought Flandry. In fact, I'm getting rich. "Fortune favors the weak, highness," he smiled. "The strong don't need luck."

"To Theudagaar with titles," said the young warrior. He was drunk; wine flushed his open face and spread in puddles on the table before him. "We're too good friends by now, Dominic. Ever since you got my affairs in order—"

"I have a head for figures, and of course Terrestrial education helps—Torric. But you need money."

"There'll be enough for all when we hold the Empire. I'll have a whole system to rule, you know."

Flandry pretended surprise. "Only a system? After all, a son of King Penda—"

"Cerdic's doing," Torric scowled blackly. "The dirty avagar persuaded Father that only one—himself, of course—should succeed to the throne. He said no kingdom ever lasted when the sons divided power equally."

"It seems very unfair. And how does he know he's the best?"

"He's the oldest. That's what counts. And he's conceited enough to be sure of it." Torric gulped another beakerful.

"The Empire has a better arrangement. Succession is by ability alone, among many in a whole group of families."

"Well—the old ways—what can I do?"

"That's hardly warrior's talk, Torric. Admitting defeat so soon—I thought better of you!"

"But what to do—?"

"There are ways. Cerdic's power, like that of all chiefs, rests on his many supporters and his own household troops. He isn't well liked. It wouldn't be hard to get many of his friends to give allegiance elsewhere."

"But—treachery—would you make a brotherslayer of me?"

"Who said anything about killing? Just—dislodging, let us say. He could always have a system or two to rule, just as he meant to give you."

"But—look, I don't know anything about your sneaking Terrestrial ways. I suppose you mean to dis—disaffect his allies, promise them more than he gives ... What's that word—bribery? I don't know anything about it, Dominic. I couldn't do it."

"You wouldn't have to do it," murmured Flandry. "I could help. What's a man for, if not to help his friends?"

Earl Morgaar, who held the conquered Zanthudian planets in fief, was a noble of power and influence beyond his station. He was also notoriously greedy.

He said to Captain Flandry: "Terrestrial, your suggestions about farming out tax-gathering have more than doubled my income. But now the natives are rising in revolt against me, murdering my troops wherever they get a chance and burning their farms rather than pay the levies. What do they do about that in the Empire?"

"Surely, sir, you could crush the rebels with little effort," said Flandry.

"Oh, aye, but dead men don't pay tribute either. Isn't there a better way? My whole domain is falling into chaos."

"Several ways, sir." Flandry sketched a few of them—puppet native committees, propaganda shifting the blame onto some scapegoat, and the rest of it. He did not add that these methods work only when skillfully administered.

"It is well," rumbled the earl at last. His hard gaze searched Flandry's impassively smiling face. "You've made yourself useful to many a Scothanian leader since coming here, haven't you? There's that matter of Nartheof—he's a great man now because he captured that Imperial arsenal. And there are others. But it seems much of this gain is at the expense of other Scothani, rather than of the Empire. I still wonder about Nornagast's death."

"History shows that the prospect of great gain always stirs up internal strife, sir," said Flandry. "It behooves the strong warrior to seize a dominant share of power for himself and so reunite his people against their common enemy. Thus did the early Terrestrial emperors end the civil wars and become the rulers of the then accessible universe."

"Ummm—yes. Gain—power—wealth—aye, some good warrior—"

"Since we are alone, sir," said Flandry, "perhaps I may remark that Scotha itself has seen many changes of dynasty."

"Yes—of course, I took an oath to the king. But suppose, just suppose the best interests of Scothani were served by a newer and stronger family—"

They were into details of the matter within an hour. Flandry suggested that Prince Kortan would be a valuable ally—but beware of Torric, who had ambitions of his own.

There was a great feast given at the winter solstice. The town and the palace blazed with light and shouted with music and drunken laughter. Warriors and nobles swirled their finest robes about them and boasted of the ruin they would wreak in the Empire. It was to be noted that the number of alcoholic quarrels leading to bloodshed was unusually high this year, especially among the upper classes.

There were enough dark corners, though. Flandry stood in one, a niche leading to a great open window, and looked over the glittering town lights to the huge white hills that lay silent beyond, under the hurtling moons. Above were the stars, bright with the frosty twinkle of winter; they seemed so near that one could reach a hand up and pluck them from the sky. A cold breeze wandered in from outside. Flandry wrapped his cloak more tightly about him.

A light footfall sounded on the floor. He looked about and saw Gunli the queen. Her tall young form was vague in the shadow, but a shaft of moonlight lit her face with an unearthly radiance. She might have been a lovely girl of Terra, save for the little horns and—well—

These people aren't really human. They look human, but no people of Terra were ever so—simple-minded! Then with an inward grin: But you don't expect a talent for intrigue in women, Terrestrial or Scothan. So the females of this particular species are quite human enough for anyone's taste.

The cynical mirth faded into an indefinable sadness. He—damn it, he liked Gunli. They had laughed together often in the last few months, and she was honest and warm-hearted and—well, no matter, no matter.

"Why are you here all alone, Dominic?" she asked. Her voice was very quiet, and her eyes seemed huge in the cold pale moonlight.

"It would hardly be prudent for me to join the party," he answered wryly. "I'd cause too many fights. Half of them out there hate my insides."

"And the other half can't do without you," she smiled. "Well I'm as glad not to be there myself. These Frithians are savages. At home—" She looked out the window and sudden tears glittered in her eyes.

"Don't weep, Gunli," said Flandry softly. "Not tonight. This is the night the sun turns, remember. There is always new hope in a new year."

"I can't forget the old years," she said with a bitterness that shocked him.

Understanding came. He asked quietly: "There was someone else, wasn't there?"

"Aye. A young knight. But he was of low degree, so they married me off to Penda, who is old and chill. And Jomana was killed in one of Cerdic's raids—" She turned her head to look at him, and a pathetic attempt at a smile quivered on her lips. "It isn't Jomana, Dominic. He was very dear to me, but even the deepest wounds heal with time. But I think of all the other young men, and their sweethearts—"

"It's what the men want themselves."

"But not what the women want. Not to wait and wait and wait till the ships come back, never knowing whether there will only be his shield aboard. Not to rock her baby in her arms and know that in a few years he will be a stiffened corpse on the shores of some unknown planet. Not—well—" She straightened her slim shoulders. "Little I can do about it."

"You are a very brave and lovely woman, Gunli," said Flandry. "Your kind has changed history ere this." And he sang softly a verse he had made in the Scotan bardic form:

"So I see you standing,

sorrowful in darkness.

But the moonlight's broken

by your eyes tear-shining—

moonlight in the maiden's

magic net of tresses.

Gods gave many gifts, but,

Gunli, yours was greatest."

Suddenly she was in his arms ...

Sviffash of Sithafar was angry. He paced up and down the secret chamber, his tail lashing about his bowed legs, his fanged jaws snapping on the accented Scothanian words that poured out.

"Like a craieex they treat me!" he hissed. "I, king of a planet and an intelligent species, must bow before the dirty barbarian Penda. Our ships have the worst positions in the fighting line and the last chance at loot. The swaggering Scothani on Sithafar treat my people as if they were conquered peasants, not warrior allies. It is not to be endured!"

Flandry remained respectfully silent. He had carefully nursed the reptile king's smoldering resentment along ever since the being had come to Iuthagaar for conference, but he wanted Sviffash to think it was all his own idea.

"By the Dark God, if I had a chance I think I'd go over to the Terran side!" exploded Sviffash. "You say they treat their subjects decently?"

"Aye, we've learned it doesn't pay to be prejudiced about race, your majesty. In fact, many nonhumans hold Terrestrial citizenship. And of course a vassal of the Empire remains free within his own domain, except in certain matters of trade and military force where we must have uniformity. And he has the immeasurable power and wealth of the Empire behind and with him."

"My own nobles would follow gladly enough," said Sviffash. "They'd sooner loot Scothanian than Terrestrial planets, if they didn't fear Penda's revenge."

"Many other of Scotha's allies feel likewise, your majesty. And still more would join an uprising just for the sake of the readily available plunder, if only they were sure the revolt would succeed. It is a matter of getting them all together and agreeing—"

"And you have contacts everywhere, Terrestrial. You're like a spinner weaving its web. Of course, if you're caught I shall certainly insist I never had anything to do with you."

"Naturally, your majesty."

"But if it works—hah!" The lidless black eyes glittered and a forked tongue flickered out between the horny lips. "Hah, the sack of Scotha!"

"No, your majesty. It is necessary that Scotha be spared. There will be enough wealth to be had on her province planets."

"Why?" The question was cold, emotionless.

"Because you see, your majesty, we will have Scothan allies who will cooperate only on that condition. ~~Some of the power-seeking nobles ... and then there is a southern nationalist movement which wishes separation from the Frithian north ... and I may say that it has the secret leadership of the queen herself ...~~ "

Flandry's eyes were as chill as his voice: "It will do you no good to kill me, Duke Asdagaar. I have left all the evidence with a reliable person who, if I do not return alive, or if I am killed later, will take it directly to the king and the people."

The Scothan's hands clenched white about the arms of his chair. Impotent rage shivered in his voice. "You devil! You crawling worm!"

"Name-calling is rather silly coming from one of your history," said Flandry. "A parricide, a betrayer of comrades, a breaker of oaths, a mocker of the gods—I have all the evidence, Duke Asdagaar. Some of it is on paper, some is nothing but the names of scattered witnesses and accomplices each of whom knows a little of your career. And a man without honor, on Scotha, is better dead. In fact, he soon will be."

"But how did you learn?" Hopelessness was coming into the duke's tone; he was beginning to tremble a little.

"I have my ways. For instance, I learned quite a bit by cultivating the acquaintance of your slaves and servants. You highborn forget that the lower classes have eyes and ears, and that they talk among themselves."

"Well—" The words were almost strangled. "What do you want?"

"Help for certain others. You have powerful forces at your disposal—"

Spring winds blew softly through the garden and stirred the trees to rustling. There was a deep smell of green life about them; a bird was singing somewhere in the twilight, and the ancient promise of summer stirred in the blood.

Flandry tried to relax in the fragrant evening, but he was too tense. His nerves were drawn into quivering wires and he had grown thin and hollow-eyed. So too had Gunli, but it seemed only to heighten her loveliness; it had more than a hint of the utterly alien and remote now.

"Well, the spaceship is off," said the man. His voice was weary. "Aethagir shouldn't have any trouble getting to Ifri, and he's a clever lad. He'll find a way to deliver my letter to Admiral Walton." He scowled, and a nervous tic began over his left eye. "But the timing is so desperately close. If our forces strike too soon, or too late, it can be ruinous."

"I don't worry about that, Dominic," said Gunli. "You know how to arrange these things."

"I've never handled an empire before, my beautiful. The next several days will be touch and go. An

that's why I want you to leave Scotha now. Take a ship and some trusty guards and go to Alagan or Gimli or some other out-of-the-way planet." He smiled with one corner of his mouth. "It would be a bitter victory if you died in it, Gunli."

Her voice was haunted. "I should die. I've betrayed my lord—I am dishonored—"

"You've saved your people—your own southerners, and ultimately all Scotha."

"But the broken oaths—" She began to weep, quietly and hopelessly.

"An oath is only a means to an end. Don't let the means override the end."

"An oath is an oath. But Dominic—it was a choice of standing by Penda or by—you—"

He comforted her as well as he could. And he reflected grimly that he had never before felt himself so thoroughly a skunk.

The battle in space was, to the naked eye, hardly visible—brief flashes of radiation among the swarming stars, occasionally the dark form of a ship slipping by and occulting a wisp of the Milky Way. But Admiral Walton smiled with cold satisfaction at the totality of reports given him by the semantic integrator.

"We're mopping them up," he said. "Our task force has twice their strength, and they're disorganized and demoralized anyway."

"Whom are we fighting?" wondered Chang, the executive officer.

"Don't know for sure. They've split into so many factions you can never tell who it is. But from Flandry's report, I'd say it was—what was that outlandish name now?—Duke Markagrav's fleet. He holds this sector, and is a royalist. But it might be Kelry, who's also anti-Terrestrial—but at war with Markagrav and in revolt against the king."

"Suns and comets and little green asteroids!" breathed Chang. "This Scothanian hegemony seems just to have disintegrated. Chaos! Everybody at war with everybody else, and hell take the hindmost! How'd he do it?"

"I don't know." Walton grinned. "But Flandry's the Empire's ace secret service officer. He works miracles before breakfast. Why, before these barbarians snatched him he was handling the Llynathaw trouble all by himself. And you know how he was doing it? He went there with everything but a big brass band, did a perfect imitation of a political appointee using the case as an excuse to do some high-powered roistering, and worked his way up toward the conspirators through the underworld characters he met in the course of it. They never dreamed he was any kind of danger—as we found out after a whole squad of men had worked for six months to crack the case of his disappearance."

"Then the Scothanians have been holding the equivalent of a whole army, and didn't know it!"

"That's right," nodded Walton. "The biggest mistake they ever made was to kidnap Captain Flandry"

"They should have played safe and kept some nice harmless cobras for pets!"

Iuthagaar was burning. Mobs rioted in the streets and howled with fear and rage and the madness of catastrophe.

The remnants of Penda's army had abandoned the town and were fleeing northward before the advancing southern rebels. They would be harried by Torric's guerrillas, who in turn were the fragments of a force smashed by Earl Morgaar after Penda was slain by Kortan's assassins. Morgaar himself was dead and his rebels broken by Nartheof. The earl's own band had been riddled by corruption and greed and had fallen apart before the royalists' counterblow.

But Nartheof was dead too, at the hands of Nornagast's vengeful relatives. His own seizure of supreme power and attempt at reorganization had created little but confusion, which grew worse when he was gone. Now the royalists were a beaten force somewhere out in space, savagely attacked by the erstwhile allies, driven off the revolting conquered planets, and swept away before the remorselessly advancing Terrestrial fleet.

The Scothanian empire had fallen into a hundred shards, snapping at each other and trying desperately to retrieve their own with no thought for the whole. Lost in an incomprehensibly complex network of intrigue and betrayal, the great leaders fell, or pulled out of the mess and made hasty peace with Terra. War and anarchy flamed between the stars—but limited war, a petty struggle really. The resources and organization for real war and its attendant destruction just weren't there any more.

A few guards still held the almost deserted palace, waiting for the Terrestrials to come and end the strife. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Captain Flandry stood at a window and looked over the city. He felt no great elation. Nor was he surprised yet. Cerdic was loose somewhere on the planet, and Cerdic had undoubtedly guessed who was responsible.

Gunli came to the human. She was very pale. She hadn't expected Penda's death and it had hurt her. But there was nothing to do now but go through with the business.

"Who would have thought it?" she whispered. "Who would have dreamed we would ever come to this? That mighty Scotha would lie at the conqueror's feet?"

"I would," said Flandry tonelessly. "Such jerry-built empires as yours never last. Barbarians just don't have the talent and the knowledge to run them. Being only out for plunder, they don't really build.

"Of course, Scotha was especially susceptible to this kind of sabotage. Your much-vaunted honesty was your own undoing. By carefully avoiding any hint of dishonorable actions, you became completely ignorant of the techniques and the preventive measures. Your honor was never more than a latent ability for dishonor. All I had to do, essentially, was to point out to your key men the rewards of betrayal. If they'd been really honest, I'd have died at the first suggestion. Instead, they grabbed at the chance. So it was easy to set them against each other until no one knew whom he could trust." He

smiled humorlessly. "Not many Scothani objected to bribery or murder or treachery when it was shown to be to their advantage. I assure you, most Terrestrials would have thought further, been able to see beyond their own noses and realized the ultimate disaster it would bring."

"Still—honor is honor, and I have lost mine and so have all my people." Gunli looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. "Dominic, disgrace can only be wiped out in blood."

He felt a sudden tightening of his nerves and muscles, an awareness of something deadly rising before him. "What do you mean?"

She had lifted the blaster from his holster and skipped out of reach before he could move. "No—stay there!" Her voice was shrill. "Dominic, you are a cunning man. But are you a brave one?"

He stood still before the menace of the weapon. "I think—" He groped for words. No, she wasn't crazy. But she wasn't really human, and she had the barbarian's fanatical code in her as well. Easy, easy, or death would spit at him. "I think I took a few chances, Gunli."

"Aye. But you never fought. You haven't stood up man to man and battled as a warrior should." Pain racked her thin lovely face. She was breathing hard now. "It's for you as well as him, Dominic. He has to have his chance to avenge his father—himself—fallen Scotha—and you have to have a chance too. If you can win, then you are the stronger and have the right."

Might makes right. It was, after all, the one unbreakable law of Scotha. The old trial by combat, here on a foreign planet many light-years from green Terra—

Cerdic came in. He had a sword in either hand, and there was a savage glee in his bloodshot eyes.

"I let him in, Dominic," said Gunli. She was crying now. "I had to. Penda was my lord—but kill him, kill him!"

With a convulsive movement, she threw the blaster out of the window. Cerdic gave her an inquiring look. Her voice was almost inaudible: "I might not be able to stand it. I might shoot you, Cerdic."

"Thanks!" He ripped the word out, savagely. "I'll deal with you later, traitress. Meanwhile—" A terrible laughter bubbled in his throat—"I'll carve your—friend—into many small pieces. Because who, among the so-civilized Terrestrials, can handle a sword?"

Gunli seemed to collapse. "O gods, O almighty gods—I didn't think of that—"

Suddenly she flung herself on Cerdic, tooth and nail and horns, snatching at his dagger. "Get him, Dominic!" she screamed. "Get him!"

The prince swept one brawny arm out. There was a dull smack and Gunli fell heavily to the floor.

"Now," grinned Cerdic, "choose your weapon!"

Flandry came forward and took one of the slender broadswords. Oddly, he was thinking mostly about the queen, huddled there on the floor. Poor kid, poor kid, she'd been under a greater strain than flesh and nerves were meant to bear. But give her a chance and she'd be all right.

Cerdic's eyes were almost dreamy now. He smiled as he crossed blades. "This will make up for a lot," he said. "Before you die, Terrestrial, you will no longer be a man—"

Steel rang in the great hall. Flandry parried the murderous slash and raked the prince's cheek. Cerdic roared and plunged, his blade weaving a net of death before him. Flandry skipped back, sword ringing on sword, shoulders to the wall.

They stood for an instant, straining blade against blade, sweat rivering off them, and bit by bit the Scothan's greater strength bent Flandry's arm aside. Suddenly the Terrestrial let go, striking out almost in the same moment, and the prince's steel hissed by his face.

He ran back and Cerdic rushed him again. The Scothan was wide open for the simplest stop thrust, but Flandry didn't want to kill him. They closed once more, blades clashing, and the human waited for his chance.

It came, an awkward move, and then one supremely skillful twist. Cerdic's sword went spinning out of his hand and across the room and the prince stood disarmed with Flandry's point at his throat.

For a moment he gaped in utter stupefaction. Flandry laughed harshly and said: "My dear friend, you forget that deliberate archaism is one characteristic of a decadent society. There's hardly a noble in the Empire who hasn't studied scientific fencing."

Defeat was heavy in the prince's defiant voice: "Kill me, then. Be done with it."

"There's been too much killing, and you can be too useful." Flandry threw his own weapon aside and cocked his fists. "But there's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time."

Despite the Scothan's powerful but clumsy defense, Flandry proceeded to beat the living hell out of him.

"We've saved Scotha, all Scotha," said Flandry. "Think, girl. What would have happened if you'd gone on into the Empire? Even if you'd won—and that was always doubtful, for Terra is mightier than you thought—you'd only have fallen into civil war. You just didn't have the capacity to run an empire—as witness the fact that your own allies and conquests turned on you the first chance they got. You've fought each other over the spoils, greater powers would have moved in, Scotha would have been ripe for sacking. Eventually you'd have gone down into Galactic oblivion. The present conflict was really quite small; it took far fewer lives than even a successful invasion of the Empire would have done. And now Terra will bring the peace you longed for, Gunli."

"Aye," she whispered. "We deserve to be conquered."

"But you aren't," he said. "The southerners hold Scotha now, and Terra will recognize them as the legal government—with you the queen, Gunli. You'll be another vassal state of the Empire, yes, but with all your freedoms except the liberty to rob and kill other races. And trade with the rest of the Empire will bring you a greater and more enduring prosperity than war ever would."

"I suppose that the Empire is decadent. But there's no reason why it can't some day have a

renaissance. When the vigorous new peoples such as yours are guided by the ancient wisdom of Terra, the Galaxy may see its greatest glory."

She smiled at him. It was still a wan smile, but something of her old spirit was returning to her. "I don't think the Empire is so far gone, Dominic," she said. "Not when it has men like you." She took his hands. "And what will you be doing now?"

He met her eyes, and there was a sudden loneliness within him. She was very beautiful.

But it could never work out. Best to leave now, before a bright memory grew tarnished with the day-to-day clashing of personalities utterly foreign to each other. She would forget him in time, find someone else, and he—well—"I have my work," he said.

They looked up to the bright sky. Far above them, the first of the descending Imperial ships glittered in the sunlight like a falling star.

Warriors From Nowhere!

"Crime," said Captain Dominic Flandry of the Terran Empire's Naval Intelligence Corps, "is entirely a matter of degree. If you shoot your neighbor in order to steal his property, you are a murderer and a thief, and will be psychorevised and enslaved. If, however, you gather a band of lusty fellows, knock off a couple of million people, and take their planet, you are a great conqueror, a world hero, and your name goes down in the history books. Sooner or later, this inconsistency seeps into the national consciousness and causes a desire for universal peace. That is known as decadence, especially among historical philosophers who never had to do any of the actual fighting. The Empire is currently in the early stages of decadence, which is the most agreeable time to inhabit: peace and pleasure, and the society not yet rotted so far that chaos sets in. One might say the Empire is a banana just starting to show brown spots."

He was not jailed for his remarks because he made them in private, sitting on the balcony of his lodge on Varrak's southern continent and enjoying his usual noontime breakfast. His flamboyantly pajamaed legs were cocked up on the rail. Sighting over his coffee cup and between his feet, he saw the mountainside drop steeply down to a green sun-flooded wilderness. The light played over a lean, straight-boned face and a long hard body which made him look anything but a petty noble of a sated imperium. But his business—maintaining the status quo of a realm threatened by internal decay and outside aggression—was a strenuous one.

His current mistress, Ella, offered him a cigarette and he inhaled it into lighting. She was a stunning blonde whom he had bought a few weeks previously in the planet's one city, Fort Lone. He gathered that she was of the old pioneer stock, semiaristocrats who had fallen on evil times and been sold for debt. With such people he sympathized, but there was nothing he could do about the system; and she could have worse owners than himself.

He took another sip of coffee, wiped his mustache, and drew a breath to resume his musings. An apologetic cough brought his head around, and he saw his valet, the only other being in the lodge. There was a slim humanoid from Shalmu, with a hairless green skin, prehensile tail, and impeccable

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