

Captains of Industry

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(4780 words)

1

The *Capitalist* was the fastest spaceship ever made by humans, and it didn't go anywhere. It orbited an unusually empty bubble of space around a black hole light years from any useful resource. Yet many considered it to be the center of the Universe.

To an outside observer, the ship was shaped like a coin, less than a meter thick. At least that's what it would look like if an outside observer could see it. If you looked at the schematic diagram you'd see some weird twisted shape that could never hold together in flat space, but in the intensely curved spacetime around the black hole, the crazy topology protected the structure from powerful tidal forces. To the privileged industrialists living on board, the *Capitalist* was a cylinder, a few kilometers long and a few hundred meters across. The ship moved as close to the speed of light as anything made of matter ever could hope. And, again, it didn't go anywhere. That wasn't the point.

Sloan Lerner, who counted his years in the old earth way at thirty-three, was by far the youngest CEO to have the privilege of locating his home office on the *Capitalist*. But, of course, he was born there. His father had just stepped off the merry-go-round to take up with a new wife and had left Sloan to look after the business and his mother, and, yes, in that order, while Lerner senior sprawled on some tropical beach somewhere and drew down the corporate account until his new time frame moved him out of the picture for good.

His fellow bosses like to joke about Sloan behind his back. Silver spoon, wet behind the ears, that sort of crap. They liked to, but they didn't get much opportunity, because he was a hell of a lot better at running the company than his father had been. Lerner Interstellar was the fastest growing company headquartered on the *Capitalist*. He had grown and diversified the shipping business to include mining, bioengineering, manufacturing, and agriculture. He employed sixty million people on eight planets and fifty-odd space stations. The stock chart looked like an exponential function. Not much material to joke about. Now he was even getting nods of respect from the others as he walked down the wood paneled hallway towards his office suite.

Millicent Danvers of Tri-Cluster smiled at him as she left her own office. "I hear you're going up against Seth," she said.

"Or he's going up against me," Sloan answered. He had no idea what she was talking about. He had learned a few lessons in business from his father, and the first was that you never let anyone know you weren't on top of things.

"You got guts, kid." Danvers shook her head and walked away.

Sloan didn't like to hear rumors flying around in these hallways. Things outside the ship happened too fast. It took good information and a steady nerve to run a business in this relativistic time frame. Sloan stepped up his pace, berating himself for not bringing his phone along for the fifteen minute walk to his office. Every step meant things were happening on the outside that he had no control over.

The accelerated time frame was more than just a nuisance, it was the whole idea behind the *Capitalist*. Physicists long ago had found that time was part of space, and that the two could not be separated. Businessmen had found out an equally important relationship, that time was money. Put those two laws together and you get the picture. Because to make money at the business of interstellar trade, you had to wait years, sometimes hundreds of years, to do a simple deal. You might have to wait generations to make any money. And the people who went into business were, not to put too fine a point on it, not interested in delayed gratification.

Back in the days of Sloan's grandfather, the bosses of interstellar businesses used to have themselves frozen and thawed out every, say, ten years or so to check on the status of their companies. Problem was two problems: one, the whole freeze thaw thing was bad on the organs, the brain in particular. Each time it took longer and longer to get up to speed, until it eventually became clear to the boss and everyone else that the grey matter was turning to bean dip in there. Two, with the CEO in deep freeze, what was to stop the help from making some creative financial arrangements? Even the computers got in on the grab. Jesus Christ, when you can't even trust a robot not to embezzle, best not to take the long sleep.

So the physicists, of all people, had a solution. When you hang out deep inside a steep gravity well, you get to watch time go by in the rest of the Universe a lot faster. You have your agents buy a load of ammonia somewhere out near Altair, ship it to an aggy planet around Tau Ceti, pick up some grain and schlep that back to the hive colonies of Sol. That's thirty-six years of crawling along at an agonizing pace of 250,000 kilometers per second, but only a long lunch on the *Capitalist*.

The first generation of CEO's to take offices on the *Capitalist*, Sloan's father among them, loved to watch their empires grow from this godlike vantage point. But, unlike the gods, they couldn't always keep up with everything the little people were up to. Sloan sometimes wished he could leave the ship for a little while, just to catch up on the details, but the logistics of getting on and off a near lightspeed satellite were daunting. His office was just around the next corner. Tony Arbequest moved to block his path. "What's this deal between you and Seth?"

"Too early to say," Sloan said, and neatly sidestepped. Arbequest was on his way out. He couldn't pay the rent, and would have to go back on the clock unless he could come up with a decent cash flow position. Sloan could afford to ignore him. But this rumor was bothering him. He didn't want to tangle with Seth Leibowitz, not now, not ever. His father and Seth had been working together, and his father had ended up with Seth's knife in his back. He dodged another CEO with what looked like a question on his mind, and ducked into his office.

Danny sat behind the ops desk to his right. He gave Sloan a worried look but said nothing. Margie stood up from behind the reception desk and smiled.

“Good morning, Mr. Lerner. There’s an urgent message from C&P. It’s the first one on your monitor. Is there anything...”

“Nothing, thanks, Margie. Morning, Danny.” Sloan didn’t wait to hear the answer. He closed the door to his office behind him. First message, Colonization & Personnel, Planet HE-47/J, the one with the petroleum. Something about the deed, right of colonization, and a prior lien. What prior lien?

He slowed down and read the message more carefully. Information Services had uncovered a flight pattern that put a transport en route to Planet HE-47/J, said transport leased to The Sculptor Group. Seth Leibowitz, in other words. His transport papers claimed a right to colonize the planet, and the space transit authorities had let it through. Legal had checked the deed and had confirmed that there was in fact a lien on the planet, a leftover from the ruined deal between Lerner Interstellar and Sculptor, under the tenure of Lerner senior. There had been a civil trial in lower court, then an appeal in Interstellar Court that had overturned one of the two claims of the suit. As it stood, after two years of legal wrangling, both companies had equally valid right of colonization of the planet. This had all happened since Sloan had left his apartment on his way to the office. It would have to happen on the day he forgot his phone.

Sloan checked the time frame in standard binary. The days on his display flipped by at a speed of one per second, as always. C & P had sent a colony ship to HE-47/J and it was supposed to arrive in just seventy years. Sculptor’s flight plan showed their ship arriving just a year later. His people would just have time to unpack the colony and fire up the factories in that amount of time.

HE-47/J was a dead world, no life left on the surface but a lot of complex organic stuff in the ground. Easy to build on, but tough to survive. A hot, sandy, windy planet. Tough enough to get things going without another colony competing for resources.

Sloan called up his deal-tracker program, the one that could keep straight the calculations of time and distance and all of the other complications that came with the running of an interstellar business. HE-47/J was about fifty light years away from the *Capitalist*, give or take. If he sent the message in the next couple of hours, it would reach the transport ship just in time for him to tell it to turn around. But he couldn't afford to give up that petroleum. Seth Leibowitz had the same window, give or take a few minutes, but he probably wouldn't back down either. What would these people do once they ran into each other? If he couldn't convince Seth to call off his ship, he'd soon find out.

“Sloan, Seth Liebowitz here. Hey, kid, it looks like our legal departments have been busy on the clock this morning. You got time to sit down?”

No way. There was no way Sloan was meeting with Seth in person at this point. He was still trying to get all the information, and his off-the-clock legal team was slogging through years of trial transcripts that were still uploading. “Kind of busy, old man, how's...” he pretended to check his calendar... “never?”

“Aw, hell, Sloan, lets cut the crap. We've got two colonies about to land on one goddamned planet. You know that can't work. There ain't enough water on that dustbowl for one. We've got to work something out.”

“OK, how about you tell your people to turn around and we put this whole thing behind us?”

“Now kid, you know that isn’t going to happen. Your old man used that planet as collateral in a legally binding arrangement, and he defaulted. I’m not just going to walk away from forty trillion barrels of crude oil. Look, now this is not a threat, it’s just a simple statement of fact. Lives are going to be lost over this.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about war, young man. Something you, obviously, know nothing about. My people are not going to tolerate the presence of your people on that planet. Your employees are going to have a serious problem on their hands. Remember, this is not a threat. This is going to happen. I’m just telling you straight out.”

“My people are ready to handle that contingency,” Sloan said. As he said it, he pulled up the company manual and had it search out the S.O.P for self defense.

“What do you got on that transport, kid? Bunch of Drabs? It is Drabs, isn’t it? You cheap bastards. You know who I got to colonize that sand dune? Bedouins. You heard of Bedouins? They’re war-like people, indigenous to Earth’s Sahara. They’re tough, and they’re bred to survive in just the sort of conditions we got down there on, what is it, HE-47/J? What the hell kind of a name is that for a planet? You people got no imagination.”

And Seth, for all of his faults, did. That was something everyone knew. While Lerner Interstellar populated every planet it owned with a quiet and sturdy people that was made up of every race of old Earth blended together, Sculptor went out of its way to match the people with the terrain. If they had a snowball, they found some Inuits to live

there. If it was a tropical jungle, they scoured the Amazon rain forest for the few remaining tribes and offered them a trip to the stars and a great benefits package.

But Sculptor was already a huge company, and Seth could afford to do things in style. Lerner Interstellar's mission statement was to create a large, multi-functional corporation without becoming distracted by extravagance. And the Drabs fit right into that business model. They had a strong work ethic, they weren't very excitable and rarely caused trouble. And they loved their company.

"You'd be surprised at what my people are capable of, Seth. Don't consider the outcome of a war to be a foregone conclusion."

"Bullshit, Sloan. You and I know that your Drabs won't last five weeks in a fight against my Bedouins. They can't even take a shit without consulting the company manual."

Speaking of the manual, Sloan found the chapter on self defense and his heart sank as he read the instructions. They were technically workable. Everything you would want to know from how to target an enemy bunker to how to prepare a unit of field rations was covered. In fact, it was the degree of detail that concerned him. The Drab soldiers would stand exactly where the company manual told them to stand while the Bedouins ran circles around them. And no one had thought to send an innovator along with the colony. They'd be on their own. He had to find another way to bluff his way out of this one.

"I see two ways this can go, Seth. Either we just let these people land on the planet and fight it out. See who wins, see who's liable for all those deaths on both sides, see what the courts have to say about a company who sends warriors to a planet without

clear right of colonization, knowing there's a legitimate colony on the way. Or, second choice, you can call your people and tell them to turn back before anyone gets hurt. I'd even be glad to compensate you for agreeing to settle this out of court. I'll send you a list of assets I think are quite generous in exchange for what is, at best, a dubious claim of right of colonization. Look it over. You have two hours. Your choice, Seth. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a staff meeting."

2

The company manual was uncharacteristically vague on the topic of war. Sub-director Bodansky could find everything he needed to know about preparing for war, from the proper methods of training an army to the access codes that would order the robot factories to make an impressive collection of lethal weapons. What was unclear was the objective. "When a colony is threatened with violent attack, it may be necessary to conduct war as an advanced means of defense."

Bodansky had already gone through the early protocols. He had armed the frontier, formed a militia, sent out patrols, and created defensive earthworks with artillery support. And still the Bedouins killed his people. He had lost over three thousand FTE's since his Colonization Team had landed on Planet HE-47/J. His team had not met his objective to build and operate one hundred oil wells, and had certainly not managed to meet the export quota handed down from the home offices of Lerner Interstellar. His project was failing, and now even the company manual was no help.

What was the objective? The problem was, he knew how to start the war. The manual told him that. But once you start, how do you stop?

“I thought we had agreed on a campaign of war,” Team Leader Miller said. She looked around at the other team leaders as if to request backup. “Isn’t the company manual fairly explicit on this?”

“The company manual tells us how to go about starting a war, yes,” Sub-director Bodansky answered. “But I’m still unclear on the objective. I’ve gone to supplementary materials to try and clear it up.”

“Supplementary materials?” Miller was incredulous. “What do you think you are, an innovator?”

That remark stung. Bodansky had risen to the position of Sub-Director as a result of years of hard work and loyal service. His creativity had never been officially recognized, because he had never let it show. When he had an imaginative solution to a problem, he held it in check and went with standard operating procedure. That had got him this far in the company, but deep down he knew he could have done better. Could have been doing better all along. He had ideas. He was an innovator, only no one knew it. And Team Leader Miller was treating the very idea as though it were a joke.

“We weren’t budgeted an innovator for this colonization project,” Bodansky answered. “But this situation clearly calls for something beyond what the company manual can provide.”

“I’m with Miller on this, Bodansky,” Team Leader Markos said. “Trying to turn yourself into an innovator is ill advised. You just weren’t trained for it. We should stick to the manual and go make war with these people.”

“The objective is fairly obvious,” Miller added.

“Then state it for me,” Bodansky demanded. “Just tell me this, as simply as you can: How do you know when you’re finished?”

“When you kill the enemy. Of course. Bodansky, that’s the whole point.”

“How many do we have to kill? All of them?”

“Well...”

“The babies?”

“Oh, no, of course...”

“The children? What if they grow up and want to fight? Or tell me this, do we kill the support personnel? The factory workers?”

“I shouldn’t think that would be necessary,” Miller said, clearly uncomfortable by this point. “I think the point is to get them to surrender.”

“Do you know when to surrender? The manual is actually quite clear that we should surrender when we are clearly outmatched. But the Bedouins got to this planet only a year or so after we did, we both have the same number of people, the same technology, roughly. We can’t be sure we can win until the last one of us kills the last one of them. This project is open ended. Without a focused objective, the war could go on until we’re all dead and there’s no one left to bury us. I don’t know anything about making war, but I do know that you never start a project without a clear idea in mind of how to stop it.”

Miller grimaced and nodded her head. “You’re right, Bodansky. We can’t start a project without an exit strategy. We’ve been going at this all wrong. What were you saying about supplementary materials?”

The other team leaders exchanged nervous looks. Their grandmothers and grandfathers had seen distant worlds, had crossed the gulf of interstellar space, had built a mighty company with hard work and good leadership. But they had never done what this team was about to do. Beyond the company manual was a scary landscape of ideas and imagination, and this was where the gateway to that land opened. Bodansky studied their faces, and he saw fear mixed with the barest hint of understanding. He knew that his own face had gone through that transition days ago, and he knew now that they were about to realize the same things he had. He was silent while they thought it over. He had led them this far, but they had to take the next steps on their own.

Markos stared down at his company manual, a display showing a standard advance column for infantry with armor support. He looked up and switched the screen off. “All right,” he said. “Tell us what you’ve found.”

“I’ve found a great deal of supplementary information on the history of war on old Earth,” Bodansky told them. “It’s too much for me to read, so I’d like to assign sub-committees to cover each of the basic areas.”

Team Leader Miller picked up the packet of information Bodansky pushed in front of her. “The Hundred Year’s War? That sounds terribly inefficient.”

“Diplomacy? There’s nothing about diplomacy in the company manual.”
Director Brennerman frowned down at the proposal on the desk in front of him. “Your

goals statement said you were going to pursue a campaign of warfare. What happened to that?”

“I saw a better way,” Bodansky told him. “I reasoned that...”

“Wait a minute, you reasoned?”

“Just listen to my argument. The war can still be initiated. We haven’t lost any time. But listen first.”

“All right, go ahead.” The director was starting to get that worried look he had seen on the faces of the team leaders. It went away as Bodansky spoke, just like it always did. His people did have imagination, they could use their minds if they had to. It hadn’t been lost. The company called them Drabs, presumably because of their mud-colored skin, but also because of the way they thought. But Bodansky had seen the intelligence in those olive skinned faces, and the spark of imagination behind those dull brown eyes.

“The objective of war in the company manual is not clear. The team leaders and I delved into supplementary material, history lessons, mostly, to gain a clearer understanding of the goals. What we found was that war was a means to force your enemy to listen to diplomacy. Once you make them realize that fighting is costly, you can convince them that it is in their best interests and yours to pursue a peaceful alternative.”

“But we’ve already tried talking to them,” the director said. “They won’t listen.”

“We’ve approached them on business terms, as if we were negotiating a contract. The problem is, we had nothing to offer them. Now we do.”

“And what is that? We still have nothing they want.”

“They want peace,” Bodansky said.

“No they don’t. If they wanted peace they wouldn’t be attacking us.”

Bodansky smiled. “Rather, I should say, they will want peace once they hear what I have to say. You see, our people are not a war-like race. We’re good workers and we get the job done, but we don’t like fighting. When we take on an unpleasant task we accomplish our objectives as efficiently as possible. Our company manual gives us access codes to get our factories to make weapons. According to the manual, we are to make the weapons in a certain order, from least destructive to most, as they are needed. I’m sure the Bedouins have a similar set of guidelines. But they like to fight one-on-one, so they like the small weapons. We don’t like this fighting, and we don’t see this as the most efficient way to proceed. We feel that it would best achieve the objectives if we just made the most destructive weapon first, use it to eliminate the enemy once and for all, and continue with the work we were sent here to do.”

“And suppose they also make their most destructive weapon?” the director asked.

“Then we all die and nobody gets any work done.”

Bodansky could tell that the director was paging through the company manual on his desktop reader. He couldn’t see it on the other side of the desk, but he knew the pattern of a man desperately searching the index for the answers to unanswerable questions.

“And you and your team came up with this idea from supplementary materials, you say?”

“There’s nothing about this in the manual, sir.”

“If it’s such a good idea, then why wouldn’t it be in there? This manual was written by smarter people than us.” The director glanced nervously up at Bodansky, then quickly back to the screen, still stubbornly silent on the topic of enforceable peace.

“The manual can’t foresee every situation, Director Brennerman. Sometimes we have to revise it as we go.”

The director looked up from the screen at Bodansky, then hung his head in resignation. Bodansky knew exactly how he felt. The company manual had never let them down before. Only the innovators were trained to think outside the box, to revise the text as needed, to create instructions out of thin air. And there was no innovator on planet HE-47/J.

“Try it, Bodansky, but keep the factories ready anyway. We may need those big weapons, after all.” As he stood to leave, Bodansky saw the director paging through the index again. The frantic clicking steeled his resolve. He would show Brennerman and even the home office that even though this project had not been budgeted an innovator, it had gotten one anyway.

3

“Message from HE-47/J,” Danny said as Sloan walked through the office on his way back to his apartment. It had been a long day. Legal had still not sorted out the mess of rulings and counter rulings. C & P had no idea how the Drabs would fare in a war with the Bedouins. And Seth had not blinked. He had not been interested in the list of space stations and mining operations that Sloan had tried to entice him with, had in fact sent a similar insulting list to Sloan for the same purpose, and he had not sent the message in time to turn back his colony ship. Neither had Sloan. He could take grim satisfaction that in the ages old battle between youth and experience, between growth and value, Sloan Lerner had not let his side down. He had not surrendered. Little good that would do to the employees whose lives would be lost, knowing nothing of the meaning behind their sacrifice.

“They’ve arrived? Their colony has landed on the planet?” Of course, the message was delayed by the speed of radio waves, and so the ship had actually landed a long time ago, but Danny knew what he meant.

“Yes, the feed is spooling through now. They’ve encountered the Sculptor colony.”

“The Bedouins.”

“Yes, they’ve been attacked, they attempted defensive measures but were not successful.”

The fact that all of this had happened fifty years ago did nothing to lessen the tension. The events of the years following the colony landing were spooled out in the continuous status feed from the real time world in minutes.

Sloan rounded the desk and began reading the feed for himself. Campaign of warfare, Sub Director Bodansky in charge...”Wait a minute, diplomacy? Back that up, Danny.”

Let’s see, supplemental materials, history of war, blah blah blah. Now here: “Sub Director Bodansky has determined that a campaign of warfare is inefficient and counterproductive. He has requested the factory robots to construct thermonuclear warheads, cruise missiles, and mobile launch vehicles. He has informed the Sculptor colony of his plans, and has urged them to reconsider their attacks.”

Now here was the diplomacy part: “The Bedouin tribe, seeing the danger of a nuclear conflict to all parties concerned, has agreed to a joint colonization effort. The colony is requesting retroactive approval for the establishment of a spin off corporation comprised of personnel from the Sculptor Group and Lerner Interstellar. The purpose of the new corporation is to provide environmental support for the Sculptor and Lerner Interstellar drilling operations. With resources thus pooled, both colonies have surpassed projected productivity milestones.”

“I’ll be damned,” Sloan muttered. “Get Seth on the phone.” Things had worked out in spite of the leadership on the *Capitalist*. It was a humbling experience. What he and Seth Leibowitz had been unable to do, this Bodansky had done. It would have been appropriate to reward him, but he’d already be long since dead by the time the message got to planet.

“Sloan,” Seth’s voice said on the speaker phone. “I imagine you’re seeing the same news I am. It looks like we’re in business together.”

“Keep your pants on, Seth, this little spin off company is barely big enough to get a line in our earnings report. I’ve got desk blotters that are worth more to me.”

Seth laughed. “You got a lot to learn, kid. Hell, I suspect we all do. We like to play at being gods here, but without our little people scurrying around out there in the real world, we’ve got nothing. Our loyal minions on planet HE-47/J found a way to get their heads together. Next time, I hope you take a page from this Bodansky fellow of yours. And did you notice, they’ve agreed to rename the planet? We’re supposed to call it Sadiq-amal from now on.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s Arabic, kid. Means something like ‘friendly co-workers.’”