

Honourable Opponent  
Cifford D Simak

The Fivers were late.

Perhaps they had misunderstood.

Or this might be another of their tricks.

Or maybe they never had intended to stick to their agreement.

"Captain," asked General Lyman Flood, "what time have we got now ?"

Captain Gist looked up from the chessboard. "Thirty-seveno-eight, galactic, sir."

Then he went back to the board again. Sergeant Conrad had pinned his knight and he didn't like it.

"Thirteen hours late !" the general fumed.

"They may not have got it straight, sir."

"We spelled it out to them. We took them by the hand and we went over it time and time again so they'd have it clear in mind. They couldn't possibly misunderstand." But they very possibly could, he knew.

The Fivers misunderstood almost everything. They had been confused about the armistice--as if they'd never heard of an armistice before. They had been obtuse about the prisoner e~xchange. Even the matter of setting a simple time had involved acruciating explanation--as if they had never heard of the measurement of time and were completely innocent of basic mathematics.

"Or maybe they broke down," the 'captain offered.

The general snorted. "They don't break down. Those ships of theirs are marvels. They'd live through anything. They whipped us, didn't they ?"

"Yes sir," said the captain.

"How many of them, Captain, do you estimate we de stroyed ?"

"Not more than a dozen, sir."

"They're tough," the general said.

He went back across the tent and sat down in a chair.

The captain had been wrong. The right number was eleven~

And of those, only one had been confirmed destroyed. Th others had been no better than put out of action.

And the way it figured out, the margin had been more tha ten to one in favour of the Flyers. Earth, the general admitte to himself, had never taken such a beating. Whole squadron had been wiped out; others had come fleeing back to Base wi~ their numbers cut in half.

They came fleeing back to Base and there were no cripple

They had returned without a scratch upon them. And the shil that had been lost had not been visibly destroyed--they h, simply been wiped out, leaving not a molecule of wreckage.

How do you beat a thing like that, he asked himself. How you fight a weapon that cancels out a ship in its entirety ?

Back on Earth and on hundreds of other planets in tZ

Galactic Confederacy, thousands of researchers were workh day and night in a crash-priority programme to find an answ to the weapon--or at least to find the weapon.

But the chance of success ran thin, the general knew, f there was not a single clue to the nature of it. Which w understandable, since every victim of the weapon had been lc irretrievably.

Perhaps some of the human prisoners would be able provide a clue. If there had been no such hope, he knew, EaJ never would have gone to all the trouble to make this prisor exchange.

He watched the captain and the sergeant hunched above t chessboard, with the captive Fiver looking on.

He called the captive over.

The captive came like a trundling roly-poly.

And once again, watching him, the general had that strange, disturbing sense of outrage.

For the Fiver was a droll grotesque that held no hint of the martial spirit. He was round and jolly in every feature, expression and gesture, dressed in a ribald clash of colours, as though designed and clad deliberately to offend any military mall.

"Your friends are late," the general told him.

"You wait," the Fiver said and his words were more like whistling than talk. One had to listen closely to make out what he said.

The general held himself in check.

No use in arguing.

No point blowing up.

He wondered if he--or the human race--would ever understand the Fivers.

Not that anyone really wanted to, of course. Just to get them combed out of Earth's hair would be enough.

"You wait," the Fiver whistled. "They come in middle time from now."

And when in hell, the general wondered, would be middle time from now ?

The Fiver glided back to watch the game.

The general walked outside.

The tiny planet looked colder and more desolate and forbidding than it ever had before. Each time he looked at it, the general thought, the scene was more depressing than he had remembered it.

Lifeless, worthless, of no strategic or economic value, it had qualified quite admirably as neutral territory to carry out the prisoner exchange. Neutral mostly because it wasn't worth the trouble for anyone to grab it.

The distant star that was its sun was a dim glow in the sky.

The black and naked rock crept out to a near horizon. The icy air was like a knife inside the general's nostrils.

There were no hills or valleys. There was absolutely nothing but the smooth flatness of the rock stretching on all sides, for all the world like a great space field.

It had been the Fivers, the general remembered, who had suggested this particular planet and that in itself was enough to make it suspect. But Earth, at that point in the negotiations, had been in no position to do much haggling.

He stood with his shoulders hunched and he felt the cold breath of apprehension blowing down his neck. With each passing hour, it seemed, the place felt more and more like some gigantic trap.

But he must be wrong, he argued. There was absolutely nothing in the Fivers' attitude to make him feel like that. They had, in fact, been almost magnanimous. They could have laid down their terms--almost any terms--and the Confederacy would have had no choice but to acquiesce. For Earth must buy time, no matter what the price. Earth had to be ready next time--five years or ten or whatever it might be.

But the Fivers had made no demands, which was unthinkable.

Except, the general told himself, one could never know what they might be thinking or what they might be planning.

The exchange camp huddled in the dimness--a few tents, a portable power plant, the poised and waiting ship and, beside it, the little scouter the captive Fiver had been piloting.

The scouter in itself was a good example of the gulf which separated the Fivers and the humans. It had taken three full days of bickering before the Fivers had been able to make clear their point that the scouter as well as its pilot must be returned to them.

No ship in all the Galaxy had ever gotten so thorough a study as that tiny craft. But the facts that it had yielded had been few indeed. And the captive Fiver, despite the best efforts of the experts in Psych, had furnished even fewer.

The area was quiet and almost deserted. Two sentries strode briskly up and down. Everyone else was under cover, killing time, waiting for the Fivers.

The general walked quickly across the area to the medic tent.

He stooped and went inside.

Four men were sitting at a table, drearily playing cards. One of them put down his hand and rose. "Any word, General ?"

The general shook his head. "They should be coming soon, Doe. Everything all set ?"

"We've been ready for some time," said the psychiatrist.

"We'll bring the boys in here and check them over as soon as they arrive. We've got the stuff all set. It won't take long."

"That's fine. I want to get off this rock as quickly as I can. I don't like the feel of it."

"There's just one thing .... "

"What's that ?"

"If we only knew how many they are handing back."

The general shook his head. "We never could find out."

"They're not so hot on figures. And you'd think, wouldn't you, that math would be universal ?"

"Well," said Doe resignedly, "we'll do the best we can."

"There can't be many," the general said. "We're only giving back one Fiver and one ship. How many humans do you figure a ship is worth to them ?"

"I wouldn't know. You really think they'll come ?"

"It's hard to be certain that they understood. When it comes to sheer stupidity .... "

"Not so stupid," Doe replied, quietly. "We couldn't learn their language, so they learned ours."

"I know," the general said impatiently. "I realize all that."

But that armistice business--it took days for them to get what we were driving at. And the time reckoning system still more days. Ood Lord, man, you could do better using sign language with a Stone Age savage?"

"You should," said Doe. "The savage would be human."

"But these Fivers are intelligent. Their technology, in many ways, has us beaten seven ways from Sunday. They fought us to a standstill."

"They licked us."

"All right, then, they licked us. And why not? They had this weapon that we didn't have. They were closer to their bases."

They had no logistics problem to compare with ours. They licked us, but I ask you, did they have the sense to know it ?

Did they take advantage of it ? They could have wiped us out.

They could have laid down peace terms that would have crippled us for centuries. Instead, they let us go. Now how does that make sense ?"

"You're dealing with an alien race," said Doe.

"We've dealt with other aliens. And we always understood them. Mostly, we got along with them."

"We dealt with them on a commercial basis," Doc reminded him. "Whatever trouble we might have had with them came after a basic minimum of understanding had been achieved."

The Fivers are the first that ever came out shooting."

"I can't figure it," the general said. "We weren't even heading for them. We might have passed them by. They couldn't have known who we were. Point is, they didn't care. They just came piling out and opened up on us. And it's been the same with everyone else who came within their reach. They take on every comer. There's never a time when they aren't fighting someone--sometimes two or three at once."

"They have a defensive complex," said Doe. "Want to be left alone. All they aim to do is keep others off their planets. As you say they could have wiped us out."

"Maybe they get hurt real easy. Don't forget we gave them a bloody nose or two--not as much as they busted us, but we hurt them some. I figure they'll come out again, soon as they can cut it."

He drew a deep breath. "Next time, we have to be ready for them. Next time, they may not stop. We have to dope them out."

It was tough work, he thought, to fight an enemy about which one knew next

to nothing. And a weapon about which one knew absolutely nothing.

There were theories in plenty, but the best no more than educated guesses.

The weapon might operate in time--hurling its targets back into unimagined chaos. Or it might be dimensional. Or it might collapse the atoms in upon themselves, reducing a spaceship to the most deadly massive dustmote the universe had known.

One thing for certain--it was not disintegration, for there was no flash and there was no heat. The ship just disappeared and that was the end of it--the end and all of it.

"There's another thing that bothers me," said Doc. "Those other races that fought the Fivers before they jumped on us.

When we tried to contact them, when we tried to get some help from them, they wouldn't bother with us. They wouldn't tell us anything."

"This is a new sector of space for us," the general said. "We are strangers here."

"It stands to reason," argued Doc, "they should jump at the chance to gang up on the Fivers."

"We can't depend on alliances. We stand alone. It is up to us."

He bent to leave the tent.

"We'll get right on it," said Doc, "soon as the men show up.

We'll have a preliminary report within an hour, if they're in any shape at all."

"That's fine," the general said and ducked out of the tent.

It was a bad situation, blind and terrifying if one didn't manage to keep a good grip on himself.

The captive humans might bring back some information, but even so, you couldn't buy it blind, for there might be a gimmick in it as there was a gimmick in what the captive Fiver knew.

This time, he told himself, the psych boys might have managed to outsmart themselves.

It had been a clever trick, all right--taking the captive Fiver on that trip and showing him so proudly all the barren, no-goo, planets, pretending they were the showplaces of the Co~ federacy.

Clever--if the Fiver had been human. For no human would have fought a skirmish, let alone a war, for the kind of planet he'd been shown.

But the Fiver wasn't human. And there was no way of knowing what kind of planet a Fiver might take a fancy to.

And there always was the chance that those crummy planets had given him the hunch that Earth would be easy prey.

The whole situation didn't track, the general thought. There was a basic wrongness to it. Even allowing for all the difference which might exist between the Fiver and the human culture the wrongness still persisted.

And there was something wrong right here.

He heard the sound and wheeled to stare into the sky.

The ship was close and coming in too fast.

But even as he held his breath, it slowed and steadied and came to ground in a perfect landing not more than a quarter of a mile from where the Earth ship stood.

The general broke into a run toward it, then remembered and slowed to a stiff military walk.

Men were tumbling out of tents and forming into lines. A order rang across the area and the lines moved with perfect drill precision.

The general allowed himself a smile. Those boys of his were good. You never caught them napping. If the Flyers had expected to sneak in and catch the camp confused and thus gain a bit of face, it was a horse on them.

The marching men swung briskly down the field. An ambulance moved out from beneath its tarp and followed.

Drums began to roll and the bugles sounded clear and crisp in the harsh, cold air.

It was men like these, the general told himself with pride, who held the

expanding Confederacy intact. It was men like these who kept the peace across many cubic light-years. It was men like these who some day, God willing, would roll back the

Fiver threat.

There were few wars now. Space was too big for it. There were too many ways to skirt around the edge of war for it to come anything but seldom. But something like the Fiver threat could not be ignored. Some day, soon or late, either Earth or Fiver must go down to complete defeat. The Confederacy could never feel secure with the Fivers on its flank.

Feet pounded behind him and the general turned. It was Captain Gist, buttoning his tunic as he ran. He fell in beside the general.

"So they finally came, sir."

"Fourteen hours late," the general said. "Let us, for the moment, try to look our best. You missed a button, Captain."

"Sorry, sir," the captain said, fastening the button.

"Right, then. Get those shoulders back. Smartly, if you will.

Right, left, hup, hup !"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Sergeant Conrad had his squad moving out with precision, escorting the captive Fiver most correctly forward, with all the dignity and smartness that anyone might wish.

The men were drawn up now in two parallel lines, flanking the ship. The port was swinging open and the ramp was rumbling out and the general noted with some satisfaction that he and Captain Gist would arrive at the foot of the ramp about the time it touched the ground. The timing was dramatic and superb, almost as if he himself had planned it down to the last detail.

The ramp snapped into position and three Fivers came sedately waddling down it.

A seedy-looking trio, the general thought. Not a proper uniform nor a medal among the lot of them.

The general seized the diplomatic initiative as soon as they reached the ground.

"We welcome you," he told them, speaking loudly and slowly and as distinctly as he could so they would understand.

They lined up and stood looking at him and he felt a bit uncomfortable because there was that round jolly expression in their faces. Evidently they didn't have the kind of faces that could assume any other expression. But they kept on looking at him.

The general plunged ahead. "It is a matter of great gratification to Earth to carry out in good faith our obligations agreed upon in the armistice proceedings. It marks what sincerely hope will be the beginning of an era . . . ."

"Most nice," one of the Flyers said. Whether he meant the general's little speech or the entire situation or was simply trying to be gracious was not at once apparent.

Undaunted, the general was ready to go on, but the spokesman Fiver raised a short round arm to halt him.

"Prisoners arrive briefly," he whistled.

"You mean you didn't bring them?"

"They come again," the Fiver said with a glorious disregard for preciseness of expression.

He continued beaming at the general and he made a motion, with the arm that might have been a shrug.

"Shenanigans," the captain said, close to the general's ear:

"We talk," the Fiver said.

"They're up to something," warned the captain. "It calls for Situation Red, sir."

"I agree," the general told the captain. "Set it up quietly."

He said to the Fiver delegation: "If you gentlemen will cooperate with me, I can offer you refreshments."

He had a feeling that they were smiling at him, but one could never tell.

Those jolly expressions were always the same. No matter what the situation.

"Most happy," said the Fiver spokesman. "These refresh .... "

"Drink," the general said and made a motion to supplement the word.

"Drink is good," the Fiver answered. "Drink is friend?"

"That is right," the general said.

He started for the tent, walking slowly so the Flyers could keep up.

He noted with some satisfaction that the captain had carried on most rapidly, indeed. Corporal Conrad was marching his squad back across the area, with the captive Fiver shambling in the centre. The tarps were coming off the guns and the last of the crew was clambering up the ladder of the ship.

The captain caught up with them just short of the tent.

"Everything all set, sir," Corporal Conrad reported in a whisper.

"Fine," the general said.

They reached the tent and went inside. The general opened a refrigerating unit and took out a gallon jug.

"This," he explained, "is a drink we made for your compatriot. He found it very tasty."

He set out glasses and sipping straws and uncorked the jug, wishing he could somehow hold his nose, for the drink smelled like something that had been dead too long. He didn't even like to guess what might have gone into it. The chemists back on Earth had whomped it up for the captive Fiver, who had consumed gallon after gallon of it with disconcerting gusto.

The general filled the glasses and the Fivers picked them up in their tentacles and stuck the straws into their draw-string mouths. They drank and rolled their eyes in appreciation.

The general took the glass of liquor the captain handed him and gulped half of it in haste. The tent was getting just a little thick. What things a man goes through, he thought, to serve his planets and his peoples.

He watched the Fivers drinking and wondered what they might have up their sleeves.

Talk, the spokesman had told him, and that might mean almost anything. It might mean a reopening of negotiations or it might be nothing but a stall.

And if it was negotiation, Earth was across the barrel. For there was nothing he could do but negotiate. Earth's fleet was crippled and the Fivers had the weapon and a renewal of the war was unthinkable. Earth needed five years at the minimum and ten years would be still better.

And if it was attack, if this planet was a trap, there was only one thing he could do--stand and fight as best he could, thoroughly suicidal course.

Either way, Earth lost, the general realized.

The Flyers put down their glasses and he filled them up again.

"You do well," one of the Fivers said. "You got the pape: and the marker?"

"Marker?" the general asked.

"He means a pencil," said the captain.

"Oh, yes. Right here." The general reached for a pad of pape: and a pencil and laid them on the desk.

One of the Fivers set down his glass and, picking up the pencil, started to make a laborious drawing. He looked for all the world like a five-year-old printing his first alphabet.

They waited while the Fiver drew. Finally he was finished.

He laid the pencil down and pointed to the wiggly lines.

"Us," he said.

He pointed to the sawtooth lines.

"You," he told the general.

The general bent above the paper, trying to make out what the Fiver had put down.

"Sir," the captain said, "it looks like a baffle diagram."

"Is," said the Fiver proudly.

He picked the pencil up.

"Look," he said.

He drew directional lines and made a funny kind of symbol for the points of contact and made crosses for the sections where the battle lines were broken. When he was done, the

Earth fleet had been shattered and sliced into three segments and was in headlong flight.

"That," the general said, with the husk of anger rising in his throat, "was the engagement in Sector 17. Half of our Fifth Squadron was wiped out that day."

"Small error," said the Fiver and made a deprecatory gesture.

He ripped the sheet of paper off the pad and tossed it on the floor. He laboriously drew the diagram again. "Attend," he said.

The Fiver drew the directional lines again, but this time he changed them slightly. Now the Earth line pivoted and broke and became two parallel lines that flanked the Fiver drive and turned and blunted it and scattered it in space. The Fiver laid the pencil down.

"Small matter," he informed the general and the captain.

"You good. You make one thin mistake."

Holding himself sternly in hand, the general filled the glasses once again.

What are they getting at, he thought. Why don't they come fiat out and say it ?

"So best," one of the Fivers said, lifting his glass to let them know that he meant the drink.

"More ?" asked the Fiver tactician, picking up the pencil.

"Please," said the general, seething.

He walked to the tent flap and looked outside. The men were at the guns. Thin wisps of vapour curled from the ship's launching tubes; in just a little while, it would be set to go, should the need arise. The camp was quiet and tense.

He went back to the desk and watched as the Fiver went on with aY~g~at~• ~fie~en~ tactics. "Interesting? he piped enthusiastically.

"I find it so," the general said. "There is just one question."

"Ask," the Fiver invited.

"If we should go to war again, how can you be sure we won't use all of this against you ?"

"But fine," the Fiver enthused warmly. "Exactly as we want."

"You fight fine," another Fiver said. "But just too slightly hard. Next time, you able to do much better." "Hard l" the general raged.

"Too roughly, sir. No need to make the ship go pooL"

Outside the tent, a gun cut loose and then another one and above the hammering of the guns came the full-throated, ground-shaking roar of many ship motors.

The general leaped for the entrance, went throughit at a run, not bothering with the flap. His cap fell off and he staggered out, thrown slightly off his balance. He jerked up his head and saw them coming in, squadron after squadron, painting the darkness with the flare of tubes.

"Stop firing]" he shouted. "You crazy fools, stop firing!"

But there was no need of shouting, for the guns had fallen silent.

The ships came down toward the camp in perfect flight formation. They swept across it and the thunder of their motors seemed to lift it for a moment and give it a mighty shake. Then they were climbing, rank on serried rank, still with drill precision---climbing and jockeying into position for regulation landing.

The general stood like a frozen man, with the wind ruffling his iron-grey hair, with a lump, half pride, half thankfulness, rising in his throat.

Something touched his elbow.

"Prisoners," said the Fiver. "I told you by and by."

The general tried to speak, but the lump was there to stop him. He swallowed it and tried once again. "We didn't understand," he said.

"You did not have a taker," said the Fiver. "That why fight so rough."

"We couldn't help it," the general told him. "We didn't know. We never fought this way before."

"We give you takers," said the Fiver. "Next time, we play it right. You do much better with the takers. It easier for us."

No wonder, the general thought, they didn't know about an armistice. No wonder they were confused about the negotiations and the prisoner exchange. Negotiations are not customarily needed to hand back the pieces one had won in a game.

And no wonder those other races had viewed with scorn and loathing Earth's proposal to gang up on the Flyers.

"An unsporting thing to do," the general said aloud. "They could have told us. Or maybe they were so used to it."

And now he understood why the Fivers had picked this planet. There had to be a place where all the ships could land.

He stood and watched the landing ships mushing down upon the rock in clouds of pinkish flame. He tried to count them, but he became confused, although he knew every ship Earth had lost would be accounted for.

"We give you takers," said the Fiver. "We teach you how to use. They easy operate. They never hurt people or ships."

And there was more to it, the general told himself, than just a silly game--though maybe not so silly, once one understood the history and the cultural background and the philosophic concepts that were tied into it. And this much one could say for it: It was better than fighting actual wars.

But with the takers, there would be an end of war. What little war was left would be ended once and for all. No longer would an enemy need to be defeated; he could be simply taken. No longer would there be years of guerrilla fighting on newly settled planets; the aborigines could be picked up and deposited in cultural reservations and the dangerous fauna shunted into zoos.

"We fight again?" the Fiver asked with some anxiety.

"Certainly," said the general. "Any time you say. Are we really as good as you claim?"

"You not so hot," the Fiver admitted with disarming candour.

"But~ you the best we ever find. Play plenty, you get better."

The general grinned. Just like the sergeant and the captain and their eternal chess, he thought.

He turned and tapped the Fiver on the shoulder.

"Let's get back," he said. "There's still some drinking in that jug. We mustn't let it go to waste."