

Talents, Incorporated

Murray Leinster

An abstract graphic design featuring a vibrant green background. Overlaid on this background are various geometric shapes in a deep purple color. These shapes include triangles of different sizes and orientations, rectangles, and thick lines. Some lines are straight, while others are curved, creating a dynamic and layered composition. The shapes are scattered across the page, with some appearing to overlap others, giving a sense of depth and movement.

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Project Gutenberg's Talents, Incorporated, by William Fitzgerald Jenkins

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TALENTS, INCORPORATED ***

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Bors felt as if he'd been hit over the head. This was ridiculous! He'd planned and carried out the destruction of that warship because the information of its existence and location was *verified* by a magnetometer.

But, if he'd known *how* the information had been obtained—if he'd known it had been *guessed at* by a discharged spaceport employee, and a paranoid personality, and a man who used a hazel twig or something similar—if he'd known *that*, he'd never have dreamed of accepting it. He'd have dismissed it flatly!

Aficionados of science fiction recognize and respect MURRAY LEINSTER as a writer of rare talent. His ingenuity of plot, his technical know-how and flight of imagination in TALENTS, INCORPORATED will go far to increase his stature and popularity as an exciting and thought-provoking storyteller.

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***TALENTS,
INCORPORATED***

Murray Leinster

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A table of contents, though not present in the original publication, has been provided below:

Part One

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4

Part Two

- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6

Part Three

- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9

Part Four

- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12

TALENTS, INCORPORATED

Part One

Chapter 1

YOUNG CAPTAIN BORS—who impatiently refused to be called anything else—was strangely occupied when the communicator buzzed. He'd ripped away the cord about a thick parcel of documents and heaved them into the fireplace of the office of the Minister for Diplomatic Affairs. A fire burned there, and already there were many ashes. The carpet and the chairs of the cabinet officer's sanctum were coated with fine white dust. As the communicator buzzed again, Captain Bors took a fireplace tool and stirred the close-packed papers to looseness. They caught and burned instead of only smouldering.

The communicator buzzed yet again. He brushed off his hands and pressed the answer-stud.

He said bleakly: "Diplomatic Affairs. Bors speaking."

The communicator relayed a voice from somewhere else with an astonishing fidelity of tone.

"Spaceport, sir. A ship just broke out of overdrive. We don't identify its type. One ship only, sir."

Bors said grimly;

"You'd recognize a liner. If it's a ship from the Mekinese fleet and stays alone, it could be coming to receive our surrender. In that case play for time and notify me."

"Yes, sir.—One moment! It's calling, sir! Here it is—."

There was a clicking, and then there came a voice which had the curious quality of a loudspeaker sound picked up and relayed through another loudspeaker.

"Calling ground! Calling ground! Space-yacht Sylva reports arrival and asks coordinates for landing. Our mass is two hundred tons standard. Purpose of visit, pleasure-travel."

A pause. The voice from the spaceport:

"Sir?"

Captain Bors said impatiently, "Oh, let him down and see if he knows anything about the Mekinese. Then advise him to go away at once. Tell him why."

"Yes, sir."

A click. Young Captain Bors returned to his task of burning papers. These were the confidential records of the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs. Captain Bors wore the full-dress uniform of the space navy of the planet Kandar. It was still neatly pressed but was now smudged with soot and smeared with ashes. He had burned a great many papers today. Elsewhere in the Ministry other men were burning other documents. The other papers were important enough; they were confidential reports from volunteer- and paid-agents on twenty planets. In the hands of ill-disposed persons, they could bring about disaster and confusion and interplanetary tension. But the ones Captain Bors made sure of were deadly.

He burned papers telling of conditions on Mekin itself. The authors of such memoranda would be savagely punished if they were found out. Then there were papers telling of events on Tralee. If it could be said that he were more painstakingly destructive than average about anything, Captain Bors was about them. He saw to it that they burned to ashes. He crushed the ashes. He stirred them. It would be unthinkable that such morsels could ever be pieced together and their contents even guessed at.

He went on with the work. His jaunty uniform became more smeared and smudged. He gave himself no rest. There were papers from other planets now under the hegemony of Mekin. Some were memoranda from citizens of this planet, who had traveled upon the worlds which Mekin dominated as it was about to dominate Kandar. They, especially had to be pulverized. Every confidential document in the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs was in the process of destruction, but Captain Bors in person destroyed those which would cause most suffering if read by the wrong persons.

In other ministries and other places similar holocausts were under way. There was practically nothing going on on Kandar which was not related to the disaster for which the people of that world waited. The feel of bitterness and despair was everywhere. Broadcasting stations stayed on the air only to report monotonously that the tragic event had not yet happened. The small space-navy of Kandar waited, aground, to take the king and some other persons on board at the last moment. When the Mekinese navy arrived—or as much of it as was needed to make resistance hopeless—the end for Kandar would have come. That was the

impending disaster. If it came too soon, Bors's task of destruction couldn't be completed as was wished. In such a case this Ministry and all the others would hastily be doused with incendiary material and fired, and it would desperately be hoped that all the planet's records went up in the flames.

Captain Bors flung more and more papers on the blaze. He came to an end of them.

The communicator buzzed, again. He answered once more.

"Sir, the space-yacht Sylva is landed. It comes from Norden and has no direct information about the Mekinese. But there's a man named Morgan with a very important letter for the Minister for Diplomatic Affairs. It's from the Minister for Diplomatic Affairs on Norden."

Bors said sardonically, "Maybe he should wait a few days or hours and give it to the Mekinese! Send him over if he wants to take the chance, but warn him not to let anybody from his yacht leave the spaceport!"

"Yes, sir."

Bors made a quick circuit of the Ministry building to make sure the rest of the destruction was thoroughly carried out. He glanced out of a window and saw the other ministries. From their chimneys thick smoke poured out—the criminal records were being incinerated in the Ministry of Police. Tax records were burning in the Ministry of Finance. Educational information about Kandarian citizens flamed and smoked in the Ministry of Education. Even voting and vehicle-registry lists were being wiped out of existence by flames and the crushing of ashes at appropriate agencies. The planet's banks were completing the distribution of coin and currency, with promissory notes to those depositors they could not pay in full, and the real-estate registers were open so individuals could remove and hide or destroy their titles to property. The stockholders' books of corporations were being burned. Small ships parted with their wares and took promises of payment in return. The planet Kandar, in fact, made ready to receive its conquerors.

It was not conquered yet, but there could be no hope.

Bors was in the act of brushing off his hands again, in a sort of symbolic gesture of completion, when a ground-car stopped before the Ministry. A stout man got out. A rather startlingly pretty girl followed. They advanced to the door of the

Ministry.

Presently, Captain Bors received the two visitors. His once-jaunty uniform looked like a dustman's. He was much more grim than anybody his age should ever be.

"Your name is Morgan," he said formidably to the stout man. "You have a letter for the Minister. He's not here. He's gathering up his family. If anyone's in charge, I am."

The stout man cheerfully handed over a very official envelope.

Bors said caustically, "I don't ask you to sit down because everything's covered with ash-dust. Excuse me."

He tore open the envelope and read its contents. His impatience increased.

"In normal times," he said, "I'm sure this would be most interesting. But these are not normal times. I'm afraid—"

"I know! I know!" said the stout man exuberantly. "If times were normal I wouldn't be here! I'm president and executive director of Talents, Incorporated. From that letter you'll see that we've done very remarkable things for different governments and businesses. I'd like to talk to someone with the authority to make a policy decision. I want to show what we can do for you."

"It's too late to do anything for us," said Bors. "Much too late. We expect the Mekinese fleet at any instant. You'd better go back to the spaceport and take off in your yacht. They're going to take over this planet after a slight tumult we expect to arrange. You won't want to be here when they come."

Morgan waved a hand negligently.

"They won't arrive for four days," he said confidently. "That's Talents, Incorporated information. You can depend on it! There's plenty of time to prepare before they get here!" He smiled, as if at a joke.

Young Captain Bors was not impressed. He and all the other officers of the Kandarian defense forces had searched desperately for something that could be done to avert the catastrophe before them. They'd failed to find even the promise of a hope. He couldn't be encouraged by the confidence of a total stranger,—and a civilian to boot. He'd taken refuge in anger.

The pretty girl said suddenly, "Captain, at least we can reassure you on one thing. Your government chartered four big liners to remove government officials and citizens who'll be on the Mekinese black list. You're worried for fear they won't get here in time. But my father—"

The stout man looked at his watch.

"Ah, yes! You don't want the fleet cluttered up with civilians when it takes to space! I'm happy to tell you it won't be. The first of your four liners will break out of overdrive in—hm—three minutes, twenty seconds. Two others will arrive tomorrow, one at ten minutes after noon, the other three hours later. The last will arrive the day after, at about sunrise here."

Bors went a trifle pale.

"I doubt it. It's supposed to be a military secret that such ships are on the way. Since you know it, I assume that the Mekinese do, too. In effect, you seem to be a Mekinese spy. But you can hardly do any more harm! I advise you to go back to your yacht and leave Kandar immediately. If our citizens find out you are spies, they will literally tear you to pieces."

He looked at them icily. The stout man grinned.

"Listen, your h— Captain, listen to me! The first liner will report inside of five minutes. That'll be a test. Here's another. There's a Mekinese heavy cruiser aground on Kandar right now! It's on the sea bottom fifty fathoms down, five miles magnetic north-north-east from Cape Farnell! You can check that! The cruiser's down there to lob a fusion bomb into your space-fleet when it starts to take off for the flight you're planning—to get all the important men on Kandar in one smash! That's Talents, Incorporated information! It's a free sample. You can verify it without it costing you anything, and when you want more and better information—why—we'll be at the spaceport ready to give it to you. And you will want to call on us! That's Talents, Incorporated information, too!"

He turned and marched confidently—almost grandly—out of the room. The girl smiled faintly at Bors.

"He left out something, Captain. That cruiser— It could hardly act without information on when to act. So there's a pair of spies in a little shack on the cape. They've got an underwater cable going under the sand beach and out and down to the space-cruiser. They're watching the fleet on the ground with telescopes.

When they see activity around it, they'll tell the cruiser what to do." Then she smiled more broadly. "Honestly, it's true! And don't forget about the liner!"

She followed her father out of the room. Outside, as they got into the waiting ground-car, she said to her father, "If he smiled, I think I'd like him."

But Bors did not know that at the time. He would probably not have paid any attention if he had. Kandar was about to be taken over by the Mekinese, as his own Tralee had been ten years before, and other planets before that. Mekin was making an empire after an ancient tradition, which scorned the idea of incorporating other worlds into its own governmental system—which was appalling—but merely made them subjects and satellites and tributaries.

Bors had been born on Tralee, which he remembered as a tranquil world of glamor and happiness. But he was on Kandar now. He served in its space-navy, and he foresaw Kandar becoming what Tralee had become. He felt such hatred and rebellion toward Mekin, that he could not notice a pretty girl. He was getting ready for the savage last battle of the space-fleet of Kandar, which would fight in the great void until it was annihilated. There was nothing else to do if one was not to submit to the arrogant tyranny that already lorded it over twenty-two subject planets and might extend itself indefinitely throughout the galaxy.

He moved to verify again the complete pulverizing of the ashes in the fireplace.

The communicator buzzed. He pressed the answer button. A voice said, "*Sir, the space-liner Vestis reports breakout from overdrive. Now driving for port. Message ends.*"

Bors's eyes popped wide. He'd heard exactly that only minutes ago! It could be coincidence, but it was a very remarkable one. The man Morgan had come to him to tell him that. If he'd come for some other reason, and merely made a guess, it could be coincidence. But he'd come only to tell Bors that he could be useful! And it was impossible, at a destination-port, to know when a ship would break out of overdrive! Einstein's data on the anomalies of time at speeds near that of light naturally did not apply to overdrive speeds above it. Nobody could conceivably predict when a ship from many light-years away would arrive! But Morgan had! It was impossible!

He'd said something else that was impossible, too. He'd said there was a Mekinese cruiser on the sea-floor of Kandar, where it could blast all the local fleet—which was ready to fight but vulnerable to a single fusion-bomb. If such a

thing happened, the impending disaster would be worse than intolerable. To Bors it would mean dying without a chance to strike even the most futile of blows at the enemy.

He hesitated a long minute. Morgan's errand had been to make a prediction and give a warning, to gain credence for what he could do later. The prediction was fulfilled. But the warning....

An enemy cruiser in ambush on Kandar was a possibility that simply hadn't been considered—hadn't even occurred to anyone. But once it was mentioned it seemed horribly likely. There was no time for a search at random, but if Morgan had been right about one thing he might have some way to know about another.

Bors gave curt orders to his subordinates in the work of record-destruction. He went out of the building to the greensward mall that lay between the ministries of the government, and headed for the palace at its end. The government of Kandar was not one of great pomp and display. There was a king, to be sure, but nobody could imagine the perspiringly earnest King Humphrey the Eighth as a tyrant. There were titles, it was true, but they were life appointments to the planet's legislative Upper House. Kandar was a tranquil, quaint, and very happy world. There were few industries, and those were small. Nobody was unduly rich, and most of its people were contented. It was a world with no history of bloodshed—until now.

Bors brushed absently at his uniform as he walked the two hundred yards to the palace. He abstractedly acknowledged the sentries' salutes as he entered. Much of the palace guard had been sent away, and most of the palace's small staff would hide from the Mekinese. The aggressors had a nasty habit of imposing special humiliations upon citizens who'd been prominent before they were conquered.

He went unannounced into King Humphrey's study, where the monarch conferred dispiritedly with Captain Bors's uncle, the exiled Pretender of Tralee, who listened with interest. The king was talking doggedly to his old friend.

"No. You're mistaken. You'll have my written order to distribute the bullion in the Treasury to all the cities, to be shared as evenly as possible by all the people. The Mekinese can't blame you for obeying an order of your lawful king before they unlawfully seize the kingdom!"

Captain Bors said curtly, "Majesty, the first of the four liners is in. Two more

will arrive tomorrow and the last at sunrise the day after. The Mekinese will be here two days later."

King Humphrey and Captain Bors's uncle stared at him.

"And," said Bors, "the same source of information says there's a Mekinese cruiser waiting underwater off Cape Farnell to lob a fusion bomb at the fleet as it's ready to lift."

King Humphrey said, "But nobody can possibly know that two liners will come tomorrow! One hopes so, of course. But one can't know! As for a cruiser, submerged, there's been no report of it."

"The information," said Captain Bors, "came from Talents, Incorporated. It's sample information, given free. The first item has checked. He came with a letter from a cabinet minister on Norden."

Bors handed it to the Pretender of Tralee.

"Mmmm," he said thoughtfully. "I've heard of this Talents, Incorporated. And on Norden, too! Phillip of Norden mentioned it to me. A man named Morgan had told him that Talents, Incorporated had secured information that an atom bomb—a fission bomb as I remember, and quite small—had been set to assassinate him as he laid a cornerstone. The information turned out to be correct. Phillip of Norden and some thousands of his subjects would have been killed. The assassins were really going to extremes. As I remember, Morgan wouldn't accept money for the warning. He *did* accept a medal."

"I think," said Bors, "I think I shall investigate what he said about a Mekinese ship in hiding. You've no objection, Majesty?"

King Humphrey the Eighth looked at the Pretender. One was remarkably unlike the other. The King was short and stocky and resolute, as if to overcome his own shortcomings. The pretender was lean and gray, with the mild look of a man who has schooled himself to patience under frustration. He nodded. King Humphrey shook his head.

"Very well," said Bors. "I'll borrow a flier and see about it."

He left the palace. There was already disorganization everywhere. The planetary government was in process of destroying all the machinery by which Kandar had been governed, as if to make the Mekinese improvise a government anew. They

would make many blunders, of course, which would be resented by their new subjects. There would be much fumbling, which would keep the victims of their conquest from regarding them with respect. And there would be the small tumult Bors had said was in preparation. The king and the Kandarian fleet would fight, quite hopelessly and to their own annihilation, when the Mekinese fleet appeared. It would be something Kandar would always remember. It was likely that she would not be the most docile of the worlds conquered by Mekin. The Mekinese would always and everywhere be resented. But on Kandar they would also be despised.

Bors found the ground-cars which waited to carry the king and those who would accompany him, to the fleet when the time came. He commandeered a ground-car and a driver. He ordered himself driven to the atmosphere-flier base of the fleet.

On the way the driver spoke apologetically. "Captain, sir, I'd like to say something."

"Say it," said Bors.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I've got a wife and children. Even for their sakes, sir. I mean, if it wasn't for them I'd—I'd be going with the fleet. I—wanted to explain—"

"Why you're staying alive?" asked Bors. "You shouldn't feel apologetic. Getting killed in the fleet ought to follow at least the killing of a few Mekinese. There should be some satisfaction in that! But if you stay here your troubles still won't be over, and there'll be very little satisfaction in what you'll go through. What the fleet will do will be dramatic. What you'll do won't. You'll have the less satisfying role. I think the fleet is taking the easy way out."

The driver was silent for a long time as he drove along the strangely unfrequented highways. Just before the ground-car reached the air base, he said awkwardly, "Thank you, sir."

When he brought the car to a stop, he got out quickly to offer a very stiff military salute.

Bors went inside. He found men with burning eyes conferring feverishly. An air force colonel said urgently, "Sir, please advise us! We have our orders, but there's nearly a mutiny. We don't want to turn anything over to the Mekinese—after all, no matter what the king has commanded, once the fleet had lifted off,

there can be no punishment if we destroy our planes and blast our equipment! Will you give us an unofficial—"

Bors broke in quickly.

"I may be able to give you a chance at a Mekinese cruiser. Can you lend me a plane with civilian markings and a pilot who's a good photographer? I'll need a magnetometer to trail, too. There's a rather urgent situation coming up."

The men stared at him.

He explained the possibility of a Mekinese space-cruiser lying in fifty fathoms off Cape Farnell. He did not say where the information came from. Even to men as desperate as these, Talents, Incorporated information would not seem credible without painstaking explanation. Bors was by no means sure that he believed it himself, but he wanted to so fiercely that he sounded as if some Mekinese spy or traitor had confessed it.

The feeling of tenseness multiplied, but voices grew very quiet. No man spoke an unnecessary word. In minutes they had made complete arrangements.

When the atmosphere-flier took off down the runway, wholly deceptive explanations were already being made. It was said that the atmosphere-fliers were to load bombs for demolition because the king was being asked for permission to bomb all mines and bridges and railways and docks that would make Kandar a valuable addition to the Mekinese empire. Everything was to be destroyed before the conquerors came to ground. The destruction would bring hardship to the citizens—so the story admitted—but the Mekinese would bring that anyhow. And they shouldn't profit by what Kandar's people had built for themselves.

The point was, of course, to get bombloads aboard planes with no chance of suspicion by spy or traitor of the actual use intended for them. Meanwhile, Bors flew in an atmosphere-flier which looked like a private ship and explained his intentions to the pilot, so that the small plane did not go directly to the spot five miles offshore that the mysterious visitors had mentioned, to make an examination of the sea bottom. Instead, it flew southward. It did not swing out to sea for nearly fifty miles. It went out until it was on a line between a certain small island where many well-to-do people had homes, and the airport of the planet's capital city. Then it headed for that airport.

It flew slowly, as civilian planes do. By the time the sandy beaches of a cape appeared, it was quite convincingly a private plane bringing someone from a residential island to the airport of Kandar City. If a small object trailed below it, barely above the waves, suspended by the thinnest of wires, it was invisible. If the plane happened to be on a course that would pass above a spot north-northeast from the tip of the cape, a spot calculated from information given by Talents, Incorporated, it seemed entirely coincidental. Nobody could have suspected anything unusual; certainly nothing likely to upset the plans of a murderous totalitarian enemy. One small and insignificant civilian plane shouldn't be able to prevent the murder of a space-fleet, a king and the most resolute members of a planet's population!

Captain Bors flew the ship. The official pilot used an electron camera, giving a complete and overlapping series of pictures of the shore five miles away with incredible magnification and detail.

The magnetometer-needle flicked over. Its findings were recorded. As the plane went on it returned to a normal reading for fifty fathoms of seawater.

Half an hour later the seemingly private plane landed at the capital airport. Another half-hour, and its record and pictures were back at the air base, being examined and computed by hungry-eyed men.

Just as the pretty Morgan girl had said, there was a shack on the very tip of the cape. It was occupied by two men. They loafed. And only an electron camera could have used enough magnification to show one man laughing, as if at something the other had said. The camera proved—from five miles away—that there was no sadness afflicting them. One man laughed uproariously. But the rest of the planet was in no mood for laughter.

The magnetometer recording showed that a very large mass of magnetic material lay on the ocean bottom, fifty fathoms down. Minute modifications of the magnetic-intensity curve showed that there was electronic machinery in operation down below.

Bors made no report to the palace. King Humphrey was a conscientious and doggedly resolute monarch, but he was not an imaginative one. He would want to hold a cabinet meeting before he issued orders for the destruction of a spaceship that was only technically and not actually an enemy. Kandar had received an ultimatum from Mekin. An answer was required when a Mekinese fleet arrived off Kandar. Until that moment there was, in theory, no war. But, in fact,

Kandar was already conquered in every respect except the landing of Mekinese on its surface. King Humphrey, however, would want to observe all the rules. And there might not be time.

The air force agreed with Bors. So squadron after squadron took off from the airfield, on courses which had certain things in common. None of them would pass over a fisherman's shack on Cape Farnell. None could pass over a spot five miles north-north-east magnetic from that cape's tip, where the bottom was fifty fathoms down and a suspicious magnetic condition obtained. One more thing unified the flying squadrons: At a given instant, all of them could turn and dive toward that fifty-fathom depth at sea, and they would arrive in swift and orderly succession. This last arrangement was a brilliant piece of staff-work. Men had worked with impassioned dedication to bring it about.

But only these men knew. There was no sign anywhere of anything more remarkable than winged squadrons sweeping in a seemingly routine exercise about the heavens. Even so they were not visible from the cape. The horizon hid them.

For a long time there was only blueness overhead, and the salt smell of the sea, and now and again flights of small birds which had no memory of the flight of their ancestors from ancient Earth. The planet Kandar rolled grandly in space, awaiting its destiny. The sun shone, the sun set; in another place it was midnight and at still another it was early dawn.

But from the high blue sky near the planet's capital, there came a stuttering as of a motor going bad. If anyone looked, a most minute angular dot could be seen to be fighting to get back over the land from where it had first appeared, far out at sea. There were moments when the stuttering ceased, and the engine ran with a smooth hum. Then another stutter.

The plane lost altitude. It was clear that its pilot fought to make solid ground before it crashed. Twice it seemed definitely lost. But each time, at the last instant, the motor purred—and popped—and the plane rose valiantly.

Then there was a detonation. The plane staggered. Its pilot fought and fought, but his craft had no power at all. It came down fluttering, with the pilot gaining every imaginable inch toward the sandy shore. It seemed certain that he would come down on the white beach unharmed, a good half-mile from the fisherman's shack on the cape. But—perhaps it was a gust of wind. It may have been something more premeditated. One wing flew wildly up. The flier seemed to

plunge crazily groundward. At the last fraction of a second, the plane reeled again and crashed into the fisherman's shack before which, from a distance of five miles, a man had been photographed, laughing.

Timbers splintered. Glass broke musically. Then there were thuds as men leaped swiftly from the plane and dived under the still-falling roof-beams. There were three, four, half a dozen men in fleet uniforms, with blasters in their hands. They used the weapons ruthlessly upon a civilian who flung himself at an incongruously brand-new signalling apparatus in a corner of the shattered house. A second man snarled and savagely lunged at his attackers; he was also blasted as he tried to reach the same device.

There was no pause. Over the low ground to the west a flight of bombers appeared, bellowing. In mass formation they rushed out above the sea. Far to the right and high up, a second formation of man-made birds appeared suddenly. It dived steeply from invisibility toward the water. Over the horizon to the left there came V's of bomber-planes, one after another, by dozens and by hundreds. More planes roared above the shattered shack. They came in columns. They came in masses. From the heavens above and over the ground below and from the horizon that rimmed the world, the planes came. Planes from one direction crossed a certain patch of sea.

They were not wholly clear of it when planes from another part of the horizon swept over the same area, barely wave-tip high. Planes from the west raced over this one delimited space, and planes from the north almost shouldered them aside, and then planes from the east covered that same mile-square patch of sea, and then more planes from the south....

They followed each other in incredible procession, incredibly precise. The water on that mile-square space developed white dots, which always vanished but never ceased. Spume-spoutings leaped up three feet, or ten, or twenty and disappeared, and then there were others which spouted up one yard, or two, or ten. There were innumerable temporary whitecaps. The surface became pale from the constant churning of new foam-patches before the old foam died.

Then, with absolute abruptness, the planes flew away from the one square mile of sea. The late-comers climbed steeply. Abruptly, behind them, there were warning booms. Then monstrous masses of spray and bubbles and blue water leaped up three hundred feet, four hundred feet, five....

A square mile of ocean erupted as the planes climbed up and away from it. There

were bombs in the ocean—some had sunk down deep. Others followed in close succession. Many, many burdens of bombs had been dropped into the sea as plane-fleet after plane-fleet went by.

The sea exploded in monstrous columns. Ton, half-ton and two-ton bombs began to detonate, fifty fathoms down. The Mekinese duty-officer below had just learned that the spies' signalling device was cut off, when a detonation lifted the hull of the Mekinese cruiser and shook it violently. Another twisted its tail and crushed it. A bomb hit sea bottom a quarter-mile away. More bombs exploded still nearer, in close contact with the giant hull. A two-ton bomb clanked into contact with its metal plating and burst.

The cruiser's duty-officer, cowering, thrust over the emergency-lever which would put the ship through pre-recorded commands faster than orders could be spoken.

Rockets flared, deep under water. But the flames set off bombs and the rocket-nozzles cracked and were useless. A midship compartment was flooding. A forward compartment's wall caved in, and still bombs burst.... The skipper of the assassin cruiser screamed an order to fire all missiles. They were already set on target. They were pre-set for the spot where the space-navy of Kandar waited to rise.

They did not. One missile was blasted as the cover of its launcher-tube opened. Another was blown in half when partly out of its tube and a third actually rammed a sinking bomb and vanished with it when it exploded.

The huge thing under the sea heaved itself up blindly. It reached the surface. But it was shattered and rent and dying, and planes dived vengefully upon it and blasted apart whatever could be seen in the roaring foam. So the blinded, suffering thing of metal only emptied itself of air and went down to the bottom again, where more bombs ripped and tore it.

The atmosphere-fliers of Kandar swung in a gigantic, ballooning circle about the spot where they had dropped a good fraction of a ton of bombs to the square yard. But nothing stirred there any more. Still, the planes flew in a great, deadly band about it until a flitterboat came out from shore and lowered a camera and a light by long, long cords.

There was no space-cruiser at the bottom of the sea. There was evidence of one, yes. There were patches of plating, and there were naked, twisted girders. The

dangling underwater camera faithfully reported what it saw by the light that was lowered with it. But there was no space-cruiser. There were only the rather small fragments of what had been one a little while before.

Captain Bors went back to the palace. He was savagely pleased. He and the air-fleet men had done something. They'd had some satisfaction. They'd killed some Mekinese and ruined a plan to assassinate the Kandar fleet. But they'd only gotten an immediate satisfaction. Kandar was still to be conquered. Nothing important had changed.

Bors made his way to the king's study. He entered. King Humphrey the Eighth and the Pretender of Tralee were listening doubtfully to a stout man. The man was Morgan.

He stopped talking and blinked at Captain Bors. The captain ignored royal etiquette and spoke to him without first greeting the king.

"The ship was there, as you said. We smashed it. Thank you. Is there any more information you can give us?"



Chapter 2

AT THE SPACEPORT, carefully selected persons filed onto the space-liner *Vestis*. It was not officially believed that the other three great chartered ships would arrive before the Mekinese fleet. It was, in fact, rather likely that none of the information given by Talents, Incorporated was ever believed until the event confirmed the prediction. In the case of the first liner, those who went on board had been chosen by a strict principle of priority. Men who would merely be imprisoned when Mekin took over had no privilege of escape. Not yet. Those who were destined for execution as soon as a quisling government was formed, were also not entitled to depart on the liner. But those who had conspicuously supported King Humphrey in his resistance to intimidation; those who had encouraged others to object to concessions which could only be forerunners of other concessions; those who had spoken and written and labored to spread information about the facts of life under Mekin, would not merely be imprisoned or executed. They would be tortured. So they were entitled to first chance at escape.

The space-liner blasted off some six hours after its arrival. It vanished blessedly into overdrive where it could not be intercepted. It headed for the far-away world of Trent, where its passengers would be allowed to land as refugees and where, doubtless, they would speak bitterly about Mekin for all the rest of their lives. But the government of Mekin would not care.

Mekin was a phenomenon so improbable that only those who were students of past civilizations could really believe it. There were innumerable references to such régimes in the histories of ancient Earth. There was, for example, Napoleon, said people informed about such matters. With a fraction of a fraction of one per cent of the French people actively cooperating, he overawed the rest and then took over a nation which was not even his own. Then he took over other nations where less than a fraction of a fraction of one per cent concurred. Then he took soldiers from those second-order conquests to make third-order conquests, and then soldiers from the third to make fourth.

There was Mussolini, said the learned men. He had organized a group of rowdies and gangsters, and began by levying protection-money on gambling-houses and even less reputable resorts, and with the money increased his following. He had

murdered those who opposed him and presently he collected protection money from even the great business corporations of his country, financing more political gangsterism until he ruled his nation for himself and his confederates.

And there was Hitler, said the historically-minded. In the beginning his followers never dared show themselves in the uniforms they adopted, because their fellow-countrymen hated everything they stood for. But before the end came they worshipped him. They murdered millions at his command, but they died because of him, too.

There was Lenin, and there was Stalin. Specialists in history could talk very learnedly about the developments on Mekin which paralleled the cabals headed by Lenin, and later, Stalin. Theirs was a much more durable organization than those of Napoleon and Mussolini and Hitler.

The ruling clique on Mekin had begun in this manner.

Mekin had once had a cause to which all its officials paid lip-service and some possibly believed in. Because of this cause it was the organization and not the individual who was apotheosized. Therefore, there could be fierce battles among members of the ruling class. There could be conspiracies. The last three dictators of Mekin had been murdered in palace revolutions, and the current dictator was more elaborately protected from his confreres than any mere hereditary tyrant ever needed to be. But Mekin remained a strong and dynamic world, engaged in the endless subjugation of other worlds for a purpose nobody really remembered any more.

Against such a society, a planet like Kandar was helpless. Mekin could not be placated nor satisfied with less than the subjugation and the ruin of its neighbors. For a time, Kandar had tried to arm for its own defense. It had a space-fleet which in quality was probably equal to Mekin's, but in quantity was hopelessly less. Also it had a defensive policy. It did not dream of any but a defensive war. And no war was ever won by mere defense. There could be no defense against the building-up of tensions, the contriving of incidents, the invention of insults. It had been proved often enough. Eventually there was an ultimatum, and there was surrender, and then the installation of a puppet government and the ruthless bleeding of another captured planet for the benefit of the rulers of Mekin.

The process was implacable. There was nothing to be done but submit, flee or die. Various parts of Kandar's population chose one or another course. Four great liners would carry away those who could be helped to flee. The mass of the

people must submit, the fighting forces savagely made ready to die.

But in the cabinet meeting after the destruction of the hidden enemy cruiser, the tone was set by highly practical men. Bors was present at the meeting. He'd destroyed the cruiser. He was to be questioned about it. He had Morgan standing by to explain the part of Talents, Incorporated if required.

King Humphrey said heavily, "This is probably the last cabinet meeting before the coming of the Mekinese. I do not think oratory is called for. I put the situation as it stands. A fleet will come from Mekin for our answer to their ultimatum. Our space-fleet will not surrender. Our air force is openly mutinous at the idea of submission. It has been said that if we fight, our planet will be bombed from space until all its air is poison, so that every living creature here will die. If this is true, I do not think that even we who plan to fight have the right to bring such a bombing about. But I doubt if that is true. There has been one incident. Whether one likes it or not, it has happened. Captain Bors has reason to hope that the space-fleet, by fighting to the death, can actually benefit the rest of our people."

Bors spoke, excitement coloring his words.

"It's perfectly simple. There are only two kinds of people, slaves and free men. Slaves can be tortured and killed without concern. With free men a bargain has always to be struck. If there is no resistance to the Mekinese, they will despise us. We will be worse off than if we fight. Because if we fight, at least our people will be respected. They may be oppressed because they are conquered, but they won't be treated with the contempt and doubled oppression given to slaves."

A bearded man said querulously, "That's theory. It's psychology. It even smacks of idealism! Let us be realistic! As a practical man, I am concerned with getting the best possible terms for our population. After all, the dictator of Mekin must be a reasonable man! He must be a practical man! I believe that we should negotiate until the very last instant."

Bors said indignantly, "Negotiate? You haven't anything to negotiate with! I am not a citizen of Kandara, though I serve in its fleet. I am still a national of Tralee. But I have talked to the officers of the fleet. They won't surrender. You can't negotiate for them to do so. You can't negotiate for them to go quietly away and pretend that nothing has happened and that there never was a fleet. When the Mekinese arrive, the fleet will fight. It doesn't hope to win; it doesn't expect anything—except getting killed honorably when its enemy would like to have it

grovel. But it's going to fight!"

King Humphrey said doggedly, "My influence does not extend to the disgrace of our fighting forces. The fleet will fight. I believe it unwise. But since it will fight I shall be in the flagship and it *will not surrender*."

There was a pause. The bearded man said peevishly, "But it should fight on its own! It should not compromise Kandar!"

There was a murmur. King Humphrey looked about him from under lowered brows.

"That can be arranged," he said heavily. "I will constitute a caretaker government by royal proclamation. I will appoint you," he looked steadily at the bearded man, "to be head of it and make such terms as you can. If you like, when the Mekinese come you can warn them that the fleet has mutinied under me, its king, and may offer battle, but that you are ready to lead the people of Kandar in —"

"In licking the boots of all Mekinese," said Bors in an icy tone.

There was a small rumble of protest. Bors stood up.

"I'd better leave," he said coldly. "I'm not entitled to speak. If you want me, I can be reached."

He strode from the council-chamber. As the door closed behind him, he ground his teeth. The stout man, Morgan, of the space-yacht *Sylva*, paced up and down the room where he waited to be called. His daughter sat tranquilly in a chair. She smiled pleasantly at Bors when he came in. Morgan turned to face him.

"Here's some Talents, Incorporated information," he said zestfully. "The cabinet is scared. A few are willing to fight, but most are already trying to think how they can make terms with the Mekinese."

Bors opened his mouth to swear, then checked himself.

"Gwenlyn," said Morgan, "will pardon an expression of honest indignation. It's a dirty shame, eh?"

"If I were a native of Kandar," said Bors bitterly, "I'd be even more ashamed than I am as a native of Tralee. The people of Tralee surrendered, but they didn't realize what they were getting into. These men do!"

The girl Gwenlyn said quietly, "I'm sorry for King Humphrey."

"He's miscast," said Morgan briskly. "He should be king of a calm and peaceful world in calm and peaceful times. You're going to have trouble with him, Captain Bors!" Then he said; "Perhaps we can work out a plan or two, eh? While you're waiting for the cabinet to call you back?"

"I've no authority," said Bors. "My uncle's the Pretender of Tralee, and I was originally commissioned in the fleet as a sort of courtesy to him. I can't speak for anybody but myself."

"You can speak for common sense," said Gwenlyn. "After all, you know what the people really want. You could try to arrange things so that the fleet can fight well."

"It'll fight well," said Bors curtly. "It'll give a good account of itself! But that won't do any good!"

Morgan struck an attitude, beaming.

"Ah! But you've got Talents, Incorporated on your side! You don't realize yet, Captain, what a difference that can make! While there's life and Talents, Incorporated, there's hope!"

Bors shrugged. Suddenly he found that he, too, drearily accepted defeat. There was no more hope of accomplishment. There was nothing to be achieved. He would serve no purpose by straining against the impossible.

He said tiredly, "I'll agree that Talents, Incorporated cost the Mekinese one cruiser."

"A trifle," said Morgan, waving his hand, "mere soupçon of accomplishment. We're prepared to do vastly more."

It occurred to Bors to be curious.

"Why? You're risking your life and your daughter's by staying here. If Mekin ever finds out about its cruiser on the sea bottom and your share in that affair, you'll be in a fix! And certainly you can't expect to make a profit here? We couldn't even pay you for what you've already done!"

"I'm right now," said Morgan placidly, "quite as rich as I want to be. I've another ambition—but let's not go into that. I want to show you what Talents,

Incorporated can do in the four days—" he looked at his watch—"three hours and some odd minutes that remain before the Mekinese fleet turns up. You've checked up on Talents, Incorporated?"

"My uncle says," Bors told him, "that you kept Phillip of Norden from being assassinated by a fission-bomb at a cornerstone laying. He also says you wouldn't accept a reward, only a medal."

"I collect them," said Morgan modestly. "You'd be surprised how many orders and decorations a man can acquire by industry and organization—and Talents, Incorporated."

Gwenlyn said, "Four days, three hours and some odd minutes—"

"True," said Morgan. "Let's get at it. Captain Bors, have you ever heard of a lightning calculator—a person who can do complicated sums in his head as fast as he can hear or read the numbers involved?"

"Yes," said Bors. "It's quite phenomenal, I believe."

"It's a form of genius," said Morgan. "Only I call it a talent because it tends to make itself useless. Have you ever heard of a dowser?"

"If you mean a man who finds places for wells, and locates mines by means of a hazel twig—"

"The hazel twig is immaterial," Morgan told him. "The point is that you've heard of them, and you know that they can actually do such things. Right?"

Bors frowned. "It's not proven," he said. "At least I think it isn't considered proven because it isn't understood. But I believe it's conceded that such things are done. I believe, in fact, that dowsing has been done on photographs and maps, in an office, and not on the spot at all. I admit that that seems impossible. But I'm told it happens."

Morgan nodded rapidly, very well pleased.

"One more. Have you heard of precognition?"

Bors nodded. Then he shrugged.

"I have a Talent," said Morgan. "I have a man in my employ with a talent for precognizing when ships are going to arrive. His gift is strictly limited. He used

to work in a spaceport office. He always knew when a ship was coming in. He didn't know how he knew. He doesn't know now. But he always knows when a ship will arrive at the planet where he is."

"Interesting," said Bors, only half listening.

"He was discharged," Morgan went on, "because he allowed a maintenance crew to disassemble, for repair, a vital relay in a landing-grid on the very day when three space-ships were scheduled for arrival. There was pandemonium, of course, because nothing could have landed there. So when my Talent let the relay be dismantled, with three ships expected.... But one ship was one day late, another two days, and the third, four. He knew it. He didn't know how, but he knew! He was discharged anyway."

Bors did not answer. The cabinet meeting in the other room went on.

"He told me," said Morgan, matter-of-factly, "that four ships would arrive on Kandar, and when. One of them has arrived. The others will come as predicted. He knows that a fleet will get here two days after the last of the four. One can guess it will be the Mekinese fleet."

Bors frowned. He was interested now.

"I've another Talent," pursued Morgan. "He ought to be a paranoiac. He has all the tendencies to suspicion that a paranoid personality has. But his suspicions happen to be true. He'll read an item in a newspaper or walk past, oh, say a bank. Darkly and suspiciously, he guesses that the newspaper item will suggest a crime to someone. Or that someone will attempt to rob the bank in this fashion or that, at such-and-such a time. And someone does!"

"He'd be an uncomfortable companion," Bors observed wryly.

"I found him in jail," said Morgan cheerfully. "He'd been warning the police of crimes to come. They happened. So the police jailed him and demanded that he name his accomplices so they could break up the criminal gang whose feats he knew in advance. I got him out of jail and hired him as a Talent in Talents, Incorporated."

Bors blinked.

"Before we landed here," said Morgan, "I'd told him about the political situation, the events you expect. He immediately suspected that the Mekinese would have

a ship down somewhere, to blast the fleet of Kandar if it should dare to resist. In fact, he said positively that such a cruiser was waiting word to fire fusion-bombs."

Bors blinked again.

"And I spread out maps," said Morgan, "and my dowser went over them—not with a hazel twig, but something equally unscientific—his instinct—and he assured me that the cruiser was under water five miles north-north-east magnetic from Cape Farnell. The map said the depth there was fifty fathoms. Then my paranoid Talent observed that there'd be spies on shore with means to signal to the submerged cruiser. My dowser then found a small shack on the map where a communicator to the ship would be. With the information about the arrival of the liners, and the facts about the cruiser—and I had other information too—I went to the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs and told you. As you know, the information I gave you was accurate."

Bors felt as if he'd been hit over the head. This was ridiculous! He'd hunted for the space-cruiser under the sea because the prediction of the liner's arrival was so uncannily correct. He'd helped plan and carry out the destruction of that warship because its existence and location were verified by a magnetometer. But if he'd known how the information was obtained, if he'd known it was guessed at by a discharged spaceport employee, and a paranoid personality, and a man who used a hazel twig or something similar.... If he'd known that, he'd never have dreamed of accepting it. He'd have flatly dismissed the ship-arrival prediction!

But, if he hadn't trusted the information enough to check on it, why, the small space-fleet of Kandar would vanish in atomic flame when it tried to take off to fight. With it would vanish Bors, and his uncle, and the king and many resolute haters of Mekin.

Gwenlyn said, "You're perfectly right, Captain."

"What's that?" asked Bors, numbly.

"It is stark-raving lunacy," said Gwenlyn pleasantly. "Just like it would have seemed stark-raving lunacy, once upon a time, to think of people talking to each other when they were a thousand miles apart. Like it seemed insane to talk about flying machines. And again when they said there could be a space-drive in which the reaction would be at a right angle to the action, and especially when somebody said that a way would be found to drive ships faster than light. It's

lunacy, just like those things!"

"Y-yes," agreed Bors, his thoughts crowding one another. "It's all of that!"

Morgan nodded his head rapidly.

"I felt that way about it," he observed, "when I first got the idea of finding and organizing Talents for practical purposes. But I said to myself, 'Lots of great fortunes have been made by people assuming that other people are idiots.' In some ways they are, you know. And then I said to myself, 'Possibly a fortune can be made by somebody assuming that *he* is an idiot.' So I assumed it was idiotic to doubt something that visibly happened, merely because I couldn't understand it. And Talents, Incorporated was born. It's done quite well."

Bors shook his head as if to clear it.

"It seems to have worked," he admitted. "But if I'd known—" He spread out his hands. "I'll play along! What more can you do for us?"

"I've no idea," said Morgan placidly. "Such things have to work themselves out, with a little prodding, of course. But one of my Talents says the lightning-calculator Talent is the one who'll do you the most good soonest. I'd suggest—"

There was a murmur of voices from the cabinet room. The door opened and King Humphrey came out. He looked baffled, which was not unusual. But he looked enraged, which was.

"Bors!" he said thickly. "I've always thought I was a practical man! But if being practical means what some members of my cabinet think, I would rather be a poet! Bors, do something before my cabinet dethrones me and tricks the fleet into disbanding!"

He stumbled across the room, not noticing Morgan or Gwenlyn. Bors came to attention.

"Majesty," he said, not knowing whether he spoke in irony or bewilderment, "I take that as an order."

The king did not answer. When the door on the other side of the room closed behind his unregal figure, Bors turned to Morgan.

"I think I've been given authority," he said in a sort of baffled calm. "Suppose we go, Mr. Morgan, and find out what your lightning calculator can do in the way of

mental arithmetic, to change the situation of the kingdom?"

"Fine!" said Morgan cheerfully. "D'you know, Captain Bors, he can solve a three-body problem in his head? He hasn't the least idea how he does it, but the answer always comes out right!" Then he said exuberantly, "He'll tell you something useful, though! That's Talents, Incorporated information!"



Chapter 3

THERE WAS A FLEET on the way to Kandar. It could not be said to be traveling in space, of course. If there had been an observer somewhere, he could not conceivably have detected the ships. There would be no occultations of stars; no blotting out of any of the hundreds and thousands of millions of bright specks which filled all the firmament. There would be no drive-radiation which even the most sensitive of instruments could pick up. The fleet might be at one place to an observer's right—where it was imperceptible—and then it might be at a place to the observer's left—where it was undetectable—and nobody could have told the difference.

Actually, each ship of the Mekinese fleet was in overdrive, which meant that each had stressed the space immediately around it so that it was like a cocoon of other-space; as if it were out of this cosmos altogether and in another. In sober fact, of course, nothing of the sort had happened. An overdrive field changed the physical constants of space. The capacity of a condenser in an overdrive field was different from that of a condenser out of it. The self-induction of a coil in an overdrive field was not the same as in normal space. Magnetic and gravitational fields also did not follow the same laws in stressed space as in unstressed extension. The speed of light was different. Inertia was different. In short, a ship could drive at many hundreds of times the velocity of light and the laws of Einstein did not apply, because his laws referred to space that men had not tampered with.

But though ships in overdrive had to be considered as in motion, and though their speed had to be considered as beyond the astronomical, there were such incredible distances to be covered that time piled up. Aside from double stars, there were no suns yet discovered which were less than light-years apart. The time required for travel between inhabited planets was still comparable to the time needed for surface-travel between continents on a world. So the fleet of Mekin, journeying faster than the mind could imagine, nevertheless drove and drove and drove in the blackness and darkness and isolation of each ship's overdrive field. They had so driven for days. They would continue to do so for days to come.

When Captain Bors burned the documents in the Ministry for Diplomatic

Affairs, the enemy fleet might have been said to be at one place. When a submerged space-cruiser, planning assassination, was itself blown to bits with no chance to strike back, the Mekinese fleet was approximately somewhere else. When a cabinet meeting disheartened King Humphrey, the fleet was much nearer to Kandar. But days of highly-tedious eventlessness were still ahead of the war-fleet.

So Bors and Gwenlyn and Morgan got a ground-car and were driven to Kandar's commercial spaceport. There they found the *Sylva*. It was far larger than the usual space-yachts. There were commercial space-craft which were no larger. But it was a workmanlike sort of ship, at that. It had two lifeboat blisters, and there were emergency rockets for landings where no landing-grids existed. The armored bands of overdrive-coil shielding were massive. The *Sylva*, in fact, looked more like a service ship than either a commercial vessel or a yacht. It was obviously unarmed, but it had the look of a craft that could go very nearly anywhere.

"You'll find the Talents a bit odd," said Gwenlyn, as they drove up under the hull's wide bulge. "When they meet new people they like to show off. Most of them were pretty well frustrated before Father found a use for them. But they're quite pleasant people if you don't treat them like freaks. They're not, you know."

Bors had nothing to say. Until he was fifteen he'd lived on Tralee, which was then a quiet, pacific world, as Kandar had been. As the nephew of a monarch at least as resolutely constitutional as King Humphrey, he'd been raised in a very matter-of-fact fashion. The atmosphere had been that of a comfortable, realistic adjustment to facts. He was taught a great respect for certain facts without being made fanatically opposed to anything else. He'd been trained to require reasonable evidence without demanding that all proofs come out of test tubes and electronic apparatus. He was specifically taught that arithmetic cannot be proved by experimental evidence, but that sound experimental evidence agrees with arithmetic. So he was probably better qualified than most to deal with something like Talents, Incorporated. But it was not easy for him.

The ground-car stopped. An exit-port in the space yacht opened and an extension-stair came down. The three of them mounted it. The inner lock-door opened and they entered the *Sylva*.

An incredibly fat woman regarded Bors with warm and sentimental eyes. A man no older than Bors, but with prematurely gray hair, nodded at him. A man in a

chair lifted a hand in highly dignified greeting. Everyone seemed to know who he was. There was a blonde woman who might be in her late thirties, a short, scowling man with several jewelled rings on his fingers, and a gangling, skinny adolescent. There were still others.

Morgan addressed them with enthusiasm. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I present Captain Bors! He's come to arrange to use your talents in the gravest of all possible situations for his world!"

There were nods. There were bows. The dignified man in the chair said confidently, "The ship was where I specified."

"Exactly!" said Morgan, beaming. "Exactly! A magnificent piece of work! Which is what I expected of you!"

He made individual introductions all around. Bors did not begin to catch the names. This was so-and-so, said Morgan, "our Telepath." Still another, "our ship-arrival Precognizer—he predicted the coming of the liner, you remember." He came to the scowling man with rings. "Captain Bors, this is our Talent for Predicting Dirty Tricks. You've reason to thank him for disclosing that Mekinese cruiser underwater."

Bors followed the lead given him.

"There are many of us," he said, "with reason to thank you for a most satisfying operation. We smashed that cruiser!"

The scowling man nodded portentously. The introductions went on. The skinny adolescent was "our Talent for Locating Individuals." The enormously fat woman: "our Talent for Propaganda."

Bors was confused. He had to steel himself not to decide flatly that all this was nonsense. Morgan and Gwenlyn took him away from what appeared like a sort of social hall for these externally commonplace persons.

They arrived at a smaller compartment. It was a much more personal sort of place. Morgan waved his hand.

"Gwenlyn and I live here," he observed. "Our cabins are yonder and you might call this our family room. Gwenlyn finds the undiluted society of Talents a bit wearing. Of course, handling them is my profession, though I have some plans for retirement. We'll see our Mathematics Talent in a minute or two. He knows

it's expected that he'll be the most useful of all our Talents at the moment. He will make an entrance."

Gwenlyn sat down. She regarded Bors with amusement.

"I think the Captain's halfway unconvinced again, Father."

"I'm not unconvinced," said Bors grimly. "I'm desperate. It's not easy either to ignore what's happened or to believe that it will continue. And I—well—if the Mekinese fleet does arrive, I don't want to miss going with our fleet to meet it."

"You won't miss anything, Captain," said Morgan happily. "Have a cigar. Gwenlyn, do you think I should—"

"Let me," said Gwenlyn. "I know how the Captain feels. I'm an outsider, too. I haven't any talent—fortunately! Sit down, Captain."

Bors seated himself. Morgan offered a cigar. He seemed too impatient and much too pleased to be able to sit down himself. Bors lighted the cigar; at the first puff he removed it and looked at it respectfully. Such cigars were not easy to come by.

"I think," said Gwenlyn amiably, "that Father himself has a talent, which makes him not too easy to get along with. But it has had some good results. I hope it will have more here. The whole business is unbelievable, though, unless you think of some very special facts."

Bors nodded. He puffed again and waited.

"He told you some of it," said Gwenlyn. "About the ship arrival Talent and the dowser. There've always been such people with gifts that nobody's ever understood, but that are real. Only they've always been considered freaks. They feel that they're remarkable—and they are—and they want people to recognize this. But they've never had a function in society. They've been *denied* all function. Take the Mathematical Talent! He can do any sort of mathematics in his head. Any sort! He used to hire out to work computers, and he always got discharged because he did the computations in his head instead of using the machines. He was always right, and he was proud of his ability. He wanted to use it! But nobody'd let him. He was a miserable misfit until Father found him and hired him."

Bors nodded again, but his forehead wrinkled.

"Talents, Incorporated is merely an organization, created by my father, to make use of people who can do things ordinarily impossible, and probably unexplainable, but which exist nevertheless. There are more talents than Father has gathered, of course. But what good are their gifts to them? No good at all! They're considered freaks. So Father gathered them together as he found them. First, of course, he needed capital. So he used them to make money. Then he began to do useful things with them, since nobody else did. Now he's brought them here to help."

Bors said painfully, "They don't all have the same gift."

"No," agreed Gwenlyn.

"And there are limits to their talents?"

"Naturally!"

Morgan broke in, amused. "Gwenlyn insists that I have the talent of finding and using talents."

"A mild talent, Father," said Gwenlyn. "Not enough to make you revolting. But —"

A door opened. A tweedy man with a small mustache stood in the doorway.

"I believe I'm wanted?" he said offhandedly.

Morgan introduced him. His name was Logan. He was the lightning calculator, the mathematical talent of Talents, Incorporated. Bors shook his hand. The tweedy man sat down. He drew out a pipe and began to fill it with conscious exactitude. He looked remarkably like a professor of mathematics who modestly pretended to be just another commuter. He dressed the part: slightly untidy hair; bulldog pipe; casual, expensive sports shoes.

"I understand," he said negligently, "that you want some calculations made."

"I'm told I do," said Bors, harassedly. "But I don't know what they are."

"Then how can I make them?" asked Logan with lifted eyebrows.

"Naturally," said Morgan, "you'll find out the kind of calculations he needs, that he can't get anywhere else. That'll be the kind he needs from you."

"Hm," said Logan. He blew a smoke-ring, thoughtfully. "Where do you use calculations in space-travel?"

"Everywhere," said Bors. "But we've computers for it. And they're quite adequate."

Logan shrugged. "Then what do you need me for?"

"You tell me!" said Bors, nettled. "Certainly we don't need calculations for space-travel. We've no long journey in mind. We're simply going to go out and do some fighting when the Mekinese fleet gets here."

Logan blew another smoke-ring.

"What calculations do you use in space-fighting?"

"Courses and distances," said Bors. He could see no sense in this, but he went on. "Allowing for acceleration and deceleration in setting our missiles on targets. Allowing for the motion of the targets. Again we have computers for this. In practice they're too good! If we send a missile at a Mekinese ship, they set a

computer on it, and it computes a course for a counter-missile which explodes and destroys our missile when it's within a certain distance of it."

"Then your missile doesn't hit," said Logan.

"All too often, it doesn't," admitted Bors.

"Then their missiles don't hit either."

"If they send a hundred missiles at us, they're cancelled out if we send a hundred to destroy them. Unfortunately, if they send more than we can counter, we get wiped out."

Bors found his throat going dry. This, of course, was what he'd desperately been denying to himself. It was the fundamental reason for a total lack of hope. The history of warfare is the history of rivalry between attack and defense. In the matter of missiles in space, there was a stalemate. One missile fired in attack could always be destroyed by another fired in defense. It was an arithmetic balance. But it meant that three ships could always destroy two, and four ships three. In the space-fight ahead, there would be at least ten Mekinese ships to every one from Kandar. The sally of Kandar's fleet would not be a rush into battle, but an advance into annihilation. "What we need," said Bors desperately, "is a means to compute courses for our missiles so they'll hit, and that the enemy can't counter-compute—so that his missiles can't compute how to change course in order to cancel ours out."

He was astonished as the words left his mouth. This was what was needed, of course. But then he realized that it couldn't be done.

Logan blew a smoke-ring.

"Mechanical computers," he said, "have limits. They're designed to calculate a trajectory with constant acceleration or no acceleration. But that's all."

Bors frowned. "What else could there be?"

"Changing acceleration," said Logan condescendingly. "A mechanical computer can't compute that. But I can."

Bors continued to frown. One part of his mind assured him that the statement that mechanical computers could not calculate trajectories of missiles with changing acceleration was incorrect. But the rest of his mind tried to imagine

such a trajectory. He couldn't. In practice, men do not have to handle the results of variable acceleration as cumulative effects.

"I think," said Bors carefully, "that if you can do that—"

Logan blew a smoke-ring more perfect than any that had gone before.

"I'll calculate some tables," he said modestly. "You can use them on your computer-results. Then if you arrange your missiles to change their acceleration as they go, the Mekinese missiles can't intercept them."

He waved his hand with the grand air of someone assuring a grammar-grade pupil that multiplication tables were quite reliable and could be used with confidence. But his eyes fixed themselves on Bors's face. As the Captain realized the implications of his statement, the eyes of the Mathematical Talent of Talents, Incorporated shone with gratified vanity.

"We'll go out in a couple of tin cans," said Bors fiercely, "and try this out with dummy warheads!"

Gwenlyn said quickly, "Marvelous! Marvelous, Logan!"

"It's nothing," said Logan modestly.

But it was a very great deal. Bors, impatient to try it out, nevertheless realized that Logan hadn't made the suggestion out of a brilliant perception of a solution to a problem in ballistics, but because he thought in terms of mathematical processes. He didn't think of a new missile operation, but a new kind of computation. And he reveled in the fact that he had showed off his brilliance.

In the ground-car on the way to the fleet, Bors said helplessly to Gwenlyn, "I'm not the right man to be the liaison with you people. But this might make us a pretty costly conquest for Mekin! With luck, we may trade them ship for ship! They won't miss the ships they lose, but it'll be a lot of satisfaction to us!"

"You expect to be killed," Gwenlyn said flatly.

"My uncle," explained Bors, "considers that he should have gotten killed when Mekin took over Tralee. It would have set a good example. Since we didn't do it for Tralee, we'll do it for Kandara. The king's going along too. After all, that's one of the things kings are for."

"To get killed?"

"When necessary," Bors told her. "Kandar shouldn't surrender even though there will be at least ten Mekinese to one Kandarian."

She smiled at him, very oddly.

"I suspect," she said, "that not everybody on the fleet will be killed. I'm sure of it. In fact, as my father would say, that's Talents, Incorporated information!"

Bors frowned worriedly.

The fleet of Mekin continued in overdrive, heading for Kandar. Each second it traversed a distance equal to the span of a solar system, out to its remotest planet. A heartbeat that would begin where a pulsing Cepheid, had it been possible to see, would have seemed at its greatest brilliance, and would end where the light from that same giant star seemed dimmed almost to extinction. Of course no such observation could be made from any ship in overdrive. Each one of the many, many ugly war-machines was sealed in its own cocoon of overdrive-stressed space. Even in the armed transports that carried officials and bureaucrats and experienced police organizers to set up a puppet government on Kandar, there was not the faintest hint of anything that happened outside the individual ship. But, what might be termed the position of the fleet, changed with remarkable swiftness. It traveled light-hours between breaths. Light-days between sentences. Light-months and light-years....

But it would not arrive on Kandar for a long while yet. Not for three whole days.



Chapter 4

THE SMALL FIGHTING SHIP lifted swiftly from the surface of Kandar. As it rose, the sky turned dark and the sun's brilliant disk, far too bright to be looked at with unshielded eyes, became a blazing furnace that could roast unshielded flesh. Stars appeared, shining myriads despite the sun, with every one vivid against a background of black. The planet's surface became a half-ball, of which a part lay in darkness.

"*Co-o-ntact!*" said a voice through many speakers placed throughout the fighting ship's hull.

There was the rushing sound of compartment doors closing. Then a cushioned silence everywhere, save for the faint, standby scratching sounds that loudspeakers always emit.

Screens lighted. A speck moved among the stars.

"*Prepare counter-missiles,*" said the voice. "*Proximity and track. Fire only as missiles appear.*"

The moving speck flamed and was again only a moving speck. It ejected something which hurtled toward the ship just up from Kandar.

"*Intercept one away!*" said a confident voice.

The last-launched missile fled toward the first moving speck, diminishing as it went. It swung suddenly, off course.

"*Fire two!*" snapped somebody somewhere.

Another object hurtled away toward the stars.

"*Fire three! Fire four!*"

Far away, something came plunging toward the ship. It did not travel in a straight line. It curved. It was not reasonable for a missile to travel in a curved line. The interceptor missiles had to detect it, swing to intercept, to accelerate furiously. The first interceptor missed. Worse, it had lost its target. It went wandering vaguely among the stars and was gone.

The second missed. The voice in the speaker seemed to crack.

"Fire all missiles! They're turning too late! Pull 'em up ahead of the damned thing!"

The deadly contrivances plunged away and further away into emptiness. The third interceptor missed. The fourth. Tiny specks moved gracefully on the radar screen. There was something coming toward the ship that had risen from Kandar. The tracer-trails of missiles appeared against the stars. They made very pretty parabolas. That was all. The thing that was coming left a tracer-trail too. It curved preposterously. The just-risen ship furiously flung missiles at it. It did not dodge. But none of the tracer-trails intersected its own. All of them passed to its rear.

For the fraction of a second it was visible as an object instead of a speck. That object swelled.

It went by. Bors's voice, relayed, said,

"Coup! You're out of action. Right?"

The skipper of the ship just up from Kandar said grudgingly, "Hell, yes! We threw fifteen missiles at it, and missed with every one! This is magic! Can we all have this before the Mekinese get here?"

"I hope so," said Bors's voice. *"We're trying hard, anyhow. Will you report to ground?"*

"Right," said the speakers in the ship which had just fired fifteen missiles without a hit or interception. *"Off."*

And then the compartment doors opened again and the normal sounds of a small fighting ship in space began again.

An hour later, aground, Bors said impatiently, "Half a dozen ships have checked out with me. I sent a single dummy-warhead missile at each one. They knew I was trying something new. They tried interceptors. Not one worked. Worse, my missiles drew the interceptors off-course so they lost their original aim on the *Isis*. Missiles set for variable acceleration not only can't be intercepted but they draw interceptors off-course and are super-interceptors themselves. I fired one dummy warhead at each target-ship. I got six hits with six missiles. They fired an average of twelve missiles against each of mine. They got no intercepts or

hits with seventy-two tries! This appears to me a very gratifying development for the situation we're in."

The bearded man who'd plumped for negotiation, earlier, now spoke indignantly in the War Council.

"Why wasn't this revealed earlier? We could have made a demonstration and Mekin would have been wary of issuing an ultimatum! Why was this concealed until it was too late to use in negotiations with them?"

"It wasn't available until today," Bors answered. "It was tried, and it worked."

An admiral said slowly, "As I understand it, this is a proposal of the—hm—Talents, Incorporated people."

"No," said Bors. "We got the idea but couldn't do the math. Talents, Incorporated did the computations to make the missiles hit."

"Why? Why let them do the math? There may be a counter to this device. Perhaps Talents, Incorporated, was sent to us to get us to adopt this freakish trick."

"Talents, Incorporated," said Bors, "enabled us to smash a submerged Mekinese cruiser. In giving us the necessary information, Talents, Incorporated kept the Mekinese from wiping out our space-fleet. Talents, Incorporated— Oh, the devil!"

The admiral gazed about him.

"This—device," he said precisely, "is not a tried and standard weapon. On the other hand, the sally of our fleet is not war. Because of our civilian population we cannot make war on Mekin! The defiance of our fleet will be a gesture only—a splendid gesture, but no more. It should be a dignified gesture. It would be most inappropriate for our fleet to take to space, ostensibly to say that it prefers death to surrender, and for it then to unveil a new and eccentric device which would say that the fleet was foolish enough to hope that a gadget would save it from dying and Kandar from conquest. The fleet action should be fought with scorn of odds. It should end its existence in a manner worthy of its traditions!"

Bors exploded, "Damnit—"

King Humphrey held up his hand and said fretfully, "As I remember it, Admiral,

you have been assigned to hold together the defense forces—those who either did not insist on going with the fleet, or for whom there was no room—who have to be surrendered. You talk of gestures. But the young men who will go out in the fleet are not going there to make gestures! They simply and furiously hate Mekin for what it is about to do. They are going out to kill as many Mekinese as they can before they, themselves, are killed. They would call your speech nonsense. And I would agree with them."

Bors said respectfully, "Yes, Majesty. It may also be said that copies of the first Talents, Incorporated launching-data tables have already been distributed to the missile crews throughout the fleet. More are being distributed as fast as Logan calculates them. I don't think you can keep our ships from trying the new missiles when the fighting starts!"

Indignantly, the bearded man said, "I protest! This is a War Council! If the council is to be lectured by strangers and if its orders won't be obeyed, why hold it?"

"Why, indeed?" King Humphrey looked sternly about the council-table. Sternness did not become him, but dignity did. He said with dignity, "You who are to stay here have to think of dealing with a victorious Mekin. We who are to go have to think of making our defeat count. There is no point in further discussion. The fleet will take off immediately."

He rose from his seat. The bearded man protested, "But the Mekinese aren't here yet! They won't arrive until day after tomorrow!"

"You're using Talents, Incorporated information," objected Bors. "And it is wise for the fleet to move off-planet at once! You are reasonable men. Too reasonable! Nothing can destroy a nation so quickly as for it to fall into the hands of practical, hard-headed, reasonable men who act upon the best scientific data and the opinions of the best experts! That happened on Tralee, and my uncle and myself are exiles and Tralee is subjugated in consequence. But I am beginning to have hope for Kandar!"

He followed King Humphrey out of the council-room. Fleet admirals brought up the rear. The stodgy, dumpy figure of the king tramped onward. It became obvious that he was bound for the ground-cars that waited to take him and those who would follow him to the launching area of the fleet.

A lean, gray, vice-admiral fell into step beside Bors.

"You don't think things are hopeless, Captain?" he asked curiously. "I don't see the shred of a chance for us. But my whole life's been in the fleet. Under Mekin I'd be drafted to work in a factory or serve as an under-officer on a guard-ship, one or the other! I'd rather end in a good fight. How can you have hope?"

Bors said grimly, "I'm not sure that I have. But I can't believe that nations can be saved by reasonable, practical men. They aren't made by them! I've no hope except that acting foolishly may be wisdom. Sometimes it is."

"Ha!" The vice-admiral grinned wryly. "But fortunes are made by businessmen, and only history by heroes. No sensible man is ever a hero. But, like you, I don't like practical men."

They went out-of-doors. The king climbed sturdily into a ground-car. It hummed away. There was a sort of ordered confusion, and then other ground-cars began to stream away from the palace.

Morgan appeared and waved to Bors. He hesitated, and Morgan pointed to an unofficial vehicle. Inside, Gwenlyn was smiling cheerfully at Bors. He found himself returning the smile, and allowed himself to be guided to her. The ground-car rolled swiftly after the others.

"I've a little more Talents, Incorporated information," said Morgan. "It's written down for you to read when you get to wherever you're going. It's rather important. Please be sure to read it fairly soon, it may affect the fight."

"I'm headed for the fleet," said Bors. "Take me there, will you? I wanted to say something before I left, anyhow."

Morgan waved his hand.

"I can guess," he said blandly. "Deepest gratitude and all that, but the rush of events blocked any way to arrange a suitable recompense for what Talents, Incorporated has done."

Bors blinked. "That's the substance of what I meant to say," he admitted.

"We'll take it up later," Morgan told him. "We'll get in touch with you after the battle."

"I doubt it," said Bors. "I'm not likely to be around."

Gwenlyn laughed a little.

"What's so amusing?" asked Bors. "I don't mean to strike an attitude, but I do hate everything Mekin stands for, and I've a chance to throw a brick at it. The price may be high but throwing the brick is necessary!"

"We," said Gwenlyn, "have Talents, Incorporated information, some of which is in that letter Father gave you. Our Department for Predicting Dirty Tricks has been busy. You'll see. But we've other information, too."

Bors frowned at her. He put the letter away.

"More information—and you'll see me after the fight. You're not telling me you know the future?"

Morgan waved a cigar.

"Of course not! That's nonsense! If one knew the future, one could change it, and then it wouldn't be what one knew! You haven't had any prophecies from me! Prophecy's absurd! All we've told you is about events whose probability approaches unity."

"But—"

"What Father means," Gwenlyn told him, "is that you can't be told beforehand about anything you can prevent, because if you can prevent it you can make your knowledge false. So it isn't knowledge. What we want to say, though, is that we aren't through."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to retire," said Morgan blandly. "But I want to do something first that I can gloat over later."

"He wants," added Gwenlyn, "to repose in the satisfaction of his vanity." She laughed again at her father's expression.

"Seriously, Captain, we wanted to give you the letter and to ask you not to be surprised if we turn up somewhere. There's a Talent," she added, "a young boy who can find people. He doesn't know how he does it, but.... We'll find you!"

The ground-car turned in at the fleet's take-off ground. The normal interstellar traffic of a planet, of course, was handled by a spaceport, with ships brought down to ground and lifted out to space again by the force-fields generated in a giant landing-grid. But a war-fleet could not depend solely on ground

installations. The fighting ships of Kandar were allowed to use the planet's spaceport only for special reasons. Emergency rocket take-offs and landings were necessary training for war conditions anyhow. So the take-off ground was pitted and scarred with burnt-over circles, where no living thing grew and where very often the clay beneath the humus top-layer was vitrified by rocket-flames.

A guard at the gate brought the ground-car to a halt.

"War alert," said Bors. "Only known officers and men admitted here. It's not worth arguing about."

He got out of the car and shook hands.

"I still regret," he told Morgan, "that we've had no chance to do something in return for the information you've given us." To Gwenlyn he said obscurely, "I'm glad I didn't know you sooner."

He turned and walked briskly into the fenced-off area. Behind him, Morgan looked inquisitively at his daughter.

"What was that he just said?"

"He's glad he didn't know me sooner," said Gwenlyn. She looked smugly pleased. "Considering everything, it was a very nice thing to say. I like him even if he doesn't smile."

Morgan did not seem enlightened. "It doesn't make sense to me."

"That's because you are my father," said Gwenlyn. She stirred restlessly. She was no longer smiling. "I hope Talents, Incorporated information isn't wrong this time! Remember, we heard on Norden that the dictator of Mekin consults fortune-tellers!"

"Ah!" said her father. "But they're only fortune-tellers!"

"One could be a Talent," said Gwenlyn worriedly, "maybe without even knowing it."

There came a far-distant, roaring sound. Something silvery and glistening rose swiftly toward the sky. It dwindled to a speck. There were more roarings. Three more silvery, glistening objects flung themselves heavenward, leaving massive trails of seemingly solid smoke behind them. Then there were bellowings. Larger ships rose up. As the din of their rising began to diminish, there were louder,

booming uproars and other silvery objects seemed to fling themselves toward the sky.

Then thunder rolled, and huge shapes plunged in their turn toward the heavens. The space-fleet of Kandar left its native world. It departed in the formation used for space maneuvering, much like the tactical disposition of a column of marching soldiers in doubtful territory. There was a "point" in advance of all the rest, to be the first to detect or be fired on by an enemy. Then flankers reached straight out, and to the right and left, and then an advance-guard, and then the main force with a rear-guard behind it.

The take-off area became invisible under a monstrous, roiling mountain of smoke, from which threads of vapor reached to emptiness. It became impossible to hear oneself talk; it was unlikely that one could have heard a shot, as the heavy ships took off. But presently there were only lesser clamors and then mere roarings after them, and the last of the rocket-boomings died away. The smoke remained, rolling very slowly aside. Then there were unexpected detonations. As the rocket-fume mist dissolved, the detonations were explained. Every building in the fleet's home area, the sunken fuel-tanks, the giant rolling gantries—every bit of ground equipment for the servicing of the fleet was methodically and carefully being blown to bits. The fleet was not expected back.

The ships rose above the atmosphere, and rose still higher, and the planet Kandar became a gigantic ball which filled an enormous part of the firmament. Then there were cracklings of communicators, and orders flittered through emptiness in scrambled and re-scrambled broadcasts of gibberish which came out as lucid commands in the control-rooms of the ships. Then, first, the point, then the advanced flankers, and then the main fleet, line by line and rank by rank—every ship drove on outward under top-speed solar-system drive.

The last of the four chartered space-liners, come to take refugees away before the Mekinese arrived, saw the disappearance of the ships in the rear of the fleet's formation. The liner was lowered to the ground by the landing-grid. It reported what it had seen. Those who were entitled to depart on it crowded aboard. With the fleet gone, panic began.

Morgan had to spend lavishly to get copies of the news reports that the liner had brought along as a matter of course. He took them back to the *Sylva*, where a frowning man with rings on his fingers read them with dark suspicion. Presently, triumphantly, he dictated predictions of dirty tricks from indications in the news.

Morgan returned to what he'd called the family room of the yacht. He relaxed. Gwenlyn tried to read. She did not succeed. She was excessively nervous.

Bors was not. The fleet re-formed itself well out from Kandar. It made for a rendezvous over a pole of the gas-giant planet which was the fourth planet from Kandar's sun. It was almost, but not quite in line with that yellow star toward the base, from which the Mekinese flotilla would come. The fleet went into a polar orbit around that gigantic planet, which was useless to mankind because its atmosphere was partly gaseous ammonia and partly methane.

The cosmos paid no attention. An unstable sol-type star in Cygnus collapsed abruptly and a number of otherwise promising planets became unfit for human exploitation. In Andromeda, a super-nova flared. The light of its explosion would not reach Kandar for very many thousands of years. The largest comet in the galaxy reached perihelion, and practically outshone the sun it circled. Nobody saw it, because nobody lived there. On a dreary, red-sky planet in Mousset, a thing squirmed heavily out of a stagnant sea and blinked stupidly at the remarkable above-water cosmos it had discovered. Suns flamed and spouted flares. Small dark stars became an infinitesimal fraction of a degree colder. There was a magnetic storm in the photosphere of a sun which was not supposed to have such things.

The war-fleet of Kandar, in very fine formation, flowed in its polar orbit around the fourth planet out from Kandar's sun. In carefully scrambled and re-scrambled communications, certain ships were authorized to modify the settings of Mark 13 missiles in this exact fashion, to remove their warheads, and to diverge in pairs from the fleet proper. They were to familiarize themselves with the results of making the acceleration of such missiles variable during flight. They would use the supplied data-tables to compute firing constants for given ranges and relative speeds. They would, of course, return to formation to permit other ships the same practice with the new method of missile handling.

Bors read the letter from Talents, Incorporated. It gave an exact time for the breakout of the Mekinese fleet. The rest consisted mostly of specific warnings from the Talents, Incorporated Department for Predicting Dirty Tricks. It listed certain things to be looked for among the ships of the fleet. The information was like the news of an enemy ship aground on Kandar; it was self-evidently plausible once one thought of it. Mekin was ruled and its military practices governed by men with the instincts of conspirators, using other men with the psychopathological impulses which make for spies. They thought of devices

neither statesmen nor fighting men would have invented. But a paranoid Talent could think of them, and know that they were true.

As a result of the warnings, the flagship was found to have been somehow equipped, by Mekin, with a tiny, special microwave transmitter which used a frequency not usual on Kandar. It was, in effect, a radio beacon on which enemy missiles could home. Also, the lead ship of a cruiser-squadron had been mysteriously geared to reveal its exact position, course and speed while in space. There were other concealed devices. Some would make the controls of predetermined ships useless when beams of specific frequency and form were trained upon them.

Once the basic idea was discovered, it was possible to make sure that all such enemy-supplied equipment was out of operation. The fleet was still in no promising situation, with a ten-to-one disadvantage. But it could not have put up even the beginning of a fight, had these spy-installed devices remained undiscovered.

Bors said carefully, by scrambled and re-scrambled communicator, "Majesty, I'm beginning to be less than despairing. If they expect our ships either to have been destroyed aground, or to be made helpless the instant combat begins, we may give them a shock. We hoped to smash them ship for ship. Finding out their tricks in advance may give us that! And if our missiles work as they've promised, we may get two for one!"

King Humphrey's voice was dogged. *"I will settle for anything but surrender! From an honorable enemy I would take severe terms rather than see my spacemen die. But I would do nobody any good by yielding to Mekin!"*

Bors clicked off. He looked at a clock. The prediction from Talents, Incorporated was that the Mekinese fleet would break out of overdrive at 11.19 hours astronomical time.

He went over his ship. His crew was by no means depressed. There had been a terrific lift in spirits when dummy-warheaded missiles made theoretic hits, though fifteen interceptors tried to stop them. The crewmen now tended elaborately to explain the process. A part of the trick was the curved path along which the re-set missiles flashed. Such courses alone could never be computed by an unwarned enemy under battle conditions. But the all-important thing was that the missiles changed their acceleration as they drove. That couldn't be solved and the solution put into practice during one fleet-action. Once the enemy

had experienced it, they could later duplicate it without doubt, but it would still be impossible to counter.

So Bors's men were cheerful to the point of gaiety. They would fight magnificently because they were thinking of what they would do to the enemy instead of what the enemy might do to them. If enemy crews had been assured that the fleet was half defeated before the fight began, to find the fleet not crippled by spy-set devices would be startling. To find them fighting like fiends would be alarming. And if—Bors grimly repeated to himself, *if*—the modified missiles worked as well in battle as in target practice....

He turned in and, despite his tensions, fell asleep immediately and slept soundly. When he awoke he felt curiously relaxed. It took him a moment to realize he had dreamed about Gwenlyn. He couldn't remember what he had dreamed, but he knew it was comfortable and good. He wouldn't let himself dwell on it, however. There was work to be done.

It was singularly like morning on a planet. The ship was spotless, immaculate. There was the fresh smell of growing things in the air. To save tanked oxygen the air-room used vegetation to absorb CO₂ and excess moisture from the breathing of the crew. There was room to spare everywhere, because unlike aircraft and surface ships, the size of a space-ship made no difference in its speed. There was no resistance due to size. Only the mass counted. So there was spaciousness and freshness and something close to elation on Bors's ship on the day it was to fight for the high satisfaction of getting killed.

Bors saw to it that his men breakfasted heartily.

"We've got a party ahead," he told the watch at mess. "Eat plenty but give the other watch a chance to fill up, too."

Somebody said cheerfully, "The condemned men ate a hearty breakfast, sir?"

Bors grinned.

"The breakfast we can be sure of. The condemned part—we'll have something to say about that. Some Mekinese wouldn't have good appetites if they knew what's ahead of them. One word! Don't waste missiles! There are a lot of Mekin ships. We've got to make each missile count!"

There was laughter. He went to the control room. He checked with the clock. Shortly after the other watch was back at its stations he calculated carefully. The

enemy fleet would break out of overdrive short of Kandar, of course. It would have broken out once before, to correct its line and estimate the distance to its destination. It would have assembled itself at that breakout point, but it would still arrive in a disorderly mob. One's point of arrival could not be too closely figured at the high speeds of overdrive. So when the Mekinese came, they would not be in formation.

Bors called the flagship, when the gas-giant planet was in line and a barrier against the radio waves. King Humphrey's voice came from the speaker by Bors's side.

"Bors? What?"

"Majesty," said Bors. "Talents, Incorporated says the enemy fleet will break out of overdrive in just about ten minutes. We're out here waiting for it, instead of aground as they'll expect. They'll break out in complete confusion. Even with great luck, they'll lose time assembling into combat formation. Being out here, we may be able to hit them before they're organized."

A pause.

"I've been discussing tactics with the high command," said the king's voice. *"There's some dispute. The classic tactic is to try for englobement."*

"I want to point out, Majesty," Bors interrupted urgently, "that when we cross the north pole again, we're apt to detect the fleet signalling frantically to itself, sorting itself out, trying to get into some sort of order. It'll be stirred up as if with a spoon. But if we come around the planet's pole—and they don't expect us to be out here waiting for them—we'll be in combat-ready formation. We may be able to tear into them as an organized unit before they can begin to co-operate with each other."

A longer pause. Then King Humphrey said grimly;

"There is one weak point in your proposal, Bors. Only one. It is that Talents, Incorporated may be wrong about the time of breakout. The more I think, the less I believe in what they have done, or even what I saw! But we'll be prepared, however unlikely your idea. We'll be ready."

He clicked off. Only minutes later, the combat-alert order came through. In the next ten minutes, Bors's ship hummed for five, was quiet for three, and then, two minutes early, all inner compartment doors closed quietly and there was that

muffled stillness which meant that everybody was ready for anything that might happen.

In the control room, Bors watched out of a direct-vision port, giving occasional glances to the screens. There were flecks of light from innumerable stars. Then the shining cloud-bank of the gas-giant planet went black. Screens showed all of the fleet—each blip with a nimbus about it which identified it as a friend, not a foe. There was the blip of the leading ship, the "point" of the formation. There were the flanking ships and all the martial array of the fleet.

Then the screens sparkled with seemingly hundreds of blips which seemed to swirl and spin and whirl again in total and disordered confusion.

Gongs clanged. A voice said, "*Co-o-ntact! Enemy fleet ahead. Wide dispersion. They're milling about like gnats on a sunny day!*"

A curt and authoritative and well-recognized voice snapped, "*All ships keep formation on flagship. Course coordinates....*" The voice gave them. "*There's a clump of enemy ships beginning to organize! We hit them!*"

The fleet of Kandar came around the gas-giant world and flung itself at the fleet of Mekin. It seemed that everything was subject to intolerable delay. For long, sweating, unbearable minutes nothing happened except that the fleet of Kandar went hurtling through space with no sensation or direct evidence of motion. The gas-giant planet dwindled, but not very fast. The bright specks on the screens which were enemy ships seemed to separate as they drew nearer. But all happened with infinite and infuriating deliberation.

It was worth waiting for. There was truly a clumping of enemy ships ahead. Some of them were less than ten miles apart. In a two-hundred-mile sphere there were forty ships. They'd been moving to consolidate themselves into a mutually assisting group. What they accomplished was the provision of a fine accumulation of targets. Before they could organize themselves, the Kandarian fleet swept through them. It vastly outnumbered them in this area.

It smashed them. Bombs flashed in emptiness. There were gas-clouds and smoke-clouds which stayed behind in space as the fleet went on.

"*New coordinates,*" said the familiar authoritative voice. It gave them. "*There's another enemy condensation. We hit it!*"

The fleet swung in space. It drove on and on and on. Interminable time passed.

Then there were flashes brighter than the stars. A Kandar cruiser blew up soundlessly. But far, far away other things detonated, and what had been proud structures of steel and beryllium, armed and manned, became mere incandescent vapor.

A third clumping of Mekinese ships. The Kandarian fleet overwhelmed it; overrode it; used exactly the tactics the Mekinese might have used. It ruthlessly made use of its local, concentrated strength. It was outnumbered in the whole battle area by not less than ten to one. But the Mekinese fleet was scattered. Where it struck, the Kandarian fleet was four and five, and sometimes twenty, ships to one.

It was a smaller fleet in every class of ships, but it was compact and controlled and it made slashing plunges through the dispersed and confused enemy. With ordinary missiles three ships could always destroy two, and four could destroy three. But in the battle of the gas-giant planet, where there was fighting the Kandarians were never less than two to one. They were surrounded by enemies, but when those enemies tried to gather together for strength, the mass of murderously-fighting ships of Kandar swung upon the incipient group and blasted it.

Nearly half the Mekinese fleet was out of action before Bors's ship fired a single missile. He'd sat in the skipper's chair, and from time to time, the course of all the fleet was changed, and he saw that his ship kept its place rigidly in formation. But he had given not one order out of routine before the enemy strength was half gone. Then the communicator said coldly:

"All ships attention! With old-style missiles we could do everything we've accomplished so far. But the Mekinese are refusing battle now. They'll begin to slip away in overdrive if we keep chopping them down in groups. We have to give them a chance or they'll run away. The new missile system works perfectly. All ships break formation. Find your own Mekinese. Blast them!"

Bors said in a conversational voice, "There are three Mekin ships yonder. They look like they're willing to start something. We'll take them on."

He pointed carefully to a spot on the screen. His small ship swung away from the rest of the fleet. It plunged toward a battleship and two heavy cruisers who had joined forces and appeared to attempt to rally the still-stronger-than-Kandar invaders.

They became objects rather than specks upon the screens. They were visible things on the direct-vision ports. Something flashed, and rushed toward the little Kandarian space-can.

"Fire one, two, three," Bors ordered.

Things hurtled on before him. A screen showed that the missiles first fired by the enemy went off-course, chasing the later-fired missiles from the *Isis*. The Mekinese shots had automatically become interceptors when Kandarian missiles attacked their parent ships. But they couldn't anticipate a curved course and their built-in computers weren't designed to handle a rate of change of acceleration. The three Mekinese ships ceased to exist.

"Let's head yonder," said Bors.

He pointed again, on the screen. Within the radar's range there were hundreds of tiny blips. Some were marked with a nimbus apiece. They were friends. Many, many more were not.

The Mekinese fleet, too, could determine its own numbers in comparison to the defending fleet. Pride and rage swept through Mekinese commanders, as they saw the Kandarians deliberately break up their formation to get their ships down to the level of the enemy. It was unthinkable for a Mekinese ship to refuse single combat! And when two and three could combine against a single ship of Kandar....

The invaders had reason to fight, rather than slip into overdrive. They still outnumbered the ships from Kandar. And for a Mekinese commander to flee the battle area without having engaged or fired on an antagonist would be treason. No man who fled without fighting would stay alive. There had to be a recording of battle offered or accepted, or the especially merciless court-martial system of Mekin would take over.

There was one problem, however, for the Mekinese skippers. When they engaged a ship from Kandar, they died. Still, no ship left the scene of the battle to report defeat.

It was absolute and complete. It was not only a defeat. It was annihilation. The Mekinese fleet was destroyed to the last ship, even to the armed transports carrying bureaucrats and police to set up a new government on Kandar. Those ships which dared not run away without a token fight, discovered the fleet of

Kandar wasn't fighting a token battle. It had started out to be just that, but somehow the plans had changed when the fighting started. For the aggressors, it was disaster.

When his fleet reassembled, King Humphrey issued a general order to all ships. He read it in person, his voice strained and dead and hopeless.

"I have to express my admiration for the men of my fleet," he said drearily. "An unexampled victory over unexampled odds is not only in keeping with the best traditions of the armed forces of Kandar, but raises those traditions to the highest possible level of valor and devotion. If it were not that in winning this victory we have doomed our home world to destruction, I would be as happy as I am, reluctantly, proud...."

Part Two

Chapter 5

NOBODY HAD EVER FOUND any use for the Glamis solar system. There was a sun of highly irregular variability. There were two planets, of which the one farther out might have been useful for colonization except that it was subject to extreme changes of climate as its undependable sun burned brightly or dimly. The nearer planet was so close to its primary that it had long ceased to rotate. One hemisphere, forever in sunshine, remained in a low, red heat. Its night hemisphere, in perpetual darkness, had radiated away its heat until there were mountains of frozen atmosphere piled above what should have been a mineral surface. It was a matter of record that a hundred standard years before, a ship had landed there and mined oxygen-containing snow, which its air apparatus was able to refine so the crew could breathe while they finished some rather improbable repairs and could go on to more hospitable worlds.

The farther-out planet was sometimes a place of green vegetation and sprawling seas, and sometimes of humid jungles with most of its oceans turned to a cloud-bank of impenetrable thickness. Also, sometimes, it was frozen waste from pole to pole. The vegetation of that planet had been studied with interest, but the world itself was simply of no use to anybody. Even the sun of the Glamis system was regarded with suspicion.

The fleet of Kandar made rendezvous at the galactic-north pole of the second planet. On arrival the massed cruisers and battleships went into orbit. The smaller craft went on a scouting mission, verifying that there was no new colony planted, that there was no man-made radiation anywhere in the system, that there was no likelihood of the fleet's presence—or for that matter its continued existence—becoming known to anybody not of its ship-crews.

The scout-ships came back, reporting all clear. The great ships drew close to one another and small space-boats shuttled back and forth, taking commanders and captains and vice-admirals to the ship, which, by convention, was commanded by King Humphrey VIII of Kandar.

Captain Bors got to the conference late. There were some grave faces about the conference room, but there were also some whose expressions were unregenerate and grimly satisfied. As he entered the room the king was

speaking.

"I don't deny that it was a splendid victory, but I'm saying that our victory was a catastrophe! To begin with, we happened to hit the Mekinese fleet when it was dispersed and disorganized. That was great good fortune—if we'd wanted a victory. The enemy was scattered over light-minutes of space. His ships could not act as a massed, maneuverable force. They were simply a mob of fighting ships who had to fight as individuals against our combat formation."

"Yes, Majesty," said the gray vice-admiral, "but even when we broke formation —"

"Again," said the king, more fretfully still, "I do not deny that the fighting ability of our ships was multiplied by the new way of using missiles. What I do say is that if we'd come upon the Mekinese fleet in combat formation instead of dispersed; if we'd attacked them when they were ready for us, it would be doubtful that we'd have been so disastrously successful! Say that the new missile settings gave each of our ships fire-power as effective as two or three or five of the enemy. The enemy was ten to one! If we hadn't hit them when they were in confusion, we'd have been wiped out. And if we'd hit their fleet anyhow, we'd be dead. We did not hit the main fleet. We annihilated a division of it, a small part. We are still hopelessly inferior to the vast Mekinese fleet."

Bors took a seat at the rear of the room.

A stout rear-admiral said somberly, "We hope we annihilated it, Majesty. There's no report of any ship fleeing in overdrive. But if any did escape, its report would lead to an immediate discovery of the exact improvement in our missiles. I am saying, Majesty, that if one enemy ship escaped that battle, we can look for all the enemy ships to be equipped with revised missiles like ours."

Bors raised his voice. "May I speak?"

"Ah," said the king. "Bors. By all means."

"I make two points," said Bors with reserve. "One is that the Mekinese are as likely to think our missiles captured theirs as that they were uncomputable. Missile designers have been trying for years to create interceptors which capture enemy missiles. The Mekinese may decide we've accomplished something they've failed at, but they're not likely to think we've accomplished something they never even thought of!"

Voices babbled. A pompous voice said firmly that nobody would be so absurd. Several others said urgently that it was very likely. All defense departments had research in progress, working on the capture of enemy missiles. If it were accomplished, ships could be destroyed as a matter of routine.

Bors waited until the king thumped on the table for silence.

"The second thing I have to say, Majesty, is that there can be no plans made until we know what we have to do. And that depends on what Mekin thinks has happened. Maybe no enemy ship got home. Maybe some ships took back inaccurate reports. It would be very uncomfortable for them to report the truth. Maybe they said we had some new and marvellous weapon which no fleet could resist. In that case, we are in a very fine position."

The king said gloomily, "You think of abominably clever things, Captain. But I am afraid we've been too clever. If Mekin masses its entire fleet to destroy us, they can do it, new missile-system or no new missile-system! We have somehow to keep them from resolving to do just that!"

"Which," said Bors, "may mean negotiation. But there's no point in negotiating unless you know what your enemy thinks you've got. We could have Mekin scared!"

There was a murmur, which could not be said to be either agreement or disagreement. The king looked about him.

"We cannot continue to fight!" he said sternly, "not unless we can defend Kandar—which we can't as against the Mekinese main fleet. We were prepared to sacrifice our lives to earn respect for our world, and to leave a tradition behind us. We must still be prepared to sacrifice even our vanity."

The vice-admiral said, "But one sacrifices, Majesty, to achieve. Do you believe that Mekin will honor any treaty one second after it ceases to be profitable to Mekin?"

"That," said the king, "has to be thought about. But Bors is right on one point. We should come to no final conclusion without information—"

"Majesty," Bors interrupted. His words came slowly, as if an idea were forming as he spoke. "The enemy may have no news at all. They may know they've been defeated, but they'd *never* expect *our* freedom from loss. Why couldn't a single Kandarian ship turn up at some port where its appearance would surely be

reported to Mekin? It could pose as the sole survivor of our fleet, which would indicate that the rest of us were wiped out in the battle. If we *had* all been wiped out, there'd be no point in their fusion-bombing Kandar. Certainly they expected us to be destroyed. One surviving ship can prove that we *have* been!"

The king's expression brightened.

"Ah! And we can go and intern ourselves—"

There was a growl. The pompous voice said, "We would gain time, Majesty. Our fear is that Mekin may feel it must avenge a defeat. But if one ship claims to be the sole survivor of our fleet, it announces a Mekinese victory. That is a highly desirable thing!"

The king nodded.

"Yes-s-s.... We were unwise to survive the battle. We can hide our unwisdom. Captain Bors, I will give you orders presently. As of now, I will accept reports on battle-damage given and received." As Bors saluted and turned to the door, the king added, "I will be with the Pretender presently."

It was an order and Bors obeyed it. He went to find his uncle. He found the former monarch in the king's cabin of this, the largest ship of the fleet. The Pretender greeted Bors unhappily.

"A very bad business," he observed.

"Bad," agreed Bors. "But for the two of us, a defeat for Mekin is not bad news."

"For us and Tralee," the old man said reprovingly, "there is some pleasure. But it is still bad. Every ship we destroyed must be replaced. Like every other subject planet, Tralee will be required to build—how many ships? Ten? Twenty? We have increased the burden Mekin lays on Tralee. And worse—much worse—"

"There's such a thing," protested Bors, "as using a microscope on troubles! We did something we badly wanted to! If we can keep it up—"

The Pretender said, "How is the food-supply on your ship? How long can you feed your crew without supplies from some base?"

Bors swore. The question had the impact of a blow. His *Isis*, like the rest of the fleet, had taken off from Kandar to fight and be destroyed. There were emergency rations on board, of course. But the food-storage compartments

hadn't been filled. The fleet did not expect to go on living, so it did not prepare to go on eating. It would have been absurd to carry stores for months when they expected to live only hours. It simply hadn't occurred to anyone to load provisions for a long operation away from base.

"That's what the king is worrying about," said the Pretender. "We've some thousands of men who will be hungry presently. If we reveal that we survived the battle, Mekin's tributaries will begin to think. They might even hope—which Mekin would have to stop immediately. If we do not reveal that we still exist, what can be done about starving ship-crews? It is a bad business. It would have been much better if the fleet had been destroyed, as we expected, in a gesture of pure fury over its own helplessness."

Bors said sardonically, "We can all commit suicide, of course!"

The Pretender did not answer. His nephew sank into a chair and glowered at the wall. The situation was contrary to all the illusions cherished by the human race. To act decently and with honor is somehow fitting to a man and consistent with the nature of the universe, so that decency and honor may prosper. But recent events denied it. Men who were willing to die for their countrymen only injured them by the attempt. And now the conduct which honor would approve turned upon them to bring the consequences of treason and villainy.

A long time passed. Bors sat with clenched hands. It was the barbaric insistence of Mekin upon conquest that was at fault, of course. But this happens everywhere, as it has throughout all history. There are, really, three kinds of people in every community, as there have always been. There are the barbarians, and there are the tribesmen, and there are the civilized. This was true when men lived on only one planet, and doubtless was true when the first village was built. There were civilized men even then. If there was progress, they brought it about. And in every village there were, and are, tribesmen, men who placidly accept the circumstances into which they are born, and who wish no change at all. And everywhere and at all times there are barbarians. They seek personal triumphs. They thrive on high emotional victories. And at no time will barbarians ever leave either civilized men or tribesmen alone. They crave triumphs over them and each other, and they create disaster everywhere, until they are crushed.

Bors said evenly, "If the king's planning to surrender the fleet to Mekin as ransom for Kandar, it won't work."

"He's considering it," said his uncle. "It will be a way of giving them the victory

we cheated them of, though we didn't intend to win."

"It won't work," repeated Bors. "It won't do a bit of good. They'll want to punish Kandar because it wasn't beaten. They feed on destruction and brutality. They're barbarians. The economic interpretation of history doesn't apply here! The Mekinese who run things *want* to be evil. They will be until they're crushed."

"Crushed?" asked the Pretender bitterly. "Is there a chance of that?"

Bors considered gravely. Then he said, "I think so."

The door opened and the king came in. Bors rose and the king nodded. He spoke to the Pretender.

"Somebody raised the question of food," he said. "There isn't any to speak of, of course. You'd think grown men would face facts! There's not a man willing to accept what is, and work from that! Lunatics!"

He flung himself into a chair.

"Suggested," he continued, "that a part of the fleet go to Norden to buy food and bring it back. Of course Mekin wouldn't hear about it, wouldn't guess at the survival of the fleet because food was bought in such quantities! Suggested, that a part of the fleet go to some uncolonized planet and hunt meat. Try to imagine success in that venture! Suggested, that we travel a long distance, pick out a relatively small world, land and seize its spaceport and facilities and equip ourselves to bomb Mekin to extinction. And do it in a surprise attack! Suggested —"

The king shook his head angrily. He did not look royal. He did not look confident. He looked embittered and even helpless. But he still looked like a very honest man trying to make up for his admitted deficiencies.

"Majesty," said Bors.

The king turned his eyes.

"You're going to send me off for news," said Bors. "I suggested earlier that my ship pretend to be the sole survivor of the fleet. I suggest now that the ship add the wild and desperate boast that since there's no longer a world which will sponsor it, it's turned pirate. It will take vengeance on its own. It defies the might of Mekin and it dares the Mekinese fleet to do something about it."

"Why?" asked the king.

"Pirates," Bors answered, controlling his enthusiasm, "have to be hunted down. It takes many ships to hunt down a pirate. I should be able to keep a good-sized slice of the Mekinese navy busy simply lying in wait for me here and there."

"And?"

"There are tribute-ships which carry food from the subject worlds to Mekin. Hating Mekin as befits the sole survivor of this fleet, Majesty, it would be natural for me to capture such ships, even if I could do nothing better with them than send them out to space to be wasted. They wouldn't be wasted, naturally. They'd come here."

The king said, "But you couldn't supply the fleet indefinitely!"

Bors nodded agreement. But he waited.

"You may try," said the king querulously. "Have you something else up your sleeve?"

Bors nodded in his turn.

"Don't tell me what it is," said the king. "So long as the fleet gets some food and its existence isn't known.... If I knew what you're up to, I might feel I had to object."

"I think not, Majesty," Bors said, showing a rare smile. "I'll need some extra men. If I do capture food-ships, they'll be useful."

"I can't imagine that anything would be useful," said the king bitterly. "Tell the admiral to give them to you."

Bors saluted and left the room. He went directly to the admiral who in theory was second in command only while the king was aboard. He explained his mission and some of his intentions. The admiral listened stonily.

"I'll give you fifty men," he said. "I think you'll be killed, of course. But if you live long enough to convince them that the fleet's been destroyed, you'll be of service."

"What," Bors asked, with a trace of humor, "can possibly be done about the fact that we wiped out a Mekinese fleet instead of letting it exterminate us?"

"The matter," the admiral answered seriously, "is under consideration."

Bors shrugged and went to his own ship, the *Isis*. He was excessively uncomfortable. He'd said to his uncle, and implied to the king, that he had some plan in mind. He did, but it angered him to know that he counted on assistance; that, in theory, he could not possibly accomplish it alone. It was irritating to realize that he expected Gwenlyn and her father to turn up, with their Talents, when absolutely nobody outside of the fleet could possibly imagine where the fleet had gone. On Kandar it must be assumed, by now, that it was dead.

His ship's boat clanked into position in the lifeboat blister. The valves closed on it. A moment later there was a whistling murmur, and the boat's vision-ports clouded over outside and then cleared. He stepped out into the ship's atmosphere. His second-in-command greeted him in the control-room.

"I was trying to reach you at the flagship, sir," he said. "The yacht *Sylva* is lying a few miles off. Her owner has forwarded news reports to the flagship. He asks that you receive him when you can, sir."

Bors's apparent lack of surprise was real. He wasn't surprised. But he was annoyed with himself for expecting something so impossible as the *Sylva* tracing the fleet through an overdrive voyage of days to a most unlikely destination like Glamis.

"Tell him to come aboard," he commanded.

He went to talk to the mess officer, reflecting that he would ask the Morgans how the *Sylva* had known where to come, and they'd tell him, and it would be extremely unlikely, and he would accept the explanation. The mess-officer looked harassed at the news of fifty additional crewmen to be fed.

"Principles of prudence and common sense," said Bors, "don't apply any more. We'll feed them somehow."

He went back to the control-room. When Morgan appeared, beaming expansively, Bors was again unsurprised to see Gwenlyn with him. Logan, the Mathematics Talent, followed in their wake, looking indifferently about him.

"We wiped out the fleet headed for Kandar," Bors observed. "I don't suppose that's news, to you?"

Morgan cheerfully shook his head.

"And we're in considerably more trouble than before. Is that news?"

"No," admitted Morgan. "It's reasonable for you to be."

"Then, damnit, I'm going off on a pirating-news-gathering-food-raiding cruise alone," said Bors. "Is that news?"

"We brought Logan," said Morgan, "to go with you. He'll be useful. That's Talents—"

"—Incorporated information and I can depend on it," said Bors dourly. "In plain common sense the odds are rather high against my accomplishing anything, such as coming back."

Morgan looked at his daughter. He grinned.

"We heard gloom from him the other day before a certain space-battle, didn't we?" He turned back to Bors. "Look, Captain. Our Talents don't prophesy. Precognition simply says that when there are so many thousand ways an event in the future can happen, then, in one of those several thousand ways, it will. Precognition doesn't say which way. It doesn't say how. Especially, it doesn't say why. But we have a very firm precognition by a very reliable Talent that you'll be alive and doing something very specific a year from now. So we assume you won't be permanently killed in the meantime."

"But anything else can happen?"

"More or less," admitted Morgan.

"What will happen?"

"We don't know!" said Morgan again. "Someday I may take you aside and explain the facts of precognition and other talents as I understand them. I'm probably quite wrong. But I do know better than to try to pry certain kinds of information from my Talents. Right now—"

"I'm going to try to capture a, what you might call a tribute-ship, loaded with food for Mekin."

"Tralee," said Morgan with finality. "You'll try there."

"Will I capture a food-ship there?" asked Bors.

"How the devil would I know?" Morgan snapped.

"You asked the wrong question," said Gwenlyn cheerfully. "If you asked if there's a cargo-ship down on Tralee, loading foodstuffs for Mekin, there can be an answer to that."

"Is there?"

"At the moment, yes," Morgan answered. "So the dowsing Talent says."

"Then I'll go there," said Bors.

"I thought you might," said Morgan. He looked at his daughter.

"May I come along?" asked Gwenlyn. "With an assortment of Talents? My father's going to have long conferences with the king. He'll need some Talents here to work out things. But I could go along on your ship with a few of the others. We could help a lot."

"No!" said Bors grimly.

"I thought not," said Morgan. "Very well. Logan, you'll help Captain Bors, I'm sure."

The math Talent said offhandedly;

"Any calculations he needs, of course."

He looked about him with a confident, modestly complacent air.

Bors walked with Morgan and his daughter to the airlock. He turned to Gwenlyn. "I don't mean to be ungallant, refusing to let you run risks."

"I'm flattered but annoyed," Gwenlyn answered. "It means I'll have to take drastic measures. Luck!"

She and her father went into the *Sylva's* space-boat. The blister doors closed. Bors went back to the control room. He began to set up the computations for astrogation from the sun of Glamis to the sun of Tralee. He shortly heard the sound of arrivals via the *Isis's* airlock. Presently, his second-in-command reported fifty additional hands aboard. They included astrogators, drive-engineers and assorted specialists.

After clearance with the flagship, the little warship aimed with painstaking exactitude at Tralee's sun, making due allowance for its proper motion, Glamis's

proper motion, the length of time the light he aimed by had been on its way, the distance, and the *Isis's* travel-rate in overdrive.

Presently Bors said, "Overdrive coming!" and counted down. After "one" he pressed a button. There was the singularly unpleasant sensation of going into overdrive. Then the small fighting ship was alone in its cocoon of warped and twisted space. Until it came out again, there was no possible way by which any message could reach it or its existence be detected or proved. Theory said, in fact, that the cosmos could explode and a ship in overdrive would be unaware of the fact so long as it stayed in overdrive.

But Bors's light cruiser came out where the sun of Tralee was a disk of intolerable brilliance, and all the stars in every direction looked exactly as usual.



Chapter 6

THE *ISIS* APPROACHED TRALEE from the night side, and at a time when the planet's spaceport faced the sun. Tralee was not a base for Mekinese war-craft. To the contrary, it was strictly a conquered world. It was desirable for Mekinese ships to be able to appear as if magically and without warning in its skies. There would be no far-ranging radars on the planet except at its solitary spaceport. Mekinese ships could come out of overdrive, time a solar-system-drive approach to arrive at Tralee's atmosphere in darkness, and be hovering menacingly overhead when dawn broke. Such an appearance had strong psychological effects upon the population.

Bors used the same device with modifications.

His ship plunged out of the sunrise and across half a continent, descending as it flew. When it reached the planet's capital city, there had been less than a minute between the first notification by radar and its naked-eye visibility. When it came into sight at the spaceport it was less than four thousand feet high and it went sweeping for the landing-grid at something over mach one. Its emergency-rockets roared. It decelerated smoothly and crossed the upper rim of the great, lacy metal structure with less than a hundred feet to spare. In fractions of an additional minute it was precisely aground some fifty yards from the spaceport office. Steam and smoke rose furiously from where its rocket-flames had played.

Lock-doors opened. Briskly moving landing-parties trotted across the ground toward the grid-control building. There were two ships already in the spaceport. One was a Mekinese guard-ship of approximately the armament of the *Isis*. Weapons trained swiftly upon it. Missiles roared across the half-mile of distance. They detonated, chemical explosives only. The Mekinese guard-ship flew apart. What remained was not truly identifiable as a former ship. It was fragments.

Bors asked curtly, "Grid office?"

The landing-party was inside. A small tumult came out of a speaker. A voice said:

"All secure in the grid office, sir."

"Hook in to planetary broadcast, declare a first-priority emergency, and run your tape," commanded Bors.

He said over the ship's speakers, "Everything going well so far. Prize crew, take the cargo-ship. Keep the crew aboard. Then report."

Ten men poured out of the grounded light cruiser's starboard port and trotted on the double toward the other ship aground. The weapons on Bors's ship did not bear upon it.

The sun shone. Clouds drifted tranquilly across the sky. Masses of smoke from the demolition-missiles that had smashed the guard-ship rose, curled and very slowly dissipated. Ten men entered the bulbous cargo-ship.

Up to now the entire affair had consumed not more than five minutes, from the appearance of a blip on a spaceport radar screen, to the beginning of a full-volume broadcast. Bors turned on the receiver and listened to the harsh voice—especially chosen from among the crew—which now came out of every operating broadcast receiver on the planet.

"Notice to the people of Tralee! There is aground on Tralee a ship with no home planet nor any loyalty except to its hatred of Mekin. We were part of the fleet of Kandar until that fleet was destroyed. Now we fight Mekin alone! We are pirates. We are outcasts. But we still have arms to defend ourselves with! We demand...."

A voice said curtly in Bors's ear, "Cargo-ship secured, sir."

"Take off on rockets and maneuver as ordered," said Bors. "Then rendezvous as arranged."

He returned his attention to the broadcast. It was a deliberately savage, painstakingly desperate, carefully terrifying message to the people of Tralee. It demanded supplies and arms on threat of destroying the city around it. A single one of its combat-missiles, as a matter of fact, could have done a good job of destruction on this metropolis.

The broadcast would be a shattering experience to men who had reconciled themselves to subjugation by the rulers of Mekin. The planet Tralee was now governed for the benefit of Mekin by the kind of men who would do such work. They knew that they could stay in office only so long as Mekin upheld them. To hear their protectors denounced if only by a single voice....

There was a monstrous roaring outside. The cargo-ship took off for the skies. It was a thousand feet high before the weapons on the *Isis* stirred. It seemed to those below that the pirate crew was taken unawares by the cargo-ship's escape. That was part of Bors's plan.

A weapon of the grounded *Isis* roared. A missile hurtled after the fugitive, and missed. It went on past its apparent target and did not even detonate at nearest proximity, as it should have done. It vanished, and the cargo-ship continued to rise in seemingly panicky fashion. It slanted from its headlong lift, and curved away and darted for emptiness at its maximum acceleration. A second missile from the fighting-ship missed. The cargo-ship dwindled, and dwindled, and now the *Isis* appeared to take deliberate measurements of the distance and acceleration of its target. It might be assumed that its radars needed to be readjusted from the long-range-finding required in space, to the shorter-range measurements called for now.

Something plunged after the fleeing cargo-boat, by now merely a pin-point in the blue. The rising object moved so swiftly that it was invisible. Then it detonated, and the fumes of the explosion blotted out the fugitive. When they cleared, the sky was empty.

There had now been a lapse of less than ten minutes from the first sighting of the *Isis* screaming toward the spaceport. The guard-ship had been destroyed and the cargo-ship which seemed to flee had apparently been destroyed. When someone had leisure to think, it would appear that the cargo-boat's crew had overcome the armed party which entered it and then taken the foolish course of flight.

Bors waited, listening absently. A voice:

"All clear on board the prize, sir. The cargo seems to be mostly foodstuffs, sir. Proceeding to rendezvous as ordered. Off."

Bors nodded automatically and resumed listening to the broadcast. Matters were going well. Everything had gone through with the precision of clockwork, which meant simply that Bors had planned in detail something that had never been anticipated and so had not been counter-planned. Before anyone on Tralee realized that anything had happened, everything had happened—the *Isis* aground, the guard-ship demolished, the grid taken over, and a fleeing cargo-ship apparently destroyed in the upper atmosphere. And a harsh voice now rasped out of loudspeakers everywhere, uttering threats, cursing Mekin—few could believe their ears—and rousing hopes which Bors knew regretfully were bound to be

disappointed.

The rasping broadcast cut off in the middle of a syllable. Somebody had come to believe that he really heard what he thought he heard. Now there would be reaction. At the sunrise-line on Tralee only a handful of people were awake. They were dumbfounded. Where people breakfasted, the intentionally savage voice made food seem unimportant. Where it was midday, waves of violent emotion swept over the land.

"Call the defense forces," Bors commanded the grid office, by transmitter. "They'll be Mekinese—Mekinese-officered, anyhow. We don't want them to get ideas of attacking us, so identify us as the pirate ship *Isis* and order all police and garrison troops to stay exactly where they are. Say we've got all our fusion-bombs armed to go off in case of an artillery-fire hit."

This was the most valid of all possible threats against the most probable form of attack. Fusion-bombs could be used against enemies in space, or for the annihilation of a population, but they could not be used in police operations against a subject people. To coerce people one must avoid destroying them. So while a ship the size of the *Isis* could—and did—carry enough confined hellfire in its missile warheads to destroy an area hundreds of miles across, the occupation troops of Mekin could not use such weapons. They needed blast-rifles for minor threats and artillery for selective destruction. In any case no sane man would try to destroy the *Isis* aground after an announcement that its bombs were armed, and that they were fused to explode.

"Now repeat the demand for stores," ordered Bors. "We might as well stock up. Speed is essential. We can't use stores they've time to booby-trap or poison. Give them twenty minutes to start the stuff arriving. Demand fuel, extra rocket-fuel especially. Remind them about our bombs."

He waited. Speakers beside him could inform him of any action anywhere outside or inside the ship. The landing-party in the spaceport building reported as it went through the spaceport records, picking up such information concerning Mekinese commercial regulations, identification-calls and anticipated ship-movements as might prove useful elsewhere. The rasping voice began to broadcast again. It went on for fifteen seconds and cut off.

"Tell the government broadcasting system that if they stop relaying our broadcast," said Bors, "we'll heave a bomb into the police barracks and the supply-depots."

He heard the threat issued and very soon thereafter an agitated voice announced to the people of Tralee that a pirate ship was in possession of the planet's spaceport and that it insisted upon broadcasting to the planet's people. It was considered unwise to refuse. Therefore the broadcast would continue, but of course citizens could turn off their sets.

There came a roar of anger and the harsh-voiced broadcaster returned to the air. His taped broadcast had run out. Now he bellowed such subversive profanity directed at the officials of Tralee-under-Mekin that Bors smiled sourly. It was not good for Mekinese prestige to have a subject people know that one ship could defy the empire, even for minutes. It was still less desirable to have the members of the puppet government described as dogs of particularly described breeds, of particularly described characteristics, and particular lack of legitimacy. Bors had chosen for his broadcast a man of vivid imagination and large vocabulary. He did not want the *Isis* to appear under discipline, lest it seem to act under orders. He wanted to create the impression of men turned pirates because everything they lived for had been destroyed, and who now were running amok among the planets Mekin had subjugated.

The broadcast was not incitement to revolt, because Bors's ship was posing as the only survivor of a planet's fleet. But it conveyed such contempt and derision and hatred of all things Mekinese that for months to come men would whisper jokes based on what an *Isis* crewman had said on Tralee's air. The respect the planet's officials craved would drop below its former low level.

Time passed. Bors, of course, could not send a landing-party anywhere, lest it be sniped. He had actually accomplished the purpose for which he'd landed, the getting of a shipload of food out to space, the announcement of the destruction of Kandar's fleet and the spreading of contempt and derision for Mekin in Tralee. Now he had to keep anyone from suspecting the importance of the cargo-ship. The demand for stores was a cover-up for things already done. But that cover-up had to be completed.

Vehicles appeared at the edge of the landing-grid. Figures advanced individually, waving white flags. Bors sent men out with small arms to get their messages. These were the supplies he'd demanded. Food. Rocket-fuel. More food.

The vehicles trundled into the open and stopped. Men from the *Isis* waved away the drivers and took over the trucks. They brought most of them to the ship's side. A petty-officer came into the control room and saluted.

"Sir," he said briskly. "One of the drivers told me his load of grub had time-bombs in it. The secret police use time-bombs and booby-traps here, sir, to keep the people terrified. He says the bombs will go off after we're out in space, sir."

"What did you do?" asked Bors.

"I pretended the truck stalled and I couldn't start it. Two other drivers tipped off our men. We left those trucks and some others out on the field, so the drivers wouldn't be suspected of alerting us."

"Good work," said Bors. "Better put detectors on all parcels from all trucks before bringing them aboard."

"Booby-traps can be made very tricky indeed, but when they are used by secret police..." Bors allowed himself to rage for a moment only, at the idea of that kind of terrorism practiced by a government on its supposed citizens. It would be intended to enforce the totalitarian idea that what is not commanded for the ordinary citizen to do is forbidden to him. But secret-police booby-traps and time-bombs would be standardized. He hadn't allowed time for complex, detection-proof devices to be made. Detectors would pick out any ordinary trickery.

The harsh-voiced broadcaster continued to harangue the population of Tralee, of which the least of his words was high treason. They enjoyed the broadcast very much.

Presently Bors began to fidget. The *Isis* had been aground for thirty-five minutes. He had sat in the control room that whole time, supervising a smoothly-running operation. He had had to supervise it. Nobody else could have planned and carried it out. But it was not heroic. He had the line officer's inherent scorn for administrative officers, who are necessary but not glamorous or admired. He was stuck with just that kind of duty now. But he fretted. The local officials were given time to get over their panic. They ought to be planning some counter-measure by this time.

He called the spaceport office.

"There should be a map of the city somewhere about," he said crisply. "Send it along special. Bring a communicator call-book. If you find any news-reports, new or old, we want them."

"Yes, sir," said a brisk voice. "*The broadcast's right, sir?*"

"It is," said Bors. "You're mining the grid set-up. We'll blow it before we leave. There's no point in letting Mekin set down transports loaded with troops to punish innocent people because they heard the Mekinese accurately described. Make 'em land on rockets and there won't be so many landing."

"Yes, sir. Will do, sir."

A click. Bors heard heavy materials being loaded aboard. Each object was being examined by a detector. The loading process stopped. Bors pressed a button.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Looks like a booby-trapped box, sir," said a voice. "Among the supplies, sir."

"Take it off a hundred yards and riddle it," ordered Bors. "This may settle a problem for us."

"Yes, sir."

Bors fidgeted again. A messenger from the grid-control building arrived. He had a map of the capital city of Tralee.

There was an explosion. A violent one. Bors looked out a port and saw where the suspected parcel had been set up as a target a hundred yards from the ship. It had been riddled with blast-rifle bolts, and had exploded. It might not have destroyed the *Isis* if it had exploded in space, but it would not have done it any good.

Bors pushed the button for the loading-port compartment.

"Throw out all the stuff loaded so far," he commanded. "Some of it may be booby-trapped like that last one. We won't take a chance. Heave it all out again."

"Yes, sir."

Bors gave other orders. The harsh-voiced broadcast stopped. Bors's own voice went out on the air, steely-hard.

"Captain Bors, pirate ship *Isis* speaking," he said coldly. "We demanded supplies. They were sent us—government-supplied. We have found one booby-trap included. In retaliation for this attempted assassination, we are going to lob chemical-explosive missiles into the principal government buildings of this city. We give three minutes' leeway for clerks and other persons to get clear of those buildings. The three minutes start now!"

The sun shone tranquilly on the planet Tralee. White clouds floated with infinite leisureliness across the blue sky. There was no motion of any sort within the wide, open area of the landing-grid. Over a large part of this world's surface all activity had stopped while men listened to a broadcast.

"Fifteen seconds gone," said Bors icily.

He wrote out an order and passed it for execution.

"Thirty seconds gone."

From twenty giant buildings in the city, a black tide of running figures began to pour. When they reached the street, they went on running. They wanted to get as far as possible from the buildings Bors had said would be destroyed.

"Forty-five seconds gone," said Bors implacably.

A voice spoke from the grid-control building, where men were now placing explosives with precisely calculated effects. The voice came on microwaves to the ship.

"Sir," said the voice, *"landing-grid reporting. Space-yacht Sylva reports breakout from overdrive and asks coordinates for landing. Purpose of visit, pleasure-travel."*

Bors swore, then smiled to himself. Gwenlyn had threatened to do something drastic!

"Say landing's forbidden," he commanded an instant later. "Advise immediate departure."

He pressed a button and said evenly:

"One minute gone! In two minutes more we send our bombs and take off."

Streets outside the government buildings were filled from building-wall to building-wall by clerks drafted to staff the incredible, arbitrary government set up on its tributary worlds by Mekin. Bors scribbled a list of buildings to be ranged on. The map from the spaceport office would help. He marked the Ministry of Police, which would contain the records essential to the operation of the planet-wide police system. Anything that happened to those records would be so much good fortune for Tralee, and so much bad for the master race and its quislings. He marked the Ministry of the Interior, which would house the

machinery for requisitions of tribute to Mekin. The Ministry of Public Order would be the headquarters of the secret and the political police. It ran the forced-labor camps. It filed all anonymous accusations. It kept records on all persons suspected of the crime of patriotism. If anything happened to those records, it would be all to the good.

"Two minutes gone," said Bors.

The voice from the spaceport control building said briskly:

"Demolition charges placed, sir. Ready to evacuate and fire. Sir, the space-yacht Sylva sends a message to the captain of the pirate ship. It says they'll wait."

Bors said, "Damn! All right." Then into the broadcast-microphone, "Two-and-a-half minutes. There will be no further count-down. In thirty seconds we fire missiles into government buildings, in retaliation for an attempt to assassinate us with time-bombs. The next sound you hear will be our missiles arriving." He cut back to the grid-control building. "Fire all charges and report to the ship."

Almost instantly curt, crisp reports sounded nearby. The landing-party came smartly back to the airlock, while explosions continued in the building they'd left.

"Launcher-tubes train on targets," Bors commanded. He pressed another button. "Rocket-room, make ready for lift." Back to the launcher-tube communicator. "Fire missiles one, two, three, four, five, six."

There were boomings, which rose to bellowings as devastation tore away from the *Isis's* launching-tubes. Bors said irritably to the rocket-room:

"Take her up!"

And then the ship lifted on her rockets—they were not solely for emergency use, as on cargo-ships—and rushed toward the sky. As the ship mounted on its column of writhing smoke, other smoky columns spouted up. Six of them. But they were limited. They went up two thousand feet and then tended to mushroom. Bits of debris went higher and spread more widely, and for a time there were fragments of buildings and their contents flying wildly about.

But the ship went straight upward. The city and the open country beyond it shrank swiftly. The spouted smokes of explosions in the city were left behind. Mountains appeared at one horizon and a sea at another. Then the vast expanse

of the planet suddenly acquired a curved edge, and the ship again went up and up—while the sky turned dark and some stars appeared in futile competition with the sun—and the surface of Tralee became visibly the near side of an enormous globe.

Then the planet became plainly what it was, a great ball floating in space, one-half of it brilliant in the sunshine and one part of it bathed in night.

Bors put on the solar-system drive and changed course. A voice came through:

"Calling pirate ship ... calling pirate ship.... Space yacht Sylva calling pirate ship...."

Bors growled into a microphone, "What the devil are you doing in this place. What's happened?"

Gwenlyn's voice, bland and amused. *"Nothing happened. But we've got some news for you. Make rendezvous at the fourth planet?"*

Bors swore again. That was where he was to meet the cargo-ship captured and sent aloft, supposedly destroyed on Tralee. But he drove on out, around and away from Tralee.

He was reasonably satisfied with his landing on Tralee. With some luck, the news of the landing of a lone survivor of the Kandarian fleet might reach Mekin before it was aware of what had happened to its occupation force. With a little more luck, the attention of Mekin would be devoted more to a ship which dared to turn pirate than to Kandar itself. With unlimited favorable fortune, Mekin might actually send ships to hunt the *Isis* instead of asking questions on Kandar.

But Bors made a mental note. The more time that passed before Mekin knew what had happened, the better. So a ship or two or three might be detached from the fleet and sent back to hang off Kandar. If a single ship came inquiringly, it might be sniped and the news of Kandar suppressed for a while longer. And it was conceivable that Mekin might come to worry more about other matters than the success or failure of a routine expansion of its empire.

The fourth planet loomed up on schedule. Bors was irritated, as often before, by the relatively slow solar-system drive. Overdrive was sometimes not fast enough—but solar-system drive was infuriatingly slow. Yet one couldn't use overdrive in a solar system. Approaching a planet on overdrive would be like trying to garage a ground-car at sixty miles an hour. One couldn't stop where one wanted

to. He wondered vaguely if Logan, the math Talent, could handle such a problem, and dismissed the idea. One could break a circuit with an accuracy of microseconds, but that wouldn't be close enough for overdrive. It wouldn't be practical.

Then the ice-sheet of Tralee's nearest neighbor planet spread out in the vision-port's range of view. Bors called for the cargo-ship. It answered almost immediately. It was standard practice, of course, that the site of a meeting planned at a given planet would be wherever its poles pointed nearest to galactic north. The cargo-ship had just arrived. It barely responded before the *Sylva* began to call again.

The three ships, then, joined their orbits and went swinging about the glacier-world beneath them while they conferred.

The report from the cargo-ship was unexpectedly satisfactory. It had been almost completely loaded, and its cargo was largely foodstuffs intended for Mekin. Kandar's fleet-in-hiding was already subsisting on emergency rations. This cargo of assorted frozen foods would be welcome. Bors gave orders for it to head for Glamis immediately, in overdrive.

Communication had been three-way, and Gwenlyn said quickly;

"Just a moment! Did you pick up any news-reports on Tralee?"

"Hm. Yes. I'd better send them—"

"You'd better?" echoed Gwenlyn, scolding. *"My father stayed with the fleet to try to explain what Talents, Incorporated can do! He kept most of the Talents with him, for demonstrations! The Department for Predicting Dirty Tricks is there! Don't you remember what that Department works on? Of course you've got to send those news-reports!"*

Bors ordered a space-boat to come from the cargo-ship for the reports.

"Would you like to come to dinner on the yacht?" asked Gwenlyn. *"You're all living on emergency rations. Nobody asked us to divide our supplies with the fleet. I can give you a nice meal."*

"Better not," said Bors curtly, and mumbled thanks.

He ordered the cargo-ship to send as much of its stores as the space-boat could

conveniently carry.

"*Then how about some cigars?*" asked Gwenlyn. She seemed at once amused and approving, because Bors would not indulge himself in a really satisfying meal while his crew lived on far from appetizing emergency foodstuffs.

"No," said Bors. "No cigars either. You said you had some news for me. What is it?"

"*I brought along our ship-arrival Talent,*" said Gwenlyn blandly. "*He can only tell when a ship will arrive at the solar system where he is, so he had to come here to precognize.*"

Bors felt again that stubborn incredulity which Talents, Incorporated would always rouse in a mind like his.

"*There'll be a ship arriving here in two days, four hours, sixteen minutes from now,*" said Gwenlyn matter-of-factly. "*He thinks it's a fighting ship, though he can't be sure. It could be a cruiser or something like that doing mail duty, coming to deliver orders and receive reports. You can't run an empire without a regular news system, and Mekin wouldn't depend on commercial ships for government business.*"

"Good!" said Bors. "Thanks!"

There was a pause.

"*What will you do now?*"

"Try to raise the devil somewhere else," said Bors. "Try to pick up another food-ship, probably. Maybe I ought to let this ship alone, to carry news of the pirate ship *Isis* back to Mekin, but— No. They use booby-traps as police devices!"

It was not reasonable, but Bors could not think of missing a Mekinese warship. The idea of a government using booby-traps to enforce its orders somehow put it beyond forgiveness, and with the government all those who served it willingly.

"*You'll go to Garen then?*" asked Gwenlyn.

Bors felt a sharp sting of annoyance. He had carefully kept secret the choice of Garen Three as the next planet to be invaded by the pseudo-pirate ship. It was upsetting to find that Gwenlyn knew about it. Blast Talents, Incorporated!

"The dowsing Talent," said Gwenlyn, *"says there's a battleship aground there. There've been some riots. The people of Garen don't like Mekin, either. Strange? The battleship is to overawe them."*

"How do you know that?" demanded Bors.

"The Department for Predicting Dirty Tricks was reading old news-reports," she told him. *"We're leaving now. 'Bye."*

"Goodbye," said Bors, and sighed, not knowing whether he felt regret or relief.

The space-yacht *Sylva* flicked out of sight. It had gone into overdrive. Bors realized that he hadn't noticed which way it pointed. He should have taken note. But he shook his head. He gave the cargo-ship detailed orders, receiving its space-boat and what food it had been able to bring. He sent it off to meet his fleet at Glamis.

He stayed in orbit around the fourth planet to wait for a Mekinese fighting-ship. He began, too, to make long-range plans.

Part Three

Chapter 7

THE MEKINESE SHIP was a cruiser, and it broke out of overdrive within the Tralee solar system just two days, four hours, and some odd minutes after Gwenlyn predicted its coming. Presumably, it had made the customary earlier breakout to correct its course and measure the distance remaining to be run. In overdrive there was not as yet a way to know accurately one's actual speed, and at astronomical distances small errors piled up. Correction of line was important, too, because a course that was even a second off arc could mount up to hundreds of thousands of miles. But even with that usual previous breakout, the Mekinese cruiser did not turn up conveniently close to its destination. It needed a long solar-system drive to make its planetfall.

Bors's long-range radar picked it up before it was near enough to notify its arrival to the planet—if it intended to notify at all. Most likely its program was simply and frighteningly to appear overhead and arrogantly demand the services of the landing-grid to lower it to the ground.

Bors's radar detected the cruiser and instantly cut itself off. The cry of "*Co-ontact!*" went through the ship and all inner doors closed, sealing the ship into sections. Bors was already at the board in the control room. He did not accept the predictions of Talents, Incorporated as absolute truth. It bothered him that such irrational means of securing information should be so accurate. So he compromised in his own mind to the point where, when Talents, Incorporated gave specific information, it was possible; no more. Then, having admitted so much, he acted on the mere possibility, and pretended to be surprised when it turned out to be a fact.

That was the case now. A ship had appeared in this solar system at the time the ship-arrival Talent on the *Sylva* predicted. Bors scowled, and swung the *Isis* in line between Tralee and the new arrival. He turned, then, and drove steadily out toward it. The other ship's screens would show a large blip which was the planet, and in direct line a very much smaller blip which was the *Isis*. The small blip might not be noticed because it was in line with the larger. If it were noticed, it would be confusing, because such things should not happen. But the cruisers of Mekin were not apt to be easily alarmed. They represented a great empire, all of whose landing-grids were safely controlled, and though there was disaffection

everywhere there was no reason to suspect rebellion at operations in space.

For a long time nothing happened. The *Isis* drove to meet the cruiser. The two vessels should be approaching each other at a rate which was the total of their speeds. Bors punched computer-keys and got the gravitational factor at this distance from Tralee's sun. He set the *Isis's* solar-system drive to that exact quantity. He waited.

His own radar was now non-operative. Its first discovery-pulse would have been observed by the Mekinese duty-officer. The fact that it did not repeat would be abnormal. The duty-officer would wonder why it didn't come again.

The astrogation-radar cut off. Then a single strong pulse came. It would be a ranging-pulse. Cargo-ship radars sacrificed high accuracy for wide and deep coverage. But war-vessels carried pulse instruments which could measure distances within feet up to thousands of miles, and by phase-scrambling among the echoes even get some information about the size and shape of the object examined. Not much, but some.

Bors relaxed. Things were going well. When four other ranging-pulses arrived at second intervals, he nodded to himself. This was a warship's reaction. It could be nothing else. That officer knew that something was coming out from Tralee. It was on approximately a collision course. But a ship traveling under power should gain velocity as long as its drive was on. When traveling outward from the sun and not under power, it should lose velocity by so many feet per second to the sun's gravitational pull. Bors's ship did neither. It displayed the remarkably unlikely characteristic of absolutely steady motion. It was not normal. It was not possible. It could not have any reasonable explanation, in the mind of a Mekinese.

Which was its purpose. It would arouse professional curiosity on the cruiser, which would then waste some precious time attempting to identify it. There wouldn't be suspicion because it didn't act suspiciously. Still, it couldn't be dismissed, because it didn't behave in any recognizable fashion. The cruiser would want to know more about it; it shouldn't move at a steady velocity going outward from a sun.

In consequence, Bors got in the first shot.

He said, "Fire one!" when the Mekinese would be just about planning to turn their electron-telescope upon it. A missile leaped away from the *Isis*. It went off

at an angle, and it curved madly, and the instrumentation of the cruiser could spot it as now there, now here, now nearer, and now nearer still. But the computers could not handle an object which not only changed velocity but changed the rate at which its velocity changed.

Missiles came pouring out of the Mekinese ship. They were infinitesimal, bright specks on the radar-screen. They curved violently in flight trying to intercept the *Isis's* missile. They failed.

There was a flash of sun-bright flame very, very far away. There was a little cloud of vapor which dissipated swiftly. Then there was nothing but two or three specks moving at random, their target lost, their purpose forgotten. The fact of victory was an anticlimax.

"All clear," said Bors grimly.

The inner-compartment doors opened. The normal sounds of the ship were heard again. Bors began to calculate the data needed for the journey to Garen. There was the angle and the distance and the proper motions and the time elapsed.... He found it difficult to think in such terms. He was discontented. He'd ambushed a Mekinese cruiser. True, he'd let his own ship be seen, and the Mekinese had warning enough to launch missiles in their own defense. It was not even faintly like the ambush of a cruiser on the bottom of a Kandarian sea, waiting to assassinate a fleet when its complement went on board. But Bors didn't like what he'd just done.

The figures wouldn't come out right. Impatiently, he sent for Logan. The mathematical Talent came into the control room.

"Will you calculate this for me?" Bors asked irritably.

Logan glanced casually at the figures and wrote down the answer. Instantly. Without thought or reflection. Instantly!

Bors couldn't quite believe it. The distance between the two stars was a rounded-off number, of course. The relative proper motion of the two stars had a large plus-or-minus buggler factor. The time-lapse due to distance had a presumed correction and there was a considerable probable error in the speed of translation of the ship during overdrive. It was a moderately complicated equation, and the computation of the probable error was especially tricky. Bors stared at it, and then stared at Logan.

"That's the answer to what you have written there," said Logan condescendingly, "but your figures are off. I've been talking to your computer men. They've given me the log figures on past overdrive jumps and the observed errors on arrival. They're systematic. I noticed it at once."

Bors said, "What?"

"There's a source of consistent error," Logan said patiently. "I found the values to correct it, then I found the source. It's in your overdrive speed."

Bors blinked. Speed in overdrive could not be computed exactly. The approximation was very close—within a fraction of a tenth of one per cent—but when the distance traveled was light-years the uncertainty piled up.

"If you use these figures," said Logan complacently—and he scribbled figures swiftly—"you'll get it really accurate."

Having finished writing the equation, he wrote the solution. Bors asked suspicious questions. Logan answered absently. He knew nothing about overdrive. He didn't understand anything but numbers and he didn't know how he did what he did with them. But he'd worked backward from observed errors in calculation and found a way to keep them out of the answer. And he'd done it all in his head. It was unbelievable—yet Bors believed.

"I'll try your figures," he said. "Thanks."

Logan went proudly away, past an orderly bringing cups of coffee to the control room. Bors aimed the ship according to the calculation Logan had given him, scrupulously setting the breakout timer to the exact figure listed.

He was still uncomfortable about the destruction of the Mekinese cruiser when he said curtly, "Overdrive coming!" He'd have preferred a more sportsmanlike type of warfare. He faced the old, deplorable fact that fighting men had had to adjust to throughout the ages; one can fight an honorable enemy honorably, but against some men scruples count as handicaps.

"Swine!" growled Bors. "They'll make us like them!" Then into the microphone he said, "Five, four, three, two, one...."

He pressed the overdrive button. The sensation of going into overdrive was acutely uncomfortable, as always. Bors swallowed squeamishly and took his cup of coffee.

The *Isis*, then, lay wrapped in a cocoon of stressed space. Its properties included the fact that its particular type of stress could travel much more swiftly than the stresses involved in the propagation of radiation, of magnetism, or gravity. And this state of stress—this overdrive field—did not have a position. It *was* a position. The ship inside it could not be said to be in the real cosmos at all, but when the field collapsed it would be somewhere, and the way it pointed, and how long before collapse, determined in what particular somewhere it would be when it came out. But travel in overdrive was tedious.

As civilization increases man's control of the cosmos, it takes the fun out of it. In prehistoric days a man who had to hunt animals or go hungry may often have gone hungry, but he was never bored by the sameness of his meals. A man who traveled on horseback often got to his destination late, but he was not troubled with ennui on the way. In overdrive, Bors's ship traveled almost with the speed of thought, but there was absolutely nothing to think about while journeying. Not about the journey, anyhow.

While the ship drove on, however, the cargo-ship seized on Tralee made its way toward Glamis and a meeting with the fleet, then gloomily sweeping in orbit around Glamis Two. The food it carried would raise men's spirits a little, but it would not solve the problem of what the fleet was to do. Morgan, on the flagship, expounded the ability of his Talents to perform the incredible, but nobody could find any application of the incredible to the fix the fleet was in. On Kandar, the population knew that there had been a battle off the gas-giant planet, but they did not know the result. The Mekinese fleet had not come. The fleet of Kandar had not returned. The caretaker government met in council and desperately made guesses. It arrived at no hopeful conclusion whatever. The most probable—because most hopeless—conviction seemed to be that the fleet of Mekin had been met and fought, but that it was victorious, and in retaliation for resistance it had gone away to send back swarms of grisly bomb-carriers which would drop atomic bombs in such quantity that for a thousand years to come there would be no life on Kandar.

The light cruiser, the *Isis*, was unaware of these frustrations. It remained in overdrive, where absolutely nothing happened.

Bors reviewed his actions and could not but approve of them tepidly. He'd sent food to the fleet, he'd destroyed two enemy fighting ships and he'd done what he could to harm the Mekinese puppets on Tralee. He'd had them publicly humiliated with well-chosen epithets. He'd destroyed the records and archives of

the secret political police.... Many people on Tralee already blessed him, without knowing who he was. There might yet be hope of better days.

But all things end, even journeys at excessively great multiples of the speed of light. The overdrive timer rang warning bells. Taped breakout notifications sounded from speakers throughout the ship. There was a count-down of seconds, and the abominably unpleasant sensation of breakout, and the ship was in normal space again.

There was the sun of Garen, burning peacefully in a vast void with millions of minute, unwinking lights in the firmament all about it. There was a gas-giant planet, a mere fifteen million miles away. Further out there were the smaller, frozen worlds. Nearer the sun, on the far side of its orbit, there was the planet Garen.

The *Isis* drove for that planet, while Bors tried to decide whether the remarkable accuracy of this breakout was due to accident or to Logan's computations.

Logan appeared as Bors was gloomily contemplating the days needed to reach Garen on solar system drive, because overdrive was too fast. Logan looked offhand and elaborately casual, but he fairly glowed with triumph.

"I found out the fact behind the bugger factor, Captain," he said condescendingly. "The speed of a ship in overdrive varies as the change in mass to the minus fourth. Your computers couldn't tell that! Here's a table for calculating the speed of a ship in overdrive according to its mass and the strength of the overdrive field."

"Fine," said Bors without enthusiasm.

"And to go with it," said Logan, his voice indifferent, but his eyes shining proudly, "just for my own amusement, I computed a complete table of overdrive speeds for this particular ship, with different strengths of field. They run from one point five light-speeds up to the maximum your equipment will give. You have to correct for changes of mass, of course."

Bors was not quite capable of enthusiasm over the computation of tables of complex figures. He simply could not share Logan's thrill of achievement in the results of the neat rows of numerals. Nor had he struggled unduly to grasp the implication of Logan's explanation.

Instead, he said politely, "Very nice. Thank you very much."

Logan's eyes ceased to shine. His wounded pride made him defiant.

"Nobody else anywhere could have worked out that table!" he said stridently. "Nobody! Morgan said you'd appreciate my work! He said you needed my talent! But what good do you see in it? You think I'm a freak!"

Bors realized that he'd been tactless. Logan's experiences before Talents, Incorporated had made him unduly sensitive. He'd done something of which he was proud, but Bors didn't appreciate its magnitude. Logan reacted to the frustration of his vanity.

"Hold it!" said Bors. "I'm not unappreciative. I'm stupid and worried about something. You just figured an overdrive jump for me that's the most accurate I ever heard of! But I'm desperate for time and we've got to spend two days in solar-system drive because we can't make an overdrive hop of less than light-days! So we're losing forty-eight hours or more."

Logan said as stridently as before:

"But I just showed you you don't have to! Cut the field-strength according to that table."

Bors was jolted. It was suddenly self-evident. Logan had said he'd figured a table of overdrive fields for the *Isis* which would work for anything between one point five light-speeds to maximum. One point five light-speeds!

It was one of those absurdities in technology that so often go so long before they are noticed. During the development of overdrive, it had been the effort of every technician to get the fastest possible drive. It was known that with a given mass and a given field-strength, one could get an effective speed of an unbelievable figure. Men had spent their lives trying to increase that figure. But nobody'd ever tried to find out how *slowly* one could travel in overdrive, because solar-system drive took care of *short* distances!

"Wait a minute!" said Bors, staring. "Do you really mean I can drive this ship under two light-speeds in overdrive?"

"Look at the table!" said Logan, trembling with anger. "Look at it! You'll find the figures right there!"

Bors looked. Then he stood up quickly. He left the ship in the care of his second-in-command and plunged into a highly technical discussion with its engineers.

He ran into violent objections. The whole purpose of overdrive was high speed between stars. The engineers insisted that one had to use the strongest possible field. If the field were made feeble, it would become unstable. Everybody knew that the field had to be of maximum strength.

"We'll try minimum," said Bors coldly. "Now let's get to work!"

He had to do much of the labor himself, because the engineers found it necessary to stop at each stage of the effort to explain why it should not be done. He had almost to battle to get an auxiliary circuit paralleling the main overdrive unit, with a transformer to bring down voltage, and a complete new power-supply unit to be cut into the overdrive line while leaving the standard ready for use without delay.

He went back to the control room. He took a distance-reading on the huge planet off to port. He threw on the new, low-power overdrive field. He held it for seconds and broke out. It was still in sight.

The speed of the *Isis*, with the adjusted overdrive, was one point seven lights.

Now, instead of spending days in solar-system drive for planetary approach, Bors went into the new-speed drive and broke out in eleven minutes twenty seconds, and was within a hundred thousand miles of Garen. He'd saved two days and secured the promise of many more such valuable feats.

As soon as the *Isis* broke to normal space near Garen, there was a call on the communicator. A familiar voice;

"Calling Isis! Calling Isis! Sylva calling Isis!"

Bors said softly, "Damnation! For the second time, what are you doing in this place?"

Gwenlyn's voice laughed.

"Traveling for pleasure, Captain Bors! I've news for you. We were allowed to land and then told to leave again. There's a warship down below. I told you about it before. It's still there. There's a huge cargo-ship, too, and there are riots because it's almost finished loading with requisitioned foodstuffs for Mekin. Mekin is—would you believe it?—unpopular on Garen!"

"Very well," said Bors. "I'll see what can be done. Will you carry a message for

me?"

"Happy to oblige, Captain!"

"Tell them that—" Then Bors stopped short. It was not probable that the fleet wave-form and frequency were known to Mekinese ships. But the possibility of low-speed overdrive travel was much too important a military secret to risk under any circumstances. He said, "I'll be along very shortly with some highly encouraging news."

"Who do I tell this to?"

"I name no names on microwaves," he told her. "Get going, will you?"

"To hear," said Gwenlyn cheerfully, *"is to obey."*

Her communicator clicked off. The *Sylva* showed on a radar-screen, but had not been near enough to be sighted direct. The blip shot out from the planet.

Bors growled to himself. The *Isis* floated a hundred thousand miles off Garen. There was no challenge. There was no query from the planet. But Gwenlyn said that there were riots down below. They could be serious enough to absorb the attention usually given to routine. But there was another reason for this inattention. Garen was a part of the Mekinese empire which was not encouraged to trade off-planet except through Mekin. Very few non-Mekinese ships would ever land there, and therefore wouldn't be watched for. It was unlikely that a long-range radar habitually swept space off Garen. The battleship should be more alert, but again there was no danger of space-borne rebellion, and the affair of Kandar might not have been bruited so far away.

But the spaceport would respond to calls, certainly. Bors considered these circumstances. A large cargo-ship loaded with foodstuffs requisitioned to be sent to Mekin. A population which had been rebellious before—witness the battleship aground to overawe resistance—and now was rioting.

Bors called for the extra members of his crew. He uncomfortably outlined the action he had in mind. There was one part that he disliked. He had to stay on board ship. The important action, as he saw it, would take place elsewhere. It was so obviously painful for him to outline a course of action in which other men must take risks he couldn't share, that his men regarded him with pleased affection which he did not guess at. In the end he asked for twenty volunteers, and got fifty.

He swung the *Isis* around to the night side of the planet. Its two port blisters opened and two boats floated free in the orbit Bors had established. The ship moved on ahead.

Just at sunup where the spaceport stood, a voice growled down from outer space.

"Calling ground!" it said contemptuously. *"Calling ground! This is the last ship left of the fleet of Kandar. We're pirates now and we're looking for trouble! There's a battleship down there. Come up and fight or we blast you in your spaceport! Just to prove we can do it—watch!"*

Bors said, "Fire one," and a missile went off toward the planet. It was fused to detonate at the very tip of the fringes of the planet's atmosphere.

It did. There was light more brilliant than a thousand suns. The long low shadows of sunrise vanished. The new-rising sun turned dim by comparison.

The voice from space spoke with intolerable levity. *"Come up with your missiles ready! We'll give you ten thousand miles of height. And if you try to duck out in overdrive...."*

The voice was explicit about what it would do to the Mekinese-occupied areas of Garen if the battleship fled.

It came up to fight. It could do nothing else.

Chapter 8

THE TRICK, of course, was in the timing, and the secret was that Bors knew what he was doing, while those who opposed him did not. Bors had declared himself a pirate on Tralee, and here off Garen he'd claimed the same status. But no Mekinese, as yet, knew why he'd outlawed himself, nor his purpose in challenging a line battleship to fight. It seemed like the raving, hysterical hatred of men with no motive but hate. But it wasn't. The *Isis* could have sent down a missile with a limited-yield warhead if its only purpose had been to kill or to destroy. He could have blasted the warship without warning and it was unlikely that it was alert enough to send up counter-missiles in its own defense. But he'd have had to smash everything else in the spaceport at the same time.

Therefore he'd left his two space-boats in low orbit on the night side of the planet. In thirty minutes or so they'd arrive near the spaceport, where there was a large cargo-ship loaded with foodstuffs, for Mekin. Bors wanted that cargo.

So when the Mekinese battlewagon came lumbering up to space, with her missile-tubes armed and bristling, Bors withdrew the *Isis*. It was not flight. It was a move designed to make sure that when the fight began there would be no stray missiles falling on the planet.

Unseen, the *Isis's* space-boats floated in darkness. They carried ten men each, equipped with small arms and light bombs. They listened to such bits of broadcast information as came from the night beneath them. Boat Number One picked up a news broadcast, and when it was finished, the petty officer in command pulled free the tape that had recorded it and tucked it in his pocket. There were items of interest on it.

The *Isis* came to a stop in space. The battleship rose and rose. It did not drive toward the *Isis*. There was a maximum distance beyond which space-combat was impractical; beyond which missiles became mere blind projectiles moving almost at random and destroying each other without regard to planetary loyalties. There was also a minimum distance, below which missiles were again mere projectiles and could not greatly modify the courses on which they were

launched.

But there was a wide area in between, in which combat was practical. The Mekinese battleship reached a height where it could maneuver on solar-system drive without rockets. It might, of course, flick into overdrive and be gone thousands of millions of miles within seconds. But that would be flight. It would not return accurately to the scene of the fight. So overdrive could not be used as a battle tactic. It could be used only for escape.

Near the planet, where the two space-boats floated, the dawnline appeared at the world's edge. The space-boats swung about, facing backward, and applied power for deceleration. They dropped into the atmosphere and bounced out again, and in again—more deeply—and then swung once more to face along their course. They began a long, shallow, screaming descent from the farthest limits of the planet's atmosphere.

Out where the sun of Garen was a disk of intolerable brilliance and heat, the battleship bumbled on its way. It would seem that its commander scornfully accepted the *Isis's* terms of combat and moved contemptuously to the position where his weapons would be most deadly. His ship's launching-tubes were at the ready. It should be able to pour out a cloud of missiles. In fact, a sardonic voice came from the battleship.

"*Calling pirate,*" said the voice.

"Yes," said Bors.

"*If you wish to surrender—*"

"We don't," said Bors.

"*I was about to say,*" said the sardonic voice, "*that it is now too late.*"

The radar-screen showed tiny specks darting out from that larger speck which was the battleship. They came hurtling toward the *Isis*. Bors counted them. A ship of the *Isis's* class mounted eighteen launching-tubes. She should be able to fire eighteen missiles at a time. The Mekinese ship had fired nineteen. If the *Isis* opened fire, by all the previous rules of space-combat, she would need to use one missile to counter every one of the battleship's, there would still be one left over

to destroy the *Isis*—unless she fired a second spread of missiles, which was virtually impossible before she would be hit.

It was mockery by the skipper of the battleship. He was doubtless much amused at the idea of toying with this small, insolent vessel. But Bors did not try to match him missile for missile. He said evenly,

"Fire one. Fire two. Fire three. Fire four."

He stopped at four. His four missiles went curving wildly, in the general direction, only, of the enemy.

On the planet Garen two shrieking objects came furiously to ground. Men leaped swiftly out of them and trotted toward a small town, a settlement, a group of houses hardly larger than a village. One man delayed by each grounded space-boat, and then ran to overtake the others. Local inhabitants appeared, to stare and to wonder. The two landing-parties, ten men in each, did not pause. They swarmed into the village's single street. There were ground-cars at the street-sides. The men of the landing-parties established themselves briskly. One of them seized a staring civilian by the arm.

"To hell with Mekin," he said conversationally. "Where's the communicator office?"

"Wha—what—?"

"To hell with Mekin," repeated the man from the *Isis*, impatiently. "Where's the communicator office?"

The civilian, trembling suddenly, pointed. Some of the landing-party rushed to it. Four went in. There were the reports of blast-rifles. Smoke and the smell of burnt insulation drifted out. Others of the magically arrived men went methodically down the street, examining each ground-car in turn. One of them cupped his hands and bellowed for the information of alarmed citizens:

"Attention, please! We're from the pirate ship *Isis*. You have nothing to fear from us. We're survivors of Mekin's invasion of Kandar. You will please co-operate with us, and no harm will come to you. Your ground-cars will be disabled so you can't report us. You will not be punished for this! Repeat: you will not be punished!"

He repeated the announcement. Others of the swiftly-moving landing-parties drove the chosen ground-cars away from the streets. The remaining cars received a blaster-bolt apiece. In seven minutes and thirty seconds from the landing of the small space-craft, a motley assortment of cars roared out of the village, heading for the capital city of Garen. As the last car cleared the houses, there was a monstrous explosion. One of the space-boats flew to bits. Before the cars had vanished, there was a second explosion. Another space-boat vanished in flame and debris. The landing-party had no way to return to space. The inhabitants of the village had no way to report their coming except in person and by traveling some considerable distance on foot. They were singularly slow in making that report. The men of the space-boats had said they were pirates. The people of Garen felt no animosity toward pirates. They only hated Mekinese.

Out in space, missiles hurtled away from the small ship *Isis*. They did not plunge directly at the battleship. They swung crazily in wide arcs. The already-launched Mekinese missiles swerved to intercept them. They failed. More missiles erupted from the battleship, aimed to intercept. They also failed. The battleship began to fling out every missile it possessed, in a frantic effort to knock out the *Isis*'s erratic missiles, which neither instruments nor eyes were able to follow accurately enough to establish a pattern of destination.

Half a dozen ground-cars roared through the streets of the capital city of Garen. They did not seem to be crowded. One man or at most, two, could be seen in each car, but they drove as a unit, one close behind another, at a furious pace. When they needed a clear way, the first sounded its warning-note and the others joined in as a chorus. Half a dozen sirens blaring together have an authoritative, emergency sound. The way was cleared when that imperative clarion demanded it.

They swerved under the landing-grid. They raced and bounced across the clear surface which was the spaceport. There stood a giant, rotund cargo-ship, pointing skyward. There were ground-trucks still supplying cargo for its nearly filled-up holds.

The six ground-cars braked, making clouds of dust. And suddenly there was not one or two men in each, but an astonishing number. They knew exactly what they were about. Five of them plunged into the ship. Others drove off the ground-trucks. Uniformed men ran from the side of the spaceport toward the

ship, yelling. One ground-car started up again, rushed to the control-building, swerved sharply as a crash into it seemed inevitable, and dumped something out on the ground. It raced back to the other cars about the cargo-ship. The hold-doors were closing.

The object dumped by the control-building went off. It was a chemical-explosive bomb, but its power was adequate. The wall of the building caved in. Flames leaped crazily out of the collapsed heap. The landing-field would be out of operation.

The last car skidded to a stop. The two men in it ran for the boarding-stair of the cargo-boat. There was nobody of their party outside now. The landing-stair withdrew after them.

Then monstrous, incredible masses of flame and steam burst from the bottom of the rotund space-ship. It lifted, slowly at first, but then more and more swiftly. It climbed to the sky. It became a speck, and then a mote at the crawling end of a trail of opaque white emergency-rocket fumes. Then it vanished.

Far out in space, there was an explosion brighter than the sun, and then a second and a third. There was a cloud of incandescent metal vapor. Presently a missile found its target-seeking microwaves reflected by the ionized metal steam. It plunged into collision with that glowing stuff. It exploded. Two or three more exploded, like the first. Others burned harmlessly.

A voice said, "*Cargo-ship reporting. Clear of ground. Everything going well. No casualties.*"

"Report again when in clear space," said Bors.

He waited. Several long minutes later a second report came.

"*Cargo-ship reporting. In clear space.*"

"Very good work!" said Bors. "You know where to go now. Go ahead!"

"Yes, sir," said the voice from space. Then it asked apologetically, "*You got the battleship, sir?*"

The voice from space sounded as if the man who spoke were grinning.

"*We'll celebrate that, sir! Good to have served with you, sir.*"

Bors swung the *Isis* and drove on solar-system drive to get well away from Garen. He watched the blip which was the captured ship as it seemed to hesitate a very, very long time. It was aiming, of course, for Glamis, that totally useless solar system around a planet where the fleet of Kandar orbited in bitter frustration.

Bors got up from his seat to loosen his muscles. He had sat absolutely tense and effectively motionless for a very long time. He ached. But he felt a sour sort of satisfaction. For a ship of the *Isis's* class to have challenged a battleship to combat, to have deliberately and insultingly waited for it to choose its own battle-distance, and then to let it launch its missiles first.... It was no ambush! Bors did not feel ashamed of this fight. He'd acted according to the instincts of a fighting man who gives his enemy the chance to use what weapons the enemy has chosen, and then defeats him.

His second-in-command said, "Sir, the cargo-boat blip is gone. It should be in overdrive now, sir, heading for Glamis."

"Then we'll follow it," said Bors. Suddenly he realized how his second-in-command must feel. The landing-party'd seen action—for which Bors envied them—and he'd felt ashamed because he stayed in the ship in what he considered safety while they risked their lives. But his second-in-command had had no share in the achievement at all. Bors had handled all controls and given all orders, even the routine ones, since before Tralee.

"I think," said Bors, "I'll have a cup of coffee. Will you take over and head for Glamis?"

He left the control-room, to let his subordinate handle things for a time. He'd seated himself in the mess-room when the voice of his second-in-command came through the speakers.

"*Going into overdrive,*" said the voice. "*All steady. Five, four, three, two—*"

Bors prepared to wince. He put down his coffee cup and held himself ready for the sickening sensation.

Suddenly there was the rasping, snaring crackling of a high-voltage spark. There were shouts. There were explosions and the reek of overheated metal and smoldering insulation. Then the compartment-doors closed.

When Bors had examined the damage, and the emergency-purifiers had taken

the smoke and smell out of the air, his second-in-command looked suicidally gloomy.

"It's bad business," said Bors wryly. "Very bad business! But I should have mentioned it to you. I didn't think of it. I wouldn't have thought of it if I'd been doing the overdrive business myself."

The second-in-command said bitterly;

"But I knew you'd tried the new low-power overdrive! I knew it!"

"I left it switched in," said Bors, "because I thought we might use it in the fight with the battleship. But we didn't."

"I should have checked that it was off!" protested his second. "It's my fault!"

Bors shrugged. Deciding whose fault it was wouldn't repair the damage. There'd been a human error. Bors had approached Garen on the low-power overdrive that Logan had computed for him. There was a special switch to cut it in, instead of the standard overdrive. It should have been cut out when the standard overdrive was used. But somebody in the engine-room had simply thrown the main-drive switch when preparations for overdrive travel began. When the ship should have gone into overdrive, it didn't. The two parallel circuits amounted to an effective short-circuit. Generators, condensers—even the overdrive field coils in their armored mounts outside the hull—everything blew.

So the *Isis* was left with a solar-system drive and rockets and nothing else. If the drive used only in solar systems were put on full, and the *Isis* headed for Glamis, and if the food and water held out, it would arrive at that distant world in eighty-some years. It could reach Tralee in fifty. But there were emergency rations for a few weeks only. It was not conceivable that repairs could be made. This was no occasion calling for remarkable ingenuity to make some sort of jury-rigged drive. This was final.

"I've got to think," said Bors heavily.

He went to his own cabin.

Talents, Incorporated couldn't improvise or precognize or calculate an answer to this! And all previous plans had to be cancelled. Absolutely. He dismissed at once and for all time the idea that the *Isis* could be repaired short of months in a well-equipped space-yard on a friendly planet. She should be blown up, after

adequate pains were taken to destroy any novelties in her make-up. There were the tables of Logan's calculation. Bors found himself thinking sardonically that Logan should be shot because he had no obligation of loyalty to Kandar, and could as readily satisfy his hunger for recognition in the Mekinese service as in Kandar's. The crew....

That was the heart of the situation. The *Isis* could not be salvaged. She should be destroyed. There was only one world within reach on which human beings could live. That world was Garen. The *Isis* could sit down on Garen, disembark her crew, and be blown up before Mekinese authorities could interfere. Perhaps—possibly—her crew could try to function on Garen as marooned pirates, as outlaws, as rebels against the puppet planetary government. But they knew too much. Every man aboard knew how the interceptor-proof missiles worked. Logan might be the only man who had ever calculated the tables for their use, but if any member of the *Isis's* crew were captured and made to talk, he could tell enough for Mekinese mathematicians to start work with. If Logan were captured he could tell more. He could re-compute not only the tables for the missiles, but the data for low-power overdrive which would make any fleet invincible.

And there was the Kandarian fleet. If its existence became known, it would mean the destruction of Kandar. Every soul of all its millions would die with every tree and blade of grass, every flower, beast and singing bird, even the plankton in its seas.

Bors had arrived at the grimmest decision of his life when his cabin speaker said curtly:

"Captain Bors, sir. Space-yacht Sylva calling. Asks for you."

"I'm here," said Bors.

Gwenlyn's voice came out of the speaker.

"Are you in trouble, Captain? One of our Talents insists that you are."

Bors swallowed.

"I thought you'd gone on as you were supposed to do. Yes. There is trouble. It amounts to shipwreck. How many of my men can you take off?"

"We've lots of room!" said Gwenlyn. "My father kept most of the Talents with him. We're heading your way, Captain."

"Very good," said Bors. "Thank you." He was grateful, but help from a woman—from Gwenlyn!—galled him.

He heard her click off, and shivered.

Presently the *Sylva* was alongside. The transfer of the *Isis's* crew began. Bors went over the ship for the last time. The ship's log went aboard the *Sylva*, as did Logan's calculated tables for low-power overdrive. Bors made quite sure that nothing else could be recovered from the *Isis*. He looked strained and irritable when he finally went into one of the lifeboat blisters on the *Isis* left vacant by the sacrifice of two space-boats in the Garen cutting-out expedition. A boat from the *Sylva* was there to receive him.

"Technically," said Bors, "I should go down with my ship, or fly apart with it. But there's no point in being romantic!"

"I'm the one," said his second-in-command, "who will stand court-martial!"

"I doubt it very much," said Bors. "They can't court-martial you for partly accomplishing something they're in trouble for failing at. Into the boat with you!"

He threw a switch and entered the boat. The blister opened. The small space-boat floated free. Its drive hummed and it drove far and away from the seemingly unharmed but completely helpless *Isis*. Bors looked regretfully back at the abandoned light cruiser. Sunlight glinted on its hull. Somehow a slow rotary motion had been imparted to it during the process of abandoning ship. The little fighting ship pointed as though wistfully at all the stars about her, to none of which she would ever drive again.

The *Sylva* loomed up. The last space-boat nestled into its blister and the grapples clanked. The leaves closed. When the blister air-pressure showed normal and green lights flashed and flashed, Bors got out of the boat and went to the *Sylva's* control-room. Gwenlyn was there, quite casually controlling the operation of the yacht by giving suggestions to its official skipper. She turned and beamed at Bors.

"We'll pull off a way," she observed, "and make sure your time-bomb works."

You wouldn't want her discovered and salvaged."

"No," said Bors.

He stood by a viewport as the *Sylva* drove away. The *Isis* ceased to be a shape and became the most minute of motes. Bors looked at his watch.

"Not far enough yet," he said depressedly. "Everything will go."

The yacht drove on. Fifteen—twenty minutes at steadily increasing solar-system speed.

"It's about due," said Bors.

Gwenlyn came and stood beside him. They looked together out at the stars. There were myriads upon myriads of them, of all the colors of the spectrum, of all degrees of brightness, in every possible asymmetric distribution.

There was a spark in remoteness. Instantly it was vastly more than a spark. It was a globe of deadly, blue-white incandescence. It flamed brilliantly as all the *Isis's* fuel and the warheads on all its unexpended missiles turned to pure energy in the hundred-millionth of a second. It was many times brighter than a sun. Then it was not. And the violence of the explosion was such that there was not even glowing metal-vapor where it had been. Every atom of the ship's substance had been volatilized and scattered through so many thousands of cubic miles of emptiness that it did not show even as a mist.

"A good ship," said Bors grimly. Then he growled. "I wonder if they saw that on Garen and what they thought about it!" He straightened himself. "How did you know we were in trouble?"

"There's a Talent," said Gwenlyn matter-of-factly, "who can always tell how people feel. She doesn't know what they think or why. But she can tell when they're uneasy and so on. Father uses her to tell him when people lie. When what they say doesn't match how they feel, they're lying."

"I think," said Bors, "that I'll stay away from her. But that won't do any good, will it?"

Gwenlyn smiled at him. It was a very nice smile.

"She could tell that things had gone wrong with the ship," she observed, "because of the way you felt. But I've forbidden her ever to tell when someone

lies to me or anything like that. I don't want to know people's feelings when they want to hide them."

"Fine!" said Bors. "I feel better." Standing so close to Gwenlyn, he also felt light-headed.

She smiled at him again, as if she understood.

"We'll head for Glamis now," she said. "The situation there should have changed a great deal because of what you've done."

"It would be my kind of luck," said Bors half joking, "for it to have changed for the worse."

It had.



Chapter 9

"THE DECISION," said King Humphrey the Eighth, stubbornly, "is exactly what I have said. In full war council it has been agreed that the fleet, through a new use of missiles, is a stronger fighting force than ever before. This was evidenced in the late battle and no one questions it. But it is also agreed that we remain hopelessly outnumbered. We are in a position where we simply cannot fight! For us to have fought would probably have been forgiven if we had been wiped out in the recent battle—preferably with only slight loss to the Mekinese. We offered battle expecting exactly that. Unfortunately, we annihilated the fleet that was to have occupied Kandar. In consequence we have had to pretend that we were destroyed along with them. And if we are discovered to be alive, and certainly if we offer to fight, Kandar will be exterminated as a living world, to punish us and as a warning to future victims of the Mekinese."

"Yes, Majesty," Bors said through tight lips. "But may I point out—"

"I know what you want to point out," the king broke in irritably. "With the help of these Talents, Incorporated people, you've worked out a new battle tactic you want to put into practice. You've explained it to the War Council. The War Council has decided that it is too risky. We cannot gamble the lives of the people on Kandar. We have not the right to expose them to Mekinese vengeance!"

"I agree, Majesty," said Bors, "but at the same time—"

The king leaned back in his chair.

"I don't like it any better than you do," he said peevishly. "I expected to get killed in a space-battle—not very gloriously, but at least with self-respect. Unfortunately we had bad luck. We won the fight. I do not like what we have to do in consequence, but we have to do it!"

Bors bit his lips. He liked and respected King Humphrey, as he had respect and affection for his uncle, the Pretender of Tralee. Both were honest and able men who'd been forced to learn the disheartening lesson that some things are impossible. But Bors believed that King Humphrey had learned the lesson too well.

"You plan, Majesty," he said after a moment, "to send me out again to capture food-ships if I can."

"Obviously," said the king.

"The idea being," Bors went on, "that if I can get enough food for the fleet so it can make a journey of several hundreds of light-years—"

"It is necessary to go a long way," the king confirmed unhappily. "We need to take the fleet to where Mekin is only a name and Kandar not even that."

"Where you will disband the fleet—"

"Yes."

"And hope that Mekin will not take vengeance anyhow for the fight the fleet has already put up."

The king said heavily, "It will be a very long time before word drifts back that the fleet of Kandar did not die in battle. It may never come. If it does, it will come as a vague rumor, as an idle tale, as absurd gossip about a fleet whose home planet may not even be remembered when the tales are told. There will be trivial stories about a fleet which abandoned the world it should have defended, and fled so far that its enemies did not bother to follow it. If the tale reaches Mekin, it may not be believed. It may not ever be linked to Kandar. And if some day it is believed, by then Kandar will be long occupied. Perhaps it will be resigned to its status. It will be a valuable subject world. Mekin will not destroy it merely to punish scattered, forgotten men who will never know that they have been punished."

"And you want me," repeated Bors, "to find the stores of food that will let the fleet travel to—oblivion."

"Yes," said the king again. He looked very weary. "In a sense, of course, we will simply be doing what we set out to do—to throw away our lives. We intended to do that. We are doing no more now."

Bors said grimly, "I'm not sure. But I will obey orders, Majesty. Do you object if I pass out the details of the new device among some junior officers? I speak of the way to compute overdrive speed exactly and how to vary it. It could help the fleet to stay together, even in overdrive."

The king shrugged. "That would be desirable. I do not object."

"I'll do it then, Majesty," said Bors. "I'll be assigned a new ship. I'd like the same crew. I'll do my best, in a new part of the Mekinese empire, this time."

"Yes," said the king drearily. "Don't make a pattern of raids that would suggest that you have a base. You understand, it is impossible to use more than one ship...."

"Naturally," agreed Bors. "One more suggestion, Majesty. A ship could be sent back to Kandar—not to land but to watch. If a single Mekinese ship went there to ask questions, it could be destroyed, perhaps. Which would gain us time."

"I will think about it," said the king doubtfully. "Maybe it has occurred to someone else. I will see. Meantime you will go to the admiral for a new ship. And then do what you can to find provisions for the fleet. It is not good for us to merely stay here waiting for nothing. Even action toward our own disappearance is preferable."

Bors saluted. He went to the office of the admiral. The commander-in-chief of the Kandarian fleet was making an inspection, to maintain tight discipline in the absence of hope. A young vice-admiral was on duty in the admiral's stead. He regarded Bors with approval. He listened with attention, and agreed with most of what Bors had to say.

"I'll push the idea of a sentry over Kandar," he said confidentially. "I'll make it two ships or three and take command. I want to send some of my engineer officers to get the details of that low-power overdrive. A very pretty tactical idea! It should be spread throughout the fleet."

"It will help," Bors said with irony, "when we go so far away that we'll never be heard of any more."

"Eh?" The vice-admiral looked at him blankly. "Oh. Perhaps. You wouldn't be likely to pick up a cargo-ship loaded with Mekinese missiles, would you? We could adapt them to our use."

"If I did," Bors answered, "I suspect that somehow that ship would land itself on Mekin and blow up as it touched ground."

The vice-admiral raised his eyebrows. Bors saluted quickly and left.

Presently he was back on the *Sylva*. His new command would be supplied with extra missiles from other ships. Despite the fleet action against the Mekinese, there was not yet a shortage of such ammunition. When a missile could not be intercepted and itself did not try to intercept, the economy of missiles was great. In the battle of the gas-giant planet, the fleet had fired no more than three or four missiles for every enemy ship destroyed.

Morgan took Bors aside.

"I'm going to keep Logan here this trip. I'm working on the commanders. I need him. And our Talent for Detecting Lies,—she was the one who knew you were in trouble, Gwenlyn tells me—is very necessary. I was hampered by not having her while Gwenlyn was away. But she did a good job for you!"

Bors shrugged. He did not like depending upon Talents. He still wasn't inclined toward acceptance of what he considered the occult. Now he said, "I'm duly grateful, but it's just as well. My mind doesn't work in a way to understand these Talents of yours. I admit everything, but I'm afraid I don't really accept anything."

"It's perfectly reasonable," protested Morgan. "The facts fit together! I'm no hand at working out theories; I deal in facts. But the facts do make sense!"

Bors found himself looking at the door of the family room, where Morgan had taken him. He realized that he was waiting for Gwenlyn to enter. He turned back to Morgan.

"They don't make sense to me," he said dourly. "You have a precognizer, you say. He foresees the future. I admit that he has. But the future is uncertain. It can't be foreseen unless it's pre-ordained, and in that case we're only puppets imagining that we're free agents. But there would be no reason in such a state of things!"

Morgan settled himself luxuriously in a self-adjusting chair. He thrust a cigar on Bors and lighted up zestfully.

"I've been wanting to spout about that," he observed, "even if I'm no theoretician. Look here! What is true? What is truth? What's the difference between a false statement and a true one?"

Bors's eyes wandered to the door again. He drew them back.

"One's so and the other isn't," he said.

"No," said Morgan. "Truth is an accordance—an agreement—between an idea and a fact. If I toss a coin, I can make two statements. I can say it will come up heads, or I can say that it will come up tails. One sentence is true and one is false. A precognizer simply knows which statement is true. I don't, but he does."

"It's still prophecy," objected Bors.

"Oh, no!" protested Morgan. "A precognizer-talent doesn't prophesy! All he can do is recognize that an idea he has now matches an event that will happen presently. He can't extract ideas from the future! He can only judge the truth or falsity of ideas that occur to him. He has to think something before he can know it is true. He *does not get information from the future!* He can only know that the idea he has now matches something that will happen later. He can detect a matching—an agreement—perhaps it's a mental vibration of some sort. But that's all!"

"I asked if I would capture a cargo-ship on Tralee—"

"And I said I didn't know! Of course I said so! How could anybody know such a thing except by pure accident? A precognizer might think of nine hundred and ninety-nine ways in which you might try to capture that ship. They could all be wrong. He might say you wouldn't capture it. But you might try a thousandth way that he hadn't thought of! All he can know is that some idea he has concocted matches—some instinct stirs, and he *knows* it's true! That's why one man can precognize dirty tricks. His mind works that way! We've got a woman who knows, infallibly, who's going to marry whom! That's why the ship-arrival precognizer can say a ship's coming in. His mind works on such things, and he has a talent besides!"

"There are definite limits, then."

"What is there that's real and hasn't limits?" demanded Morgan.

The door opened and Gwenlyn came in. Bors rose, looking pleased.

"I'm telling him the facts of life about precognition," Morgan told her. "I think he understands now."

"I don't agree," said Bors.

Gwenlyn said amusedly, "Two of our Talents want to talk to you, Captain. You might say that they want to measure you for rumors."

"They what?" demanded Bors, startled.

"The Talent who predicts dirty tricks," said Gwenlyn, "is going to work with the woman who broadcasts daydreams. They'll be our Department of Propaganda."

Bors said uncertainly, "But there's no point in propaganda! It's determined."

"I know!" said Morgan complacently. "The high brass has made a decision. A perfectly logical decision, too, once you grant their premises. But they assume that Talents, Incorporated, given some co-operation, of course, lacks the ability to change the situation. In that they're mistaken."

"Father hopes," said Gwenlyn amiably, "to modify the situation so their assumptions will lead logically to a different conclusion. Apparently they're going to change their minds!"

Bors objected. "But you can't know the future!"

"Our precognizer—our Precognizer for Special Events," said Gwenlyn, "got the notion that a year from now King Humphrey should open parliament on Kandar, if everything is straightened out. The notion became a precognition. We don't know how it can come about, but it does seem to imply a change of plans somewhere!"

Bors found himself indomitably skeptical. But he said, "Ah! That's the precognition you mentioned on Kandar—that the fleet wouldn't be wiped out and everybody killed."

"No-o-o," said Gwenlyn. "That was another one. I'd rather not tell you about it. It might be—unpleasant. I'll tell you later."

Bors shrugged.

"All right. You said I'm to be measured for rumors? Bring on your tape-measures!"

Morgan beamed at him. Gwenlyn went to the door and opened it. An enormously fat woman came in, moving somehow sinuously in spite of her bulk. She gave Bors a glance he could not fathom. It was sentimental, languishing and wholly and utterly approving. He felt a momentary appalled suspicion which he

dismissed in something close to panic. It couldn't be that he was fated—

Then the arrogant man with rings came in. He'd been identified as the Talent for Predicting Dirty Tricks. Bors remembered that he had a paranoid personality, inclined toward infinite suspiciousness, and that he'd been in jail for predicting crimes that were later committed.

"Gwenlyn says propaganda," said Morgan, "but I prefer to think of these two Talents as our Department for Disseminating Truthful Seditious Rumors. You've met Harms." The man waved his hand, his rings glittering. "But I didn't tell you about Madame Porvis. She has the extraordinary talent of contagious fantasy. It is remarkably rare. She can daydream, and others contract her dreamings as if they were spread by germs."

The fat woman bridled. She still regarded Bors with a melting gaze. Again he felt startled unease.

"It's been a great trial to me," she said in a peculiarly childish voice. "I had such trouble, before I knew what it was!"

"Er—trial?" asked Bors apprehensively.

"When I was just an overweight adolescent," she told him archly, "I daydreamed about my school's best athlete. Presently I found that my shocked fellow-students were gossiping to each other that he'd acted as I daydreamed. Other girls wouldn't look at him because they said he was madly in love with me."

The arrogant man with the rings made a scornful sound.

"He hated me," said Madame Porvis, ruefully, "because the gossip made him ridiculous, and it was only people picking up my daydreams!"

She looked at Morgan. He nodded encouragement.

"Years later," she said to Bors, "I grew romantic about an actor. He was not at all talented, but I daydreamed that he was, and also brilliant and worshipped by millions. Soon everybody seemed to believe it was true! Because I daydreamed it! He was given tremendous contracts, and—then I dared to daydream that he met and was fascinated by me! Immediately there was gossip that it had happened! When he denied that he knew me,—and he didn't—and when he saw my picture and said he didn't *want* to, I was crushed. I wove beautifully tragic fantasies about myself as pining away and dying because of his cruelty,—and

soon it was common gossip that I had!" She sighed. "He was considered a villain, because I daydreamed of him that way. His career was ruined. I've had to be very careful about my daydreams ever since."

"Madame Porvis's talent," Morgan said proudly, "is all the more remarkable because she realized herself that she had it. She lets ideas pop into her head and presently they pop into other people's heads and you have first-class rumors running madly about. When her fantasies contain elements of truth, so do the rumors. You see?"

"It's most interesting," admitted Bors. "But—"

"Now Harms," said Morgan, "reads news-reports. He's specialized on those brought back by Gwenlyn and by you. He guesses at the news behind the news—and he knows when he's hit it. He'll tell Madame Porvis the facts, she'll weave them into a fantasy and they'll spread like wildfire. Of course she can't plant new subjects in people's minds. But anybody who's ever heard of Mekin will pick up her fantasies about graft and inefficiency in its government. Riots against Mekin, and so on. However, one wants not only to spread seditious rumors about villains, but also about—say—pirates who go about fighting Mekin. Tell her stories about your men, if you like. Anything that's material for heroic defiance-fantasies against Mekin."

Bors found himself stubbornly resisting the idea. It might be that there was such a thing as precognition in the form Morgan had described. There might be such a thing as contagious fantasy. But on the other hand—

"I give up," he said. "I won't deny it and I can't believe it. I'll go about my business of piracy. But you, sir," he turned to Morgan, "you've got to keep Gwenlyn from taking risks!"

"True," said Morgan. "She could have some very unpleasant experiences. I'll be more stern with her."

Gwenlyn did not seem alarmed.

"One more thing," Bors added. "They say the dictator of Mekin is superstitious, that he patronizes fortune-tellers. Suppose one of *them* is a Talent? Suppose *he* gets precognized information?"

"I worry about that," admitted Morgan. "But I know that I have effective Talents. There's no evidence that *he* has."

"He might have a Talent whose talent is confusing our Talents," Bors said with some sarcasm.

Morgan grinned tolerantly.

"Talk to these two. We've got some firm precognitions that make things look bad for Mekin."

He left the room. Gwenlyn remained, listening with interest when the conversation began, and now and then saying something of no great importance. But her presence kept Bors from feeling altogether like a fool. Madame Porvis looked at him with languishing, sentimental eyes. Harms watched him accusingly.

Their questions were trivial. Bors told about the landings on Tralee and on Garen. The woman asked for details that would help her picture feats of derring-do. Bors hesitated, and did not quite tell her about the truck drivers on Tralee who volunteered the information that their loads were booby-trapped. But he did stress the fact that the populations of dominated planets were on the thin edge of revolt. The suspicious Talent asked very little. He listened, frowning.

When it was over and they'd gone—the fat woman again somehow managing a gait which could only be called sinuous—Bors said abruptly, "What's this event you know of, a year ahead?"

"King Humphrey opening parliament on Kandar," said Gwenlyn pleasantly.

"There's another," said Bors, "which implies specifically that I'll still be alive."

"That?" said Gwenlyn. "That's another one. I won't talk about it. It implies that my father's going to retire from Talents, Incorporated."

Bors fumed.

"I don't like this prediction business," he said. "It still seems to hint that we're not free agents. Tell me," he said apprehensively. "That precognition about me, it doesn't include Madame Porvis?"

Gwenlyn laughed. "No. Definitely no!"

Bors grunted. Then he managed to grin.

"In that case I'll go pilfer some provisions so the fleet will be prepared to do

what you tell me it won't, but which it has to be prepared to do. I suppose I'll be back?"

"I hope so," said Gwenlyn, smiling.

She gave him her hand. He left. He shook his head as he made his way to the *Sylva's* space-boat blister. He had it immediately taken to his new ship. It was a light cruiser of the same class as the *Isis*. It would, of course, seem to be the same ship, and it had nearly the same crew aboard. No one of Morgan's freakish Talents was included this time, and Bors felt more than a little relieved. He inspected everything and made sure his drive-engineers were more tractable than they'd been on the *Isis*. He meant to build another low-power overdrive at once.

He cleared for departure with the flagship. He was swinging the ship toward his first destination when a call came from the *Sylva*. He was asked for. He went to a screen. He preferred to see Gwenlyn when he talked to her. She was there.

"I've a memo for you," she said briskly. "There are cargo-ships aground on Cassis and Dover. There is a sort of patrol-squadron of warships aground on Meriden. Nothing on Avino. Are you recording this?"

"I won't forget it," he said.

"Then here's the situation on each of the subject worlds so far as cargo-ships and fighting ships are concerned. Our dowser can tell about them. Remember, this doesn't apply to ships in overdrive! We can't precognize anything about them unless we're at the destination they're heading for, and then only the time of arrival. And the dowser's information is strictly as of this moment."

Bors nodded. Her tone was absolutely matter-of-fact. Bors was almost convinced.

She read off a list of statements with painstaking clarity. She'd evidently had the dowser go over the list of twenty-two dominated planets. Bors told himself that the events she reported were possibilities that might somehow be true.

"Most of the Mekinese grand fleet," she finished, "is aground on Mekin itself. It's probably there for inspection and review or some such ceremony. There's no way to tell. But it's there. And that's the latest Talents, Incorporated information. As my father says, you can depend on it."

"All right," said Bors. "Thanks." Then he added gruffly, "Take care of yourself."

She smiled at him and clicked off. Bors was confused because he couldn't quite believe that other matters could be predicted.

The new ship, the *Horus*, sped away in overdrive, leaving the fleet in orbit around the useless planet Glamis. Glamis was in a favorable state just now. It was a lush green almost from pole to pole, save where its seas showed a darker, muddy, bottom-color. It would look inviting to colonists. But at any time its sun could demonstrate its variability and turn it into a cloud-covered world of steaming prospective jungle, or in a slightly shorter time turn it to a glacier-world. The vegetation on Glamis was remarkable. The planet, though, was of no use to humanity because it was unpredictable.

The *Horus* ran in overdrive for two days while a low-power unit was built in its engine-room, to go in parallel to the normal overdrive. But there was a double-throw switch in the line, now. Either the standard, multiple light-speed overdrive could be used, or the newer and vastly slower one, but not both together. The ship came out of overdrive in absolute emptiness with no sun anywhere nearby. She was surrounded on every hand by uncountable distant stars. The new circuit was brazed in. It had a micro-timer included in its design. Within its certain, limited timing-capacity, it could establish or break a contact within the thousandth of a microsecond.

Bors made tests, target-practice of a sort. He let out a metal-foil balloon which inflated itself, making a sphere some forty feet in diameter. In the new low-speed overdrive he drew away from it for a limited number of microseconds. He measured the distance run. He made other runs, again measuring. From ten thousand miles away he made a return-hop to the target-balloon and came out within a mile of it.

He cheered up. This was remarkably accurate. He sent the ship into standard overdrive again. Twice more, however, he stopped between stars and practiced the trick of breaking out of the new overdrive—in which his ship was undetectable—at a predetermined point. The satisfaction of successful operation almost made up for the extremely disagreeable sensations involved.

But on the eighth ship-day out from Glamis, the *Horus* came back to unstressed space with a very, very bright star burning almost straight ahead. The spectroscope confirmed that it was the sun of Meriden.

Bors sounded the action alert. Gongs clanged. Compartment-doors hissed shut.

"You know," said Bors conversationally into the all-speaker microphone and in the cushioned stillness which obtained, "you all know what we're aiming at. A food-supply for the fleet. But we've got what looks like a very useful gadget for fighting purposes. We need to test it. There's a small squadron on Meriden, ahead, so we'll take them on. It is necessary that we get *all of them*, so they can't report anything to Mekin that Mekin doesn't already know. All hands ready for action!"

In twenty minutes by the ship's clocks the *Horus* was a bare thirty thousand miles off the planet Meriden. The new drive worked perfectly for planetary approach, at any rate. It even worked more perfectly than the twenty-minute interval implied. It had been off Meriden for five minutes then.

Mekinese fighting ships were boiling up from the atmosphere of Meriden and plunging out to space to offer battle. They were surprisingly ready, reacting like hair-triggered weapons. Bors hadn't completed his challenge before they were streaking toward Meriden's sky. They couldn't have been more prompt if, say, Meriden seethed with rumors about a pirate ship in space, which it was their obligation to fight.

According to the radar screens, there were not less than fifteen ships streaking out to destroy the *Horus*. Fifteen to one—interesting odds.

Bors sent the *Horus* roaring ahead to meet them.

Part Four

Chapter 10

THE MEKINESE did not display a sporting spirit. There were four heavy cruisers and eleven lighter ships of the *Horus's* size and armament. According to current theories of space-battle tactics, two of the light cruisers should have disposed of the *Horus* with ease and dispatch. It might have seemed sportsmanlike and certainly sufficient to give the *Horus* only two antagonists at a time, which would have been calculated to provide odds of six hundred to one against it. Two light cruisers would have fired eighteen missiles apiece per salvo, which would have demanded thirty-six missiles from the *Horus* to meet and destroy them. She couldn't put thirty-six missiles into space at one firing. She would have disappeared in atomic flame at the first exchange of fire. But the Mekinese were not so generous. They came up in full force loaded for bear. They obviously intended not a fight but an execution. Mekinese tactics depended heavily on fire-power of such superiority that any enemy was simply overwhelmed.

Their maneuvering proved that they intended to follow standard operation procedure. Light ships reached space and delayed until all were aloft. They formed themselves into a precise half-globe and plunged at top solar-system drive toward the *Horus*. This was strictly according to the book. If the *Horus* chose, of course, she could refuse battle by fleeing into overdrive—which would be expected to be the regulation many-times-faster-than-light variety. If she dared fight, the fifteen ships drove on. Mekinese ships never struck lightly. The fifteen of them could launch four hundred missiles per salvo. No single ship could counter such an attack. But even Mekinese would not use such stupendous numbers of missiles against one ship unless that ship was famous; unless rumors and reports said that it was invincible and dangerous and the hope of oppressed peoples under Mekin.

The *Horus* received very special attention.

Then she vanished. At one instant she was in full career toward the fleet of enemies. The next instant she had wrapped an overdrive field about herself and then no radar could detect her, nor could any missile penetrate her protection.

When she vanished, the speck which indicated her position disappeared from the Mekinese radar-screens. The hundredth of a second in overdrive as known to the

Mekinese should have put her hundreds of millions of miles away. But something new had been added to the *Horus*. The hundredth of a second did not mean millions of miles of journeying. It meant something under three thousand, and a much more precise interval of time could be measured and used by her micro-timer.

Therefore, at one instant the *Horus* was some two thousand miles from the lip of the half-globe of enemy ships. Then she was not anywhere. Then, before the mind could grasp the fact of her vanishing, she was in the very center, the exact focus of the formation of Mekinese battle-craft. She was at the spot a Mekinese commander would most devoutly wish, because it was equidistant from all his ships, and all their missiles should arrive at the same instant when their overwhelming number could not conceivably be parried.

But it was more than an ideal position from a Mekinese standpoint. It was also a point which was ideal for the *Horus*, because all her missiles would arrive at the encircling ships at the same instant. Each Mekinese would separately learn—without information from any other—that those projectiles could not be intercepted. No Mekinese would have the advantage of watching the tactic practiced on a companion-ship, to guide his own actions.

The *Horus* appeared at that utterly vulnerable and wholly advantageous position. She showed on the Mekinese screens. They launched missiles. The *Horus* launched missiles.

The *Horus* disappeared.

She reappeared, beyond and behind the half-globe formation. Again she showed on the Mekinese screens. The Mekinese could not believe their instruments. A ship which fled in overdrive could not reappear like this! Having vanished and reappeared once, it could not duplicate the trick. Having duplicated it....

There was more, and worse. The *Horus* missiles were not being intercepted. Mekinese missiles were swerving crazily to try to anticipate and destroy the curving, impossibly-moving objects that went out from where the *Horus* had ceased to be. They failed. Clouds of new trajectories appeared....

A flare like a temporary sun. Another. Another. Others....

Bors turned from the viewport and glanced at the radar-screens. There were thirteen vaporous glowings where ships had been. There were two distinct blips

remaining. It could be guessed that some targets had been fired on by more than one launching-tube, leaving two ships unattacked by the *Horus's* missiles.

Both of those ships—one a heavy cruiser—now desperately flung the contents of their magazines at the *Horus*.

Bors heard his voice snapping coordinates.

"Launch all missiles at those two targets," he commanded. "Fire! Overdrive coming! Five, four, three, two...."

The intolerable discomfort of entry and immediate breakout from overdrive was ever present. But the *Horus* had shifted position five thousand miles. Bors saw one of his just-launched missiles—now a continent away—as it went off. It accounted for one of the two Mekinese survivors. The radar-blip which told of that ship's existence changed to the vaguely vaporous glow of incandescent gas. The other blip went out. No flare of a bomb. Nothing. It went out.

So the last Mekinese ship was gone in overdrive. It was safe! It could not possibly be overtaken or attacked. It had seen the *Horus's* missiles following an unpredictable course, which was duly recorded. It had seen the *Horus* go into overdrive and move only hundreds of miles instead of hundreds of millions. It had seen the *Horus* vanish from one place and appear at another in the same combat area, launch missiles and vanish again before it could even be ranged.

The last Mekinese ship certainly carried with it the *Horus's* tactics and actions recorded on tape. The technicians of Mekin would set to work instantly to duplicate them. Once they were considered possible—once they were recognized—they could be achieved. The combat efficiency of the Mekinese fleet would be increased as greatly as that of the fleet of Kandar had been,—and the overwhelming superiority of numbers would again become decisive. The hopeless situation of the Kandarian fleet would become a hundred times worse. And Mekinese counter-intelligence would make a search for the origin of such improvements. Since Kandar was to have been attacked and occupied, it would be a place of special search.

The only unsuspected source, of course, would be Talents, Incorporated.

For a full minute after the enemy ship's disappearance, Bors sat rigid, his hands clenched, facing the disaster the escape of the Mekinese constituted. Sweat appeared on his forehead.

Then he pressed the engine-room button and said evenly, "Prepare for standard overdrive, top speed possible."

He swung the ship. He lined it up with Mekin itself, which, of course, was the one place where it would be most fatal for a ship from Kandar to be discovered.

Very shortly thereafter, the *Horus* was in overdrive.

Traveling in such unthinkable haste, it is paradoxical that there is much time to spare. Bors had to occupy it. He prepared a careful and detailed account of exactly how the low-speed overdrive had worked, and its effectiveness as a combat tactic. He'd distributed instructions and Logan's tables on the subject before leaving Glamis. He would be, of course, most bitterly blamed for having taken on a whole squadron of enemy ships, with the result that one had gotten away. It could be the most decisive of catastrophes. But he made his report with precision.

For seven successive ship-days there was no event whatever on the *Horus*, as she drove toward Mekin. Undoubtedly the one survivor of the enemy squadron was fleeing for Mekin, too, to report to the highest possible authority what it had seen and experienced. It would not be much, if at all, slower than the *Horus*. It might be faster, and might reach the solar system of Mekin before the *Horus* broke out there. It had every advantage but one. It had solar-system drive, for use within a planetary group, and it had overdrive for use between the stars. But the *Horus* had an intermediate drive as well, which was faster than the enemy's slow speed and slower than the fast.

Bors depended on it for the continued existence of Kandar and the fleet. As the desperately tedious ship-days went by he began to have ideas—at which he consciously scoffed—concerning Tralee. But if anything as absurd as those ideas came to be, there were a score of other planets which would have to be considered too.

He sketched out in his own mind a course of action that would be possible to follow after breakout off Mekin. It did not follow the rules for sound planning, which always assume that if things can go wrong they will. Bors could only plan for what might be done if things went right. But he could not hope. Not really. Still, he considered every possibility, however far-fetched.

He came to first-breakout, a light-week short of Mekin. The yellow sun flamed dead ahead. He determined his distance from it with very great care. The *Horus*

went back into overdrive and out again, and it was well within the system, though carefully not on the plane of its ecliptic.

Then the *Horus* waited. She was twenty millions of miles from the planet Mekin. Bors ordered that for intervals of up to five minutes no electronic apparatus on the ship should be in operation. In those periods of electronic silence, his radars swept all of space except Mekin. He had no desire to have Mekin pick up radar-pulses and wonder what they came from. The rest of the system, though, he mapped. He found two meteor-streams, and a clump of three planetoids in a nearly circular orbit, and he spotted a ship just lifted from Mekin by its landing-grid. It went out to five planetary diameters and flicked out of existence so far as radar was concerned.

It had gone into overdrive and away. Another ship came around Mekin, in orbit. It reached the spot from which the first ship had vanished. It began to descend; the landing-grid had locked onto it with projected force-fields and was drawing it down to ground.

Bors growled to himself. It was not likely that this ship was the one he'd pursued, sight unseen, since the end of the fight off Meriden. But it was a possibility. If it were true, then everything that mattered to Bors was lost forever.

Then a blip appeared. It was at the most extreme limit of the radar's range. A ship had come out of overdrive near the fourth planetary orbit of this solar system.

Bors and the yeoman computer-operator figured its distance to six places of decimals. Bors set the microsecond timer. The *Horus* went into low-speed overdrive and out again. Then the electron telescope revealed a stubby, rotund cargo-ship, about to land on Mekin.

Bors swore. It would be days before this tub reached Mekin on solar-system drive. But it must not report that an armed vessel had inspected it in remoteness.

"We haul alongside," said Bors angrily. "Boarding-parties ready in the space-boats."

Another wrenching flicker into overdrive and through breakout without pause. The cargo-boat was within ten miles.

"Calling cargo-boat!" rasped Bors, in what would be the arrogant tones of a Mekinese naval officer hailing a mere civilian ship. "Identify yourself!"

A voice answered apologetically, "*Cargo-ship Empress, sir, bound from Loral to Mekin with frozen foods.*"

"Cut your drive," snapped Bors. "Stand by for inspection! Muster your crews. There's a criminal trying to get ashore on Mekin. We'll check your hands. Acknowledge!"

"Yes, sir," said the apologetic voice. "*Obeying, sir.*"

Bors fretted. The space-boats left the *Horus's* side. One clamped onto the airlock of the rounded, bulging tramp-ship. The second lifeboat hovered nearby. The first boat broke contact and the second hooked on. The second boat broke contact. Both came back to the *Horus*.

The screen before Bors lighted up. One of his own crewmen nodded out of it.

"All clear, sir," said his voice briskly. "*They behaved like lambs, sir. No arms. We've locked them in a cargo hold.*"

"You know what to do now," said Bors.

"Yes, sir. Off."

Ten miles away the cargo-boat swung itself about. Suddenly it was gone. It was on the way to Glamis and the fleet.

Another hour of watching. Another blip. It was another cargo-carrier like the first. As the other had done, it meekly permitted itself to be boarded by what it believed were mere naval ratings of the Mekinese space-fleet, searching for a criminal who might be on board. Like the first ship, it was soon undeceived. Again like the first, it vanished from emptiness, and it would be heading for the fleet in its monotonous circling of Glamis.

The third blip, though, was a light cruiser. The *Horus* appeared from nowhere close beside it and its communicator began to scream in gibberish. It would be an official report, scrambled and taped, to be transmitted to ground on the first instant there was hope of its reception.

"Fire one," said Bors. "The skipper there is on his toes."

He watched bleakly as the *Horus's* missile arched in its impossible trajectory, as the light cruiser flung everything that could be gotten out to try to stop it, while its transmitter shrieked gibberish to the stars.

There was a blinding flash of light. Then nothing.

"He got out maybe fifteen seconds of transmission," said Bors somberly, "which may or may not be picked up from this distance, and may or may not tell anything. He got a tape ready while he was in overdrive, with plenty of time for the job. My guess is that he'd take at least fifteen seconds to identify his ship, give her code number, her skipper, and such things. I hope so...."

But for minutes he was irresolute. He'd send his own minutely detailed report back to Glamis on the second captured ship. He did not need to return to report in person. He hadn't yet sent back provisions enough for the intended voyage of the fleet. The solar system of Mekin was an especially well-stocked hunting-ground for such marauders as Bors and his crew declared themselves to be—so long as word did not get to ground on Mekin.

But it did not get down. From time to time—at intervals of a few hours—specks appeared in emptiness. Mekin monopolized the off-planet trade of its satellite world. There would be many times the space-traffic here that would be found off any other planet in the Mekinese empire.

One ship got to ground unchallenged. By pure accident it came out of overdrive within half a million miles of Mekin. To have attacked it would have been noted. But he got two more cargo-ships. Then he found the *Horus* alongside a passenger-ship. But it couldn't be allowed to ground, to report that it had been stopped by an armed ship. A prize-crew took it off to Glamis.

Bors made a formal announcement to his crew. "I think," he told them over the all-speaker circuit, "that we got the ship which could have reported our action off Meriden. I'm sure we've sent four shiploads of food back to the fleet, besides the passenger-ship we'd rather have missed. But there's still something to be done. To confuse Mekin and keep it busy, and therefore off Kandar's neck, we have to start trouble elsewhere. From now on we are pirates pure and simple."

And he headed the *Horus* for the planet Cassis, which was another victim of the Mekinese. It was a rocky, mountainous world with many mines. Mekin depended on it for metal in vast quantities. The *Horus* hovered over it and sent down a sardonic challenge. One missile came up in defiance. But it was badly aimed and Bors ignored it. Then voices called to him, sharp with excitement. He heard shots and shouting and a voice said feverishly that rebels on Cassis, who had been fighting in the streets, had rushed a transmitter to welcome the enemies of Mekin.

Bors had one light cruiser and merely a minimum crew for it. He couldn't be of much help to insurrectionists. Then he heard artillery-fire over the communicator, and voices gasped that the Mekinese garrison was charging out of its highly-fortified encampment. Bors sent down a missile to break the back of the counter-attack. Then the communicator gave off the sound of gunfire and men in battle, and presently yells of triumph.

He took the *Horus* away. Its arrival and involvement in the revolt was pure accident. It was no part of any thought-out plan. But he was wryly relieved when he had convinced himself that Mekin needed the products of this world too much to exterminate its population with fusion-bombs.

More days of travel in overdrive tedium. Bors was astounded and appalled. Interference here would only make matters worse. The *Horus* went on.

There was a cargo-ship aground on Dover, and the *Horus* threatened bombs and a space-boat went down and brought it up. That ship also went away to Glamis where the fleet was accumulating an inconvenient number of prisoners. The fact that the capture of this ship only added to that number made Bors realize that King Humphrey would be especially disturbed about the passengers on the liner sent back from Mekin. Unless they were murdered, sooner or later they would reveal the facts about the Fleet. And King Humphrey was a highly conscientious man.

There was dissention even on Dover. The landing-party was cheered from the edge of the spaceport. Bors could not understand. He tried to guess what was going on in the Mekinese empire. He could not know whether or not disaster had yet struck Kandar. He could only hope that there were ships lurking near it, ready to use the recent technical combat improvements against any single Mekinese ship that might appear, so no report would be carried back. But it seemed to him that utter and complete catastrophe was inevitable.

He reflected unhappily about Tralee, and wondered what the Pretender, his uncle, really thought about his loosing of chemical-explosive missiles against puppet government buildings there. He found himself worrying again about the truck drivers who'd warned his men of booby-traps in the supplies they delivered. He hoped they hadn't been caught.

The *Horus* arrived at Deccan, and called down the savage message of challenge.

There came a tumultuous, roaring reply.

"*Captain Bors!*" cried a voice from the ground exultantly. "*Land and welcome! We didn't hope you'd come here, but you're a thousand times welcome! We've smashed the garrison here, Captain! We rose days ago and we hold the planet! We'll join you! Come to ground, sir! We can supply you!*"

Bors went tense all over. He'd been called by name! If he was known by name on *this* world—twenty light-years from Mekin and thirty-five from Kandar—then everything was lost.

"Can you send up a space-boat?" he asked in a voice he did not recognize. "I'd like to have your news."

It must be a trap. It was possible that there'd been revolt on Deccan; he'd found proof of rebellion elsewhere. There'd been claims of revolt on Cassis, but he hadn't been suspicious then. He'd sent down a missile to help the self-proclaimed rebels there. Now he wondered desperately if he'd been tricked there as, it was all too likely, he would be here. There'd been reported fighting on Avino. There was cheering for his men on Dover, and he might have landed there. But there were too many coincidences, far too many.

He waited, fifty thousand miles high, with the ship at combat-alert. He felt cold all over. Somehow, news had preceded him. It was garbled truth, but there was enough to make his spine feel like ice.

He spoke over the all-speaker hook-up, in a voice he could not keep steady by any effort of will.

"All hands attention," he said heavily. "I just called ground. We have had a reply calling me by name. You will see the implication. It looks like somehow the Mekinese have managed to send word ahead of us. They've found out that no one can stand against us. They know we have new and deadly weapons. Probably there have been orders given to lure us to ground by the pretense of a successful revolt. It would be hoped that we can be fooled to the point where we will land and our ship can be captured *undestroyed*.—That's the way it looks."

He swallowed, with difficulty.

"If that's so," he said after an instant, "you can guess what's been done about Kandar. The grand fleet was assembled on Mekin. It could have gone to Kandar...."

He swallowed again. Then he said savagely, "Well make sure first. If the worst

has happened we'll take our fleet and head for Mekin and pour down every ounce of atomic explosive we've got. We may not be able to turn its air to poison, but if there are survivors, they won't celebrate what they did to Kandar!"

He clicked off. His fists clenched. He paced back and forth in the control room. He almost did not wait to make sure. Almost. But he had never seen a Mekinese fighting man face to face. He'd gone into exile with his uncle when that unhappily reasonable man let Tralee surrender rather than be bombed to depopulation. He'd served in the Kandarian navy without ever managing to be in any port when a Mekinese ship was in. He'd fought in the battle off Kandar, he'd destroyed a Mekinese cruiser off Tralee, another in the Mekinese system itself and a squadron off Meriden. But he had never seen a Mekinese fighting-man face to face. Filled with such hatred as he felt, he meant to do so now.

A space-boat came up from the ground. The *Horus* trained weapons on it. Bors painstakingly arranged for its occupants to board the *Horus* in space-suits, which could not conceal bombs.

There were six men in the space-boat. They came into the *Horus's* control room and he saw that they were young, almost boys. When they learned that he was Captain Bors, they looked at him with shining, admiring, worshipping eyes. It could not be a trick. It could not be a trap. He was incredulous.

The message from the ground was true.

Chapter 11

THE NEWS as Bors got it from the men of Deccan was remarkable for two reasons: that so much of it was true, and that all of it was glamorized and romanticized and garbled. It was astonishing to find any relation at all between such fabulously romantic tales and the facts, because there was no way for news to travel between solar systems except on ships, and no ships had carried stories like these!

Here on Deccan, the shining-eyed young men *knew* that Bors had landed on Tralee and on Garen. They *knew* that there was a fleet in being which had fought and annihilated a Mekinese task-force many times its size.

To the Captain, their knowledge was undiluted catastrophe!

They admired Bors because they believed he commanded that fleet, which he now had in hiding while he flashed splendidly about the subjugated worlds, performing prodigious feats of valor and destruction, half pirate and half hero. The story had it that he'd been driven from his native Tralee by the invaders, and that now he fought Mekin in magnificent knight-errantry, and that it was *he* who'd set alight the flame of rebellion on so many worlds.

Bors listened, and was numbed. He heard references to the fight off Meriden, and the temporary escape of one of his enemies, and that he'd pursued it to the solar system of Mekin itself and there destroyed it while Mekin watched, helpless to interfere.

The distortion of facts was astounding. But the mere existence of facts at this distance was impossible! Then Bors found himself thinking that these tales sounded like fantasies or daydreams, and he went white. He knew what had happened.

Just before he'd left the fleet, he'd talked to a fat woman and a scowling man who, together, made up the Talents, Incorporated brand new Department for Disseminating Truthful Seditious Rumors, so that rumors of a high degree of detail got started, nobody knew how. If such rumors spread, and everybody heard them, nobody would doubt them. It was appallingly probable that the fighting on Cassis and Avino and Deccan had no greater justification in reason

than that an enormously fat woman romantically pictured such things as resulting from the derring-do of one Captain Bors, of whom she thought sentimentally and glamorously and without much discrimination.

But she'd daydreamed about the fleet, too! And that it had destroyed a Mekinese squadron many times its size....

He heard the leader of the young men from Deccan speaking humorously. "Your revolt, sir," he told Bors, "is spreading everywhere! On Cela, sir, there are great space-ship yards, where they build craft for the Mekinese navy. Not long ago they finished one and it went out to space for a trial run. It didn't come back. Sabotage. Everybody knew it. The Mekinese raged. A little while later they finished another ship. But the Mekinese were smart! They sent it off for its trial run with only Celans on board. If there were sabotage this time, it wouldn't be Mekinese who died in space! But that ship didn't come back either! It touched down here, sir, three weeks ago, and we supplied it with food and missiles and some of us joined it. It went off to try to find you."

"I'd better—go after it," said Bors, dry-throated. "It could blunder into trouble. At best—"

The youthful leader of Deccan's revolt grinned widely.

"It's got plenty of missiles," he told Bors. "It can take care of itself! And it has plenty of food. We even gave them target-balloons to practice launching missiles on. We've been storing up missiles to lay an ambush for a Mekinese squadron if one comes by. A lot of us joined the ship, though."

"In any case," said Bors, with the feel of ashes in his throat, "I'll track it down so it can join the fleet."

He could not bring himself to tell these confident and admiring young men that there was no hope and never had been; that the tales of his achievements were only partly true and that they had popped into people's minds because a very fat woman far away indulged in daydreams and fantasies.

They wouldn't have understood. If they had, they wouldn't have believed. He found that he savagely resisted the conviction himself. But there was no other way for such garbled tales with such a substratum of fact to be spread among the stars. And whoever spread them knew of events up to the last news sent back by Bors, but nothing after that. Undoubtedly, Talents, Incorporated's Department for

Disseminating Truthful Seditious Rumors had been at work on Mekin, but the damage done elsewhere was a thousand times greater than any benefit done there.

It was too late to repair the damage, here or anywhere else. This planet and all the rest were too far committed to rebellion ever to be forgiven by Mekin. Mekin would take revenge. It was not pleasant to think about.

So the *Horus* departed, and traveled in high-speed overdrive for ship-days seemingly without end, toward Glamis. It knew nothing that happened outside its own cocoon of overdrive field. It knew nothing of any of the thousands of myriads of stars, whose planetary systems offered unlimited room for humanity to live in freedom and without fear.

During the journey Bors only endured being alive. All this disaster was ultimately his fault. The fleet's survival was due to his work with Talents, Incorporated. The raids of a single ship—which now would have such disastrous results—were the fruits of his suggestion, the consequence of his actions.

Talents, Incorporated was involved, to be sure, but only because he'd allowed it to be. He should have realized that Madame Porvis would work havoc if her talent was as described. No mere romantic daydreamer would fashion fantasies with military secrecy in mind and security as a principle. Everything was betrayed. Everything was ruined. And if he, Bors, had only been properly skeptical, the fleet would have been destroyed and Kandar now occupied by the Mekinese—doomed to servitude but not necessarily to annihilation—and other worlds would also be safely servile. They'd still be resentful and they'd bitterly hate Mekin, but they would not have before them the monstrous vengeance now in store.

Bors, in fact, felt guilty because he was still alive.

There was only one small thing he could still try to set aright. He could insist that Morgan take Gwenlyn far away from the dangerous possibility that Mekin might somehow find her. He *had* to make Morgan see the need for it. If necessary, he would convince King Humphrey that a royal order must be issued to send the *Sylva* light-centuries away, before the Mekinese empire began to restore itself to devastated calm—if that process hadn't already begun.

Mekin had its grand fleet assembled and ready. If convincing and, unfortunately, truthful rumors ran about Mekin, as elsewhere, concerning the fleet and Bors's

attempts to hide it, then their dictator need only give a single order and the grand fleet would lift off. When it found Kandar unoccupied it would leave Kandar dead. Then it would seek out the fleet, and destroy it, and then it would move from one to another of its rebellious tributaries and take revenge upon them....

And Bors could only hope to salvage the life of one girl from the wreckage of everything that human beings prefer to believe in. He could only hope to send Gwenlyn away—if he was not already too late.

The *Horus* broke out into normal space twelve days after leaving Deccan. The untrustworthy sun of Glamis still shone brightly. The inner planet revolved about it with one side glowing low red heat and the other side piled high with frozen atmosphere. The useless outer planet remained a lush green, save for its seas. And the fleet still circled it from pole to pole.

Bors had himself ferried to the flagship by space-boat, because what he had to report was too disheartening to be spoken where all the fleet might hear. Gwenlyn met him at the flagship's airlock. She looked very glad, as if she'd been uneasy about him.

"Call for a boat," Bors commanded her curtly, "to take you to the *Sylva*. Go on board with anybody else who belongs on it, your father, anybody. I'm going to ask the king to insist that the *Sylva* get away from here—fast! Before the Mekinese turn up."

Gwenlyn shook her head, her eyes searching his face.

"The *Sylva's* not here. It's gone to Kandar as a sort of dispatch-boat."

Bors groaned.

"Then I'll try to get another ship assigned to take you away," he said formidably. "Maybe one of the captured cargo-ships I sent back."

"No," said Gwenlyn. "They're going to be released. They'll go to Mekin, and we *couldn't* go there!"

Bors groaned again. Then he said savagely, "Wait here for me. I'll arrange something as soon as I've seen the king."

He strode down the corridor to King Humphrey's cabin. A sentry came to attention. Bors passed through a door. The king and half a dozen of the top-

ranking officers of the fleet were listening apathetically to Morgan, at once vexed and positive and uncertain.

"But you can't ignore it!" protested Morgan. "I don't understand it either, but you'll agree that since my precognizer said no ship but Bors's is coming here—and he precognized every one of the prizes before they arrived—you'll concede that the Mekinese aren't coming here. So you're going out to meet them."

He saw Bors, and breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"Bors!" he said in a changed tone. "I'm glad you're back!"

Bors said grimly, "Majesty, I've very bad news."

King Humphrey shrugged. He spoke in a listless voice.

"I doubt it differs from ours. You captured a passenger-liner off Mekin, you will remember. You sent it here. When it arrived we found that all its passengers knew that Kandar was not occupied and that the fleet sent to capture it had not reported back."

"My news is worse," said Bors. "The continued existence of our fleet, and the fact that it defeated a Mekinese force, is common knowledge on at least five planets—all of them now in revolt against Mekin."

The king's expression had reached the limit of reaction to disaster. It did not change. He looked almost apathetic.

"Mekin," he said dully, "sent a second squadron to Kandar to investigate the rumors of defeat. We have a very tiny force there—three ships. Of course our ships won't attack the Mekinese, but they might as well. Knowing that we destroyed their first fleet and that we still live, Mekin will assuredly retaliate."

"And not only on Kandar," said Bors. "On Tralee and Garen and Cassis and Meriden—"

Morgan interrupted.

"Majesty! All this is more reason to listen to me! I've been telling you that all my Talents agree—"

King Humphrey interrupted tonelessly, "We've made our final arrangements, Bors. We are going to release the cargo-ships and the passenger-ship you sent us."

We will use them as messengers. We are going to send a message of surrender, to Mekin."

Bors swallowed. His most dismal forebodings had produced nothing more hopeless than this moment.

"Majesty—"

"We have to sacrifice," said the king in a leaden voice, "not only our lives but our self-respect, to try to gain something less than the total annihilation of Kandar. We shall tell the Mekinese that we will return to Kandar and form up in space. If they send a small force to accept our surrender, they shall have it. If they prefer to destroy us, they can do that also. But we submit ourselves to punishment for having resisted the original fleet. We admit our guilt. And we beg Mekin not to avenge that resistance upon our people, who are not guilty."

Bors tried to speak, and could not. There was a sodden, utterly unresilient stillness in the room, as if all the high officers of the fleet were corpses and the king himself, though he spoke, was not less dead.

Then Morgan moved decisively. He moved away from the spot where he had been engaged in impassioned argument. He took Bors by the arm, and hustled him through the door.

"Come along!" he said urgently. "Something's got to be done! You have the knack of thinking of things to do! The king's intentions—"

The door closed behind him and he broke off. He wiped sweat from his forehead with one hand while he thrust Bors on with the other. They came to a cabin evidently assigned to him. Gwenlyn waited there.

"Craziness!" said Morgan bitterly. "Craziness! I get the finest group of Talents that ever existed! I teach them to think! I instruct them! And they can't think of what is going to happen. And everything depends on it! Everything!"

"When will the *Sylva* be back?" demanded Bors.

Morgan automatically looked at his watch. Gwenlyn opened her mouth to speak. Morgan shook his head impatiently. Gwenlyn was silent.

"My ship-arrival Talent's with the *Sylva*," said Morgan harassedly. "We sent him to Kandar to find out if the Mekinese fleet's coming there, and when. It isn't

coming here. He said so."

"It'll go to Kandar," said Bors bitterly, "to destroy it. I imagine we'll go there too, to be destroyed."

"But it's insane!" protested Morgan. "Look! You captured a passenger-ship off Mekin. Right?"

"Yes."

"You sent it here with all its passengers. Right?"

"Yes."

"One of the passengers said he was a clairvoyant. Hah!" Morgan expressed the ultimate of disgust. "He was a fortune-teller! He didn't know there was anything better than that! A fortune-teller! But he's a Talent! He's a born charlatan, but he's an authentic Talent, and he doesn't know what that is! He thinks predictions as Madame Porvis thinks scandals! And they're just as crazy! But he *is* a Talent and they have to be right!"

Bors said, "You're going to take Gwenlyn away from here,—and fast!"

Morgan paid no attention. He was embittered, and agitated, and in particular, he was frustrated.

"It's all madness!" he protested almost hysterically. "Here we've got a firm precognition that King Humphrey's going to open parliament on Kandar next year, and there's another one—"

Gwenlyn said quickly, "Which you won't tell!"

"Which I won't tell. But something's got to happen! Something's got to be done! And this crazy Talent gives me a crazy precognition and looks proud because I can't make sense of it! What the hell can you make out of a precognition that Mekin will be defeated when an enemy fleet submits to destruction, lying still in space? There's no sense to it! My Talents wouldn't think of anything idiotic like that! They've got better sense! But when this lunatic said it, they could precognize it too! It's so! They couldn't think of it themselves, but when this Mekinese Talent does, they know it's true. But it can't be!"

Bors said coldly, "The fleet's going to be destroyed, certainly. If that will defeat Mekin. But Gwenlyn is not to stay aboard to be destroyed with it! How are you going to get her away?"

"The king's waiting for the *Sylva* to come back," Morgan said indignantly, "so he'll know—my ship-arrival Talent went to find out—if the Mekin fleet's going to Kandar, and when. He insists that if they know the fleet exists, they know where it is and will come here looking for it. But Madame Porvis couldn't have told that in her daydreaming. She didn't *know* what planet we're circling! She couldn't have spread that fact by contagion!"

"She spread plenty more!" said Bors. "Her daydreams were too damned true!"

Gwenlyn said, "It's a contradiction in terms for a fleet to win a battle by letting itself be destroyed. Perhaps the Captain—"

"It's also a contradiction in terms," said Bors bitterly, "for all our troubles to come because we won a victory. Now we regret that we weren't all killed. But it's madness for the king to propose to get us all slaughtered in hope of rousing the Mekinese better nature!"

"Maybe you can resolve it, Captain," said Gwenlyn thoughtfully. "Could it be that it isn't a contradiction but only a paradox?"

Bors spread his hands helplessly. Of all times and circumstances, this particular moment and situation seemed the least occasion for quibbling over words.

Then he said, "Yes.... It could be a paradox. If this prediction by that wild Talent is true, there is a way it could win a fight. I don't believe it, but I'm going to put something in motion. Nothing can make matters worse!"

He turned and strode back to the council room where King Humphrey and the

high commanders of his fleet sat like dead men, waiting for the moment to be killed, to no purpose.



Chapter 12

BORS GOT NOWHERE, of course. His proposal had all the ear-marks of lunacy of purest ray serene. He proposed urgently to equip all the ships of the fleet with the low-power overdrive fields. It could be done in days. Instructions were already distributed and would have been studied and understood. The fleet would then go to Kandar—if it appeared that the Mekinese grand fleet would go there—and set up a dummy fleet of target-globes in war array. This would be a fleet, but not of fighting ships. It would be a fleet of metal-foil inflated balloons.

One actual fighting ship, he stipulated, would form part of this illusory space-navy. He volunteered the *Horus* for it. That ship would signal to the Mekinese when they arrived. It would make the king's proposal to surrender, on the Mekinese promise to spare the civilian population of Kandar. If the enemy admiral agreed to these terms and the king believed him, then the true Kandarian fleet could appear and yield to its overwhelmingly-powerful enemy. If the admiral arrogantly refused to pledge safety to Kandar's population, then the dummy formation might be destroyed, but the fleet would fight. Hopelessly and uselessly—though the new low-power drive worked well in action—but it would fight.

The First Admiral said stonily, "If I were in the position of the Mekinese admiral, and I agreed to terms of capitulation, and if it were then shown to me that the basis of the terms was a deceit, I would not feel bound by my promise. When the actual fleet appeared, I would blast it for questioning my honor."

Bors looked at him with hot eyes. The king said drearily, "No, Bors. We must act in good faith. We cannot question the Mekinese good faith as you propose, and then expect them to believe in ours. The admiral is right. We can fight and bring destruction on our people, or we can place ourselves at the mercy of Mekin. There can be only one choice. We sacrifice ourselves, but we keep our honor."

"I deny," said Bors savagely, "that any man keeps his honor who enslaves his fellows, as you will do in surrendering. I resign my commission in your service, Majesty."

King Humphrey nodded wearily.

"Very well. You have served us admirably, Bors. I wish I thought you were right in this matter. I would rather follow your advice than my convictions. Your resignation is accepted."

An hour later, fuming, Bors paced back and forth across the floor of a cabin in the flagship. The Pretender of Tralee entered. The older man looked wryly amused.

"It was a most improper thing to do. You resigned your commission and then ordered the low-power fields built on all ships."

"To the contrary," said Bors, "I spread the news that I had resigned my commission *because* the low-power fields were *not* to be installed to give us a fighting chance!"

The Pretender sat down and regarded his nephew quizzically.

"But is it so important? To use tables of calculations instead of computers?"

"Yes," said Bors. "It is important. I should know. I've used the low-power fields in combat. Nobody else has."

The old man said without reproof, "The First Admiral is indignant. The fields were not ordered on the ground that they're an untested device and that at least once such a field blew out, leaving your ship, the *Isis*, so helpless that it had to be abandoned."

"True," agreed Bors. He made no defense. The attitude of the First Admiral would have been perfectly logical in ordinary times. Anything like the new intermediate, low-power overdrive field should have been proposed through channels, examined by a duly-appointed commission of officers, reported on, the report evaluated, and then painstaking and lengthy tests made and the report on the tests evaluated. Then it should have been submitted to another commission of officers of higher rank, who would estimate the kind and amount of modification of standard equipment the new device required, its susceptibility to accident and/or obsolescence, the ease of repair, the cost of installation and the length of time in-port required to install it. Somewhere along the line there should also have been a report on the ease with which it could be integrated into other apparatus and standard operational procedures, and there should have been reports on its possible tactical value, the probable number of times it would be useful, the degree of its utility and whether the excessive discomfort of going

into and out of overdrive at extremely short intervals would have an adverse effect on crew morale. Under normal circumstances a ship might have been equipped, for testing purposes, in six to ten years, and in ten years more all new ships might be equipped. But it would be well over a generation before its use was general.

The older man said, "Since your resignation's been accepted, you'll be put on the *Sylva* when it comes back. You won't be taken to Kandar with the fleet."

Bors's hands clenched.

"They'll say I resigned to stay out of the fight!"

"No," said his uncle mildly. "They'll say you resigned to avoid surrender. I'm being evicted with you. I'm to be dumped on the hospitality of your friend, Morgan, too. Humphrey is a very kindly man. Abominably so. But I am tired of being an exile. I'd really rather stay with the fleet. But he stands on his dignity to preserve our lives. I'm not sure what for, in a universe where such things as Mekin can happen."

"They happen," growled Bors, "because we value peace and quiet as much as the Mekinese do power, and much less than freedom. We compromise."

He paced up and down.

"Up to now," he said harshly, "every effort made against Mekin has been defensive. Twenty-two worlds, in turn, have fallen because they only wanted to *stop* Mekin. It's time for some world to resolve very solidly to *smash* Mekin, to act with honest anger against a thing that should be hated. It's got to be done!"

"The time for such a resolution," said his uncle, gently, "went by long ago."

There was sudden voice from the compartment speaker.

"*Co-o-o-ntact!*"

There was the hissing sound of doors closing. The peculiarly-muffled silence of a closed compartment fell. The Pretender said quietly, "If this is the Mekinese fleet, everything is solved. But your friends of Talents, Incorporated will have to be wrong. They insist the grand fleet will not come here."

Bors rasped, "I wish I were in that control room! But at least we've got missiles they can't intercept!"

"Except that they won't be fired, they're a great improvement," the Pretender said mildly.

He sat at ease. Time passed. Presently the tiny compartment air-refresher hummed, bringing down the CO₂ content of the air. It cut off. Bors paced up and down, up and down. He pictured what might be happening outside. It could be that the grand fleet of Mekin had appeared and now drove proudly toward Glamis. It could be that the fleet was offering surrender. There would be near-mutiny on many of its ships. There would be monumental frustration. Junior officers, in particular, would have examined the low-power overdrive tables, and would have studied longingly the reports of Bors's use of low-power overdrive against an enemy squadron off Meriden. They would yearn passionately to have their ships equipped with apparatus by which it could vanish from a place where it was a target to reappear elsewhere, unharmed, and make the enemy its target. Two fleets equipped with the new device might checkmate each other. But one fleet....

The speaker said curtly:

"Captain Bors, a single ship has broken out of overdrive. It identifies itself as the ship Liberty, of Cela. It declares that it has come to place itself under your command."

Bors stared. He had forgotten about the two Cela-built ships which the Deccan rebels told him about—the first of which had gone on a trial run with a Mekinese crew and failed to return, and the second of which, with a Celan crew, had gone off to look for Bors and his marauders.

Somehow, it had found him. It seemed totally improbable. Bors instantly thought of Talents, Incorporated. The Talents on the ship had spread rebellion on worlds unthinkable distances apart. It was conceivable that in some way they'd brought this ship to Glamis.

"Very well," said Bors coldly, in the cabin to which he was confined. "I request to be put on board."

"I'll come with you," said his uncle. He smiled at Bors, who noted, but was not surprised at, the genuineness of the smile. "This is the ship you mentioned as hoping to emulate the *Horus*. I don't think you'll surrender it. But I've surrendered once and I don't like it. I'd rather not do it again."

Compartment-doors went back to normal, as combat-alert went off. Morgan appeared, agitated and upset.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

Bors told him curtly as much as he knew, all that he'd been told on Deccan. It was the only ship technically in actual rebellion against Mekin. It had heard rumors of Bors, and it wanted his leadership.

"But you can't go now!" insisted Morgan. "You've got to wait until the *Sylva* gets back! You have to have Talents, Incorporated information to act on! You need my Talents!"

"I'm going to get moving as fast as I can," said Bors. "I don't think we can wait. If the *Liberty's* what I think, and her crew what I believe, they'll crave action."

There was a space-boat at the flagship's lock. Bors and his uncle entered. Those already in the boat were young men in the nondescript clothing of ship-workers. They grinned proudly at Bors when he took his seat.

"I don't know whether you know, sir," said the young man at the space-boat's controls, "but we heard about your revolt, sir, and we were about at the limit so we—"

"I stopped at Deccan," Bors said briefly. "They told me about you. Do you want action against Mekin?"

"Yes, sir!" It was a chorus.

"You'll get it," said Bors. "I'll try you out on a concentration of Mekin ships that should be turning up at Kandar. How are you equipped for repairs and changes?"

"We left Cela for a test trip, sir," said the young man at the controls. There were grins behind him. He chuckled. "Naturally we had materials to repair anything that went wrong on a trial run!"

"I've got some new settings for missiles," said Bors, "which make them hard to dodge. And we'll want to set up a special overdrive control, which makes it easy to dodge Mekinese ones. We can attend to it on the way to Kandar. How many aboard?"

He asked other curt questions. They answered. What Bors asked was what a commanding officer would need to know about a new ship, and his new

followers realized it. They had been exultant and triumphant when he entered the space-boat. In the brief time needed to get to the *Liberty* they became ardently confident.

His reception was undisciplined but enthusiastic. He made a hurried inspection. The *Liberty* had started out with a skeleton crew of shipyard workers and no stores or arms. The ranks were now filled with volunteers from Deccan and elsewhere, and its storage-rooms fairly bulged with foodstuffs. Bors, however, really relaxed only once. That was when he saw the filled racks of missiles. On Deccan they'd been lavish in their gifts to the rebel space-ship.

Bors went into the control room, glanced about, and spoke crisply into the all-speaker microphone.

"All hands attention! Bors speaking. A concentration of Mekinese ships is expected at Kandar. We shall head for that planet immediately. On the way I shall arrange for some changes in the settings of the missiles we have on board. We will fix and distribute aiming-tables for their use. We will stop twice on the way for target practice. Much more than your lives or mine depends on how well you do your work. We'll also modify the overdrive to make this ship able to do everything my other ships did—and more. You will work much harder on the way to Kandar than you ever worked before, but we have to accomplish more than usual. That's all."

He stood by while the ship was aimed for Kandar. The young astrogator said enthusiastically, "Prepare for overdrive. Five, four, three—"

A voice out of a speaker:

"Calling Liberty! Calling Liberty! Morgan calling Liberty!"

"Hold it," said Bors.

He answered the call. Morgan's voice, in a high state of agitation, *"Bors! The Sylva's just back! Just broke out! The grand fleet will get to Kandar in five days, four hours, twenty minutes! My Talent on the Sylva is sure of it. It's Talents, Incorporated information!"*

"We haven't any time to spare, then," said Bors.

"Bors!" panted Morgan's voice. *"There were three ships of our fleet hanging about, on watch for Mekinese. They expected one. Twelve came. The*

observation-ships attacked. They got eleven of the twelve. The last one went into overdrive and got away! Bors! Do you see what that means?"

"It means," said Bors coldly, "that Mekin won't be accepting surrenders this week. Destroying the first division was bad enough. I got one off Meriden. Now that a third squadron's wiped out, Mekin will insist on somebody getting punished—and plenty! All right! We're leaving for Kandar now."

He nodded to the young man at the control board. He noted with approval that he'd kept the *Liberty's* aim exact while Bors talked to Morgan.

"Proceed," Bors ordered.

The young man said, "Five, four, three, two, one—"

There was the familiar dizzying sensation of going into overdrive. The *Liberty* wrapped stressed space about itself and went hurtling into invisibility.

This was one voyage in overdrive which was not tedious. Bors had to organize the ship for combat. He had to train launching-crews to work like high-speed machinery. He had to teach the setting of missiles for ranges he had to show how to measure. Once he stopped the ship between stars and all the launching-crews took shots at an inflated metal-foil target. The Pretender of Tralee displayed an unexpected gift for organization. He divided all space outside the ship into sectors, assigning one launcher to each sector. If an order to fire came, the separate crews would cover targets in their own areas first. There would be no waste of missiles on one target.

The Pretender would have made an excellent officer. He was patient with those who did not understand immediately. He had dignity that was not arrogance. In five days the *Liberty* was a fighting ship and a dedicated one. There were rough edges, of course. Man for man and weapon for weapon the ship would not compare with a longer-trained and more experienced fighting instrument. But the morale on board was superb and the weapons were—to put it mildly—inspiring of hope.

The *Liberty* broke out of overdrive and the sun of Kandar shone fiery yellow in emptiness. The gas-giant planet had moved in its orbit. It was more evenly in line than before with a direct arrival-path for a fleet from Mekin. Bors was worn out from his unremitting efforts to turn the ship into a smooth-running unit. He looked at a ship's clock.

"The Mekinese," he said over the all-speaker circuit, "will break out in two hours, forty minutes. And we're going to set up a dummy fleet for them to deal with."

His uncle said gently, "I suggest some rest, to be fresh for the handling of the ship. I'll set up the dummy fleet."

Bors resisted the idea, but it was not sensible to humor his own vanity by insisting on his indispensability. He flung himself down on a bunk. He was much better satisfied with the ship and crew than he would have admitted. And he was dead-tired.

Around him, young men of Cela and Deccan prepared target-globes for launching. The Pretender gently pointed out that the formation was to remain perfectly still and in ranks. Therefore, each globe had to be launched with no velocity at all, so it would remain in fixed position with relation to the others, to convincingly appear to be a fleet of ships.

Far away the *Sylva* hurtled through space with a much-agitated Morgan on board. Gwenlyn, too, was frightened. For the first time, both of them seemed doubtful of the value of Talents, Incorporated information.

Again, far away, the fleet of Kandar rushed through emptiness. On its various ships, junior officers had come threateningly close to mutiny. There was now a sullen, resigned submission to discipline and what orders might be given, but the fleet was fighting angry. The *Sylva* had brought back news of a third defeat of Mekinese by Kandar ships and hot blood longed to make a full-scale test of its own deadliness. There were few ships of the fleet which did not have a low-power overdrive field unit ready to be spliced into circuit if the occasion arose. If the king could not make acceptable terms for surrender, the junior officers were prepared to make a victory by Mekin a very costly matter.

Stretched out on his bunk, Bors thought of all these things. Finally he slept—and—dreamed. It was odd that anyone so weary should dream. It was more strange that he did not dream of the matters in the forefront of his mind. He dreamed of Gwenlyn. She was crying, in the dream, and it was because she thought he was killed. And Bors was astonished at her grief, and then unbelievably elated. And he moved toward her and she raised her head at some sound he made. The expression of incredulous joy on her face made him put his arms around her with an enormous and unbelieving satisfaction. And he kissed her and the sensation was remarkable.

Half-awake, he blinked at the ceiling of the control room of the *Liberty*. His uncle was saying amiably to the young man at the control-board, "That's a very pretty fleet-formation, if we do say so ourselves!"

Bors stood up, one-half of his mind still startled by his dream, but the other half reverting instantly to business.

But all matters of business had been attended to. Out the viewports he could see the dummy fleet in an apparently defensive formation. Its ships were only miles apart, and if they had been fighting ships, every one could have launched missiles at any point of attack from the pattern they constituted. At a hundred miles they could be seen only as specks of reflected sunlight. At greater distances a radar would identify them only as dots which must be enemy ships because the radar-blips they made lacked the nimbus of friendly craft.

"Hm," said Bors. He looked at the clock. "The Mekinese should have broken out five minutes ago."

"They did," said his uncle. "They're yonder. They're heading straight for this fleet."

He pointed, not out a port but at a screen where a boiling mass of bright specks showed the Mekinese fleet just out of overdrive and speeding toward the dummy formation, sorting itself into attack formation as it moved.

"The king's not here on time," observed Bors grimly. "We have to play his hand for him, Uncle. We haven't the right to commit Kandar by beginning to fight ourselves. Offer surrender, as he'd wish it to be done. If they accept, he can carry out his part when he arrives. He'll be here!"

The former monarch spoke gently into a beam transmitter.

"Calling Mekinese fleet," he said. "Defending fleet calling Mekinese fleet!"

In seconds a reply came back.

"*Mekinese Grand Admiral calling Kandar,*" the voice answered arrogantly. "What do you want?"

"We will discuss capitulation on behalf of Kandar," said the old man. "Will you give us terms?"

He grimaced, and said, aside, to Bors, "I'm speaking for Humphrey as I know

he'd speak. But I am ashamed!"

There was a pause. It took time for the Pretender's voice to reach the enemy and as long for the reply to come back. The reply was ironic and arrogant and amused.

"What terms can you hope for?" it demanded. *"You attacked our ships. You indulged in destruction! How can you hope for terms?"*

The Pretender scratched his ear thoughtfully. He regarded the radar screen with regret.

"We ask life for the people of our planet," he said steadily. He was annoyed that he had to speak for the tardy King of Kandar. "We ask that they not be punished for our resistance."

The young men in the control room looked astonished. Then they saw Bors's expression, and grinned.

A long pause. The boiling, shifting specks on the radar-screen began to have a definite order. The Mekinese voice, when it came, was triumphant and overbearing.

"We will spare your planet," it said contemptuously, *"but not you. You have dared to fight us. Stand and be destroyed, and there will be no punishment for your world. There are no other terms."*

The Pretender looked at Bors. He shrugged.

"Now what would the king do?" He looked puzzled.

"What can our dummy fleet do?" asked Bors.

The Pretender nodded. "We will offer no resistance," he said into the transmitter.

There was a long silence. Bors looked at the radar-screen. The mass of bright specks at the edge of the screen seemed to have sent a shining wave before it. It was actually a swarm of missiles. They were so far away that they could not be picked up as individuals on the screen. They were a glow, a shine, a wave of pale luminosity.

"We shift to low-power overdrive readiness," said Bors. "That is an order."

A ship-voice murmured, *"Low-power overdrive in circuit, sir."*

He watched the screen. The Mekinese missiles accelerated at a terrific rate. They left their parent ships far behind. They were a third of the way to the drone-fleet and the *Liberty* before Bors spoke again.

"Launch and inflate another target-globe," he ordered drily. "We could speak for the king since he was late. But we won't stay here to be killed as his proxy! Not without fighting first!"

A voice, crisp: "*Target globe launched, sir.*"

"Low-power overdrive toward the gas-giant planet. One-twentieth second. Five, four, three, two, one!"

There was the unbearable double sensation of going into, and breakout from, overdrive simultaneously. The *Liberty* vanished from its place in the formation of the dummy fleet, but left a metal-foil dummy where it had been. It reappeared a full five thousand miles away.

The rushing missiles now were brighter. They were individual, microscopic specks like stars. They began visibly to converge upon the space occupied by the dummy fleet.

"They'll be counting the ships," said the Pretender mildly, "to make sure that all stay for their execution. This would be a tragic sight if it were Humphrey's real fleet. He is just obstinate enough to let himself be killed, on the word of a treacherous Mekinese!"

The cloud of radar-blips grew bright and came near. The dummy fleet also appeared on the screens in the *Liberty's* control room. Bors and the others could see the rushing, shining flood of missiles as it poured through space upon the motionless targets.

"There!" Bors pointed. "The king's ship's breaking out! Away over at the edge. I wonder if the Mekinese will notice!"

There were very tiny sparkles off at the side of the radar-screen. They increased in number.

There was a flash, like the sun brought near for the tenth of a second. Another. Yet another. Then an overwhelming spout of brilliance as tens and twenties and fifties of the projectiles went off together. It was an unbelievable sight against the

stars. Missiles flamed and flashed and there seemed to be an actual sun there, now flashing brighter and now fainter, but intolerably hot and shining.

It went out, and left a vague and shining vapor behind. Then, belated missiles entered it and detonated. Their flares ceased. Then there was nothing where there had seemed to be a fleet.

"Which," said Bors, "is that!"

Then a voice spoke coldly from space.

"Connect all speakers for a message in clear," it commanded. "Alert all personnel for a general order."

There was a pause. The voice spoke again.

"Spacemen of Mekin," it said icily. "The fleet of Kandar is now destroyed. Kandar itself will be destroyed also as an example of the consequences of perfidy toward Mekin. But it should be a warning to others who would conspire against our world. Therefore, in part as penalty and in part as a reward to the men of the Grand Fleet, you will be allowed to land during a period of two weeks. You will be armed. You may confiscate, for yourself, anything of value you find. You are not required to exercise restraint in your actions toward the people of Kandar. They will be destroyed with their planet and no protests from such criminals will be listened to. You will be landed in groups, each on a fresh area of the planet. That is all."

There was silence in the control room of the *Liberty*. After a long time the Pretender said very quietly, "I will not live while such beasts live. From this moment I will kill them until I am killed!"

"I suspect King Humphrey heard that," Bors said, and drew a deep breath. "Combat alert!" he ordered crisply. "We're attacking the Mekinese fleet. Handle your missiles smoothly and don't try to fire while we're in overdrive! We'll be going in and out.... Choose your targets and fire as we come out and while I count down. Overdrive point nine seconds. Five, four, three, two, one!"

The cosmos reeled and stomachs retched when the *Liberty* came out in nine-tenths of a second. She was in the very midst of a concentration of the Mekinese fleet. Missiles streaked away, furiously, as Bors counted down. "Two-fifths second, five, four, three, two, one!"

More missiles shot away. Bors almost chanted, while with gestures toward the radar-screen he picked out the objects near which breakout should fall.

"Point oh five seconds." The ship went into overdrive and out. It seemed as if the universe dissolved from one appearance to another outside the viewports. "Five, four, three, two, one! Hold fire!"

The *Liberty* came out a good ten thousand miles from its starting-point and beyond the area occupied by the enemy fleet. Three thousand miles away a flare burst among the distant stars. A second. A third. Six thousand miles away there were flashings in emptiness.

"We're doing very well," said Bors calmly into the all-speaker microphone. "A little more care with the aiming, though. And read your ranges closer! They're not intercepting our missiles. We're not aiming them right. We try it again now..."

The universe seemed to reel and one felt queasy, but there was work to be done, while a voice chanted, "Five, four, three, two, one!" Then it reeled again and the same voice continued to chant. Sometimes the crews saw where missiles hit, but they could never be sure they were their own. Then, suddenly, the number of hits increased. They doubled and tripled and quadrupled.

"All hands!" barked Bors. "The fleet of Kandar is wading into this fight. Be careful to pick your targets! No Kandar ships! Save your missiles for the enemy!"

Someone, man-handling missiles for faster and more long-continued firing than any ship-designer ever expected, gasped, "Come on boys! Missiles for Mekin!"

It became a joke, which seemed excruciatingly funny at the time.

Nobody saw all the battle, or even a considerable part. There was a period when the *Liberty*, alone, fought like the deadliest of gadflies. It appeared in the middle of a Mekinese sub-formation, loosed missiles and vanished before anything could be intercepted. There was no target for Mekinese bombs to home on when they got to where the *Liberty* had been.

Then the fleet of Kandar appeared. It broke out in single ships and in pairs, and then in groups of fives and tens. The general order for the Mekinese fleet had been picked up, and the fleet of Kandar seemed to have gone mad.

The flagship tried to fight in orthodox fashion, for a time. It depended on the attraction its missiles had for Mekinese to keep it in space. But presently it was alone, and the battle was raging confusion scattered over light-minutes, and somebody went down in to the engine room and brazed in a low-power overdrive unit—providentially made by a junior officer—and the flagship of the Kandarian fleet waded in erratically, never knowing where it would come out, but rarely failing to find a Mekinese ship to launch at.

The third phase of the battle was much more of an open fight, ship against ship, except that more and more Kandarian ships were using low-power overdrive—clumsily and inefficiently, but to the very great detriment of Mekin's grand fleet. The Mekinese officers could not quite grasp that their antagonists were doing the impossible. They became confused.

The fourth phase of the battle consisted of mopping-up operations in which individual ships were hunted down and destroyed by the simple process of a Kandarian ship seeming to materialize from nowhere a mile or half a mile from an enemy, launching one missile and seeming to dematerialize again and vanish.

Very few Mekinese ships went into overdrive. Probably most of them didn't believe what was happening. Perhaps four ships, out of the entire grand fleet, escaped.



Later, of course, there was embarrassment all around. King Humphrey the Eighth landed on Kandar to assure his people that they were no longer in danger. He was embarrassed because he was a victor in spite of himself. The fleet officers were embarrassed because Bors had been forced out of the fleet, and had literally tricked them into battle.

Bors, too, was embarrassed. There was the admiration displayed by junior officers of the fleet. He had become, very unwillingly, a model for young space-navy officers. They tried to pattern themselves after him in all ways, even to the angle at which they wore their hats. He squirmed when they looked at him with shining-eyed respect.

He was embarrassed, also, by the necessary revelation to the *Liberty's* crew that he was neither the leader of a rebellion nor in command of a fleet; nor that he had performed quite all the fabulous feats credited to him. He had to explain that he'd only commanded two ships, the *Isis* and the *Horus*, one of which had to be

destroyed, and that when the *Liberty* placed itself under his command he'd just been forced to resign his commission from King Humphrey. The young men who'd fought under him were unimpressed.

The fleet was re-supplied with food and missiles, and in one day more the major part of it would take off for Mekin. Other ships would journey, of course, to the twenty-odd, once-subject worlds. There they would—they were calmly confident about it—mop up any surviving Mekinese ships and enforce the surrender of Mekinese garrisons. And they would gather emissaries to be carried to the fleet as it rode in orbit about Mekin. The fleet and the representatives of the twenty-two worlds, together, would firmly rearrange the government and the policies and the ambitions of Mekin.

There was still the matter of Gwenlyn. The *Sylva* came down on Kandar, of course, where Morgan swaggered happily, pointing out the indispensable help given to Kandar by Talents, Incorporated. Bors reminded King Humphrey that Morgan collected medals, and he was duly invested with sundry glittering decorations, which would have staggered a lesser man.

Gwenlyn found Bors secluded in the palace, waiting until it was time to board ship and head for Mekin. Her father accompanied her.

"I've come to say goodbye," she said gently. "We've done what we came for."

"I still don't understand why you came," said Bors, who would much rather have said something else. "We can't possibly do anything adequate in return. Why *did* you come?"

He turned to Morgan, who answered blandly, "One of our Talents precognized an event. We had to come here and help it to happen. Gwenlyn was doubtful, but she's come around."

"What was it?"

"It hasn't happened yet," said Morgan. He produced a cigar and lighted it. "Gwenlyn, shall I tell him?"

"Don't you dare!" said Gwenlyn hotly.

Bors said unhappily, "I'm sorry you're going away, Gwenlyn. If things were—different, I—I—"

"You what?" asked Morgan. "By the way! One of our Talents has precognized that your uncle's going back to Tralee as its king again. Largely on your account. You're his heir, aren't you?"

Bors blinked.

"Hero," said Morgan, waving his hand. "Twenty-two planets adoring you, believing you brought Mekin down single-handed. Aching to work with you, follow you, admire you. Naturally, Tralee wants your uncle back. Then they'll have you. Of course," he added complacently, "our Department for Disseminating Truthful Seditious Rumors had something to do with it. But that was necessary wartime propaganda. And you didn't let anybody down." Then he said peevishly, "Not until now!"

Bors gaped. He looked at Gwenlyn. Her cheeks were crimson. Revelation struck Bors like a blow.

"I don't believe it!" he said, staring at her. He said more loudly, "I don't believe it!"

"Damn it," said Morgan indignantly. "She didn't believe it either! She said she'd come here because she was curious, nothing more. But that particular Talent's never missed yet! She just plain *knows* every time who—"

"Hush!" said Gwenlyn fiercely. "Goodbye."

Bors moved toward her, not to shake hands. She ran out of the door. She ran fast, for a girl. He ran faster.

Morgan puffed contentedly. Presently the completely unreal figure of King Humphrey the Eighth came to where Morgan had surrounded himself with aromatic smoke.

"Where's Bors?" asked the king.

"Yonder," said Morgan. He waved his hand. "Kissing my daughter, I think. D'you know, Majesty, I've known this would happen all along? One of our Talents precognized you opening parliament next year. So I knew things had to come out right."

"Y-yes," said the king, dubiously. "I suppose so. But there had to be efforts, too, to bring it about. Otherwise it wouldn't seem right."

"Naturally!" said Morgan. "When one of my Talents precognized that Gwenlyn was going to marry the heir of the Pretender of Tralee and be Queen of Tralee some day, why, it didn't seem a bit likely. But once I knew about that precognition, I put in a little effort...."

King Humphrey was thoughtful.

"Things look good," said Morgan expansively. "My Talents are precognizing all over the place. They tell me that this planet's going to be a fine place to live. Quiet and peaceful, and serene.... Gwenlyn will be living on Tralee, most likely, and I don't want to be underfoot. I'll probably settle down here. Retire, you know."

"Splendid," said the king, politely, his mind occupied with the prospect of a warless future.

"And as for Gwenlyn and Bors," Morgan added, confidentially, "I'll tell you something. My Talents've been working on her future. I wouldn't tell her all of it. Some of it should be a surprise. But she and Bors are going to be what you call happy ever after! And that's Talents, Incorporated information! You can depend on it!"

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