

The First Conquest of Earth

by David W. Goldman

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When the alien fleet was first sighted just beyond the asteroid belt, end-of-the-world riots broke out in cities around the globe. But when astronomers calculated that the huge, silent ships would take nearly three weeks to reach Earth, all but the most committed rioters felt their enthusiasm wilt. By the end of the day they'd all dropped their bricks or bats and slunk home, plundered consumer electronics in hand, muttering about the aliens' apparent lack of urgency.

Nearly three weeks later, the alien fleet braked into Earth orbit. Telescopes provided increasingly detailed photographs of the six immense, gleaming spheres, thoroughly bristled with ominous protuberances.

Once the ships had settled into an assortment of planet-girdling orbits, the transmissions began. Radio and television channels in every part of the world were filled by an androgynous voice. After nearly two minutes of declamation—in Chinese—the voice paused briefly.

With a slight click, it resumed. “Humans of Earth, be advised! In accordance with the law and custom of the Syndicate of Mutually

Tolerated Civilizations, you are hereby notified that your existence has caused unacceptable offense to the free-trading people of the Orelop Hegemony. You are hereby granted a period of anticipatory mourning, said period to extend no less than 87 and no more than 121 hours from the initiation of this notification. At the completion of said period, the conquest of Earth by the Orelop Hegemony will commence.

“In accordance with Syndicate law and custom, the conquering party will be granted right of first refusal toward all resources of the conquered party, including but not limited to items mineral, biological, and intellectual. In addition, the conquered party shall immediately provide the conquering party with a supply of personal slaves, equal in number to the population of the conquering party or one-quarter the population of the conquered party, whichever is less, as determined at the commencement of conquest. Said slaves shall be non-returnable and fully transferable, with the provider guaranteeing perpetual replacement for fatal defects caused by improper design, intrinsic pathology, or self-negligent behavior.

“Further details, including a complete database of relevant Syndicate law and custom, shall be disseminated immediately post-conquest at a non-declinable price set by the seller in accordance with Syndicate law and custom.

“Humans of Earth, be advised!”

The message repeated in Spanish. Then in Hindi. And then, one by one, in five hundred other languages.

And then the Orelops went silent, disregarding the myriad governmental and other responses that frantically sought to clarify or negotiate.

In the tense days that followed, behind closed doors in capitols around the globe, calls for a military response were hurriedly rebuffed by those terrified of Orelop reprisals. Given the aliens’

presumed technical prowess—not to mention the threatening appearance of their monstrous ships—no leader wanted to be the first to draw the Orelops' ire.

So it was with a collective holding of high governmental breath that, three days after the Orelop transmission, these same leaders responded to urgent alerts that a missile launch had been detected in North Korea.

For ten minutes, terrestrial, airborne and satellite reconnaissance focused on the rocket climbing toward one of the great alien vessels. Watchers argued over likely Orelop countermeasures. Lasers and particle beams? Space-to-space projectiles? Remote reprogramming of the weapon's guidance system?

The missile continued its ascent.

Or perhaps the aliens were waiting until the instant before impact, when they would simply dodge the primitive Earth weapon using the fantastic acceleration of their formidable engines?

The Orelops didn't dodge.

The missile struck the ship's hull and exploded, its flare immediately blinding most of Earth's observing instruments.

As new instruments were hastily brought to bear, they did not reveal a crippled warship venting atmosphere and debris from a jagged, gaping wound. Instead, the entire ship had been vaporized. A huge, dimming cloud of glowing gas expanded outward from the point of explosion.

The five remaining ships were moving to higher orbits. None, so far, had taken any other apparent action.

An anxious Earth awaited reprisal. Silent minutes passed, and then the radio and television transmissions returned. As before, the familiar voice spoke first in Chinese—briefly, this time—before switching to English.

“Humans of Earth! We had no idea that you possessed weapons of such ferocity. The Orelop Hegemony offers its immediate and unconditional surrender!”

* * *

June, 2013

René Erdani hated his job.

After more than a decade of generally satisfying work as a United Nations negotiator, a month ago René had thought he'd reached his career's zenith by being named head of the Earth delegation to the Settlement of Conquest talks. But today his chief motivation for getting out of bed was the knowledge that in a few hours the final documents would be signed, and then for the rest of his life René Erdani could spend each day not speaking with Orelops.

Following his superiors' bidding, René had started the first day of talks by demanding all scientific and technical details needed to construct vessels with the speed of the Orelops' ships. Trulz, the Orelop negotiator—a deferential entity who stood a head taller than René, and otherwise bore a remarkable resemblance to a purple, three-armed saguaro cactus plush toy mounted on a wheeled cart—had responded by causing its cart to trace a small circle on the floor. A familiar human-sounding voice then emerged from a fist-sized brass crescent strapped to Trulz's trunk. “I regret to inform the dignified representative of the people of the Earth that while the Orelop Hegemony would of course be eager to supply its conqueror with the information you request, we are otherwise constrained by the law and custom of the Syndicate of Mutually Tolerated Civilizations.”

“Constrained?” René responded. “How so?”

Again the Orelop traced a circle. (In the succeeding weeks, René would come to abhor this gesture. According to Trulz it indicated

humble and regretful apology. But René would grow to suspect that it actually represented the Orelop equivalent of a snicker.) “The people of Earth, by Syndicate law and custom, have right of first refusal to all intellectual resources of the Orelop Hegemony. However, said law and custom also require the Hegemony to demand an appropriate and fair price for any resource transferred. With all humility and respect, I must inform the dignified representative of the people of the Earth that his world presently lacks the assets necessary to purchase the information in question.”

“I see.” René steepled his fingers. “Perhaps there has been some confusion in translating the terms ‘conquest’ and ‘unconditional surrender.’”

But Trulz wouldn’t budge. It claimed that the Syndicate placed considerable emphasis on encouraging its members to uphold Syndicate laws and customs.

René remained calm. “We have defeated your armada with a single, small missile. Hundreds of more powerful weapons are now trained upon your remaining ships. You are hardly in a position to refuse our demands. Relations between the Hegemony and your Syndicate are of no concern to Earth.”

Trulz circled. It explained that the Syndicate’s “encouragement” in such matters tended to involve the warships of member civilizations whose military vigor significantly exceeded that of the Orelop Hegemony. Or of Earth.

René chose not to press the point. According to his briefings, from their new, higher orbits the Orelop ships could easily detect and avoid anything Earth might launch at them. Humanity’s superior status in these talks seemed to depend entirely upon Orelop convention, and not on anything Earth could enforce.

Over the following days René failed to acquire the secrets of

artificial gravity, interstellar travel via wormhole, and vacuum-based energy generation. Then, in a protracted negotiation whose inventiveness and resolve would be studied for decades by diplomats worldwide, he finally forced Trulz to name an accessible price for the details of a very limited form of teleportation. Unfortunately, that deal was ultimately scuttled by Turkey's disinclination to allow Istanbul to be shipped offworld.

At one point René had asked the Orelop, on a purely hypothetical basis, what humanity might purchase with a promise to allow Trulz to return to its ship unharmed.

Trulz didn't flinch. "The taking of hostages, if I may so grossly recharacterize the hypothetical suggestion of the esteemed Earth representative, is not, in fact, prohibited by any Syndicate law or custom."

René's eyebrows lifted. "Indeed," he replied.

"However," continued Trulz, "in such situations member civilizations are enjoined from paying, directly or otherwise, any form of ransom or liberation fee. The penalties for noncompliance are impressive."

"We're talking about your life, Trulz. Hypothetically." René pursed his lips. "I believe you're bluffing."

Trulz's trunk twisted clockwise, a gesture that René had come to consider a shrug. "The beliefs of the distinguished representative of the people of Earth are of course his own. But as, at present, we are speaking of hypotheticals and suchlike inconsequential matters, I hope that the respected representative will not be offended by my changing the topic to a brief description of the planet-broiling devices possessed by a few of the Syndicate's member civilizations?"

René chose not to press the point.

In the end, René had been able to satisfy only a single request from his superiors. In exchange for two tonnes of refined ytterbium,

Trulz had agreed to hand over a sample of his purple integument. The U.N. department franchising Orelop action figures was ecstatic.

Now, in this final meeting with Trulz, René watched somberly as the Settlement of Conquest documents were signed (or, in Trulz's case, purply smudged). René had done his best to draft an agreement as impressive-sounding as the occasion of Earth's first interstellar conquest deserved, but buried within the usual vacuous ceremonial language were really only two substantive points. First, that the Orelop Hegemony had been conquered by Earth. Second, that humanity would purchase from the Hegemony, immediately upon conclusion of the signing ceremony, a complete database of Syndicate law and custom, along with a Syndicate new-member application form, at the non-declinable price of six tonnes of refined iridium.

As diplomats and world leaders chatted over champagne, René managed to extract his opposite number for a brief conversation in an adjacent room.

"You know, Trulz," he began, "There's something I've wondered about."

The Orelop twisted counterclockwise, indicating a query.

"How is it," asked René, "that your people could master five hundred Earth languages, yet in the process somehow never notice that we possess and frequently argue about nuclear weapons?"

The trunk twisted clockwise. "Our surveillance was obviously imperfect. Will that be all?"

Bemused, René shook his head. "Trulz, you and I have spoken every day for a month. Yet I don't think I understand you or your people any better now than when we first met."

"How fascinating. I think I'll head back to the party."

As the Orelop pivoted, René said, "Representative Trulz, I note that your former, ah, formal prolixity seems to have lessened

somewhat now that the Settlement has been signed.”

The Orelop paused. “Don’t sweat it, René. Tomorrow the Orelop Hegemony will start fulfilling all of its requirements as a conquered civilization.”

René frowned. “Wait—”

But Trulz wheeled onward through the doorway, his cart tracing a small circle as it crossed the threshold.

* * *

September, 2025

Stephanie leaned her sponge-mop against an armchair, and opened her front door. On the other side of the screen door squatted a waist-high, grayish-orange, lumpy cone. Its glistening surface heaved with each of its wheezy breaths. The stick-like appendage it had used to ring the doorbell was now slurpily retracting into an oozing blister near the cone’s pockmarked peak.

Stephanie turned away.

“Jason!” she shouted. “Your new alien is here!”

As usual, the teenager failed to respond to her call. In the meantime, the alien on her porch had rotated so that the brass crescent strapped around its otherwise undefined midriff pointed toward Stephanie.

“Jays,” it announced. “On.” A few seconds later it added, “You?”

Stephanie sighed. “No, I’m his mother. You might as well come in.” She pushed the screen open an inch, until it nearly struck the alien. “Back up, so I can open the door.”

The alien rose on its many tiny feet to scoot away, and then to scurry inside. As it passed her, Stephanie glanced down—in the alien’s wake a faint sheen of slime coated the living room’s hardwood floor. Well, that was an improvement, anyhow.

Stephanie’s own alien shuffled in from the dining room. Maybe

an inch taller than the newcomer, with a more bluish tinge and considerably more lumps, its synthetic voice was indistinguishable from the other's. "Doorb," it informed her. "Ell."

"Yes," she said. "I've already answered it. See?"

Stephanie's alien pivoted to bring its eye-blisters to bear on the new arrival. They viewed each other for a moment, and then one of them said, "Hell. Oh."

"Hell," replied the other. "Oh."

Stephanie told her alien to lead the newcomer to Jason. She waited as they left the room—like two wobbling, wheezing fire hydrants—and then she retrieved her sponge-mop. Making a half-hearted effort to wipe up the newcomer's sheen of slime, along with the familiar ropy mucus trail beside it, she made her way to the kitchen.

And swore. Shards of her favorite mug lay scattered over the floor beside the open dishwasher. Only a few days had passed since she'd commanded her alien—again—to leave all dishes for her to handle.

As she turned toward the broom stationed in the room's corner, she made the further discovery that somehow her alien, perhaps while reacting to its crockery mishap, had managed to knock her toaster off the counter. Burnt crumbs surrounded the dented appliance.

Stephanie sighed.

Last week, while Jason had been engrossed by a video game, his alien had decided to rinse out Jason's hair dryer. Without unplugging it.

Stephanie had insisted that Jason be the one to pull the wagon holding the corpse, despite her own alien's repeated attempts to assume the task. And when they'd arrived at City Hall and eventually reached the front of the line, it was Jason who had to

explain the circumstances of his alien's demise to the local Syndicate arbitrator.

After listening to the teenager's halting tale, the arbitrator—who bore a remarkable resemblance to a goldfish bowl overfilled with constantly roiling pink sand—asked to view the remains. Jason and Stephanie stepped aside.

The arbitrator roiled.

Stephanie glanced at her son. He shifted from foot to foot; she saw that he'd crossed the fingers of both hands.

Finally, the arbitrator ruled the death a case of self-negligence. Jason let out a loud, relieved sigh. No maltreatment penalty would be assessed against humanity.

The arbitrator ordered, per Syndicate law and custom, that a non-returnable replacement slave be transferred as soon as practical from the holdings of the Orelop Hegemony.

Stephanie winced at the term “slave.” Nobody she knew liked to use that word, regardless of its contractual accuracy. “Alien” wasn't a huge improvement, but no one had come up with anything better; the aliens' original name for themselves—along with their original language and culture—had been lost somewhere in the thousands of times they'd been transferred from one conquered civilization to the next.

Over the following week Stephanie had maintained a façade of sternness, and Jason continued to act appropriately abashed. Really, though, she'd envied his alien-free days. But now, she thought as she lifted the toaster to the counter, things were back to normal.

Her alien wobbled into the kitchen. It extruded an appendage to grab the dustpan from the corner, and shuffled toward the scatter of burnt crumbs. “Sorr,” it said. “Y.”

As the alien circled around the crumbs, kicking them into the

dustpan with its numerous feet, Stephanie gasped. On the alien's rear surface a deep, vertical crevice ran from its bluish, lumpy tip to its heaving base.

"Is that—" she began. "I mean, are you...splitting?"

The alien paused. "Joy," it said. "New. Me."

Stephanie gaped. Aliens were supposed to fission only once every seventy years or so. Of course, you couldn't really tell an alien's age, but this one had been with her for just a few years, and they all seemed so childlike....

Congratulations, she told herself. Soon the endless days of being followed everywhere by an idiot alien would be over.

By this time tomorrow, she could start getting used to the company of *two* idiot aliens.

"Great," she said.

"New. Me," repeated the alien. "Great."

* * *

June, 2213

Mustapha Jung-Su Dawson hated his job.

"Faster," said the exercise bike, using its perkier voice. "Dig!"

Mustapha gritted his teeth and pedaled harder. The harness holding him to the bike chafed his ribs.

"Say!" said the bike. "How about a cultural monitoring session while you enjoyably maintain your bone and muscle health?"

Mustapha grunted assent.

An image formed in the air before him. As it expanded into a monochrome view of the inside of a crowded subterranean den, Mustapha recognized first the hangings on the den's walls, and then the two shaggy creatures—each bearing a remarkable resemblance to a long-haired koala with five legs and two eye-stalks—swaying from side to side in the foreground.

Renfriffree's Den of Odorousness. Of all the programs emanating from the small, green planet that orbited 4 AU in-system of Mustapha's ship, this was one of the more accessible. Slapstick, if you could believe Syndicate archives, was universal.

The episode diverted Mustapha enough that the bike twice had to remind him to keep pedaling. At the show's end he unstrapped himself, grabbing a hand-vacuum as he floated from the saddle. For the next five minutes Mustapha chased sweat droplets around the cabin, cursing—as he did several times each day—the ridiculous prices that Syndicate civilizations demanded for the secrets underlying artificial gravity generation.

But for the moment, humanity could barely keep up with even its most essential expenses. Mustapha's boss, for example, had paid so much for the coordinates of this solar system that afterward she could afford only a pair of single-person scoutships for the actual prospecting. So Mustapha was stuck here alone for three years while the other ship shuttled back to Earth and then returned with his relief.

Well, not exactly alone. Glued to the hull above the command console, a Syndicate arbitrator ensured that Mustapha adhered to all laws and customs governing first contacts. Its pink sands swirled vigilantly anytime Mustapha's hand strayed near the knobs of his radio, or approached the switches that would deploy his cargo. Otherwise it seldom deigned to acknowledge his existence.

Now, pointedly ignoring the arbitrator, Mustapha strapped himself into the command chair and began to run through the past day's recordings of technical, military, and political communications among the furballs. (Well, Mustapha had to call the five-legged locals *something*. And he certainly didn't want to prejudice future negotiations by getting into the habit of using a term from any one of the planet's multitudinous bickering cultures.)

A series of muffled bangs emerged from the hatch at the cabin's other end. Mustapha pivoted, just in time to see the hatch squeak open. Through the opening oozed a clutch of slime-coated liquid globules. He watched for a moment as they wafted, undulating, out into the cabin's air.

Mustapha turned back to the console, not bothering to sigh.

The furballs had invented nuclear explosives decades ago. They'd been launching ballistic missiles for five years now. So far, though, nobody seemed to have gotten around to combining the two technologies.

"Sorr," said a voice from behind the hatch. "Y."

Mustapha eyed the switches that would inflate his small fleet of "warships" and send them on their way.

He hoped the furballs would hurry up.



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