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# THE ALTAR ON ASCONEL

John Brunner



First Book Publication





## BEACHHEAD FROM ANOTHER GALAXY

Whether or not he had wanted to turn back at the last minute, he couldn't have—the wave of dirty, hungry people carried him helplessly along in their fervor to reach the temple. *Like dope addicts, he told himself, they don't even care about themselves, only about the thing that is inside the temple!*

He remembered the day ten years ago when his older brother had been made a Warden of Asconel, a prosperous and happy planet, and he and his other brothers had left in the interests of their people. Now they had returned to a world where a fanatical cult had usurped the Warden's chair, and men and women were gladly offering themselves up as human sacrifices to Belizuek—whoever or whatever that being from beyond the galaxy was. . . .

*I'll find out, he told himself grimly, when I enter these doors. . . .*

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# **THE ALTAR on ASCONEL**

**John Brunner**

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## I

AT LAST, after almost ten years, the moment had come. He felt himself ready for the task he had undertaken.

Spartak of Asconel closed the latest of hundreds of books which he had consulted, drew a deep breath, and gazed around his cell. Other books were piled high on every shelf; beside them were tape, crystal and disc recordings, reels of microfilm, manuscripts—the winnowings of a decade-long search through the unparralleled store of knowledge here on Annanworld.

The switch from student to teacher was as easy as picking up the microphone of his own recorder and uttering the first words. Yet it was somehow not easy at all. In one instant he would change the pattern of his life—not obviously, as when he left Asconel forever, but subjectively. The realization brought with it a curious floating sensation, as though he were suspended in space between two planets.

Abruptly he was impatient with his own reluctance. His

hand closed on the microphone as though seizing a noxious plant that must be gripped firmly to prevent it stinging, and he began to speak in a measured voice, not diffident or hesitant, but nonetheless unassured, as if it were a long time since he last made a dogmatic assertion of the truth.

And that was so. Life on Annanworld centered on a single basic assumption: that mankind knew a great deal, but understood virtually nothing.

"The fall of the Empire," he commenced, and heard in imagination the crashing of worlds like bowling-balls being hurled down a skittle-alley, "is for most people shrouded in a mystery only less deep than the obscurity attending its foundation, and that although the former event is closer to us in time than the latter by some ten thousand years. The reason in both cases is the same, and so simple that it generally has to be pointed out before it is noticed. It is as difficult to maintain detailed records during a landslide as it is during an explosion.

"The erosive effect of ten millennia has stripped the deceitful flesh from the story of the Imperial rise; today we are fortunate enough to have only the skeleton arrayed before us. We know that we were borrowers; we know that we inherited the abandoned property—most significantly, the interstellar ships—of a people who matured and died in the galactic hub while we were struggling outward from our legendary planet of origin. We know that this chance bequest allowed our race to spread among millions of stars like an epidemic disease. We know that our reckless habit of spending our resources as though their store was infinite was sustained for the entire lifetime of the Argian Empire by the billion-vessel spacefleet of our mysterious benefactors. Details beyond this bare outline, however, can now almost certainly never be reclaimed. It is as though one were to blink and find a century had passed. Blink now, and man is creeping along the galactic rim, in those areas which were later to be regarded as the home of mutants and pirates—but which, significantly, were and remain the only areas where interstellar ships have been built by human beings. Blink again, and Argus is already a wealthy world, imposing economic domination on its neighbors like Phaidona. Blink

once more, and the Empire's writ runs all the way to the Marches of Klareth, and the threshold of the Big Dark."

Now he was warming to his tale, the greatest in the checkered span of human history. His hooded eyes saw other sights than the plain stone walls of the tiny room; the note of uncertainty was fading from his voice. He was scarcely aware of the opening of his door, and did not turn to look at the gray-clad novice who appeared in the entrance.

"So total was the absorption of our borrowings into the pattern of human development," he continued, "that tens—perhaps hundreds—of billions of people were born and died without being able to conceive an alternative to the structure of the Empire. Yet . . . something strained past its limit. Something was overburdened, and broke. And the Empire fell."

The novice, impatient perhaps, moved from one foot to the other; the disturbance caught a fragment of Spartak's attention, and he bowed his bearded head in a brief nod of acknowledgment, though without breaking the flow of his discourse.

"The collapse left more worlds than we can count suspended, as it were, in a void between a glorious past and a future so bleak it has been nicknamed, already, the Long Night. Most relapsed towards barbarism; having been dependent for millennia on the tightly-knit network of galactic trade they could not support their own populations. Others, somewhat more fortunate, contrived to hold on to a portion of what they had formerly enjoyed, but at the expense of extreme privation and a near-total denial of individual liberty. An example in this category was Mercator, which conquered and then bled two nearby worlds to preserve itself. Again, there were worlds—including Argus itself, the galactic capitol—where the dissolution proceeded slowly enough for adjustments to be made without undue violence."

A draft from the still-open door stirred some notes before him, and reminded him that the novice was waiting for a chance to speak to him. He began to hurry, wishing to get the whole of his initial argument on record before interrupting himself.

"The purpose of this present work, however, is to make a contribution towards the documentation of the first truly

human expansion through the galaxy—one, that is, which does not depend on the leavings of another species. It may never take place; we may have squandered our energies too swiftly, and already be going into a permanent decline. On the optimistic assumption that the present trend is to be reversed, the seeds of such a regeneration may most likely be found on worlds sufficiently far from the cataclysmic effect of Argus's decay to have maintained their society under the guidance of benevolent rulers, like Loudor, Klareth, and the subject of this study: my home world of Asconel."

He put aside the microphone, and the hum of the recorder died. Shifting his lanky body in its coarse brown robe to face the intruder, he looked questioningly at him.

"I'm sorry, Brother Spartak," the novice said. "Brother Ulwyn sent me with a message from the gatehouse. There is a man demanding to see you who claims to be your brother."

Spartak repressed an exclamation of astonishment and put his hand to his crisp brown beard. He said, "Ah—well, it's not impossible. I have brothers, though I never expected to see one of them on Annanworld. . . .What's his name?"

The novice looked unhappy, and shuffled his sandal-clad feet on the stone flags. He said, "I'm afraid Brother Ulwyn didn't tell me."

"What does he look like? Did you see him?"

"I caught a glimpse of him through the bars of the gate. He's—well, not as tall as you are, and he has red hair. And there's a long scar down his right cheek, which looks like a sword-cut." The novice added the final detail eagerly.

"That's not very helpful—all three of my brothers have red hair and all are shorter than I am, and last time I saw them none had a sword-scar!"

"He bears no resemblance to you that I could tell," the novice suggested after a pause.

"That's no help either," Spartak grunted. "I call them my brothers, but in fact we're half-brothers, only. Well, it can hardly be Hodat, who rules on Asconel, so it must be either Vix or Tiorin. Does he—? But why am I asking these ridiculous questions? All you have to do is send him in!"

"Unfortunately—" The novice swallowed in enormous em-



barrassment. "Unfortunately Brother Ulwyn cannot admit him. He carries a gun, and will not part with it."

In spite of himself, and his oath of allegiance to the principles of his non-violent Order, Spartak felt he was beginning to grin. "It sounds like Vix," he said gravely. "Tell me, has he already threatened to burn his way in if the gate isn't opened?"

"I—I imagine so, from Brother Ulwyn's agitation," the novice confirmed, and ventured a shy smile.

"That'll be Vix," Spartak murmured, and got to his feet. "Ten years haven't changed him very much, that's obvious. Well, I'll go with you and find out what he wants."

They passed through twilight passages, cool for all the baking heat of noon outdoors, and walked the length of the gravel paths between the crisp green lawns, the low trees and beds of carefully tended flowers. Here and there, groups of gray-clad novices—among them an occasional off-world student in gaudier clothing—gathered about their brown-robed tutors, discussing knotty points of human history. Spartak caught random phrases as he passed, but only a few, for without realizing he had quickened his stride till the novice was scuttling to keep up. After all, the appearance of a brother he hadn't seen in a decade—even a half-brother—was an event.

At the threshold of the gatehouse Brother Ulwyn came to meet them. That was an event, too; the gatekeeper was stout, elderly and usually imperturbable. Now his round face was sweat-shiny and his voice wheezed with agitation.

"That—that *ruffian!*" he exploded. "He carries arms all about him! He offered violence to me—to *me!* And on An-nanworld! You must calm him, Spartak, and persuade him to enter—already there's a jeering crowd from the village beyond the gate, and more are gathering all the time."

"Let me through, and I'll talk with him," Spartak said.

"But calm him, and bring him in," Brother Ulwyn stressed, reaching for the bunch of keys that swung at his girdle. "Do you know, I think if the peephole had been larger he'd have dragged me through it?"

Moments later Spartak emerged onto the dusty roadway that led up from the village in the valley a short walk

distant. As Ulwyn had said, a crowd had gathered on the other side of the road, grinning and chattering. A few paces away from them, sitting on a milestone and looking thunderously angry, was Vix, the sword-scar about which the novice had spoken milk-white on his rage-red cheek. It was small wonder that Ulwyn had been agitated; across his back Vix wore an energy gun which would probably have been capable of razing the gatehouse with a single bolt.

Spartak threw his hood back on his shoulders. Vix stood up. He spoke his brother's name in a strange, uncertain voice: "Spartak—?"

"Yes, it's I. Though the beard is new to my face since last we met."

All the fury, and with it all the spirit, seemed to drain out of Vix in an instant. "So it's true," he said warily, and spat in the dust before turning with a shrug to ease the weight of his gun and starting along the road towards the village.

## II

PUZZLED, the gaping country-folk fell silent, apart from one who laughed. But he too was silent the moment after Vix had scythed him with a murderous glare.

"Vix!" Spartak cried, and lost the self-control which ten years on Annanworld had ingrained in him. He caught up his robe and closed the distance between himself and his half-brother in a dozen loping strides, the loose soles of his sandals slapping up little clouds of yellow dust. "Was that why you came to seek me out?"

Vix spun to face him and set his hands squarely on his hips. He had to throw back his head to look directly into the younger man's eyes; he was head and shoulders shorter of the two, but made up in muscles like steel springs for his lack of inches.

"I couldn't believe I'd been told the truth about you!" he blazed. "I never thought that the son of a Warden of Asconel would skulk in his hole and make no move to right injustice! Well, now I've had it forced down my throat. I'm

off to find Tiorin and see if he still speaks a language with which an honest man needn't fear to foul his mouth!"

"What are you talking about?" said Spartak in icy tones.

Vix's green eyes flashed. "Ah, so you think to save your newly bearded face, do you? What's this—you're claiming not to have heard the news? That's rich! On Annanworld, the university planet of the Empire, where all knowledge is collected and stored!"

Spartak took a deep breath, fighting the premonition that had overcome him at Vix's astounding behavior. He said, "Our business is more with the past, trying to analyze what brought about the downfall of the Empire, than with the present. I've been doing the research for a history of Asconel, but the latest news I've had is—oh—five years old at least."

"Save the sales talk for the yokels," Vix grunted, jerking his head towards the villagers grouped by the roadside. "Well—I'll believe you, because you're my own father's son. And then I'll see what counterfeit metal you hide under that cheap brown robe. Hodat is dead, and—"

"Dead?" Spartak blurted. "When? How?"

And on the instant, so swiftly that he returned to full attention in time for Vix's answer, he felt himself transported back in space and time to their last meeting: in a glade on the royal island of Gard, in Asconel's placid tropical ocean.

They had come together, the three brothers, alone: Tiorin the eldest, Vix the next, and—standing a little apart, because he had been apart from birth, being the child of his father's second wife—Spartak.

For long moments after the departure of the attendants who had accompanied them here, there was no sound except the distant plashing of the summer sea and the quiet humming of insects about their immemorial business of fertilizing the flowers. Spartak used the time to look at his half-brothers and fix them in his memory. He would miss them, despite the fact that they had never been as close to him as they were to each other.

They had the red hair of their mother and the stocky, brawny build of their father; so did Hodat, who was to be Warden of Asconel at noon today. But Spartak had the gaunt tallness of his mother's line, rooted in a past of which

even she herself knew little—the late Warden had taken her a year after being left a widower, and then she was only a wandering singer and teacher who had been born twenty systems distant of an unknown father. Younger than Vix by four years, he already had the scholar's stoop, the hooded thoughtful eyes of one much given to study.

Tiorin broke the uneasy silence. He had called the meeting, so the others waited on his words.

"It has all happened so suddenly," he muttered, little above a whisper. There were nods of encouragement.

*Suddenly!* Spartak thought. Why, only last month . . . And now three orphans, himself included. He thought of his mother, gone to death with her lord in the flaming ruin of their lightning-struck skyboat, and found he was picturing visions more horrible than he could bear—a roasted face, from the lipless hole of which came screams.

"I'm sure none of us ever made plans for this day," Tiorin resumed. "Nor Hodat either—except that he knew he was to take the Warden's chair eventually. So this is a matter we've never discussed between us. Now we must face it. Spartak?"

Startled at having his name thus uttered, Spartak raised his bent head.

"You've learned a deal about the fall of the old Empire," Tiorin said. "You know what's happened in many places—too many—since the prop of Imperial support was withdrawn."

"You mean—" Spartak was groping. "You mean when there was a quarrel over the succession to power? Why, yes!" *So this is what it's all about,* he added silently to himself.

"Now just a moment!" Vix took a pace forward. "Is there supposed to be some notion going around of usurping Hodat's chair?"

Tiorin, who had matured a little past Vix's suspicious touchiness, raised a pacifying hand. "You jump ahead of me, Vix. We've known since childhood that Hodat would one day succeed to the Warden's chair, and I don't think any of us would envy him this task. We've seen from the inside what it's going to be like—an infinity of hard work,



a paucity of reward and comfort. But what I'm afraid of is something more subtle than the possibility you mentioned."

He found himself a seat on a chair carved from the living trunk of a tree, and relaxed into it, his hair very bright against the dull brown bole.

"I don't pretend to Spartak's knowledge of what's gone on elsewhere," he continued. "But I've heard stories that frighten me. . . . It doesn't have to be the doing of a rival heir which oversets a smooth succession. It might be an independent faction taking someone's name in vain. Vix, you've generated an army to put down insurrections in the northern islands, and you're pretty well regarded over there."

"I should think so," Vix agreed without a trace of modesty, letting his hand fall to the butt of his sidearm.

"Now suppose in five years, or ten, some discontent arises there, and the rumor goes about that you'll seize power and deliver them from some harsh decree of the Warden—may you not find yourself called to put down a revolt of which you're the patron without your knowledge?"

Spartak felt a stir of admiration at the way Tiorin was broaching this subject to the touchy Vix; he himself could never have found such tact, being unused to the devious paths of diplomacy.

"It could well happen," Vix conceded grudgingly.

"We have nine hundred million people on this planet," Tiorin stressed. "It could happen far too easily! It could happen to me, likewise—I've never disciplined myself as Hodat had to, for I've always assumed he'd live and inherit, and consequently I've been . . . let's say more popular than he was. I've had a lot more fun as a result. But I'd hate to think that anyone could visualize me as a more easy-going Warden, and try to rebel against Hodat in the hope of having me take over. Even you, Spartak, might find yourself in a similar plight."

"Me? How?" Spartak raised his eyes in disbelief.

"I mean no disrespect," Tiorin emphasized. "But your reputation isn't so—so fiery as ours. An ambitious party wishing to become a power behind the Warden's chair might think of you as pliable, a potential puppet. Knowing you as I do, I believe they'd be mistaken. *But . . . !*"

Vix clapped his half-brother on the shoulder with bear-

like clumsiness; the blow stung, but Spartak, from long habit, smiled under it. "I'll grant that," Vix declared. "I used to think he was just a milksop, but I've come to have some respect for brains since I've had a man's problems to contend with. He doesn't fool easily, this boy here!"

At age twenty-two, it was Vix's use of the term "boy" which made Spartak wince, rather than the bang on his shoulder. He said, to cover his annoyance, "Well, Tiorin? What lies behind this smoke screen of verbiage?"

"I think we should all leave Asconel," Tiorin said.

Once more there was silence. During it, Spartak thought with an aching heart of a lifetime without this green, hospitable world, its orderly cities, its prosperous commerce, its high reputation among less fortunate neighbor systems, its bleak majestic mountains and its soft tropical sea. . . . He almost cried aloud: *Not to see Gard again, not to stand and watch the sun go down behind the Dragon's Fangs, not to eat island-caught fish and bread from the plains of Yul!*

And then he thought of his mother, a wandering singer and teacher who had seen and perhaps loved twenty worlds before she saw and loved the man to whom she bore her son.

He said, in a voice that surprised him by its steadiness, "I think you're right, Tiorin. And I'll go. I've often wanted to visit Annanworld—wished I could have been sent there to school as used to be done in the old days of the Empire. I think I could almost be happy there, among the stored-up knowledge of the galaxy."

"I can believe that," Tiorin said with a wry smile. "And it makes me envy you. For myself, I propose to travel, merely. It will take a long time to blot out Asconel in my heart. And you, Vix?"

They both turned and looked at him. Spartak half expected him to bluster that he would not leave his home—that to be asked to go was tantamount to accusing him of plotting a revolution against Hodat. But though some such outburst apparently trembled on the tip of his tongue, it never emerged.

"Well, indeed, what is there to keep me?" he began in a high angry voice, as though rebuking himself. "It's go-

ing to be a quiet dull place under sober Hodat, isn't it? There's no more discontent in the north that can't be snuffed out by a squad of men under a drunken sergeant, and if I pick fights in the street to pass the time the city guard will haul me in and my brother—my own brother—will talk to me like a father! And I've had most of the women I ever wanted here, and tasted all the best vintages and hunted the few remaining game-animals so successfully we're reduced to mere cubs and ancient cripples! Yes, I'll go, and with good will, to some place where they fancy a fighting man—take service, maybe, with the army of Mercator or go hunting pirates in the Big Dark. Yes, I'll go."

But he looked desperately unhappy as he stared straight ahead of him, not seeing the green foliage of the trees.

And all the memory of that final meeting was vivid in one single second when Spartak hung on Vix's answer ten years afterward, there beside the stone gatehouse of his order on Annanworld.

"Hodat is dead. Murdered," the redhead stressed. "And a usurper has made himself Warden. And he has brought a foul cult from no one knows where, and his evil priests lord it over the citizens of Asconell"

"But—when? How?" Spartak clutched at the other's arm, a torrent of questions rising in his mind.

"The news was already stale when it reached me on Batyra Dap. My first thought was to raise forces and liberate the planet, but it costs hard cash to hire an army, and I've—not been so lucky as I hoped." A grim sardonic twist drew up half his mouth; the sword-slash seemed to have paralyzed the other side of his lips. "And anyway, by this time Bucyon—that's his name, mark it well—has by all reports made a cringing pack of dogs of our once-proud people. I thought you'd have left Annanworld as I left Batyra Dap, hot on the news; instead, I've found you here."

"You must tell me—" Abruptly aware of where they stood on the hot dry road, Spartak broke off. "No, come inside and take refreshment and tell me there."

"They won't let me in," Vix grunted.

"Not you—the weapons you wear. We're an Order sworn to absolute non-violence; no knife, sword or gun is per-

mitted inside the gate. But you may safely leave your weapons with Brother Ulwyn, and collect them on departure."

"Much help you'll be," Vix sighed. "To think I came so far, and find you bound by an oath to abjure violence, when that's what it'll take to set our home-world free. Still, I'll come with you and tell the tale, and see if the horrors in it stir some spark of love for Asconel after all this time."

### III

"A FINE comfortable backwater you picked yourself!" Vix exploded. He was in a padded chair in the anteroom of the refectory; the order to which Spartak had pledged himself had a tradition of hospitality to travelers, and it had only taken a word about Vix's journey to the chief steward to produce a meal of cold meats, bread and fruit such as the Warden himself on Asconel would have been proud to present. Also there was wine aplenty, though not stronger drink nor any of the Imperial euphorics like ancinar. The rules of the foundation decreed a clear head.

"Now I begin to see," the redhead added around the leg of katalabs on which he was chewing, "why you decided to come here rather than be a wanderer like Tiorin and me!"

It was going to take a long time to dispel the hostility Vix had conceived towards him, Spartak realized. And that wasn't so surprising if one reflected on it. After all, at their last meeting at home, Vix had confessed that he had regarded Spartak as a mere milksop, not recognizing until he came of age that the difference in their temperaments which he mistook for cowardice was the mask covering a considerable degree of intelligence. Overlay this lasting childhood impression with the setbacks and disappointments leading up to this encounter on distant Annanworld, and you got an inevitable antagonism.

Determined not to feed it, Spartak said mildly, "Annanworld has been as little touched by the disasters associated with the downfall of Argus as was Asconel—less, perhaps. I don't know why it was originally decided to make the main center of galactic learning an isolated world like this—maybe the idea was that it should be free from the hustle

and bustle of Imperial affairs—but it certainly paid off in the long run.”

“Don’t tell me,” Vix muttered. “I can see, and taste, all that!” He drained his wine-mug and offered it for replenishment to the gray-robed novice waiting on them.

“By the stars, I haven’t had a meal like this in five years! And to think I was fool enough to pick a fighting order for myself!”

Startled, Spartak blinked at him. “You joined an order too?”

Mouth full, Vix nodded. “I took service with one of the rump forces left over from the Imperial collapse, full of big-headed ideas about re-imposing galactic rule on the rebellious worlds. But it’s all comet-dust. I’ve slept on the bare ground as often as not, drunk dirty water till the medics had to stick me full of needles and bathe me in rays, collected this scar and others which I can’t show in polite company. . . . Ah, but it hasn’t all been so bad. I’ve enjoyed myself in my own fashion, for if I hadn’t I’d have dug myself a piece of mud somewhere and planted corn.”

He swallowed the last of his food, leaned back in his chair, and burped enormously. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he stared at Spartak.

“You’re waiting there very calm and smug, aren’t you?” he accused. “I thought you’d ply me with questions all the time I was eating!”

“I was sure you’d tell me in your own good time,” Spartak answered peaceably. He was going to have to tread very carefully in his dealings with this irascible older brother, that was plain. “In any case, the shock of hearing Hodat was dead seems to have—” He made a vague gesture. “Chilled my mind, so to speak. I can hardly credit it.”

“Ah, you always were a corked bottle. Ashamed to show your feelings in front of anyone else. If you have any feelings, that is.” With the solid food in his guts, Vix was reverting to his normal manner.

“I’d like to hear the full story now,” Spartak suggested.

“From me you won’t get the full story,” Vix countered. “I guess no one knows it except those devils on Asconel—Bucyon, and the witch Lydis, and maybe that monster Shryl!” He shot a keen look at Spartak. “You flinched when

I said 'witch', and 'devil' too—don't you hold with such terms?"

Spartak looked at the table before him, choosing his words carefully. "There are certainly records of mutations developing possessed of what are generally called supernormal talents," he granted. "Indeed, it was part of Imperial policy for some millennia to maintain the stability of the *status quo* by locating such mutations and—if they hadn't already been put to death by superstitious peasants or townsfolk—transporting them to the lonely Rim worlds. There are said to be whole planets populated by such mutations now. But words like 'witch' have—ah—unfortunate connotations."

"I'll tell you something, *kid brother*. You're talking like your dust-dry books, not like a human being!" Vix gulped another mouthful of wine. "Maybe you've been cooped up here so long you've forgotten how to make regular conversation!"

The jab went home. Spartak flushed. "I'm sorry. It's true I've spent more time reading than talking these past several years. But it's been in a good cause," he added defensively, thinking to penetrate the other's hostility. "I'm working on a history of Asconel."

"Faugh! I'm not concerned with the dead past. I'm worried about the future. Don't your books tell you that that's under our control, while the past is what we find it and we can't set it to rights?" Another gulp of wine, and once more the mug was held out for refilling. "Besides, I don't much hold with working at distance. Asconel is its own history."

"I—" On the verge of a hot objection, Spartak checked. "I'll tell you something, too," he continued after a moment's pause. "That's a far more philosophical remark than I ever expected to hear from your lips!"

"By the nine moons of Argus, if you can't learn something in ten years' traveling, you might as well be dead." Vix put his hand to his waist, as though uncomfortable at the absence of his sidearms. "And I'm not dead. Well, let's not bicker among ourselves. I'll tell you what I can, if you'll agree not to argue about my calling Lydis a witch."

*You challenged me on the term*—But Spartak bit back the retort. He was now absorbing the important points of what Vix had told him: Hodat dead, a usurper ruling Asconel,

some cult with an arrogant priesthood dominating the citizens. All this added up to a frightening whole. He nodded for Vix to go on.

"The reason they call Lydis a witch seems plain enough to me," the redhead asserted. "Don't you recall Hodat as the most levelheaded of us? Don't you recall what plans he'd made, of his own accord, for his eventual marriage and fatherhood?"

"Surely," Spartak agreed. "He had in mind to make a formal alliance with some other world which had recovered well from the Imperial collapse."

"Right. What could have made him settle for a woman whose very home planet wasn't known?" Vix thundered. "If that wasn't witchcraft, I'm a—No, I get ahead of myself. Listen.

"This woman Lydis appeared one day, off a ship from no one knows where. Somehow, she got herself to the attention of Hodat, and once they'd met, things went out of control. He said, so the story runs, that this woman knew his innermost thoughts—that she was like a part of himself. Before anyone knew what had happened, she was being talked of as his wife-to-be.

"True, for a while things went well enough, I'm told. The witch Lydis was said to be beautiful, which is a good start for any woman, although she never appeared in public except in a long black gown with a veil over her hair. Like Tiorin foresaw, there was a plot to depose Hodat because of some decree or other, and allegedly she warned him of it, having seen into the minds of those who planned it."

"A telepathic mutant," Spartak muttered. "There are said to be some such. . . I'm sorry. Continue."

"So far so good. Then the priests of Belizuek started to come in. It had always been Imperial policy that if anyone was fool enough to want to spend time talking to idols or the empty air they should be allowed to get on with it, so under the guise of religious freedom they were permitted to land. Hodat started listening to them a great deal. I ought to say this was some cult to which Lydis herself adhered, by the way—said it was from her home world of Brinze.

"People started to get worried when the rumor got around that Hodat was considering adopting this belief himself; when the word was passed that he might impose it on the whole of Asconel, people got really alarmed." Vix broke off, noting an expression of dismay on Spartak's long bearded face. "Hm! Taking notice now, aren't you?"

"But—Oh, never mind," Spartak snapped. "Go on!"

"The first and worst of the priests was a man called Shry, a cripple of some sort in a black gown. By then, Hodat was completely obsessed with Lydis, and Shry had Lydis's ear. A new tax was imposed to finance a foundation of Belizuek teaching and build a temple, and that was just the thin end of the wedge.

"They say Grydnik was the first person to grow anxious. Remember him?"

"Ah—Port Controller of the main spaceport," Spartak rapped.

"Correct. I knew him well at one time. He started to wonder where these hordes were coming from—there seemed to be a never-ending supply of priests and acolytes and whatever. He checked on this place Brinze in all the Imperial records. There is no Imperial record of any such planet." Vix slapped the table with a look of triumph.

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything. The Empire never embraced the whole of the galaxy, though people generally assume it did. It could be a Rim world, some distance from the hub." But Spartak felt sweat crawling on his skin.

"And what benefit to Asconel is likely to come from a Rim world probably peopled by pirates and mutants?" countered Vix. "But wait a while longer. I haven't told you the half of it." His face darkened.

"The tax was followed by the extension of special privileges to the priests, the foundation of temples in all the big cities—this thing one year, and that the next. And then . . .

"I guess it was the sacrifices which sparked the last resistance in Hodat. Bemused though he was by the witch, he yet had enough love for Asconel and its people to refuse that horrible last step."



"Sacrifices?" Spartak heard his own voice utter the word an infinitely long distance away. "Not-human sacrifices?"

"Human," Vix echoed, and the word seemed to curdle the air of the room. "And it was then, while Hodat yet refused, that Bucyon came from space with a fleet the equal of the one I used to fight with over by Batyra Dap—ex-Imperial ships.

"They took over. They killed Hodat. And Bucyon sits in the Warden's chair with Lydis at his side—she having been the bait dangled ahead of Hodat to lead him to disaster. And Asconel is a ruin of all our father's hopes."

"Is there no resistance to the usurper?" Spartak whispered.

"Some, some. I hear that Trigrig Zen—remember him?—is either in exile or in hiding on one of the outer planets of the home system, trying to find an opening in the net Bucyon has cast around Asconel. But at last hearing, the devils had proved too clever, and there's no spirit in the people to support an uprising."

Spartak got blindly to his feet. He said, "I—I must go and speak to Father Erton, and tell him I'm called away. And then I'll fetch my belongings and come with you."

"Well!" Vix studied him. "That's more like the response I'd hoped for, late though it is. But I warn you, I can't tote all your beloved books and such around the galaxy! I've grown used to traveling light in these past ten years."

"My books are in my head," Spartak said quietly, and went out.

#### IV

OUT IN THE corridor, Spartak barely paused as he snapped his fingers at a passing novice. It was the same one, by coincidence, that Brother Ulwyn had sent with the panicky message about Vix's arrival; he was having a bad day's general duties. Sighing, but obedient enough, he came trailing Spartak and listening to the curt instruction: *Inform Father Erton I wish to see him, collect my belongings and pack them in my cases, have the kitchener prepare two travel packs of food. . . .*

Their paths diverged just after the last order had been

issued, the novice turning right towards the block of cells in which Spartak had lived since being accepted into the order, Spartak himself continuing straight ahead towards the library.

He entered the enormous hall with sufficient lack of the proper ceremony to draw a reproving glare from the Head Librarian, Brother Carl, in his high pulpit overlooking the entire array of more than five hundred low-walled cubicles. But he barely noticed that; he was concerned only to spot a vacant cubicle on the master plan-board and make his way to it as quickly as possible.

There was a place unoccupied at Aisle II, Rank Five. He almost broke into a run as he approached it. Without bothering to close the door behind him he dropped into the single chair and punched a rapid succession of buttons on the panel which formed the only other feature of the tiny booth. One finger poised to stab the PRESENTATION button, he hesitated; then he decided it was best to have a permanent record, and run the risk of the knowledgeable library computers swamping him with a flood of literature. He punched for a print-out instead of spoken or screened data.

Then he took a deep breath. "Brinze," he said. "Planet, presumed habitable, location unknown."

He waited in a mood of grim expectancy. It was all very well for Port Controller Grydnik, out on Asconel—which was, after all, rather an isolated world—to state that Brinze didn't exist because there was no Imperial record of it. But the records on Annanworld weren't so parochial.

The library disgorged a small plain card, no larger than the palm of his hand, from the slot at the base of the panel. Dismayed, Spartak picked it up and read it. It ran:

"BRINZE, planet presumed habitable, location unknown. No data. Request verify basis for question."

He tore the card across and threw it away. "Belizuek," he said. "Religious cult or feature of cult."

The answering card was slightly larger, but not much. On it were the words: "BELIZUEK, title and object of veneration of religious cult introduced to former Imperial space at ASCONEL (q.v.) approximately four years ago. No data on origins. No data on ritual. Unconfirmed reports of human sacrifice posted as IMPROBABLE."

"Bucyon," Spartak said. "Personal name. Lydis, personal name." Deliberately he refrained from cross-referencing to Asconel. The fact that the library contained information even as meager as what it had given him on this mysterious Belizuek cult had taken him aback; he had imagined that in his ten-year research for his projected history of his home planet he had exhausted every single reference in the entire store.

"BUCYON," the third card said. "Present Warden of Asconel. LYDIS, present consort of Bucyon. Unconfirmed reports of usurpation by violence posted as—"

He didn't bother to see under what delicate category the memory of the library had entered those reports. He crumpled the card and tossed it aside in fury.

"I'm an idiot," he growled. "All kinds of an idiot!"

This material the library was supplying to him was nothing more than the siftings of the story Vix himself had just told in the refectory anteroom. Brother Ulwyn, in the gatehouse, must have informed the library as a matter of routine that a visitor from Asconel by way of who-knows-where had arrived, and the library, finding it lacked recent news of that planet, had automatically eavesdropped on this much-traveled stranger. Techniques like these—some of them scarcely ever used—had been partially responsible for making Annanworld into the most notable of all the Empire's information centers.

For some minutes after that, he just sat. He had hoped to present a whole stack of data about Brinze and Belizuek to Vix, as some sort of justification for having hidden away in this placid backwater—Vix's gibe was half-true, he had to admit. And it turned out there was nothing in the library but the same rumors, now rendered third-hand.

Wearily, he wondered whether his ostensible reason for compiling a history of Asconel was sound. Was there going to be a renaissance of galactic civilization, based this time on human achievement instead of a borrowed technique of star-flight? Or was he simply whistling against the dark? Once, news had come from a million worlds within the year, so swift and reliable was the Imperial communications net. How much had changed! He had told himself Asconel was among the few worlds where anything significant was like-

ly to happen—yet prior to Vix's arrival, his last news had come to him two years ago, and was already three years stale, so that the vaunted library was forced to gobble crumbs of unverified data to bring its stock up to date. . . .

The door of the cubicle was pushed aside, and a startled off-world student was there, carrying a recorder. "Oh! Excuse me, Brother, but this cubicle was shown vacant on—"

"That's all right," Spartak said, rising with limbs that seemed to have stiffened from the passage of a lifetime. "I forgot to shut the door and close the circuit. But I've done what I came to do, anyway."

"You'll forgive me," Father Erton said in his wheezy, ancient voice. He was very old; rumor placed him at well past the century mark. "I should perhaps not say this. We are a center for study and distribution of information, and it's only a courtesy obligation that we place on those who make such extensive use of our facilities as you have done, to recompense us with some original work before leaving." But he loaded the words with a glare, and Spartak, who had always regarded the Master of his order with great respect, felt impelled to excuse himself against the implied charge.

"I have no intention of departing permanently, Father," he said. "It is simply that this news—"

"Moreover," Father Erton continued, totally ignoring the interruption, "Brother Ulwyn gives us most unfavorable reports of this half-brother of yours who comes to drag you away. Says he is violent in the extreme. Heavily armed. Scarred from fighting!"

"But Asconel is one of the few—"

"You may have no intention of departing permanently," Father Erton proceeded, as though his ears and mouth were keeping different time-scales, the gap between them amounting to several seconds. "But someone else—for example, the alleged usurper on Asconel—may take no notice of what you plan, and your chance to return will be . . . pffft!"

"I'm sorry, my mind is made—"

"And it would be a shame to waste a mind of your caliber on some desperate single-handed attempt to stand against the general tide of galactic decadence. I grant you, As-

conel was a great name in Imperial days—but so was Delcadoré, so was Praxulum, so was Norgel!”

“Delcadoré still functions as one of the Imperial—”

“Most crucial of all is my final point. If you leave here and while absent infringe the vow you took to renounce all forms of violence, you cannot be re-admitted.” Father Erton leaned back with an effort and stared at Spartak.

“I am not by temperament a violent person,” Spartak forced out, acutely conscious that Father Erton’s refusal to listen to a word he had to say had made him long to employ a great deal of violence on his sparse gray pate. “My intention is merely to—”

“Your intention is to throw away ten years of valuable study on a heroic gesture. You may well not return alive, and even if you do you stand the same chance of turning back the calendar as I would have of combating a tidal wave. I understand your attachment to Asconel—why, I myself, after seventy years, still occasionally find myself nostalgic for my own birth-world! And that the appeal comes from your half-brother makes it even more understandable that you should be tempted. Nonetheless, I urge prudence, a night’s sleep before your final decision, and—best of all—a reconsideration.”

Spartak got to his feet, a cold rage filling his breast. “Now listen to me,” he said between his teeth. “You know what’s going to happen here? One of these days someone who doesn’t give a yard of a comet’s tail for some hypothetical Second Galactic Empire is going to remember Annanworld, and he’ll whistle up a few score jollyboys with armed starships and knock this pretty study down around your ears. Then he’ll pick over the survivors and choose out the girls for raping and some of the novices for general drudgery, and loot the wreckage for enough to last him out a lifetime of luxury. And if this doesn’t happen, it’s going to be because a few places like Asconel and Lou-dor and Delcadoré held to the old-fashioned ways, stood up for justice and order and the rule of law and did their best to keep the pirates and the slavers and the privateers from off your neck!”

Father Erton gazed up at him unblinkingly. He said,

"It's taken you ten years, has it, to come around to this way of thinking?"

"No. More like ten minutes. I suddenly started to wonder where our resurgent Galactic Empire is coming from if our Asconels are allowed to go down into barbarism."

"And this was sparked by talking to your brother?"

"Yes."

"You should perhaps have questioned him more closely," Father Erton said. His old neck was getting stiff with gazing up at Spartak far above; he let his eyes drop to the desk at which he sat. "According to what he told Brother Ulwyn when he was trying to threaten his way past the gate, he's been serving with the Order of Argus, which was the rump of the old Imperial Tenth Fleet. They hired out to Mercator for its conquest of those two neighbor worlds it now rules; they sacked three cities on Poowadya in search of—ah—*provisions*, I believe they said; they exterminated the remains of the former Twenty-Seventh Imperial Fleet because the latter had the same aims and objectives as themselves and was making slightly better progress. . . . Rather a poor record, on the whole, for one who wants to save Asconel as a nucleus of a resurgent civilization!"

"I doubt if Vix cares one way or the other, just so long as Asconel is decently governed and prospers by modern standards. I was giving you my reasons, not his."

"Then go," Father Erton sighed. "But remember! If you commit yourself to violence, save the expense of coming back!"

Vix was waiting at the gate, with the novice who had brought Spartak's belongings, Brother Ulwyn hovering nervously in the background. There were three large bags piled on the path.

He hailed Spartak accusingly as the younger man came in view, face dark as a storm cloud. "Hey! I warned you, I travel light! If you expect me to carry this lot for you—"

Spartak shook his head. He had never been strong as a child, and doubtless Vix still thought of him as a weakling; now, though, was hardly the time to explain about the scientific dietary used on Annanworld, which enabled each

individual to realize the maximum strength of his muscles by providing the optimum available energy from his food. He merely gathered the three big bags and slung them together over his shoulder.

"Let's go," he muttered.

Vix gave him a puzzled look. "Listen, if you have any doubts about what you're letting yourself in for, stay put! I'd rather not be trammed with a reluctant passenger—"

"Don't worry," Spartak cut in wearily. "I'm having second thoughts about staying here these past ten years, not about leaving. Are we going, or not?"

"Why—why, of course. At once!" And the astonished Vix swung around to claim his weapons from the perspiring Brother Ulwyn.

## V

THEY WENT A considerable distance in silence, with no one else in sight except some children playing on a hill top. The group of villagers who had been in evidence earlier must have followed Vix up the hill out of mere curiosity.

Spartak was engaged with his own bitter thoughts, and was anyway used to long hours of private study and contemplation, but it occurred to him when they were almost halfway to the village that it was unlike Vix to hold his tongue so long. He was in the act of turning his head when the older man erupted.

"And this is supposed to be the great place for knowledge and science and everything! Here we are, going on foot in blistering sunshine, dust kicking up fit to make you choke—not a skyboat to be had in that primitive town there!"

"It was—uh—deliberate policy," Spartak sighed. "You might not think it, but it's possible to get from any point on Annanworld to anywhere else within one full day, elapsed time. And there are spaceports at the corners of an imaginary dodecahedron, providing twelve equally-spaced points from which you can go off-world. That was deemed to be fast enough for a planet whose chief concern is the accumulation of knowledge."

"Yes, but—" Vix shrugged. "Galaxy, what am I doing raising complaints? I got started late enough on this whole business; the fact that I have to walk to the nearest transport terminus is just an extra irritation. I have this feeling that I ought to be doing everything at maximum speed."

Spartak didn't answer, and they trudged some half-mile or so further before he did speak again.

"How—uh—how did you come here? By the regular spacelines?"

"Blazes, no. In this corner of the galaxy, shipping schedules are down to monthly, sometimes bi-monthly frequencies. I should sit on my butt while they get around to organizing a crew and lifting their creaky old tubs? No, I have my own ship now."

"Your own ship?" Spartak echoed in surprise. "You've done well. I've not heard of a privately-owned starship before."

"Don't picture any ship of the line," Vix grunted. "I have an Imperial scout, probably one of the original ships they tell me we found when we came out into space the very first time. I've never dared compute how old she must be."

"Twenty thousand years," Spartak said positively.

"Twenty—?" It was Vix's turn to be astonished. "Oh, never!"

"If it's one of the original Imperial vessels, it must be. According to what events you take as marking the establishment and the collapse of the Empire, it lasted something between eight and a half and nine and a half thousand years. By the time we came out to collect them, the various artifacts our predecessors left behind were already at least as old as the whole lifespan of the Empire."

"This is something I've never got straight in my mind," Vix said slowly. He seemed to be groping for some subject of conversation which would be sufficiently neutral to let him get to know this stranger-brother of his, who had adopted a way of life so alien to his temperament and yet now had to be his companion and confidant. "I guess you must have put in a deal of study on it—hm?"

"I did when I first came to Annanworld," Spartak agreed. "I had this over-ambitious idea that I was going to find out how the Empire originally arose. But the records simply don't exist; no one had much time for documentation when



we first stormed through the galaxy, and later on, what little had been recorded was either destroyed or simply rotted away. We've never had the skills required to build something to last ten thousand years. Even an Empire!"

"But—well, at least you can tell me how it is we're still flying ships supposed to be as old as you just said?"

"We've made some intelligent guesses. The best and most likely is that at some time late in their own history the people who left the ships behind lost interest in physical activity, and built sufficient ships and some few other items to last out their—well, maybe their life span. Or else they went to another galaxy because they'd studied this one from rim to rim and exhausted it and themselves. But they'd built well, and it took us ten thousand years to use up what they left behind."

"It's not used up yet, not by a long way," Vix countered.

"Yes, but what time couldn't do to those ships, we've done deliberately. It costs to buy a ship, but it doesn't cost anything to run one, for they're self-fueling and almost indestructible. The Argian fleet numbered one hundred million vessels at the height of Imperial power, and there must have been almost one thousand times as many as that in service throughout the galaxy. Yet now—as you just said—there are so few ships you may wait a month for passage on what used to be a flourishing Imperial starlane."

"We're building some ships of our own, though—"

"Where? Not in Imperial space, Vix. Out on the Rim, where the Imperial writ never ran. I sometimes think I'd like to go out there, to see what human endeavor can do by itself, without accidental help from a vanished race."

"A long trip without much prospect of reward," Vix said. "Me, I'll stick around the hub. Numbers like a hundred million can't mean much to a man unless he's prepared to think of planets as grains of dust and human beings as less than bacteria. And no one raised on a world as sweet as Asconel could do that."

Spartak shifted his heavy load to the opposite shoulder. He was a little relieved at what Vix had just said. In the years since they last met, this fiery older brother of his had clearly matured as Tiorin had done, and there was a

good chance, he reasoned, of their becoming friends at last. "Want me to take over one of those bags?" Vix offered now, forgetting his downright refusal to help in carrying them.

"Hm? Oh—no thanks. They're not as heavy as they look. If I do get tired, I'll tell you."

But Vix hadn't lost all his former touchiness; at the declining of his help, he put on a scowl and left it there for the next several minutes.

"How did you—how did you come by your ship?" Spartak asked eventually, after casting around for some way of keeping the talk moving.

"Took it as my pay after we put down the rebellion of the old Twenty-Seventh Fleet."

Spartak remembered Father Erton's accusation against the fighting order to which Vix had pledged himself; he swallowed dryness and was glad when the other left the subject where it lay.

"That's not all I've picked up, by any means, though most of what I've had I've spent as fast as I got it. Matter of fact, I guess there may be some problems if you've fallen into the ways of these sexless monks you've kept so much company with."

"You have a girl with you?" Spartak suggested.

"That's right."

"A slave?"

"I don't like the tone of your voice," Vix said sharply. "I don't pay her regular wages, if that's what you mean, but I keep her, feed her, clothe her—and she does the chores for me that a woman usually does for a man. But there are other reasons why a girl keeps company with a man without being enslaved. Have you forgotten, cooped up in your hermitage here?"

"Have you been together long?" Spartak inquired peaceably. He was tempted to correct Vix's mistaken idea of the life led by his order, but after the row with Father Erton he felt he no longer held a brief to defend it.

"About five years altogether." Vix brightened a little; they were in full sight of the transport terminus in the village. "Ah! From here we can get to the spaceport in under the hour."

"There she is," he exclaimed, throwing up a proud arm to point. "The smallest vessel in sight, but mine. Go over and stow your bags. I have to pay port dues and get clearance—they still observe all sorts of old-fashioned rules and regulations here."

"Ah—this girl of yours," Spartak ventured. "What's her name, for when I meet her?"

"Vineta. Don't worry—she knows it's you coming back with me if anyone off this world does."

Spartak shrugged and made off across the hard gray surface of the port. A great deal must have changed in the last few years, he reflected, for his brother to have secured a ship of his own. Governments of planets, great trading enterprises, and other corporate organizations had owned ships under the Empire; if these bodies were letting go of the items most indispensable to the continuance of galactic trade and communication, decay must have spread far and fast.

There was one exception to the list of ship-owners he'd mentally made: pirates sometimes claimed to own their ships absolutely. But he preferred not to linger on that idea.

He came close to the ship now. The access ladder was down; awkwardly he clambered to the top, his bags swinging. He rapped on the door of the lock, thinking: *twenty thousand years! It is incredible!*

When no one opened to him, he tested the manual lock release. It opened the door for him.

He frowned. It was unlike Vix to risk leaving the ship thus. But if he'd done it, perhaps it was to comply with some regulations such as he'd mentioned—or else this girl of his felt safe on her own. He climbed inside and called aloud. "Ah—Vineta? Are you there?"

But there was no one in any of the accessible compartments of the vessel: control cabin, living quarters, sleeping quarters, even the sanitary facilities were all empty.

He was standing, puzzled, in the control room when Vix came stamping aboard, and forestalled the redhead's questions with a curt sentence.

"She wasn't here when I arrived."

"What? Vineta! *Vineta!*"

The harsh sound reverberated in the hollow hull. No answer came. Vix set to searching, as Spartak had just done, and came back moments later with his face a mask of fury.

"Gone!" he roared. "After all I've done for her, to walk out like this—take to her heels without even clearing out her gear! The little baggage! The little radiation-spawned sweet-tongued—"

"Vix," Spartak said very softly, "are you altogether surprised?"

"What do you mean by that?" the redhead blasted.

"I remember from—from back home. The way you used to treat your women sooner or later turned them against you. And the life you've been leading isn't the sort which would make you any more gentle."

"So you think she just waited till my back was turned and ran for it?"

"Not exactly. But Annanworld had quite a reputation. Isn't it possible that she decided she was tired of a roving life? She'll never have been to Asconel, probably never stopped on any single world with you for more than a short stay—"

"What are you talking like this for? You never even saw the girl!" Vix wiped away sweat that has started on his forehead. "Ach! Go stow your gear in the lower cabin—that was hers, and some of her things are still there. I'm going to ask the port authorities what became of her, and fetch her back by her hair if I have to!"

He gave his half-brother a final withering glare. "Well, move. Or would you rather I left her behind, because it might embarrass you to have my mistress here in such a confined space? Is that why you're trying to talk me into thinking it's my fault? If she was going to run off she could have done it on a dozen other worlds without waiting for this previous favorite of yours!"

Spartak said nothing, but picked up his bags and made his way to the lower cabin as directed.

## VI

A FROWN of self-directed anger pulling his brows into deep furrows over his nose, Spartak glanced around the lower cabin, barely taking in the pathetic few belongings which bore witness to the occupancy of it by the girl Vineta. He had not meant to spark an argument with Vix; it was simply that ten years on Annanworld had accustomed him to going straight to the point in the interests of exposing the truth, and he had largely forgotten how to use tact. He had been shorn of most of his false conceptions of himself, and was glad to have lost them. But it made no odds that Vix had almost certainly treated his girl the same as he had always treated women—even beating her occasionally. To have told him that she had probably grown tired of him and run off was a stupid error.

Sighing, he cleared away the miscellaneous junk disposed on the shelves and in the drawers. Without his at first realizing, they made a picture to him: a kind of implied portrait of their owner. This curiously shaped seashell, from some planet where the mollusca had a copper-based metabolism to judge by the bluish sheen of the lining; this necklet of rock crystal, pink and blue and yellow; this solido of two smiling elderly folk—her parents, possibly?

It wasn't until he came to tall closets in the far corner and found half a dozen costumes hanging there, together with a small stringed instrument which he did not recognize, that he checked and started to think seriously about the conclusions he ought to draw. Even then he went ahead with what he had originally intended—changing clothes, putting aside the brown robe of his order in favor of garments not worn since his arrival on Annanworld, but still a fair fit to his body, whose leanness had remained constant since his late adolescence.

There was a reminder in that stringed instrument of his own mother, who had been a wandering singer and teacher. It was the means of getting a living. Surely that, and the clothing, would not have been left behind, no matter how eager she was to escape Vix and lose herself on Annan-

world? And it was still less likely that she should have abandoned small souvenir items, like the solido, which were no burden to carry and presumably held emotional significance for her.

*Maybe she went aground to buy something*, he told himself at last, marveling how sluggish his mind had been made by the annoyance his disagreement with Vix had caused. *I must tell Vix not to do anything rash—*

In that instant, when he stood with one leg in his old but serviceable breeches of Vellian silk, the ship's gravity went on, and within seconds he felt the surging of the drive. This was not the slickly smooth operation of a large liner, elaborately maintained for the passengers' comfort—like the only other vessels in which he had ever flown space. It was the jarring violence of a scoutship stripped for action, without frills, and seemed to vibrate all the way into his belly, triggering a reflex nausea.

He resisted it in near-panic, thinking what foul company Vix would be if he worked out for himself, many systems distant, what Spartak had just deduced from the clothing still in the cabin.

He struggled out into the corridor, and as he turned from sliding shut the cabin door, caught a glimpse of movement at the foot of the companionway leading up to the control room. It was too brief, and the drive-induced nausea was now too strong, for him to get a clear view of the person who had gone by, but the obvious deduction was that Vineta was aboard after all.

He had no time to work out where she might have been hiding; he was completely unfamiliar with this design of ship, and if Vix hadn't found her she must have concealed herself very thoroughly. Or else Vix himself wasn't yet aware of all the nooks and crannies in his prized new possession. . . .

No, rational thought was beyond him at the moment. Wait till the drive settled down to free-space operation—that would be soon enough to solve the riddle.

He was on the point of returning to his cabin when he heard the cry.

*"Spa-ar-tak!"*

And the drive went off.

The shock was like a dash of cold water, clearing the fog from his brain. With reflex speed he made for the companionway, scrambling up it with the agility of a Sirian ape.

The shock was renewed as soon as he saw what was happening in the control room. It was no girl that he had glimpsed passing this way. It was a man, huge and bulky as a Thanis bull, his hair wild, his body cased in crude leather harness and his feet in steel-tipped boots, who now was wrestling chest-to-chest with the tough but far smaller Vix, overbearing the redhead in a crushing embrace.

Vix tried to butt him on the nose, failed as the attacker jerked his head back, lost his balance to one of the steel-tipped boots as it cracked against his ankle, and went slamming down to the floor. He had had no time to draw his sidearms, obviously—perhaps he'd mistaken the sound of the stranger's approach for Spartak's—but he'd done well in the first instance, for a short sword lay at the foot of the control board: his assailant's, logically, which he had somehow contrived to dash from his grip.

Horried, Spartak saw the two antagonists crash to their full length, saw the stranger break Vix's grasp on his right wrist and force his hand closer and closer to the redhead's throat. Wild pleading showed in the green eyes, but there was no breath available for him to call for aid again.

To renounce his oath so soon? To pick up the sword from the floor and drive it into the stranger's back? It could be done, but—

And then he remembered, as clearly as if he were hearing it in present time, the voice of one of his earliest tutors on Annanworld. "Always bear in mind that the need for violence is an illusion. If it seems that violence is unavoidable, what this means is that you've left the problem too late before starting to tackle it."

Spartak dodged the struggling men and made for the control board. As he scanned the totally unfamiliar switches, he heard a sobbing cry from Vix—"Spartak, Spartak, he's going to strangle me!"

Time seemed to plod by for him, while racing at top speed for his brother. But at last he thought he had it. He put one hand on the back of the pilot chair, and with

the other slammed a switch over past its neutral point to the opposite extreme of its traverse.

Instantly he went head over heels. But he was prepared for this; in effect, he fell to the ceiling like a gymnast turning a somersault, and landed on his feet with a jar that shook him clear to the hips. The universe rolled insanely around him, and through a swirling mist of giddiness he saw that what he had intended had indeed come about. Locked in their muscle-straining embrace, Vix and the unknown had crashed ten feet to the ceiling as the gravity reversed, and now Vix was on top—and breaking free! For the force of the upside-down fall had completely stunned the stranger.

Spartak reached out, clutching Vix by the loose baldric on which he normally slung his energy-gun, and reversed the gravity once more, restoring its normal direction. The attacker slammed to the floor again while he and Vix fell rather less awkwardly; this time, he moved the switch with careful slowness, not exceeding a quarter-gravity till he felt his soles touch the floor.

And then he said, "Who is he?"

"I—I—" Vix put his hands to his temples and pressed, breathing in enormous sobbing gasps. "What did you *do*?"

"I put the gravity over to full negative."

"But—" Vix began to recover. "But—how? Do you know these ships, then?"

"No, I've never seen one before. But it followed logically. There's always an automatic gravity compensator on a starship, for high-gee maneuvering in normal space, and it seemed reasonable to expect a manual over-ride on a vessel like this which might get damaged during combat."

"You mean you just took a chance on it, while he was throttling the life out of me?" Vix exploded.

Clearly the redhead had suffered one of the worst frights of his life. Spartak hesitated.

"Why didn't you just pick up his sword and run him through with it?" Vix blasted on.

"Ah—well, if I'd done that," Spartak countered in the calmest tone he could manage, "he wouldn't have been able to tell us who he is and why he set on you. As it is,



here he's no more than stunned, and you're alive to ask him the right questions."

"I guess so," Vix agreed sullenly, and gave the dazed attacker a prod in the ribs with his foot. "I look forward to beating some answers out of him, at that. Here, I'll put some lashings on him before he wakes up."

He started to a corner chest in search of ropes.

"I don't think you'll have to beat the information out," Spartak ventured. "I have some stuff with me which will probably make him talk a lot faster than that."

"Such as what?" Vix found a length of braided leather and a short flexible chain, and started to bind the man's limbs.

"I—uh—brought some medical things I thought might come in handy," Spartak said, swallowing hard. Ever since his childhood, fighting and violence had physically upset him, and the glee in Vix's voice as he proposed torturing the man to make him talk had picked up the backwash of the nausea from the drive and redoubled it. "I'll go fetch it right away!"

But first, he told himself, he'd better take a dose of something to calm his own stomach.

He was at the door of the lower cabin, fumbling to open the sliding panel, when he felt the knocking beneath his feet.

Astonished, he stared down at the flooring of featureless metal plates. The knocking came again, more vigorously, and his eyes suddenly spotted a small cluster of bright new scratches at one end of the plate on which he stood.

"By the moons of Argus!" he exploded, and dropped to his knees to lever up the plate and push it aside.

In the compartment beneath him lay the missing Vineta, a crude cloth gag in her mouth, her clothing torn and a huge bruise discoloring the soft olive skin of her right cheek. She was small and slender, but even so her assailant had had to cram her by main force into the tiny space under the floor.

Frantically he lifted her out and set her on her feet; she stood for a second holding on to him, shaking out her space-black hair, then seemed to recover a little and let

go of his arm. He made to remove the gag, but she shook her head and tore it out herself.

"Are you Vix's brother?" she whispered. Her voice was pitifully hoarse.

"Yes—yes, I'm Spartak."

"Is he—?"

"He's all right. He's up in the control room tying up the man who attacked him—and you too, presumably. How did it happen?"

"He had a message sent from the port controller to say he was some sort of official." Vineta swallowed painfully. "And Vix had told me that on Annanworld they had lots of regulations left over from Imperial days, which we'd have to comply with or be delayed in leaving . . . so I let him come aboard."

She passed a weary hand over her forehead and then touched the bruise on her cheek, wincing. "Thank you for letting me out," she whispered. "I was so afraid . . ."

And she turned to hurry in search of Vix.

Spartak watched her go. The rips in her costume exposed much more of her tight, firm body than he cared to see, and a completely irrational envy overcame him against his will, at the thought of the endless succession of beautiful women Vix had enjoyed and abandoned. Contrary to the assumption Vix had made, his order on Annanworld didn't demand celibacy, and even Father Erton had kept up an association with a woman in the same specialization as himself, which had endured for almost thirty years. But his own two or three attempts to form such a relationship had foundered on his shyness and his reluctance to detach himself from his studies.

Now, without warning, he found he was wistful, as if he had left some very important part out of his life.

## VII

THE LAST thing he expected to find when he returned to the control room clutching his large black medical case was a full-blown shouting match. But he heard it even before he came in. Vix was bellowing at the girl.

"You realize he could have killed me? You just let him in—opened the lock for him and let him in! You didn't keep a gun on him, or anything sensible like that—oh no, you wouldn't have thought of it!"

"But you told me yourself we had to. . . ." The answer dissolved on a high note which foreshadowed tears.

"What conceivable reason could the controller have to send someone aboard before I got back?" Vix thundered. "I ought to take the hide off you!"

Spartak pushed the door aside, and Vineta ran into him blindly, making headlong for the privacy of the lower cabin. He caught her with his free hand, and spoke sharply to Vix.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Just because you've been scared white, that's no reason to take it out on her. She's had a worse shock than you have—look at that bruise on her! And you know where I found her? Folded up like an embryo in a tiny hole under the floor of the lower corridor! Here," he added in a gentler tone to the girl, looking for a place to set down his medical case. "I'll put something on the bruise and give you a pill to calm your nerves."

She accepted his ministrations dumbly, swallowed the pill as directed, and whispered, "Can I go now?"

"Lie down for a while—you'll be all right." Spartak gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder and stood aside for her to leave.

"I'm—sorry," Vix said with an effort as the door slid to. "You're right, I oughtn't to talk to her that way."

"It's better to think of points like that in advance and not afterwards," Spartak answered curtly, and crossed the floor to drop to his knees beside the bound man. "Hm! How long has he been awake?"

"Awake?" Vix echoed in astonishment. "I thought he was still knocked out."

"Hold it," Spartak rapped, foreseeing that Vix's next impulse would be to kick the man into talking. "Let's see what I can do to loosen his tongue before you—" He reached behind him for an injector and a small phial of grayish liquid.

"What are you going to give him?" Vix demanded.

"It's one of the old Imperial drugs—not really meant as a truth drug, but supposed to bring forgotten experiences back to consciousness during psychotherapy." With deft fingers he loaded the injector.

"Why did you think that, of all drugs, might come in handy?" Vix grunted. "Think I might be precessing with my gyros, maybe?"

"You do take everything personally, don't you?" Spartak sighed. "As a matter of fact, I thought it might help us to find out how this Belizuek cult gets the hold it's supposed to have over apparently rational people like Hodat. There," he added, shooting the dose into the bound man's wrist veins.

"How long does it take to work?"

"A few seconds . . . Open your eyes, you!"

The bound man complied after an obvious struggle to go on feigning unconsciousness.

"Who are you? Where are you from?" Spartak asked.

"I'm—" Another, equally unsuccessful struggle to still his tongue, and a yielding. "I'm Korisu, and I come from Asconel."

"From—I?" Vix took a pace forward in amazed horror.

"What was your mission and who ordered you to do it?"

His eyes fixed open and seeming glazed, the man whispered, "I was sent by Bucyon to track down Vix and kill him."

"Why?" thundered Vix.

"Because he'd heard that you planned to raise an army and depose him, and wipe out Belizuek on Asconel."

"I'm Spartak, Vix's half-brother," Spartak said softly. "Does my name mean anything to you?"

"Y-yes. After I'd found and killed Vix, since I was on Annanworld anyway, I was to locate you and eliminate you as well."

"Has someone been sent after Tiorin?" Vix demanded.

"I—I don't know for sure. I think so. But nobody knew where he was when I left home. There was a rumor that he had gone towards the hub, to travel in what's left of the Empire. Someone mentioned Delcadoré."

"Then that's where we'll go!" Vix declared, and strode towards the control board.

"Just a moment," Spartak said. "There are some other things I want to set straight. You, Korisu—are you a follower of Belizuek?"

"Of course I am. Everyone on Asconel is nowadays."

Vix uttered a filthy string of oaths.

"What is Belizuek?"

"He is all-seeing and all-powerful. He reads the inmost thoughts of men and no one can stand against him. He's a superior being and men ought to recognize that and serve him."

"Is he a telepathic mutation from human stock?"

"I've never seen him. But the priests say he's different. Superior. Deserving of our worship."

Spartak wiped sweat from his face. "I'm told he demands human sacrifices. Is that true?"

"No, of course not!" Shocked, the bound man tried to sit up, and failed. "The priests say it's blasphemy to call it sacrifice. It's a free-will offering, and it's an honor to serve Belizuek in that way just as in any other."

Spartak's jaw set in a grim line. If in such a short time Bucyon and his consort Lydis had managed to persuade all—or even a substantial part—of the citizens of Asconel that this transcendent rubbish was the revealed and mystic truth, their mission wasn't going to be confined to so simple a task as deposing the usurper and restoring the rightful Warden.

"Where does Belizuek come from?"

"The priests say he's existed since the beginning of the galaxy."

"Then where is Brinze?"

"That's where Shry and Bucyon and Lydis and some of the others come from. But I don't know where it lies."

"Delcadoré," Vix muttered to himself, over at the control board. "I'd not meant to go so close to the hub—there are still idiots around there with dreams of Imperial glory, and it's risky. But if that's where Tiorin is said to be . . ." He glanced over his shoulder. "I have a course set up now. Anything more you want from him?"

"Not right now." Spartak straightened. "What shall we do with him?"

"Put him where he put Vineta, why not?"

"No, that's too small—literally and absolutely. In a closet we can lock; that would do."

"There's an empty one next to the head," Vix grunted. "I'll help you lug him down there."

Still weary from the mental strain as well as from the physical effort of hauling the reluctant Korisul to his prison, Spartak stole into the lower cabin. Vineta had stretched out on the left bunk, and was sleeping with deep and regular breathing. Near her pillow she had ranged the little objects to which she plainly attached a great deal of value: the shell, the solido, the cheap jewelry. . . .

Spartak put his medical case away and crept out again.

"You again, Spartak?" Vix called as he re-entered the control cabin. "Say—uh—I ought to thank you. I guess I was too shaken up to remember. It was very smart, the way you stopped the fight. And it was just as well we tackled him your way and not mine. Apart from anything else, I imagine you're now convinced that I wasn't spinning you a wild fantasy about what's happened on Asconel!"

Spartak shook his head distractedly. "It's incredible," he muttered. "The speed and completeness of the process, to have produced a fanatic like Korisu in so short a time—it almost persuades me that you were right about witchcraft."

Vix hesitated. Then he put out his hand. "Brother, I was in two minds whether to go to Annanworld and seek you out. I wondered if I might not burden myself. But ten years is a slice out of any man's life, and love for a world like Asconel is a bond to bring men together."

Spartak put his hand into the other's grasp.

But the full measure of Korisu's fanaticism did not emerge until much later—until the time when they went to feed him in his cramped prison and found that he had contrived to strangle himself, against all probability, with the braided leather Vix had used to bind his arms. . . .

The shadow of that incredible death still lay over them when they gathered in the control room to watch the planet Delcadore grow beyond the main ports. To break the intolerable silence between them, Vineta—recovered almost

completely from her treatment at the hands of Korisu—spoke up.

“What sort of a world is this one, now?”

Vix, occupied with the controls, tossed an answering grunt over his shoulder. “Ask Spartak—he has the head full of knowledge. I’ve not followed the progress of events down here towards the hub. Still too rigid and organized for my taste!”

The girl glanced at Spartak rather shyly—they had hardly yet got to know one another during this brief trip, and she had spent most of her time out of the way of both brothers, although Spartak had seen enough to convince him that Vix still at heart regarded women as expendable; currently, he just did not have the time to get himself another if he lost Vineta, and was doing his clumsy best to keep on her right side.

“Well,” Spartak commenced, “this was formerly one of the main garrison systems for the Imperial fleet, and when the Empire began to lose its outer reaches this was one of the—the foci, so to speak, on which retrenchments were made. I think it’s now effectively a frontier system. The Empire hasn’t vanished, of course, but only shrunk to a fraction of its former size.”

“That’s what’s worrying me,” Vix interjected. “I’ve tangled with certain bone-headed parties who seem to imagine the Empire still flourishes. For my part, I think it’s now a farce, and will only prove a handicap to some new and more stable foundation.”

Spartak nodded in surprised agreement.

At that moment a light sprang up on the communicator panel, and Vix reached over to activate the circuit. A voice boomed out with a ring of crude authority. “Identify yourself and your ship!”

“See what I mean?” Vix muttered wryly, and added more loudly, for the benefit of the distant challenger, “Vix of Asconel piloting my own vessel, on private business and landing on Delcadoré.”

“Asconel, hm?” The voice was as clear as if it came from the next room, even when at lower volume it continued, “Where in all of space is that?”

Other voices, much fainter but quite distinct, chimed in.

"Asconel—isn't that where. . . .? Well, it's off towards the Rim anyway, so I guess it'll do. . . . Anything to shift this problem off *my* back . . . Yes, we'll settle for this one—we don't want to wait till the galaxy freezes just to find a ship bound for the Big Dark or somewhere *really* distant. . . ."

Vix and Spartak exchanged appalled glances, and the first voice roared out again.

"Vix of Asconel, you're under Imperial requisition. Do you hear and understand? Your ship is under Imperial requisition. Do not attempt to evade this order, or it will be the worse for you!"

"What does this all mean?" Vineta whispered.

"Right now, that's what it means!" Vix replied in white-lipped fury, and gestured towards the viewport which moments ago had held only Delcadoré, its larger moon and the stars beyond.

Now, like a monstrous fish swimming leisurely to intercept smaller prey, there loomed the gigantic shape of an Imperial ship of the line, the ancient Argian symbols blazoned at prow and stern, for all the galaxy as though Argus could still issue orders to a million planets, and prepared to back this false contention with the all-too-real support of fire-power equal to the output of a minor sun.

## VIII

FIGHTING and running were out of the question. When the order was given to make a landing on Delcadoré under the escort of the Imperial battleship, Vix—punctuating his pilot work with oaths that seemed to grow fouler by the second—furiously complied, while Spartak tried to console him with the suggestion that at least so far they weren't being told to do anything but what they had intended all along.

Meanwhile, Vineta stood close against him, her large dark eyes fixed as though hypnotized on the hull of the escorting ship, her whole body trembling with the unexpressed terror she felt at the nameless threat the "Imperial requisition" implied.



Spartak's heart lifted, though only briefly, when he saw what forces the Empire could still command—there might be a thousand vessels, he guessed, docked here at what huge illuminated signs still declared to be the Headquarters Port of the Third Imperial Fleet. Then he took a second look at those monstrous hulls, ranged like a forest of branchless metal trees across the concrete plain, and realized he had failed to make an obvious deduction. The Empire, by all accounts, was struggling against decay and rebellion all through the galaxy—why then were so many ships out of the sky at one place and one time? And he began to spot the clues which accounted for their presence: gashed hulls from distant battles, plating removed by the hundreds of square feet to expose the vital equipment within which was being cannibalized to maintain those ships still capable of flight.

Maybe somewhere out near the rim there was a world where ships stood like this in vast numbers, but not antiques used to the limit by reckless commanders—new ships, human-made, ready to bring inwards to the hub those who for ten millennia had been harried away from the Argian domains and had bided their time on the threshold of intergalactic emptiness, waiting for the inevitable collapse.

If there were such a world, he thought, it would be worth hunting for. The shadow of an idea crossed his mind, and was dispelled immediately by the arrival alongside their own vessel of officials from the port controller's staff.

Vix vented his anger on them in a single blast of abuse and complaint. They ignored him as they might have ignored a breath of wind. Spartak, urging Vix aside, attempted to tackle them on a more rational basis, inquiring the authority for "Imperial requisition" and contesting the legality of giving orders to non-Imperial citizens.

The officials sighed and produced guns. It seemed that this had become the standard substitute for argument on Delcadoré.

All three of them were taken—for Vineta refused to stay alone aboard the ship after her experience on Annanworld—to wait in a large, light anteroom outside the office of the port controller. There was no one else there apart from a man of early middle age, who to their horror lacked both

a leg and an arm. They could not refrain from staring at him; on a world returning to barbarism after the withdrawal of Imperial support, such a sight might have been expected, but Delcadore was supposed to be an outpost of the still viable Argian civilization.

The man cracked a bitter smile as he saw their eyes covertly turning on his injuries.

"I'm not pretty any longer, am I?" he rasped. "Well, not to wonder at that! If you'd been picked out of an airless wreck the way I was, you'd have . . ." A fit of coughing interrupted his angry words, and racked his body for a good minute before he could answer Spartak's tense questions.

"Oh, sure they'll fix me up sooner or later. But that can wait, they tell me. I'm the only survivor from my whole team, and all they want to know is where they went wrong. I'm going to tell 'em, too! Without mincing my words!"

"What happened?" Vix snapped.

"Fools—gas-brained fools! I could have told them. . . ." The man's eyes were unfocused, staring through the wall at a faraway disaster. "Hiring pirates, that's what they've hit on as their latest brain-wave! A whole Imperial fleet revolts under a commander who thinks he can do better than the mud-heads we have in charge at the moment—and who's to say he couldn't? Sometimes I think I could! And what do they do to combat this? They hire a ramshackle bunch of pirate ships, thinking to keep them from pillaging some Imperial planet this way, send out a command echelon to give the orders—that's where I got involved—and sit back and pour some more ancinarad. And what happens? Exactly what any schoolchild would have said: you can't give pirates orders, so they break and run, and the Imperial-trained rebels pick them off like scooting watersliders, and then the Imperials—that-were loot the very planet the pirates were aiming for, to make up for the inconvenience and minor losses they suffered!"

"Which fleet?" Vix demanded.

"The Eighteenth." The injured man stared at him. "What other did you think it was?"

"What do you mean, 'what other'?" Vix countered. "The Twenty-Seventh is wiped out, as I well know—but it could

have been the Tenth, or the Fortieth, or the Forty-Second, or—" He broke off, the other man's eyes burning at him.

"Are you sure?" the cripple whispered, after glancing around to make sure there was no one else in earshot.

"Of course. I've just come from Annanworld, before that I was at Batyra Dap, and before that Poowadya, and before that—"

"All these fleets are still operating? In revolt, but still operating?"

"At the last hearing, yes. Bar the Twenty-Seventh, as I mentioned."

"The liars," the cripple whispered. "The dirty, double-tongued, deceiving, damnable—"

"Vix of Asconell" a speaker cried from the wall. "Go to the door which will open on your right. Bring your companions with you."

Puzzled at the cripple's reaction, Spartak lingered to put a final question to him, and got the answer he had half expected but was barely able to credit. If a high-ranking officer of the crack Third Imperial Fleet had been lied to about the fate of so many other fleets, lying must have become the general policy of the rump Empire. How long could it stand on falsehood? He had envisaged another century or so before its prestige diminished to the point at which rebels and outlaws were tempted clear down to the hub—ultimately perhaps to Argus itself. But if they were already so desperate at the reduction of their loyalist forces that they were hiring pirates as mercenaries, the word would travel fast, and the next time the Empire would find pirates and rebels combined against it; there would be an end to futile shifts like trying to make the two enemies destroy each other.

Gloomy beyond description, he found he had followed Vix and Vineta into the adjacent office, and there confronted a podgy, gray-haired woman in a uniform encrusted with meaningless decorations and ostentatious badges of rank.

"Sit down," she said tonelessly. "Which of you is Vix, the alleged owner of the ship we've requisitioned?"

"Alleged!" Vix purpled again. "I have clear title—"

"I'm not arguing," the woman sighed. "If you want to go into legalisms, starships are by definition Imperial pro-

perty and only leased to corporations, trading companies or—save the mark—individuals.” Her mouth twisted as though in disgust. “But where would it get me to rely on a thin argument like that? I imagine you’re competent to handle the ship, and if I wanted to commandeer it I’d have to pick someone equally skillful, and that’s not easy because next thing you know he’d be headed for the great black yonder. . . .”

Spartak found himself suddenly pitying the woman, for she had defined herself instantly by what she had said: a weary official trying to keep things going while chaos battered at the structure of law, order and principle by which she had to be guided. He signaled Vix to be quiet, and leaned forward.

“May we know your authority?”

The woman blinked heavy lids at him. “Frankly, I’m not sure which capacity I’m acting in right now—I have so many jobs I sometimes lose track. I sit in this room as assistant immigration supervisor, Delcadoré West/North Sector. I have the requisition on your ship as Acting Transport Director, Imperial space, Delcadoré volume. And I’m under orders from the Planetary Government, Department of Public Order, and legally empowered to represent them.”

“We have business here,” Spartak said. “If we could know what you want our ship for, we could perhaps—”

“To the Big Dark with your business,” the woman said. “I have a solution to one fiddling little problem out of about ten thousand waiting for me to deal with, and I’m not disposed to compromise.”

“Now you listen to me!” Vix burst out. “First off, my ship is mine and I’m not handing it over to anyone who still has delusions of glory about the Empire! Second, my business here is important not only to me but to my home planet, and I’m not going to be cheated out of it. And thirdly—”

“Oh, shut up,” the woman said. “Third is probably going to be something about not being an Imperial citizen. You’re an Imperial citizen if you were born on any planet which was ever part of the Empire, and Asconel was—your Warden still holds his fief from Argus, and his space fleet too.”

“The blazes he does! The present Warden’s a usurper,

and he brought his fleet with him from some world called Brinze which the Imperial records don't show!"

"I wouldn't know," the woman shrugged. "Don't think I have time to keep up with what's happening on back-water planets like that, do you? What's left of the Empire generates enough problems to keep my attention fully occupied. So swallow this, and digest it at leisure."

"We have a girl here who can apparently read minds—a mutant, obviously. We could have let her be stoned to death, I guess; things are nearly that bad already, even on Delcadoré. But when we can we cling to the Imperial rules, because they're better than anything else we have, and the Imperial rules say we keep the *status quo* by putting her out of the way on some habitable planet off towards the rim."

"In the old days we could have assigned her passage on regular liner-routes, under Imperial guard and protection to make sure some superstitious knothead didn't assassinate her before she reached where she was sent. According to my best information—which I'll share with you since you're from way out anyway—there isn't a single commercial routing left which would get her to a rim system in less than a year. Coordination had gone to hell, schedules aren't reliable, and pirates are picking off so much traffic the lines are closing down or flying only in armed convoy."

"So you'll have to do. I'm having this girl brought here from wherever the blazes she's been kept, and the moment she arrives you're going to take off and head for—what's the name of that place?" She pushed a stud on the arm of her chair and consulted a small screen set at an angle beside her. "Ah yes—Nylock. I picked it because it's comparatively close: a straight-line route from here to the rim."

Vix was half out of his chair with rage. "You can't do this!" he thundered.

"Be grateful," the woman said stonily. "I could have sent you anywhere—out the far side of the Big Dark, come to that! How do you fancy your chances with the pirates in that volume, hey? Used to take three Imperial battleships to get across there safely!"

Spartak, controlling himself better than Vix but nonethe-

less white-hot inside, forced out, "What right have you to make the requisition anyway?"

"Argian decree," the woman said. "If you want the number and text I'll get it for you, but it runs to seventy figures and two full recording crystals, and seeing it won't make a grain of difference. I don't care for your business on Delcadoré, I don't care for your complaints and objections—all I care about is getting shut of one irritating problem."

She stabbed another stud on her chair-arm, and the doors of the room slid back.

"And don't think, either, that there's an easy way to avoid doing as you're told—dumping the girl in space when you get out of our jurisdiction, for instance, and trying to sneak back here. You'll be welcome to conduct your business when you've finished ours. And to make sure you do—"

Soft footfalls sounded behind Spartak's chair, and he half-turned to see menacing uniformed figures there.

"We condition you," the woman said. "You won't be able to be comfortable or happy or sexually potent or even sleep properly from now on unless you're directing all your efforts to the completion of the mission on which you're sent."

## IX

THE EFFICIENCY of the conditioning process was flawless: impersonal as a mechanical repair, thorough as the work of a first-rate surgeon. Spartak, who knew something of this and related psychological techniques from his wide researches on Annanworld, had hoped to offer at least token resistance to the drugs and hypnotic instructions employed on him. But it was useless. As though a shutter had snapped down over his brain, he blanked out, and on re-awakening he found he could recall nothing of what had happened except at the two extreme levels of his awareness. Consciously he knew he had been conditioned; subconsciously he was disturbed, as it were by an itch, that was already intense and would grow to be unbearable if he did not at once comply with the Imperial order.

He was appalled beyond measure. If this experience was

anything to go by—and he felt it was, for the odds against a random sample in a society organized on a multi-billion population basis like the Empire being anomalous were tremendously high—it appeared that the chief tools of the Imperial power had been reduced to lies, propaganda and the threat of obliteration.

Small comfort, in view of that, to know that the galaxy now held forces too strong to be impressed by the last of those three instruments!

And perhaps worst of all was the fact that they were so confident of the reliability of the conditioning that they permitted him, Vix and Vineta to return to the ship without escort, knowing that until the telepathic girl was delivered to them they would sit and wait, and once she arrived they would helplessly depart for Nylock, the only place in the galaxy where they could be sure of release from the imprinted command.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Vix pleaded for the tenth time. His courage in regular combat, his habitual assertive self-confidence availed him not at all when faced by a weapon as subtle as this conditioning. It had perhaps been an inspiration on the part of the gray-haired woman to cite sexual impotence as one of the consequences of failing to comply with her decree; in any case, Spartak was reminded of a theory he had once formed about this red-haired half-brother of his—that his insatiable demand for women was a way of compensating for the fact that he was youngest of three brothers, much alike—he needed women's attention to reassure him about his own individuality.

For a long moment Spartak didn't reply. All he would have said would have amounted to the same as he had already repeated over and over. He knew of nothing that could be done without psychological assistance as skilled as what the Empire could draw on, and it couldn't be obtained without putting the ship into space for some other friendlier world—and once in space, the compulsion would be far too strong to withstand.

The pause gave Vix a chance to think of something else: Vineta was weeping silently in the corner of the control room, her face pale and drained of hope. Vix rounded on her.

"Stop that sniveling, woman!" he blazed. "I can't do anything about what's happened—can I? Control yourself and stop crying as if I'd been beating you!"

"Vix!" Spartak snapped. "You ought to stop taking your frustration out on the poor girl! It can't make much difference to her where you drag her away to—Nylock and Asconel are both meaningless names to her. If she's in tears it's for your sake, not her own."

The cloud of gloom lifted momentarily from Vineta's perfectly shaped features, and she found the energy for a sad smile of gratitude at the intervention. Beside himself, Vix retorted, "I suppose you're glad of this, are you? Glad we're being sent to some back-of-beyond planet instead of to Asconel where we belong! There's fighting there—or will be—and you have no stomach for it!"

Spartak clung grimly to the shreds of his own temper. The abstract principles inculcated in him on Annanworld, though, were very hard to apply under present circumstances.

"How long did you spend burrowing in your piles of stale knowledge?" Vix sneered. "Ten years, isn't it? And does nothing you learned in all that time tell you how we—?"

He was interrupted by a bang on the outer door of the lock. Hardly stopping to draw breath, he charged away on a new line of complaint: "Now our time's up—they've brought this telepathic mutant along and the moment she's aboard we've lost our last chance to figure out a way of staying on Delcadoré and tracking down Tiorin!"

The idea struck Spartak that having a mind-reader close to him frightened Vix as much as being sent far away from Asconel. Superstition, merely—or the fear of having some secret misdeed revealed? For himself, he knew he would welcome thin consolation in this opportunity to find out the truth behind all the rumors which he had heard; the policy of deportation which the Empire had instituted to insure itself against wild factors in the peoples it ruled by imposing statistical averages on them had worked well, but it had also fed the imaginations of the ignorant.

He got to his feet. Somehow he wasn't so sure as Vix that the mutant girl was waiting at the entrance. He would have expected a call from the port controller and per-



haps some triggering command to reinforce the conditioning on their minds, not a simple knock without advance warning

He unlocked the panel and slid it aside.

The person who met his gaze was a little man, apparently very nervous, with protruding teeth and wide startled eyes. He held tight to the guardrail around the narrow platform, as though he was afraid of losing his balance and crashing to the ground.

He said in a squeaky, eager voice, "Is this the ship from Asconel?"

Spartak nodded, and the nervous man was infinitely relieved, even going so far as to take one hand from the rail he clutched.

"Please! May I come inside and discuss a proposition with you?"

Spartak hesitated, then stepped back and gestured that the other should pass him. Vix, from within the control room, called out fiercely to know what was going on.

But the nervous man would not say anything further until he was safely in the control room himself. Then he drew himself up importantly.

"My name is not of any consequence," he commenced. "It is in fact Rochard, but I am representing a—uh—a third party who is very desirous of securing passage to your planet. For some time he has had his agents making inquiries at all the spaceports on Delcadoré, asking about ships from Asconel and nearby systems, offering a generous fee for a flight there. Yours is the first such ship to come to my notice since I was requested to assist him."

Vix and Spartak exchanged astonished glances. Then the redhead pursed his lips as if to spit.

"Can't help him," he snarled.

Rochard put his hand suggestively into his belt-pouch, and there was the mellow jingling noise of solid Imperial coin. He said, "I'm instructed to make a very liberal payment in advance, and then my—uh—principal will guarantee double the old commercial rate for the distance. You'd be well advised to—"

"It's nothing to do with money," Vix broke in. His shoulders bowed, and he turned half away from Rochard. "Go

look for some other vessel. If I could, I'd cheerfully take him to Asconel and not ask one circle for the flight—that miserable world needs outsiders to visit it and view its present plight! But it's out of the question."

Bewildered, Rochard renewed his original offer, his wide alarmed eyes seeking a clue to the refusal. Abruptly Vix whirled and clamped a hand on his wrist.

"Out! Or I'll throw you out. You can't take no for an answer, can you? I guess you're losing a fat bonus for finding us, hey? Well, have your argument with the woman who sits in the port control building yonder!" He added a vivid and obscene description of her.

"Just a second," Spartak whispered. His mind had been buzzing ever since Rochard's entrance with a wild, fantastic notion. Even now he was reluctant to utter it, but he felt he must.

"This 'principal' of yours—he isn't by some miracle a man called Tiorin of Asconel?"

Rochard started. "Why, you know him!" he blurted. "How do you know him? I was forbidden to name him to anyone."

"Don't you see a resemblance between him and this man who holds your arm?" Spartak rapped. The success of his million-to-one probe had shaken him, physically, so that he was now trembling with excitement. As for Vix, he was so startled he had completely forgotten to release his hold on Rochard.

"Why—I guess so. But there are many worlds where one genetic strain has dominated others and produced a general likeness between many people."

"This is no accidental resemblance. You're looking at his full brother Vix. And I'm Spartak, his half-brother."

"Amazing!" Rochard breathed. "Why, for this he'll pay me double—treble—ten times what he promised! Please let me go," he added cringingly to Vix. "I must carry the news to him at once."

"It still won't help much," Spartak grunted, silencing a threatened interruption from Vix with a lift of his eyebrows. "We've been put under Imperial requisition, and conditioned to take a mutant girl to some place called Ny-

lock. You must be well in touch with what goes on around here—what can we do to get out from under this?”

Rochard's face fell. He said, “Oh, no. . .” The two words were like the sighing of wind through bushes in a cemetery.

“Is there someone we can bribe to have the conditioning reversed?” Spartak urged. “Is there anyone we could go to for counter-conditioning?”

“How about Tiorin himself?” Vix snapped. “What's his situation here? How's he fixed for contacts, government influence, things like that?”

Rochard spoke so rapidly he was almost babbling, his gaze apparently riveted on the imaginary spectacle of a fat reward disappearing into space. “Your brother is in no position to help you either! He's not meant to be on Delcadoré at all. You see, some short time ago there came a man from—I think—his own world, yours too of course, an assassin, from whom he barely escaped. Since then he's been in hiding, and only some few trusted agents have been told he's still here; for the sake of any more would-be killers, the news was passed that he had left for Argus to raise aid against the new rulers of Asconel.”

“Do you know where he is? Can you contact him quickly?” Spartak demanded.

“Why, within minutes if he's at the usual place. But it may take a while to bring him to you. If you're under Imperial requisition you can't leave the ship, and any attempt you make to communicate with people on the planet will be automatically jammed.”

“Get hold of him at once anyway,” Spartak ordered. “It's our only chance.”

Frantically Rochard dashed for the door.

Spartak turned to Vix, wiping sweat from his face. He said, “It might have taken weeks to track him down here—he might have fooled us, along with Bucyon's assassins, and we'd have gone on a ridiculous chase to Argus looking for him. Even if we have to go home via Nylock, we may prove to have wasted amazingly little time.”

“If we get back from Nylock,” Vix said. “If we get him aboard in time to make the trip with us, and the girl isn't brought here before he arrives. If. If. If!”

"I should have given Rochar'd a message to cover that risk," Spartak whispered. "Told Tiorin to wait for us, and we'd be back to locate him right here."

"You were not expecting to find your brother on this world at all," Vineta suggested unexpectedly. "You were prepared to find he had left for somewhere else."

Spartak nodded absently.

"Then you are in luck," she said with a shrug. "Try to look on that side of it. I will go fix refreshments against your brother's arrival."

She slipped silently from the cabin, and the two men settled down to try and abide by her extremely sensible advice.

## X

IT SEEMED that a slow eternity passed before they again heard a bang on the outer door. Vix leapt to his feet.

"That *must* be the girl being brought!" he declared. "And we *still* haven't heard from Tiorin!"

"I don't think so," Spartak countered, and now voiced the thought which had occurred to him earlier: that the port authorities would certainly advise them of the girl's arrival by communicator. He went to open the lock, and found Rochar'd had returned.

"I wouldn't have been so long," the nervous man exclaimed, "but I thought it safer to try and reach you by communicator rather than come back. Only once you're under Imperial requisition even the palms I can normally grease seem to be put back in their pockets. . . . To the point, since I did have to come here again: your brother is on his way, and if you can delay your departure one more hour he'll join you. Uh—I can't help wondering," he finished in a fawning tone, "whether I may not have done you too some small service. . . . ?"

Spartak had been isolated in the environment of his order on Annanworld for so long that at first he did not get the point of this delicate probe for a gratuity. When he did, he found he was ignorant of the current purchasing power of Imperial money. He fumbled a twenty-circle piece from

his pouch, and that seemed to satisfy Rochard; at any rate, he gave a mechanical smile and scampered down the ladder again.

"I wonder who he is," Spartak murmured to Vix when he had relayed Rochard's news.

"Him?" Vix shrugged. "He's of a type which I've seen spring up on a dozen worlds—carrion worms infesting the gangrened body of the old Empire. Probably he's regretting this instant that we're not doing anything which would entitle him to a reward if he informed on us to the port authorities. That's how people like him make a living: buying and selling information for use in blackmail, law evasion, and petty crime in general."

"I thought he was a frightened fool when I first saw him," Spartak admitted. "But he must be pretty astute."

"Astute? Him? He didn't even try to find out if we were from Bucyon, like the assassin he told us about who came after Tiorin. He might have sold out his best employer and seen his throat cut without reward to himself."

Spartak was briefly silent. Then he mentioned his unfamiliarity with the purchasing power of money nowadays, and added ruefully, "I think I've been too long away from real life, Vix!"

"I could have been put away from it permanently, but for quick thinking on your part," Vix retorted in a gruff tone. "At least we know we need only delay another hour, now. I hope they're having trouble locating this mutant girl."

But barely half the hoped-for period had gone by when the communicator barked at them.

"Vix of Asconel, come to the port control building. Your passenger under requisition is here."

Vix and Spartak exchanged glances that promised determination to resist, and sat tight, their mouths clamped shut on the temptation to answer and comply.

After a second peremptory order, however, there was a noise from below, and Vix jumped up.

"Vinetal!" he exclaimed. "The conditioning is on her too, isn't it?"

Spartak nodded. "Is she trying to get out of the lock?"

"No, it doesn't sound like it." Vix went to the door to peer out. "No, she's coming here!"

The girl's face was pearly with sweat, and her teeth were chattering. "Vix, you must shut me in the cabin!" she forced out. "Or else I cannot stay against the orders I can hear!"

"Hear?" Vix rapped.

She nodded. "Like a little voice in my own head, whispering all the time."

"It's a good idea to lock her in," Spartak confirmed. "I wish there was some way we could lock all of us in—is there?"

"Not that I know of," Vix grunted. "Sooner or later, even if we closed everything fast, we'd be driven to operating the emergency escape hatches, which can't possibly be locked."

He did as Vineta had asked, and on his return put a question to Spartak. "Little voices inside the head—is that how it feels to you?"

Spartak shook his head. He answered loudly, as another command came over the communicator, trying to drown out the words with his own. "It affects different people different ways, I'm told. It gives me a helpless tightness in the guts, makes my mouth dry and I think eventually it will blur my vision."

"How long before it gets unbearable?"

"I don't know. How strong are we?"

But the authorities' patience was shorter than their endurance. With ten minutes still to go before the promised time of Tiorin's arrival, there came a thunderous banging on the lock door, entirely different from Rochard's timid knock.

"Tiorin?" whispered Vix, whose neck was now corded with tension as he struggled against the invisible compulsion to leave the ship and fetch their unwanted passenger.

"I guess it could be," Spartak replied with difficulty. "I'd better go see. I think I know more about what's been done to us than you do—I stand a marginally better chance of arguing for a while longer if it's not Tiorin down there."

"Go ahead," Vix consented, and his face twisted with self-contempt at his own frailty.

It was not Tiorin. It was the pudgy woman with gray hair, accompanied by a squad of uniformed guards and the mutant girl—presumably—laid out on a stretcher on the back of the ground car in which they had all ridden over to the ship.

"You there!" she roared at Spartak's appearance. "If you fight our conditioning much longer, you won't be in a state to fly space! If that's how you think you're going to evade my orders, I tell you straight you won't get away with it! I'll condition one of my own pilots and drag you out to jail, and Delcadore will be the only planet you see for the rest of your lives!"

A cloud of formless terror due to the conditioning enveloped Spartak's brain. He was unable to speak. Ignoring him, the woman turned to the guards with her.

"Get that girl off the car and put her aboard!"

Slowly, the terror retreated as Spartak called on every trick of self-discipline taught him on Annanworld. He found his voice again, could see clearly as the guards awkwardly sought to get the girl-laden stretcher up the ladder to the lock at which he stood.

A shocking possibility crossed his mind, and everything else, conditioning included, fled from his awareness. He leaned forward on the rail, peering down at the girl. From her face, and the slightness of the body under the blanket in which she was wrapped, he deduced that she was scarcely more than a child—fifteen or sixteen, perhaps.

But that wasn't what transfixed him. He had assumed her to be unconscious, perhaps injured by the peasants or whoever had tried to stone her to death—the gray-haired woman had mentioned something about that. However, he had seen without a shadow of doubt that her eyes were open.

"What's wrong with that girl?" he called.

The guards, busy trying to get her up the ladder, didn't answer. The woman on the car merely scowled.

Behind him in the lock, Vix appeared, clutching his gun but somehow unable to find the trigger, so that his hands wandered absurdly over the stock and barrel, like jointed insects with minds of their own.

"Is she sick, or hurt?" he inquired feverishly.

"I don't think so," Spartak rapped.

"Get back!"—from one of the guards manhandling the stretcher up to them. Despite himself, Vix obeyed instantly. Spartak heard him cursing under his breath.

The stretcher grated over the edge of the platform and was slammed flat. Blue eyes in a face which would normally have been ruddy and healthy, but had turned sallow, stared at the sky, not even turning to see into whose care she had been committed.

"Catatonel!" Spartak thundered, and rage so great that it overcame the force of the conditioning stormed into his limbs.

"What did you say?" Vix cried.

"She's under catatonel! It's a paralyzant—they first got it from the poison of the Loudor ichneumon." He stamped to the guardrail and stared down at the gray-haired woman.

"Correct!" she applauded mockingly.

Vix plucked at his arm. "Isn't it as well?" he whispered. "After all, to have her—"

Spartak brushed aside the other's hand. "It's the cruelest thing in the galaxy!" he blazed. "Because it *only* paralyzes! It doesn't dull pain! How'd you like to be unable even to moisten your eyes by blinking—or move to relieve a cramped leg—or control your bowels?"

He heard Vix draw his breath in sharply, and from the corner of his eye saw that the redhead was staring with dismay at the girl's taut body.

"And don't you know why they did it?" Spartak raged on. "Because there's so much lying and deceit going on in this once-proud Empire they're afraid a mind-reader could tell a few unpleasant truths to the people they're duping—like the man we met earlier, shy of his arm and his leg!"

He saw, as clearly as through a telescope, that his taunt had made the gray-haired woman wince. Without conscious intent, he shot out his arm and seized the energy gun from Vix's fumbling grasp. Trying desperately to stretch this moment of not-thinking to its utmost, he leveled the weapon and found the trigger.

"Where's the antidote?" he shouted. "Get me the antidote or I'll burn you where you sit!"

There was a dreadful silence. Incredulous, the guards turned at the foot of the ladder and stared up at him, shaking with



the effort of keeping the gun sighted on the gray-haired woman, but somehow finding the resources to go on.

"We—we haven't got it!" the woman quavered.

"Then get it!" Spartak told her. "No, not you—you're my hostage. Send one of these bullyboys for it. And tell him to run both ways!"

Vix put his hands on the guardrail, clamping them till the knuckles were white. Seeming to draw strength from his brother's example, he cried, "And tell that man below not to pull any tricks—I saw him move for his sidearm!"

The guard who had tried to get at his gun jerked his hand back from his waist, holding it out at his side.

"Hurry!" Spartak rasped. "Your conditioning is good. I might decide I have to give in—but I'll burn you first!"

The woman shrieked terrified orders, and the guards broke as one to dash back to the port control building and fetch what was required.

The time that passed now was hardly human-scaled, inside Spartak's over-strained mind. It was time slow enough to suit the growth of galaxies, the cooling of suns. Yet there was nothing in all of space except a frightened fat woman on a ridiculous little groundcar, trembling as the gun stayed aligned with her head.

Could he endure? His guts were chilled with nausea; his vision was swimming and there were random, insane noises in his ears. The metal of the gun seemed alternately burning hot and freezing cold, and often he had the illusion that—like Vix—he was not gripping the trigger, but fumbling in front of and behind it.

"There he comes!" Vix said. He pointed, but Spartak dared not look away from the sole focus of his attention.

"Let him bring it up," he breathed. "Put it alongside the girl's head."

"Bring what up?" Vix glanced at him in wonder and not a little admiration. "Oh! Not the guard coming back—but Tiorin! I can see his red hair plainly!"

"I don't care about Tiorin," Spartak said. A vague puzzlement flashed across his mind: he did care really, didn't he? Only somehow it was less important than the main purpose, the bringing of the antidote for catatone. . . .

"Spartak, listen to me," Vix was saying out of infinite distance. "Spartak, Tiorin is here—he's come up to the lock and brought the antidote with him. I told the guard to give it to him and here he is and he's brought it. You can put down the gun and we can leave."

Spartak's temporary universe, containing only himself, the gun and its target, crumbled, and utter darkness overwhelmed him.

## XI

TWO BLURRED faces topped with red hair swam in Spartak's unfocused vision. He struggled to bring the images into register with one another. The effort made his eyes hurt. He gave up, and only then discovered that there were two faces in reality, not merely in his imagination. One of them belonged to Vix. But the other—

Of course, Tiorin! Memory came flooding back, and he was able to force himself up on his elbows. He was lying on one of the bunks in the upper cabin, and both his brothers were leaning over him with expressions of concern.

"Spartak?" Tiorin said doubtfully. "How do you feel?"

Thoughtfully Spartak took stock of his body and still more of his bruised mind. He said eventually, "Bad. But I'll survive."

"By the moons of Argus, it's a miracle," Vix declared. "I shall never know till my dying day how you managed to keep that gun on its target. I had something like that in mind, but I couldn't control my hands under the conditioning."

"They're alleged to know a good many things on Ananworld which have been forgotten elsewhere in the galaxy," Tiorin said. "Where's that jug of broth your girl brought? Oh, there. Give some of it to Spartak—it'll help to restore his strength."

Vix carefully set the spout of the jug to Spartak's lips, his other arm serving as a prop behind the younger man's shoulders. Spartak sipped and sipped again; the broth was

hot and spicy, and he thought he detected the faint flavor of some energy concentrate under the masking tastes.

Meantime, he had a chance to look at Tiorin, whom he had not seen since the day of Hodat's accession to the Warden's chair.

His second brother had aged noticeably. He would in fact be—Spartak calculated rapidly—forty-one, which in the heyday of galactic civilization had been late youth, not early middle age. But the extreme wealth of the Empire was needed to support freely available geriatric treatment; now, and for the foreseeable future, only those fortunate enough to inhabit secure planets like Annanworld would enjoy the old benefits. He had a passing vision of peasants grubbing on decadent worlds, mating in their teens, the women worn out by childbirth at age thirty. It was not a pleasant idea, and Spartak spoke hastily to distract his mind.

"Tiorin, it's incredible that we should have located you!"

"Not really." Even Tiorin's voice had changed from what Spartak recalled: grown deeper and become colored with a sort of drawl to suggest that he weighed every single word. "I've been explaining to Vix how it happened. Right now, he tells me, you're feeling very annoyed at the pretensions of the rump of the Empire, but it saved my life by still possessing some of the old advantages—an efficient law force, swift communications. . . . It was no secret that I was second son to the former Warden of Asconel, you see. I'd found it helpful to draw on the small prestige this conferred. And when Bucyon's assassin arrived, and started asking rather too freely where he could find me, some inspired official grew alarmed. He sent a warning to me, and we laid a trap for the would-be killer; it was from him that I learned about this hellish cult Bucyon had imported, and also of course about the death of our brother Hodat."

A shadow crossed his prematurely lined face.

"Accordingly, I had it noised about that I'd gone to beg Imperial aid in the deposition of the usurper at the court of Argus."

"I still don't see why you didn't," Vix muttered.

"You of all people should know," Tiorin retorted. "Holding what it has is beyond the Empire's power now—whole

fleets are rebelling and setting up on their own. . . . What chance would I have had of securing aid except on terms that would be ruinous to Asconel? Do you know what price the old Twenty-Seventh Fleet set for their return to Imperial jurisdiction? You, Spartak?" On receiving headshakes, he concluded, "The free right to sack the planet Norge!"

Spartak, shocked beyond measure, pushed aside the empty jug of broth. "But Norge was one of the last Imperial outposts beyond Delcadoré!"

"Still is. The price was refused. But the point is: the price was set. I'd have had to promise something similar in respect of Asconel, and I wouldn't have had the heart." Tiorin scowled. "No, it seemed to me that my only hope was to exploit my inborn capital as Hodat's legal heir; that's why I hired agents to inform me of the arrival of any ship from Asconel. I was afraid the most likely occupants of such a ship would be more assassins, out to complete the job I'd once frustrated, but by good luck yours was the first vessel to reach Delcadoré since I learned the news."

"You're relying on your appeal to the citizens to make them rise up in support of you against Bucyon?" Spartak suggested.

"So are you, I gather," Tiorin countered.

Spartak shook his head heavily. He said, "I talked with Korisu, the man Bucyon sent to murder Vix—and of course myself as well if possible. My judgment is that if Bucyon has contrived to turn a once-loyal citizen of Asconel into a fanatic supporter of his regime and his cult, it's going to take more than simply fomenting a counterrevolution to set our planet free."

There was a depressed pause. Vix broke it with his habitual intolerance of extended silence. "We're going to have all the time in the galaxy to work out our plans," he grunted. "Once you dropped that gun and keeled over, Spartak, the conditioning took hold on me, and I had—*had*—to get to the controls and set our course for this planet Nylock. And we're well on the way there now."

"The girl!" Spartak said, and swung his feet to the floor. "Did you give her the antidote?"

"We thought we'd better not," Tiorin admitted. "Obvious-

ly you knew something about medicine in general and catatone in particular, and I'm afraid I've learned little about anything in the years we've been apart. I've gone on indulging myself."

"Wise of you, I guess, but. . ." Spartak stood up, swaying, and had to close his eyes briefly as empathic agony stabbed him at the thought of the torment the mutant girl was undergoing. "Where is she?"

"I told Vineta to make her comfortable in the other cabin," Vix muttered.

Spartak hesitated. Then he spoke his mind, as his training on Annanworld had accustomed him to do. "Listen, Vix! It's painfully obvious that you hate the idea of having a mind-reader aboard. I guess you'd rather leave her the way the Empire liked to have her—incapable of speech, so she can't give away any secrets she picks up. But mutant or not she's a human being, and sheer chance decreed that she should be gifted with abnormal talents rather than you or I or Tiorin. If she's survived into her teens, she's bound to have learned discretion and foresight. She won't reveal the things you want to keep private."

"I hope not," Vix shrugged. But he seemed ashamed of himself, and turned away without further comment.

"Here's the phial of antidote," Tiorin said, fumbling in his belt-pouch. "I hope it's the real stuff, not some fake they palmed off on us to make us leave the planet."

"We'll soon find out," Spartak answered grimly.

Vineta looked up, startled, as he entered the lower cabin, then gave him one of her quick shy smiles. He nodded in response before dropping to his knees alongside the mutant girl and reaching for his medical case.

"She doesn't move at all!" Vineta exclaimed. "She is alive, isn't she? But how does she breathe?"

It was an astute question. Not for the first time Spartak found himself suspecting that this self-effacing girl was the exact opposite of Vix: where he talked much and thought rather too little, she probably thought a great deal despite speaking very seldom.

"You haven't looked under this covering?" he suggested.

Vineta nodded. "She's clothed in some thick garment—I couldn't see how it fastened, so I left it."

Spartak drew the blanket aside. The girl's body was revealed completely enclosed in a suit that glistened as if wet. A bulging hump showed across her bosom; another made her belly rise as though she were pregnant.

"Yes, I've seen that technique before," he said—more to himself than Vineta. "Turn her head on the side, please. I shall have to put the antidote into the neck arteries; if I take the suit off she'll suffocate before I save her."

*If Tiorin's ghastly suspicion is correct, she'll die anyway.* . . . But he drove down that thought and administered the antidote with deft fingers.

Seconds dragged away like hours—and she moved. Spartak realized he had been holding his breath; he exhaled gustily. "Now we must get the suit off, quickly. See, it fastens on the shoulders and at the hips. Open that side."

With a sucking noise the wet-looking material let go. The skin revealed was pallid and unhealthy, somewhat swollen with accumulated fluids and here and there wrinkled up into ugly white ridges.

"That's how she breathed—see?" he explained, as the mound on her bosom was exposed, and proved to be a machine in a metal casing. "That drives air in and out and acts as a pacemaker for her heart. And this"—the similar device on her belly—"takes care of bodily wastes, but not very well."

Now the mutant girl had sufficiently recovered for an expression to come to her face, and at the sight of it Vineta could not stifle an exclamation of horror. It was the worst look of pain Spartak had ever seen.

"Can you do massage?" he demanded, stacking the prosthetic machines anyhow on a handy shelf. "Space knows how long she's been kept from moving—the return of normal sensation will be pure torture!"

Vineta's hands flew to the pale stiff limbs and began to rub.

"Thank you." The words came on breath alone, barely audible. "Thank you. You can stop now. The pain's gone."

Spartak sat back, exhausted, and stared at the girl. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure." A small tongue slipped out to moisten her lips, which were chapped. "You are Spartak, yes? And you are Vineta?"

Spartak's eyebrows drew together. So far as he could recall, he hadn't addressed Vineta by name, nor been addressed, since entering the cabin. He said, "Did you read names from our minds?"

A smile came and went on the mutant girl's face. She said, a trifle louder as her vocal cords came under control, "Yes. And it feels very good. I have felt so much fear in people who knew what I am, but in your mind I feel—what to call it? Curiosity, I think. And in hers, much kindness. I am so glad to be here."

"Then you also know what's going to happen to you?" Spartak suggested.

"Yes. And I see why you ask. Frankly, I don't care where I go so long as it's away from—from the past." The small sharp-featured face clouded.

"I'll let you rest now," Spartak said. "Vineta, perhaps you should bring her some of that broth you made for me—it seems to have brought about my recovery from shock very quickly." A thought struck him, and went unvoiced by deliberate decision as his eyes returned to the mutant girl.

She gave a thin chuckle. "My name's Eunora," she said. "You have a clear mind, Spartak—it's like looking into a deep transparent pool of pure water, and I can see all the way to the rocks at the bottom except in one place. And that's where you've been conditioned to take me to Nylock."

"I imagine," Spartak said with difficulty, "that you can make allowances for my brothers. I don't think they feel as I do about—about people like you."

"No, I can sense them—just barely." Eunora shut her eyes and seemed to be listening to distant noises. "They are both full of resentment; the conditioning lies on all their thoughts like dense fog, and one of them can't help thinking that I'm responsible for the delay in your mission."

After that, silence. Spartak caught Vineta's eye and nodded her out of the cabin. Then he went, heavy-hearted, to rejoin his brothers.

## XII

THE two others had gone up to the control room again. As he approached the door, he heard Vix's voice raised.

"Well, I know Spartak's views on this, because he told me."

"And they are—?" Tiorin prompted.

"That we might have spent months hunting you, maybe going clear to Argus on the false trail you laid, so we should be glad our only delay is this little side trip to Nylock."

"Suitably philosophical, I guess," Tiorin replied as Spartak paused outside the door, "for someone who took vows to an order on Annanworld. It's a hotbed of philosophy, I'm told. For my part, I agree with you—if luck runs your way you ought to grab its tail and hang on tight! Is there no means whereby we could get around the conditioning imposed on you? I'm not conditioned—could you give me a course of instruction and let me fly the ship to Asconel?"

"No, for two reasons." Spartak slid the door aside and stepped into their view. "First, conditioning of this order of efficiency turns your own mind against your wishes—if Vix were to try and teach you how to pilot the ship, he'd so instruct you as to insure that you set course for where we're commanded to go. Or, if by some miracle he avoided that trap, he and I and probably Vineta would conspire to take the controls away from you again. And secondly, even if you did succeed in getting us to Asconel, we'd arrive there in the sort of state I was in when they finally brought the antidote for Eunora. Only worse. The strain might literally kill us; I'd certainly expect us to be incurably insane."

"The girl!" Reminded of his other omnipresent anxiety, Vix tensed. "Did you—uh—cure her?"

"And what was the name you used?" Tiorin added.



"Eunora." Spartak combed at his beard with agitated fingers. "I guess you could say she's cured—she's released from the paralysis, at least. But I'm astonished at how normal and level-headed she seems. It's not what you'd expect from someone of her age—still very young—treated in such an abominable fashion." He paused and frowned. "Oh—maybe I'm being overly suspicious. Maybe she's just so glad to get free of the Imperials and the people who were apt to stone her. . ."

"Is that what they were going to do?" Tiorin exclaimed.

"So we were told by that fat old fool at the spaceport on Delcadoré," Vix confirmed. "Well, we have to make the most of our chances such as they are. Spartak, when you came in we were discussing how to tackle the problem. Tiorin has unconfirmed reports of a center of resistance established by Tigrid Zen on Gwo."

"How old are these reports?" Spartak asked sourly. "Gwo is too close and too obvious for Bucyon to overlook it." He had been taken to Gwo once, and never forgotten the impression it made on him; marginally habitable, it served Asconel and five or six neighboring systems as a source of raw materials, the far greater distance for transport as compared with asteroids in their own systems being counterbalanced by the extra convenience of working with breathable atmosphere. It was a bleak, oppressive world, its vegetation drab olive and gray, its climate wet and windy, its oceans perpetually tossed by storms.

The point apparently hadn't occurred to Vix. He glanced at Tiorin. "Is this something you had from Bucyon's assassin?"

Tiorin nodded. "But I did confirm the story by checking with the crews of ships that had recently passed within—well—earshot, so to speak, of Asconel. There's a spaceman's slang term for that; what is it?"

"Rumor-range," Spartak answered shortly. "Four kinds of news: standing there, landing there, rumor-range and rubbish."

Vix gave a humorless chuckle. "I'm surprised at you knowing that, not ever having been a spaceman yourself."

Spartak made a gesture of dismissal, dropping into a seat. "Speaking of Bucyon's assassin reminded me. Your tracks

may be fairly well covered on Delcadoré, Tiorin—though after meeting Rochard, I'm not so sure of that. Ours certainly are not; the most casual inquiry on Annanworld would give a lead to Vix and me. And Bucyon is hardly likely to rest content with the triple frustration of his attempts at wiping us out. Indeed, I'm amazed he relied on lone agents—in his position, I'd stop at nothing to get rid of all of us."

Tiorin nodded, his face grave. "The impression I had from the interrogation of the man sent to kill me was that fanatics deluded by the cult of Belizuek acquire the illusion of being invincible, capable of undertaking any mission single-handed. But I grant that this isn't an impression apt to survive a succession of setbacks like the ones luck has brought us up to now."

"Fanatics are tricky to handle," Spartak muttered. "If you catch them on their blind side—say by doing something they define as impossible—you can cope with them easily. If you stand in their way as we must stand in Bucyon's . . . Or do we?"

"What do you mean?" Vix snapped. Then a light seemed to dawn on him. "Oh! Do you mean that this errand to dump the mutant girl is something of Bucyon's doing?"

"A means of getting us out of the way? I doubt it. Even Bucyon could hardly organize a chain of coincidences like that. No, what I mean is this: if he's managed to inspire dupes like Korisu and the man sent to kill Tiorin, if he's reduced the citizens to a state of blind adoration, he may feel secure without disposing of us. He may wait for us to come home, frantic with rage, and then pick us off at his own convenience."

Vix's face darkened. "By the moons of Argus, I'd like to test that ideal I'd like to set course now for Asconel and pitch Bucyon and his woman Lydis from the top of the Dragon's Fangs—*ach!*"

The last sound was not a word, but a gasp of agony, and he doubled over. Alarmed; Spartak jolted up from his seat, but Vix waved him back.

"Second time that's happened," the redhead wheezed. "If I so much as think about going straight to Asconel, I get a gripping in the guts, but if I speak it out loud, it's like molten metal being poured into my belly."

"It's the conditioning," Tiorin said. "It must be."

Spartak nodded. "Think about Nylock," he urged Vix. "Think about going to Asconel after we've left the mutant girl behind. It'll calm you and you'll be eased."

"Go on talking on those lines," Vix whispered. The whole of his face had paled to the whiteness of his long scar.

"Uh—yes." Spartak turned to Tiorin. "Well, the simple plan is to link up with Tigrid Zen. By the way, though: who is he? Vix assumed that I'd know him, but I don't recall the name."

"He was Vix's senior aide when they were putting down the revolt in the northern islands," Tiorin said. "A former sea-sailor who entered government service because of the rebellion."

Spartak nodded. He remembered very vaguely a man with a bushy black moustache and a roaring voice—that would be Tigrid Zen.

"But he's been closer than we have, he's had a long time—and we don't hear news of any progress towards victory." Tiorin scowled. "We have the mystique of our blood to draw support, descended as we are from the Warden who steered Asconel through the storms which followed the collapse of Argian influence in our sector of the galaxy. That might tip the scales in our favor. But after ourselves, I know no one more likely to rally resistance to Bucyon than Tigrid Zen, and if he's failed. . . ." He shrugged despondently.

"We're guessing," Spartak said angrily. "What we need to do is make straight for Asconel—contact Tigrid Zen if we can, but not chasing him if he's gone hunting support in some other system. Then on Asconel, perhaps disguised, we ought to—"

He broke off. Tiorin was gazing at him queerly.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"You just said 'make straight for Asconel'," Tiorin exclaimed. "And nothing happened to you! When Vix said the same thing, more or less, he doubled up in pain."

Blank, Spartak tried it again. "We should make straight for Asconel. I want to go straight there now. I intend to go straight there now." He jumped to his feet. "By the moons of Argus, you're right! Vix, try it!" Excitedly, he rounded on the redhead.

"I—" Vix moistened his lips and gathered his courage, fearing another blast of the torture which had overcome him moments earlier. "I want to go to Asconel. Now."

And slowly a smile replaced his look of anxiety.

"The conditioning's failed!" Tiorin exploded. "It must have been badly implanted—"

"No!" Spartak rapped. "I felt it, and believe me, I *know*. The psychologists who treated us knew their job. Either we're suffering from a delusion, implanted as a second line of defense against the breakdown of the main commands, or—No, that can't be right. We have you as a control, Tiorin; you're not conditioned, and you'd observe that. Then that leaves one single possibility, and I think I know what it is."

"Tell us!" cried Vix, almost beside himself with joy at being unexpectedly released from his invisible bonds.

"Eunora," Spartak said.

"What? The—the mind-reading girl?" Vix took half a pace back as though recoiling from a physical shock. "But—how?"

"I don't pretend to know that," Spartak said. "I'm just eliminating the things I know to be out of the question, and I find one unknown factor operating. Let's go see her and find out—"

"That won't be necessary," a soft voice said, and the panel of the door slid aside to reveal Eunora herself. Spartak had not realized till this moment how tiny she actually was; she barely came to Vix's elbow, and he was the shortest of the three men. She had borrowed one of the costumes he had seen in Vineta's closet when he boarded the ship on Annanworld, and it hung loosely on her as though she were a child dressing up in her mother's clothes.

"Eunora! Did you take the conditioning off us?" Spartak blurted.

The girl gave a grave nod.

"Then I can't begin to tell you how grateful we are!"

"That's right!" Vix confirmed. His face was alight with enthusiasm. "Why, you may have saved a whole planet's people by saving us that trip to Nylock!"

Eunora didn't answer at once. She walked into the control room with careful, mincing steps, seeming still to be

finding out how her unparalyzed legs should support her. Behind her, a trifle nervous, but looking calm enough, came Vineta, who had presumably tried to dissuade her from leaving her cabin and failed.

"I didn't know about this—this *conditioning*," the mutant girl said at last. "It was only when I felt the pain and twisting in your mind"—nodding to Vix—"that I decided I had to find out about it. It's . . . interesting."

A nameless premonition filled the air.

"It's difficult being a mutant," the soft voice went on. "Hardly daring to use the gift—afraid all the time that it will leak out and then there'll be . . . killing. But it's grown without my noticing. I have more talents than I ever realized. I was able to work on your minds like a locksmith picking locks, locating and releasing all the implanted orders." She gave a little crazy giggle. "And when you see how it's done, it's so simple!"

Spartak's whole body had gone cold as ice. He waited numbly for her to make the point which he foresaw with terror.

"Asconel. That's where you want to go. But I don't think I like the idea much. It's an Imperial world—or was. So they don't tolerate my kind of people. Also it's going to be a place of fighting. I can see that in your mind, Vix. You want to go there and fight against these priests and this man called Bucyon, and because you're so frightened of having your mind probed you'll probably be glad if something bad happens to me. Spartak perhaps not—I don't know. But even he. . ."

She hesitated. Then she giggled again. "Well, I've found out about conditioning now. I see how it's done. I think I can probably make you do what I want. There's only one question that remains: it's such a big galaxy, so where shall I make you take me?"

She looked around her petrified audience with mocking eyes. "Go on!" she urged. "Think of the other places I might like to be taken—anywhere but Asconel or back where I came from—and then I'll get you to pilot the ship there!"

### XIII

**HORROR-STRUCK** visions raced through Spartak's mind in three successive and distinct stages.

First, there was the appallingly vivid picture of them all condemned to serve the whim of this mentally unstable girl, slaves bound with unseen chains, compelled to take her on a colossal joyride around the wheel of stars which was the galaxy.

Second, there came a flood of memories of Asconel: its seas, its mountains, its forests and open plains, every recollection painful with yearning. He had resigned himself long ago, that day on the royal island of Gard, to a life of exile, but since Vix came to find him he had without realizing conceived an ache and a desire to go home, that now permeated every fibre of his being. The agony of deprivation was almost physical in its intensity, like hunger or—more nearly—like sex.

And third, as he began to bring his whirling thoughts under control, followed the shadow of a question. Could even Eunora, who had certainly released them from the Imperial conditioning, reverse the process with her supernatural talent, imposing fresh commands in place of those she had wiped out? *Could* she? Surely a mere child would find the range and sweep of adult minds—male minds, moreover—beyond her abilities to master.

Or maybe not. Here there were so many unknown factors, he was almost afraid to believe he dared hope.

But no one said anything. He and his half-brothers simply stared at Eunora, as, though her tiny face and body held an infinite fascination for them. Bit by bit, the waiting grew to be a strain on her, and the expression of mocking triumph she wore gave place to a look of uncertainty.

At last she burst out, "Do as I tell you! Do as I tell you!" But the words were tinged with hysteria.

Behind her shoulder, Spartak saw Vineta move. She came forward into the middle of the control room floor, and spoke unexpectedly in a level voice.

"I want to go to Asconel. Because that's where Vix wants to go."

"Shut up!" Eunora rounded on her, the skin around her eyes crinkling up as though she were about to cry.

Murmurs of astonishment came from Vix and Tiorin. Spartak was not less surprised than they at Vineta's intervention, but he was perhaps better equipped to see how it was possible than they were. He forced his thinking along the most promising line, remembering that Eunora was exposed to all of them at once.

Deliberately he fanned the coals of his resentment into flame, visualizing her as she had been when she was brought to the ship—corpse-stiff, kept alive only by machines, and suffering unspeakable cramps and soreness. *Is this how you repay our help?* he whispered wordlessly inside his head. And beyond that, more subtly: *Is this the life you want, for years, forever perhaps—the loneliness of power, without love, without friendship and trust?*

"Stop it!" she whimpered, and dashed at him to beat with her little absurd fists on his chest. He folded his arms and stared sternly down at her.

*Once you begin it, you can never stop.* And behind the thought, carefully constructed pictures of faceless people, by hundreds and then by thousands, plotting to escape from her control and drive her down to final darkness.

"Stop it!" she shrieked again.

He complied, and thought instead of Asconel, a fair world, hospitable and kindly, with himself and Vix and Tiorin and Eunora too enjoying its sunshine, its wine, its fields and cities.

Helpless, the girl bent over and covered her face with her hands. The threatened onslaught of tears overcame her. Impulsively, Vineta put her arm around her shoulders, and she turned and buried her sobs in the long dark hair.

"What—what happened?" Vix whispered, moving as though waking from nightmare.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Vineta could tell you," Spartak answered slowly. "You've been underestimating this girl of yours, Vix! She thinks very clearly indeed."

Vineta, comforting the weeping Eunora, shook her head. "I only know what store Vix sets by going to Asconel. And

I couldn't bear to think of him—and all of you—being turned into toys for *her*.”

“And there you have it,” Spartak grunted. “Eunora found it easy to release the conditioning the Imperial psychologists imposed on us, but to implant new commands of her own against the terrible need we all have to go home and set our people free—that's not something one untrained child can achieve!”

“But—” Vix started to object.

“Think of it this way,” Spartak interrupted. “Anyone can take a ship out to space, yes? Because space is big and open, and there's a margin for error of a million miles if you need it. But landing is something different again; one aims for a spaceport perhaps no more than a mile across, and probably for a berth measured in yards rather than miles. That takes skill and long practice. Similarly, wiping out commands which the victim resents is easy for Eunora. To overcome our resistance and bend us to her will proved beyond her.”

“But never mind how it was done,” Tiorin snapped, wiping sweat from his furrowed brow. “The question is, how do we cope with her from now on? If she's apt to repeat that little performance—”

“Dump her in space,” Vix said shortly. The naked brutality of the words jolted all of them, and especially Eunora, who spun in terror to gaze at him.

“That's disgusting, Vix!” Tiorin countered. “Nonetheless—since you're free of the compulsion to take her to Nylock, I think we should put her down on the nearest habitable planet and be glad to be rid of her.”

“I . . .” Vineta let the word hang timidly in the air. Spartak gave her an encouraging nod.

“Go on, Vineta. Like I said, you're a clearer thinker than most people. I'd be interested to hear your view.”

“Well . . .” Vineta licked her lips. “I've heard from Vix that this mysterious woman Lydis gained power over your late brother Hodat by appearing to read his thoughts. And what I've heard, too, about the way the people on Asconel have been changed from free independent citizens to blind fanatic dupes of the Belizuek cult sounds like the effect of some sort of conditioning. I—well, I didn't have a very hap-



py childhood. Even though I wasn't set apart from everybody the way Eunora is, I often felt the way she did just now—desperate to get even with the universe, wanting to be as cruel to others as they had been to me. So I can't even be angry with her.

"And. . ." She hesitated. "I can't see into your minds the way she can, but I do believe that you're the nicest people I've ever had to deal with. Vix, for all that you have a temper like a star going nova, you can be very kind, and Spartak here is such a gentle person, and strong inside too. I think perhaps when she's recovered from the dreadful things they did to her on Delcadoré, Eunora will see that the same as I do. And when she does—well, isn't it going to be tremendously valuable to have someone with us who can see into people's inmost thoughts? Won't it save months of spying and guessing, trying to find out how Bucyon keeps his hold on your citizens at home?"

There was a pause. Tiorin broke it.

"I see what Spartak means about you, girl. I hadn't looked at it that way myself. But it's the first really constructive suggestion I've heard for tackling the problem we face. My one reservation is that we can't be sure about Eunora. Are we to undo the effects of years of maltreatment in a few days?"

Spartak drew a deep breath. "I'd be willing to try, if she'll cooperate."

Eunora gave a little frightened cry. "I see what's in your mind, Spartak! No! No!"

No? His sober bearded face bent close to hers, he let himself think through the idea in detail, trying to maintain the same mood in which he had taken his vows to the order he joined on Annanworld: the sense of disgust inspired by the stupid violence attending the collapse of Imperial authority, the longing for rationality, calm judgment and peace which drove him to his self-imposed exile.

But it wasn't that, he realized later, which impressed her. It was the memory of the agony he suffered while waiting for the antidote to be brought so that he could release her from catatone paralysis.

"I don't like this," Vix muttered in the background. "I still feel we'd be better off if we got rid of her."

"Wait," Tiorin counseled. "Look now!"

With an expression of total childlike trust, she had put her tiny hand in Spartak's large one, and he was leading her without another word from the control room.

"What?" Vix demanded. "What?"

It was Vineta who answered, her eyes on the door which had closed behind Spartak. "I think she saw what he endured for her sake before we left Delcadoré, and decided that if he could do that for her, she could do as much for him."

When Spartak returned, much later, his face was stamped with incredible weariness.

"She's sleeping," he said in answer to an eager question from Tiorin. "Oh, but I've dug some foulness from that mind of hers! Like seeking jewels in a pile of dung!"

Obviously not yet convinced of the wisdom of keeping Eunora aboard, Vix demanded harshly, "What did you do?"

"Hm?" Rubbing his eyes, Spartak spoke around a yawn. "Oh—I gave her some of the same drug I used on Korisu. I told you it was employed in psychotherapy. Before she's capable of liking us, or anyone, she's got to be cleansed of the hate she's conceived for the human race—and are you surprised at that hate? The Empire, afraid of being toppled by some superiorly gifted assailant, made it policy to deport mutants, and the common people turned that policy into fear for their own security. You'd stand up to a raving crowd, defying them with your gun, or a sword, or your bare fists if it came to that. But she's a child! How can she understand and forgive a mob of fools driven out of their minds with superstitious terror?"

Vix hesitated for a long moment. Finally he shrugged. "I don't like the idea, but—but you know a few things I don't, having spent so long with your nose buried in your books. So far, things have turned out well for us. I'll go along with you. But if she pulls another trick like the one she scared us with, I'll dump her in space as I said I would!"

"She's not less human because she's a mutant," Vineta summed up. "She's a hundred per cent human—*plus*."

"Well said," Tiorin approved. "Now, though, we have

a choice to make, Spartak. Vix feels we should go directly to Asconel, for fear of wasting any more time. I think it would be safer to try and contact Tigrid Zen on Gwo. Things have changed terribly on Asconel; even if we disguise ourselves, we might be betrayed by some chance ignorance."

"But will Tigrid Zen be any better informed?" Vix challenged. "If the stories we hear about Bucyon's mastery of Asconel are correct, he won't simply be able to come and go freely. He may not even have been able to land ships at home. And someone who's totally cut off can't give us much guidance."

"I'll give you one sound reason for visiting Gwo first," Spartak said. "Vineta reminded us of it, just now. Lydis is alleged to be a mind-reader too. Suppose she's one of many; suppose the technique whereby Bucyon overcame all resistance so easily is a mutant trick. How do we disguise our minds against discovery?"

Vix blanched. With the memory of Eunora's powers fresh as it was, that shaft struck home in him. He admitted, "I hadn't considered that. If you're right, though, would—?"

"I don't know if Tigrid Zen could advise us," Spartak cut in, stretching his exhausted limbs. "But he could warn us. I say we make first for Gwo anyway."

"I'll set up the revised course, then," Vix muttered, and moved to the controls.

## XIV

CAUTIOUS AS a wild beast sniffing at bait in a suspected trap, they circled the mining world of Gwo. It was a lake-planet and not an ocean-planet; in other words, its land surface rather than its water surface was continuous. Although it had a CO<sub>2</sub>-water ecology, it had never been permanently settled in the days when men first blasted through the galaxy—with a vast number of more Earth-like planets to choose from, they could let places such as Gwo alone.

It wasn't short of water, however. The atmosphere was sponge-saturated, and every least hillock was a watershed.

The effect over eons of time had been to turn uplands into bare, rounded rocks, and fill all the valleys with deep layers of rich sediment supporting the typical drab vegetation. It was from these sediments that the half-dozen nearby human worlds had drawn their raw materials.

*Had.* Spartak reflected on the chilling implications of that word as the echo of Vix's exclamation died in the still air of the control room.

"It seems to be dead. . . ."

"It can't be," Tiorin objected. "They might have had to cut back their mining, but to abandon it completely—"

"It's been ten years," Spartak broke in. "Asconel was the most stable of the planets hereabouts, and think what's happened to it now. Revolution, civil war, plague—a dozen things might have put a stop to luxuries like mining another system. Vix, do we have no clue at all to the location of Tigrid Zen's resistance hideout?"

"You'd expect it to be based on Asconel's old holdings here," Vix grunted. "Except that if it was, Bucyon could too easily locate it and wipe it out."

"Maybe he did," Tiorin muttered.

"Maybe." Vix reached towards the communicator switches. "We'll just have to risk a call, I guess."

"Hold it," Spartak rapped.

"What else can we do?" Tiorin glanced at him. "Agreed, we may run ourselves into a Bucyon ambush, but we could spend a lifetime hunting through the mist and drizzle here."

"I have a better idea," Spartak said. "Let me bring Eunora up and ask if she can help us."

She came willingly, her hand in Spartak's like father and daughter. He had never hoped that there would be such rapid progress in gaining her friendship and trust, but he had overlooked the fact that since she could see into his mind she could examine her personality as in a mirror, using his knowledge of psychology to afford an insight into her thinking. With incredible speed she had discovered why she nurtured blind hatred against ordinary people and why she had been senselessly persecuted; then, borrowing from Spartak's calm assessment of human inadequacy, she had

seen how to rise above mere resentment and achieve a sort of pity.

Even Vix had been impressed by the result. Now, as she came into the cabin, he gave her a smile of welcome.

"Yes, I can tell you where you'll find your friends," she said. "Over there!"

She pointed. "It's a long way—half around the planet. But there are a lot of people, perhaps as many as a hundred."

"A hundred!" Tiorin was appalled. "If that's all he's managed to gather together out of the nine hundred millions on Asconel, what are we hoping to do?"

"More," Spartak said briefly. "Vix, let's go there."

When they broke through the cover of cloud and hovered amid ceaseless rain, the drops trickling down the viewports, they found themselves above a heavily wooded valley. No human habitation was in evidence, and Vix jumped to one of his typical conclusions.

"Eunora's wrong. There isn't anybody here."

"Yes, there is," the girl replied stubbornly. "Hiding!"

"Hiding where?"

"Go down lower and you'll see."

Reluctantly Vix complied. Shortly, Tiorin let out an exclamation. "Those—those aren't natural trees! Look, they're on nets suspended above ground level."

"Identify yourselves or we'll shoot you down!"

The voice blasted from the communicator, making them jump. In earnest of the threat, a bolt of energy sizzled up from a concealed gun emplacement, leaving a streak of white steam to mark its path through the dripping sky.

Tiorin leapt to the communicator. "Vix of Asconel's ship!" he shouted. "Spartak of Asconel and Tiorin of Asconel are aboard! We're looking for Tigrid Zen!"

A moment of blank disbelief. Then: "Would you say that again?"—in the meekest possible tone. And lower, as if to someone beside the speaker: "Go tell the general at once!"

A gap opened in the camouflage of fake vegetation. "Come down slowly," the distant voice instructed. "We have our weapons trained on you, so don't make a careless move."

"Eunora," Spartak murmured, "can you convince them that we are who we are?"

"I'll try," the mutant girl agreed doubtfully, and closed her eyes.

Abruptly, the communicator sounded again. "All right, we're satisfied. Welcome! Welcome!"

Tiorin cocked an eyebrow at Vix, who had overheard Spartak's soft request to Eunora, and the redhead shrugged and set the ship down.

The relief of finding that there really was a nucleus of anti-Bucyon forces here was soon tempered with dismay, however. As Eunora had said, the total amounted to some hundred persons, ill-clad and half-starved, the proud possessors of two small spaceships which had formerly belonged to the Asconel navy and had been snatched from Bucyon's grip after his own fleet attacked Asconel. One ship was here; the other had been sent on a mission to try and raise help among neighboring systems—at latest reports, without success, for everywhere the tale was the same, and the withdrawal of Imperial authority had left those systems with problems of their own.

Tigrid Zen himself, who came to embrace his former commander Vix with tears in his eyes, had aged twenty years, not ten, since Hodat's accession. His hair was vanished from his head, and his long moustache was grizzled. His uniform was dirty and there were holes in his boots. None of his followers were in much better plight.

But he made the newcomers as welcome as he could, treating them to a meal in the mountainside cave which served as his headquarters, and from him they heard the sorry tale of Asconel's capitulation at first hand.

"It was terrible," he muttered. "At first, you see, it didn't seem too bad. This woman Lydis—granted, she followed some ridiculous cult or other, we thought, but there was some compensation in Hodat's obsession with her. Twice she enabled us to frustrate a plot against him—though now I'm not sure she didn't inspire the plots herself, to gain his confidence. Her, or this loathsome cripple Shry that she brought in as—well, her chaplain, I guess you'd say.

"We owe it to Grydnik that we weren't completely duped."

He nodded at the former port controller of the main Asconel spaceport, a shrunken man who had once been fat, but since his exile on Gwo had become a body cased in the loose bag of his own skin. "He challenged the easy admission of all these people from Brinze, saying there were too many greedy priests among them and no one who could offer the hard work and technical skills we needed. But Hodat grew deaf to our pleading. First he ordered the erection of this temple, then he imposed the taxes to establish sister centers of Belizuek in every large town, and finally—well, I'm sure you know. He was murdered, and in the resulting confusion Bucyon's fleet came from space and overwhelmed our defenses. The priests and other immigrants from Brinze proved to be a well-trained underground movement, which paralyzed our defenses and our communications. Now we are as you see: a hopeless band of loyalists stranded in exile."

"Tell me about Bucyon," Vix said softly, "and this woman Lydis."

"Bucyon—he's a big man, with swarthy skin and a bright brown beard. They say he's a strong personality, dazzling to those who come in contact with him. But he keeps aloof." He gestured to an aide standing by. "We have pictures of him and Lydis. Bring them."

"And Shry," Spartak said. "In what way is he a cripple?"

"Hunchbacked. As though some monstrous growth covered him from neck to waist, bulging out obscenely. Ah, here are the pictures. You'll find them everywhere on Asconel now, venerated like idols by the stupid citizens!"

He slammed them down on the table. Vix, who had requested information about Bucyon and Lydis, studied them with care, lingering longest on the portrait of the woman.

"She's very beautiful," he said.

Spartak nodded. Although the picture showed her in long black robes, with a veil over her fair hair, her face was of a perfection to tempt the King of Argus.

"This I swear," Vix said between his teeth. "One day I shall enjoy that woman. I shall take her, and throw her down, and. . ." His hands curled into claws.

Tiorin broke the ensuing silence. "And what is it like on Asconel now? You have contact with people there—I hope."

"A certain amount. Bucyon has grown contemptuous of our opposition, and we contrive to get our ship through for a landing every now and again, to land spies or put fresh heart—such as we can—into the very few who harbor loyal memories of Hodat. But as to present conditions there, why, you should ask our latest recruit Metchel." He indicated a stocky man who stood a little apart from the others present. "We brought him away at our last landing. He was scheduled to be sacrificed to Belizuek, and wasn't duped as so many are. Can you credit that?" Tigris Zen added bitterly. "Our people, offering up their lives!"

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from the brothers.

"Conditions on Asconel," Metchel shrugged. "Well . . . Look around you, and imagine this expanded to the whole planet. Everywhere despair, poverty, plough-land gone to weed, fishing boats rotting at the quay, commerce reduced to the passage of tax payments in order to support the burden of the fat and greedy priesthood. But nobody cares—the entire populace is deluded into thinking that they don't matter anymore; only Belizuek and his followers count. It's true that people willingly offer up their lives in sacrifice at every temple."

"How is the sacrifice conducted?" Spartak rapped.

"I don't know. No one sees but the priests, and they don't talk."

"And what's Belizuek?"

Metchel shook his head again. "The priests say 'he'. In every temple, behind a screen, there's a sanctum for him. Daily one must go and bow to him, sing a song in his praise, and hear an exhortation by the priest in charge, which usually boils down to this: that we are dirt under his feet, our only purpose is to serve him, and he has existed as long as the galaxy. Incredible as it may seem, this convinces people; they go to their miserable work and dirty homes and starvation meals and comfort themselves with what the priest said."

Metchel's face twisted, and he added violently, "I hope to go back soon. I can go to another town, perhaps, and work to overthrow Bucyon."



Gloom descended on the listeners. Painted thus, the task before them seemed impossible. Spartak put his elbows on the table and buried his head in his hands.

Beside him, Eunora plucked at his sleeve. He shook her hand away with impatience, but she insisted, and he wearily bent his head close to hear her whisper.

What she said shook him to the core.

"Metchel is lying," came her faint clear breathy message. "He's an agent sworn to Bucyon, and when he goes back he plans to tell where this place lies so that it can be wiped out by Bucyon's fleet."

"Are you sure?" Spartak's head whirled with suspicions: *Is she trying to ingratiate herself? Are we to be deceived?*

"If you don't believe me," Eunora said in pique, "you only have to use on him the drug you used on Korisu. And I tell you it'd be a waste. If I can't tell when someone's lying, who can?"

## XV

CENTURIES OF despair seemed to settle their weight on the shoulders of Tigrid Zen as he listened to the flood of hatred and abuse Metchel poured out, lying on the crude wooden bed to which they had bound him. They were in a secondary cave of the system in which he had established his hideout, the only light the yellow glow of an almost expired hand-lamp.

"What made you suspect he was lying?" he asked Spartak.

The bearded man hesitated. "Does it matter?" he countered finally, deciding it was better not to reveal Eunora's talent for fear there might be superstitious alarm at her presence on Gwo. "You've heard what came out when we unlocked the doors of his mind."

His eyes shifted to the medical case alongside the bed. He had spent a great deal of his most useful drug on Eunora aboard ship, on Korisu and now on Metchel. But he didn't feel it was, as Eunora maintained, a waste to have acted as he did. Granted, the mutant girl could see into the traitor's mind, but apart from wishing to establish that

she was telling the truth, he had suspected there might be things in Metchel's memory Eunora could not understand well enough to describe to a third party. And he was convinced he was right.

"What are we going to do?" Vix muttered from the dim recesses of the cave. It was the third or fourth time he had asked the same question.

"I don't know," Tigrid Zen sighed. "To think that a spy for Bucyon could fool us so easily—come right here to our secret headquarters and worm his way into my confidence—oh, it makes me ashamed! I'm growing old, sirs. I'm turning into a senile fool."

Tiorin clapped him comfortingly on the back, but didn't voice any denial. Instead, he said, "What worries me is that this suggests some of your underground contacts on Asconel have been infiltrated by Bucyon's men. By what miracle does he gain this blind obedience? I'll swear that Metchel told the truth—why, haven't we heard him repeat much the same under this drug of Spartak's?—when he described the shocking way poverty and ruin have overtaken our once-prosperous people. Yet he doesn't *care*. For him, Bucyon is a superman, Shry is the voice of a divine oracle, and Belizuek is a being so superior to humanity that his service excuses the worst of insults to human dignity!"

"What is Belizuek?" Spartak said softly.

"There was a pause. Tiorin said at length, "Go on, Spartak. You have something in mind."

"Yes." Wearily Spartak rubbed his forehead. "Vix had a vague plan originally which consisted of landing on Asconel in secret, preferably having raised forces elsewhere to aid the loyalists when they rebelled against the usurper, and rely on his—our—prestige as Hodat's legal successors to foment an uprising. But this assumed we were coping with an ordinary tyrant: a dictator such as any world might throw up from the chaos of post-Imperial decline, against whom the forces of unpopularity would already be at work. Correct, Vix?"

Vix nodded. "I had it in mind to land in the northern islands. I imagined I would still enjoy some support there."

Tigrid Zen grunted. "I had that same idea. That was my first tactic when Bucyon came. But though it's true

we've been maintaining contacts with home through our former friends in that area, I'm no longer sure whether I was right to trust them or whether Bucyon has subverted everybody and now laughs at me."

Spartak leaned forward, elbows on knees, and shot a sidelong glance at the prone figure of Metchel, now breathing heavily in a stupor induced by the drug he had been given.

"Neither Metchel, nor Korisu, nor the man who came to try and kill you, Tiorin, would have knuckled under to any ordinary dictator. Our traditions of good government, loyalty to the legal Warden, and public justice would have ensured that a mere usurping tyrant met the full force of a popular revolt—if not instantly, then within a year or two of his seizing power. Clearly, Bucyon is no ordinary tyrant. What has he to make him different from anyone else?"

"The woman Lydis?" Vix hazarded. "Allegedly she can read minds."

"That, yes," Spartak nodded. "But far more important, he has Belizuek. A figment of the imagination, a mere cult-object? I think not."

"What, then?" Tiorin snapped. "A mutant of human stock?"

"Again, I think not. Remember, we've heard from Metchel how Belizuek is present in every temple in every town on Asconel, and here under the drug he's further informed us that Belizuek is said to be present everywhere on Brinze—wherever that world may lie."

"Something—artificial perhaps?" Tiorin suggested. "A mechanical device which subdues the hostile thoughts of the people who come within range?"

"That's a possibility I hadn't considered," Spartak conceded. "And it would explain a good deal."

"Can't we milk something further from Metchel?" Vix exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "He can't really be so ignorant about this deity he follows as he pretends!"

"But he is. I'm satisfied on that score." Spartak spread his hands. "Only the priests know what Belizuek is. Logically, since Belizuek is what we have to fight and not just a man called Bucyon, we must go to Asconel and—well, I guess kidnap a priest to interrogate him in the same way."

"And then?" Tiorin countered.

"Who knows? But until we have positive information, we're wasting our time."

"To go to Asconel would be foolhardy," Tigrid Zen said. "Sirs, until I've had a chance to determine which of our contacts Bucyon has subverted, I can offer you no help at home, name no one you could look to for shelter and protection—"

"Careful," Spartak cut in. "You're falling into a trap in which Bucyon would like to see us all caught, if I'm not mistaken. Consider: he's been in power on Asconel for some time, yet Metchel must presumably be the first traitor he's infiltrated into your loyalist underground at home—if not, he'd have located this base and wiped you out already. If Belizuek were all-powerful, the process of conversion to his cause would be sudden and complete. I think it's not; I think it affects many people—most people—quickly, but there remain a certain number who are capable of resistance. As time passes, they grow fewer and fewer." He sketched a rising curve in the air with his finger. "But I'd estimate one full generation as the time required for absolute planet-wide submission."

"It's a comforting thought, anyway," Tiorin said. "Look, though, Spartak! If Belizuek is the key factor, why should we not simply raise a few ships—possibly hire them from the fighting order with which Vix has been serving—and bombard all his temples from space?"

"What payment will you offer?" Spartak said glacially. "The right to sack Asconel for three days afterwards? And if you're to take the Warden's chair, what chance do you think you'll have of ruling a people who've been blasted at random, by the million, maybe? They're happy under Bucyon, remember! If they weren't, they'd have rebelled of their own accord. And you won't simply take out the temples from space—that order of accuracy is beyond our powers. Whole towns would probably be razed by such a bombardment."

"Ground infiltration and sabotage," Vix said, half to himself. "Blow up or burn the temples."

"That still leaves the problem of reconciling the people to what we've done," Spartak pointed out. "No, I say we're

wasting our breath until we know what Belizuek is and how he—it—they—dominates the citizens."

"So we go to Asconel," Vix shrugged. "Excellent. About time. Swallow your misgivings, Tigrid Zen, and tell us how good are our chances of making a landing undetected."

"Fair," the grizzled man muttered. "Among the things which Bucyon has let go to rack and ruin is the space-side detection system. He has a large fleet, now including the remnants of our own which surrendered, but it seldom flies space. My guess is it won't fly again till the time comes to spread the plague to some other miserable world."

"I know a place in the northern islands which I marked once as a good secret landing-ground," Vix offered. "I had it in mind to sneak forces around behind the rebels, but I never had to use it."

"Once landed, though, what then?" Tiorin said. "We're not likely to have been forgotten in ten years. You, Vix, least of all. Spartak, just possibly . . . Yes?" to Spartak.

"We have a means of telling our friends from our enemies," Spartak said significantly. "One which Vix considers unreliable, but which I have now some confidence in since it served to unmask Metchel here."

Tigrid Zen looked from once face to another but refrained from asking any questions.

"That helps a little," granted Tiorin. "At least we can determine whom we turn to for food, shelter, information. . . . But I still say we'll be recognized."

"I thought of that back on Annanworld," Spartak murmured. "We shall have disguises our own brother Hodat would not penetrate. I've given some thought too to the problem of how we might travel. I'll have to interrogate Metchel more fully on some of the details, but we all have skills we could employ on any world struck down by poverty. I might pass as a doctor of medicine, for instance. Vineta is a musician—at least, she plays some instrument or other. Tiorin, do you still sing the songs you used to shock me with?"

Tiorin, startled, said, "Am I to be a minstrel—a clown, perhaps?"

"Please! Unbecoming to your dignity or not, we're going

to have to pose as people who can convincingly travel around, unsettled on any one town, and with the iron grip Bucyon has taken on the planet there must be very few people traveling for pleasure any longer. Trudging the road in search of work and food, yes. If you compare the situation which obtained on—oh, never mind. Just take my word that I've studied the pattern of social dislocation which evolves when a formerly wealthy planet decays in a single generation to a place of poverty."

He didn't wait to hear further objections, but turned to Metchel again, reaching his hand out for his medical case.

"There's just one trouble. As soon as I'd mentioned the possibility of my posing as a doctor, I realized that the sick are probably now exhorted to offer themselves to Belizuek. So a doctor may not—"

"You're wrong," Tigrid Zen said heavily, stirring his stiff aging body as though shifting a heavy load. "That's perhaps one of the most dreadful things of all. Belizuek refuses the sick, taking only the healthy and strong. And they go to him. They offer themselves willingly. Galaxy, what can *we* offer that will withstand a force like that?"

Tiorin gave a sudden bitter laugh. "I think we're all insane," he muttered. "What are we doing? Setting out to reconquer a planet taken by a usurper who can bend its people to his will like twigs off a tree! And how are we to do it? By going home as tramps and mendicants, too poor to keep ourselves, let alone hire a space fleet to attack Bucyon's ! And what forces have we? A hundred sick and starving wretches, huddling from the eternal rain on this forsaken ball of mud!"

Metchel, forgotten on his crude bed, moaned and whimpered. The drug must be losing its grip, Spartak realized; when he recovered and remembered that he had betrayed the secret of his mission, only his bonds would keep him from following Korisu's example.

Deliberately Spartak turned his back on his brothers, opening his medical case again.

"If that's how you feel," said over his shoulder to Tiorin, "do as you wish. Go hunt mercenary forces—blast Belizuek's temples from space! But for me . . . if I have no other resources than my own body and mind, that's what I'll use.

Vix has taken a vow on himself, to cast Lydis down in the mud and enjoy her. I'll take one also: to unmask Belizuek, whatever he or it or they may be."

There was a brief silence. Then Tiorin said, "And I. I'll unseat Bucyon from the Warden's chair, or die in the attempt."

Stiffly, slowly, Tigrid Zen got down on his knees and kissed the rightful Warden's hand.

## XVI

NOW THAT the time of their homecoming was finally upon them, they were overtaken by a sense of estrangement which was irrationally reinforced by the disguises Spartak had prepared. He had some confidence in his beard and the passage of ten years to change him; nonetheless, he had altered his haircolor to blond, Tiorin's and Vix's both to jet-black, worked delicately over the line of chin and eyebrow and nose with soft inert substances injected below the skin, till the resemblance between all three of them and Hodat's brothers was reduced to a similarity of stature and gait.

That would have to suffice. Would *have* to.

But the physical illusion combined with a feeling that each was retreating into a universe of private thought where the others could not follow, and in a desperate attempt to retain their newly re-found kinship even Vix—warily supervising the controls, ever alert for the signal which would indicate that Tigrid Zen was over-optimistic and Bucyon's forces indeed watched the space around Asconel for intruders—was driven to speak at random for the sake of breaking the tension.

"It's winter down there," he muttered. "I'd forgotten. That makes things difficult."

"We'll have to get some warmer clothing," Spartak agreed, "especially for Eunora, who has nothing."

"I wasn't thinking of that so much," Vix shrugged. "If there's snow on the ground, it'll be much harder to land unseen—and impossible to get away from where we do set down without leaving tracks."

Tiorin made to speak, hesitated, finally gave a bitter

laugh. "I was just about to ask where we should buy our clothing and whether it would be safe to show our Imperial currency. But it suddenly struck me that if we're to trust Metchel's descriptions we'll be lucky to find anyone with clothing to sell even in a town."

"Aren't you exaggerating?" Vix said.

"I doubt if he is," Spartak put in. "The entire planet will be shockingly changed, Vix. Production, distribution, communications—all reduced to the bare minimum needed to support Belizuek's domination. Rags will have become precious, and to throw away a crust of bread will be unthinkable. Typically, it'll be safe enough to show Imperial currency, and what's more it'll buy incredible quantities of anything that's for sale, but our own money will have become effectively worthless."

"Then how can people live?" Vix demanded savagely.

Vineta spoke up from the corner of the control room in which she huddled with Eunora; being close to her own childhood, she had established a sort of shy intimacy with the mutant girl. "Vix, you've seen how it is on worlds we've traveled to with your order. They live like beasts, ready to fight for a morsel of food, neglecting everything but the sheer necessity of staying alive."

"I guess so," Vix sighed. "But I can't transfer what I've seen on worlds like Batyra Dap to my own beloved Asconel."

His fingers curled like claws, as if he had Bucyon's throat between them.

Spartak said hastily, "We're agreed at least on what we do at first, aren't we? We land as Vix recommends on the southerly tip of the island which the town of Penwyr stands on. There's a concealed site for the ship; the people stood loyal to our father while Vix was putting down the rebels; there's a temple at Penwyr, the only one on the island; and it's—well, if not easy, at any rate possible to get to Penwyr on foot, so that we run the least risk of being reported and attracting the attention of the priesthood. Once arrived, we go directly to the temple and try to find out what Belizuek is behind these screens which always hide him. If we must, we'll kidnap a priest and interrogate him back at the ship. Meantime, Eunora will tell us which of



the people we meet still harbor the seeds of resistance to Belizuek, and we'll sound out those we feel we can trust to guide our long-term planning."

"Can we just walk into the temple?" Tiorin asked. "I know Metchel told us everyone had to go there daily—"

"It's not quite like that," Spartak corrected. "Every morning there's a ceremony to honor Belizuek, but not all the citizens are required to do daily homage. In towns they are expected to go to the temple one day out of three; in the country, one day in six. But it seems not to be looked on as a duty; it's one of the great events in lives which have become uniformly drab and depressing. Accordingly, the temples are open all day, from dawn to dusk, so that people with particularly fervent adoration for Belizuek can go and prostrate themselves."

"What do they do at these sacrifices?" Vineta put in.

"Metchel said that every twenty or thirty days there's a special ceremony at which the volunteers are decked with flowers and walk behind the temple screen to the sound of joyful music." Spartak's face darkened. "What becomes of them, nobody knows except the priests. But they are never seen alive again."

"Are they seen dead, then?" Vix growled. "Served as the main dish at a banquet, maybe?"

Tiorin exclaimed in disgust.

"What time of day will it be when we set down?" Spartak asked.

"Around sunrise. If we make haste, we can reach Penwyr just in time for the morning ceremony at the temple." Vix scanned his control panel closely, and gave a nod. "I think Tigrid Zen was right—we can go to land without being challenged. Here's hoping!"

He put the ship into the landing trajectory.

The lock door slid aside. Beyond lay a bleak, forbidding landscape: gray rocks, contrarily shadowed with the whiteness of drifted snow, skewered with the trunks of leafless trees of which the very crowns were just catching the first rays of dawn. There was no sound except the distant noise of the sea gnashing its teeth. The air was bitterly cold.

But it wasn't the sudden chill which made Spartak shiver

and brought the tears stinging to his eyes. It was the sum of all his childhood memories.

*Asconell! Mother of us all, that you should be brutally raped and betrayed!*

His emotion choked him, and by the long silence he knew his brothers were equally overcome.

It was astonishing, therefore, that the first voice to disturb the cold morning was Eunora's. Scarcely louder than a whisper, it said: "Forgive me, all of you. If I could have seen the love you have for your home, I'd not have frightened you by threatening to make you—make you . . ."

She could not finish, but they all knew what she meant, and they gave her frosty smiles in acceptance of her apology. Vix, gathering himself quickest of the three men, crossed to her and put his arm around her tiny shoulders.

"You've had no reason to love any world, child! Maybe you'll find a reason here. It's a sad and lonely thing to have no home."

The mutant girl nodded, and two tears shone brightly on her pallid cheeks.

"We must move," Tiorin said practically. "Vix, you'll need to inactivate the ship, fit alarms and booby traps—"

"It's as easy as turning a switch," Vix cut in. "The owners who had my ship before were all suspicious people, and I'll wager when we close her up no one but ourselves will be able to get within arm's length of the hull. In any case, no one comes to this part of the island. No hunting, no fishing worth the name—no reason for visitors."

He patted his chest making sure he had the concealed sidearm which—apart from good wishes—was about all Tigrid Zen had been able to offer from his resources on Gwo to speed their mission, and led the way down the ladder to the ground.

They picked a route to leave the fewest possible tracks, going first by rocky slopes from which the snow had blown away, then by a road which had been used since the last fall, where there were already plenty of footmarks. It all seemed very straightforward, and Spartak might have relaxed, but for realizing that Eunora was freezing cold; once they got out of the sheltered depression in which they had landed, a wind came off the sea keen as a knife. He

had given her his old brown robe from Annanworld, but even kilted up to her tiny size it was still a garment meant for a subtropical climate, and the wind sliced through its wide loose weave.

The chattering of her teeth drummed a menacing accompaniment to the rhythm of his steps.

They had walked the better part of an hour when there was a sharp exclamation from Vix, leading the way because he had visited the island before. The others hurried to see what he had found, and saw that he had halted opposite a form half-buried by snow in the meager shelter of a bush.

"He's dead," he said slowly, and the others, shocked, saw what at first their minds had denied. This was indeed a man—very old, for his beard was not white only with frost—who must have sat down to rest here while trudging the road, and never got up again.

Spartak exhaled sharply, his breath wreathing in the icy air. "Well, he has no further use for what little he possessed," he grunted, and began without more ado to strip the clothing from the corpse. Tiorin made to object, and he gave him a glare. "If you're going to be squeamish, perhaps you'd rather strip yourself and lend the clothes to Eunora?"

When he'd finished she was so grotesque in the miscellaneous rags he had supplied that Vix looked doubtful. "Can we really go into Penwyr with her dressed like that?"

"You're fond of betting," Spartak answered. "I'll bet that most of the people we meet will be worse clad yet."

With a last surge of energy he put the fragile corpse out of sight in a bank of snow beyond the bush where it had rested, and they tramped on.

His estimate of the condition of people in Penwyr was correct. They began to encounter the citizens on the road just before entering the town: this was a day for folk from outlying farms to attend the temple ceremony, that was plain, and they were gathering on foot and in wheezing old groundcars fueled with woodgas generators. None of them offered to speak to Spartak and his companions, which suited them well.

Two things appalled Spartak especially: first, the numbers on foot—for Asconel had been among the few worlds

retaining nuclear-powered transport after the withdrawal of Imperial support—and second, the looks of near ecstasy on all the faces. Even the children, some of whom one would have expected to be sullen and fractious, were uniformly cheerful as they clung to their parents' hands.

In the town, placards depicting Bucyon and Lydis were everywhere, mostly on the fronts of stores long closed for lack of goods to sell. Several people in the now large crowd heading for the temple paused to kiss the pictures.

Wary, eyes taking in every detail around, they let themselves be carried along until they were in sight of the temple itself. Originally it must have been the island's agricultural produce mart, a low-roofed building several hundred feet square. Now it was decked with Bucyon's picture and many crude slogans. The crowd paused as it entered the street on which the temple stood and joined with other streams of people from elsewhere in the town, giving Spartak time to read some of the gaudy exhortations: WE ARE BORN AND WE DIE, BUT BELIZUEK GOES ON FOREVER! BEFORE THE GALAXY BELIZUEK WAS! MANKIND ARE ANIMALS BUT BELIZUEK IS AN IMPENETRABLE MYSTERY!

Spartak tried to keep the grim look of hatred from his face as he shuffled his feet to warm them on the frozen ground. When he felt a nudge, he thought at first it was Eunora huddling close to him for shelter against the cold wind, but it was Tiorin who had pressed up in order to whisper.

"Spartak, you've noticed the—the *joy* with which all these people are going to the temple?"

Spartak nodded.

"It terrifies me," Tiorin breathed. "Spartak, what makes us think that we can resist Belizuek ourselves? How do we know that we're not walking into his jaws by coming to his temple? How do we know when we come out we won't be his willing slaves for the rest of our lives?"

## XVII

THE ECHO of Tiorin's depressing suggestion made Spartak's head ring like a gong as they were carried willy-nilly forward in the crowd. It was far too late now to change their minds about entering the temple; the people pressed on every side, eager to get out of the cold and into the steamy warmth of the building. He wished achingly that Eunora could speak directly to his mind, telling him what she was picking up from those around, but she could not, and after Tiorin's brief whisper there were too many other people too close for any more private conversation.

Wondering what was going on inside the mutant girl's head, Spartak used the advantage his over-average height gave to peer around and seek clues—if there were any—to the grip Belizuek exerted on his disciples. None offered themselves. He saw, heard and smelt a horde of dirty, hungry wretches, who seemed to find their plight perfectly natural and, indeed, enjoyable.

*Drug addiction.* The concept thrust itself out of a corner of memory, and at once he realized it was apposite. He had only rarely seen victims of an uncontrollable addiction, but they bore the same stamp as the people surrounding him: an expression of single-minded urgency indicating that every other need had been subordinated to the craving for their dope.

He began to make guesses, putting himself into the place of any of millions of people here, who had failed to admit the necessity for starting over from their own resources when the Empire withdrew its economic and military support. To such a person it might easily seem that human vanity had been met with nemesis; after thousands of years of Imperial domination, the idea of Asconel making its own way would be literally inconceivable. And since the Empire was identified with human aspirations, what more logical conclusion than that man was unworthy of the master-ship?

From there it was a short enough step to believing that the purpose of the universe was incomprehensible to human

beings, and that some higher order of intelligence was entitled to the adulation formerly accorded to the Warden of Asconel and through him to the Imperial court on Argus.

He shook his head. It was only half an explanation. It accounted neatly enough for the existence of a gap in people's world-structure into which Bucyon and Shry were able to fit Belizuek, but it didn't match the traditions of independence and free thought which Asconel had cherished. The story went that as recently as when taxes were imposed to finance the building of temples in all the main towns, the citizens grumbled and at least threatened resistance. Once the temples were built and people went to them, this change followed like a landslide. *Ergo* Tiorin was right in his underlying assumption.

They were coming to the door now. Spartak felt his nape tingle as he sought for any intrusion on his mind, any process comparable to conditioning which might turn him too into a loyal disciple of the greedy deity. But it was useless; he could not tell.

Clutching Eunora's tiny hand as fiercely as she ordinarily clung to him, trying to keep within arm's reach of his brothers, he was forced into the temple.

There was nothing remarkable about it, barring three comparatively minor but unexpected discoveries. First, there were no seats; the people were supposed to pack in shoulder to shoulder and stand during the ceremony. Second, the interior walls were decorated with prized personal possessions—paintings, sculptures, tapestries and objects in precious metal—described on small attached plaques as voluntary donations by adorers of Belizuek. And third, the screen at the far end, behind which Belizuek was allegedly concealed, was not what he had envisaged—some curtain of force akin to the defensive field of a starship—but just a screen of woven metal links on a frame adorned with gems.

More than likely, it would carry a killing charge, but he could not see the point at which it joined the floor to determine if it was insulated from the ground.

He got his first sight of the priests now: wearing robes not unlike those affected by his own order on Annanworld, but in various colors, black, white, green and gold, they stood watching the congregation assemble. Was there any

clue to their origin in their physique? He searched every cranny of his memory, and was driven to the conclusion that they might as easily have been born on Asconel as any other world of the galaxy, so thoroughly had the traffic of the Empire mixed all the existing human stocks.

The eyes of one priest seemed to dwell on him, and he had to repress a start of alarm. Glancing around, he decided that there was nothing to mark them out as unusual—many of the men were taller than himself, many of the children were smaller and younger than Eunora. If the priest was curious, he would only be so because he did not immediately recognize them. It would therefore be wise to slip away after the ceremony, delaying their return to the empty temple until some later hour of the day when perhaps the curious priest would not be around.

The last of the crowd from the street jammed in through the doors; the doors closed; there was an air of expectancy. All at once, a note of music sounded apparently from nowhere, and the assembly broke into a fervent chant of praise for Belizuek.

*Equilocal sonar generation*, Spartak glossed. He wondered if it was used for any special reason—surely people here would be too sophisticated to be impressed by technical trickery? But he had no time to follow that up at once; he was more concerned with the fact that neither he nor his companions knew this hymn the others were so loudly singing.

Moving his mouth in some sort of imitation of the rest, he saw that nobody near them was likely to notice; all eyes were riveted on the screen behind which was Belizuek.

A possible reason for the unison singing came to him: to inspire a sense of unity, welding the crowd together and making it more susceptible to the priests' appeals. But so far he couldn't detect any more advanced methods of working on the people's minds—no hypnotically rhythmic lighting effects, no air-borne drugs. . . . Of course, they might be too subtle for even an aware victim to notice.

The chanting ended. A priest came out before the screen and turned his back on the congregation. There was a pause. He bowed, and everyone bowed with him—Spartak and his companions fractionally late.

Again? No. Once apparently sufficed.

The priest turned, the people hanging on every movement, and began to address them in ringing tones. His theme was exactly the same as what Spartak had heard first from Vix, then from Korisu and most recently from Metchel: that Belizuek was a superior being, that men could have no higher purpose than his service, and that this desire should supersede all personal ambitions.

After a while Spartak let his attention wander. So far, he'd seen and heard nothing to account for the blind obedience of once-rational persons. He was jolted back to awareness with boundless amazement when a yell went up from the body of the hall.

"Proof!" someone shouted. And another voice, a woman's: "Proof!"

The priest, unperturbed, continued on his former subject. The voices resumed, now swelling, until the discourse could hardly be made out, and Spartak wondered if he ought to join in himself for fear of exciting notice if he remained silent. He was on the point of doing so when the priest raised a hand.

The shouting stopped as if a switch had been turned.

"Proof you want," the priest intoned. "And proof you shall have!" He turned to face the screen again, and raised his other hand to the same level as the first before bowing more deeply than before.

"Belizuek! We who are less than the dust beseech a revelation of your majesty!"

And Spartak learned the answers to all his questions.

At first, it was merely as though the temple had grown larger, the walls receding into a misty distance and beginning to glow. With a shock, a sense of perspective overtook him. Those walls were the very bounds of the universe, and the faint glow was the light of stars—countless in number, inconceivably far away.

Then there was a pause which had the still quality of eternity. Nothing moved, nothing changed.

Seeping in, then, like water oozing through a porous rock, came a sense of presence. Personality. Consciousness. And power!



Somewhere in this monstrous emptiness, perhaps as far off as the dim stars, perhaps further, a being had come into existence to the reach of whose mind the gap between galaxies was no more than a single stride. As though drawn by a magnet, Spartak's dissociated awareness began the eon-long plunge through nowhere to find it and pay his homage.

Out of the misty blur of stars a form took shape: a lens. The lens of this familiar galaxy. Chance glimpses occurred of well-known features: the Big Dark, which some freak of stellar drift had notched like a sawcut into the galactic rim, a hundred light years wide; the pattern of globular clusters nicknamed the Eyes of Argus for the multitude and brilliance of them. By now, the other galaxies filling the plenum had dwindled to their customary status of bright blobs on the black curtain of infinity.

But the presence knew them. The presence was aware of everything, from the least bacterium to the pattern of those vanishing galaxies; had sounded and plumbed the furthest void, had weighed and measured the nucleons of the atom. It "said" so, and what petty human could contradict such a declaration?

For it knew all human history, and felt contempt—such contempt as made any man wriggle with embarrassment and wish to vanish through the ground—for these squabbling, greedy, half-intelligent creatures which had stolen the techniques and artifacts of their greater predecessors and claimed the conquest of the galaxy. To what end? To the downfall of their vaunted Empire, and the return of the species on tens of thousands of worlds to a state no better than the mud-grubbing life of beasts!

Even when it was over, the vision still filled his head and dazzled his eyes. He was passive among the crowd that forced its way from the temple, letting himself be pushed back on to the street. His questions had been answered, and in a way he had not expected; the shock had dazed him.

Someone tried to claim his attention. He shook his head and went on thinking about what he had learned. The person—Tiorin, possibly—gave up in annoyance and turned to

someone else: Eunora. He wasn't interested in what was being said; all that concerned him was in his memory.

It was much later that he realized he was being escorted along a street floored with dirty snow, his companions beside him. He was shivering, having failed to fasten his clothing about him when he left the hot overcrowded temple. Ahead, someone was walking fast with occasional backward glances that suggested anxiety.

"Where are we going?" he forced out.

"You're with us again?" Tiorin came eagerly to his side. "I was afraid you'd been overtaken by the same thing as these unfortunate wretches."

"Hm? Oh! Oh, yes. I guess I was." The reference drove him back inside himself, his eyes unfocusing and his feet stumbling occasionally on the unlevel rock-hard snow.

"The man ahead," Tiorin explained, thinking Spartak was still listening. "Vix recognized him from the campaign he fought here—says he was a loyal and brave soldier. And Eunora got close enough to tell that he's still trying to resist Bucyon, only goes to the temple because he'd risk exposure if he didn't. We plan to follow until we get him alone and can approach him openly."

But Spartak was lost again in the depths between the galaxies, playing over in his mind the vision he had had of supernal power, monstrous intelligence, and indescribable conceit.

## XVIII

LIKE MOST of the towns and all the cities in Asconel's northern hemisphere, Penwyr relied largely on water-borne transport; it was unusual, however, in being built astride a river instead of on the coast. They continued to follow the man whom Vix recognized until he reached the embankment paralleling the river, by which time they were sure he would take the bridge to the other side of the town, a quarter of low-built, rather mean houses.

He was becoming frightened by then, however, and had quickened his pace so much that it looked as if he might break into a run at any moment. People were about on the

river's edge, some inspecting boats moored to rings in the stone wall, some working on repairs, some merely leaning over and watching. It was a choice between losing their quarry if he ran, and attracting a good deal of undesirable attention by running themselves.

"Shall I go and speak to him?" Vineta proposed. "He's not likely to be afraid of a girl."

Tiorin hesitated. "That might be the answer, Spartak, what do you think?"

"No use trying to talk to him," Vix grunted. "He's off mooning again."

Tiorin looked dismayed. "Yes, Vineta, see if you can catch him up and get him talking—Eunora was quite sure he was not a Bucyon man, isn't that right?"

The mutant girl's eyes were on Spartak. She started. "What—? Oh yes! Yes, he's not one of these miserable dupes, like all the others."

"Go ahead," Tiorin ordered, and Vineta hurried off, leaving them to stroll like any of the other idlers along the quay.

"It's horrible," Vix muttered. "Everything's *stopped!* Even during the worst of the revolution here, we kept the main streets running, and the bridge yonder"—he threw up an angry arm. "It's all going back to the mud now! What's become of the engineers we had, the builders, the craftsmen?"

"Right now I'm more worried about Spartak," Tiorin muttered. "Eunora, can you tell us what's happened to him? I agree, the—the mental show, or whatever it was, that we had at the temple was pretty impressive, but I was on guard against some sort of tampering with my mind, and it's mainly left me with the feeling I'd like to know how it's done."

"Not so impressive," Vix put in. "To people who haven't flown space much, perhaps—especially to people who thought the Empire was all pure magnificence and got some of their illusions dented. But we've seen what it's like nowadays, and made up our minds that's not the best mankind can do."

"If they spread the cult of Belizuek any further, it's apt to be the only thing we ever did," Tiorin said sourly. "Look,

Vineta's beckoning. Spartak, hurry up, will you, instead of dawdling along like a dreamer?"

Tiorin kept one eye on Eunora as they approached Vineta and the man Vix recognized, but she gave no indication of altering her judgment, and it was with some confidence that he addressed the allegedly loyal citizen.

"Your name is Tharl, I understand. You won't know us, but I assure you you'll be very interested in what you hear from us."

Tharl, a nervous man of early middle age, clad in old but carefully patched clothes and with a pinched expression on his face, looked from one to other of the people who had been following him. He said at length, "I took you for a party of Bucyon's men set on my heels by the priests. But I should have known better, seeing the child with you. Well, what do you want with me?"

"We've returned to Asconel from traveling ten long years," Tiorin said. "And—we're horrified."

Tharl let a quick smile come and go on his lips. "Say no more! I can provide you little hospitality—my wife and my son both offered themselves to Belizuek, and my two daughters are married and living away. But I have a home still, and some refreshment; come and join me there!"

"Luck's with us," Vix muttered, and they fell in behind Tharl to cross the bridge over the river. As they had foreseen, its formerly heated and moving surface was immobile beneath a covering of soiled snow, so they had to walk all the way.

Tharl's house was less neglected than those which flanked it; those had snow on their roofs, whereas his was warm enough to melt it away, and the doors and windows still drew power instead of being converted to manual operation. But all he could offer by way of "refreshment" was some stale beer and bread and cheese.

"Ten years!" he murmured as he set out the food and drink, "Why, then I'd have offered you meat and fruit, even in dead winter. . . . Do you know that now they kill all their herds in the fall, salting the meat in sea-brine and keeping only enough stock to breed again in spring? The

priests taught them that! I was raised on a farm, and to me it makes no sense."

"You—ah—you said your wife and son both offered themselves to Belizuek," Tiorin ventured. "Since then you've lived on your own."

"That's what's saved me from becoming like all these fools you saw at the temple." Tharl's brows drew together over his nose and he stared into the distance. "I learned to hate just in time. Those who didn't have been duped, and betrayed, and ultimately they won't be human anymore."

He peered curiously at Tiorin; apparently his eyesight was failing. "Tell me, though, how did you know it was safe to address me? If I make myself so obvious the priests will catch me—it's a crime even to think, let alone speak, against Bucyon's rule." Alarm colored his words.

Tiorin hesitated, making a warning gesture to Vix who might have blurted out their true identity. "Ah—we took a chance. My friend here remembers meeting you during the campaign against the rebels hereabout in the time of the old Warden, Hodat's father. You were loyal then, and we felt a man like yourself couldn't have changed so much."

Tharl pursed his lips. "Luck's with you!" he commented, unconsciously echoing Vix's remark of a short while earlier. "You can't have been home long, or you'd know that anyone can be changed and made into a follower of Bucyon. Why, men I fought beside in the old days, Warden's men as they were, have offered themselves to Belizuek since!"

"Does nothing withstand Bucyon, then?" Vix demanded.

It was Tharl's turn for hesitation. Coming to a favorable decision, he leaned forward and spoke in a confidential tone. "There's my old general, Tigrid Zen, who's in exile on Gwo. He has forces, and ships—why, occasionally word comes to say there's been a landing in a secret place, and a message is passed as to how those whom the priests are hunting may safely be hidden till a ship can fetch them to Gwo. . . ." He seemed to realize it was thin comfort to his hearers, and the words tailed away.

"You're in touch with a resistance movement here, then?" Vix suggested.

"A movement—well . . ." Tharl sighed. "Put it like this. Over two or three years, I've sounded out those who

have a reason to hate Belizuek as I do, and perhaps ten or twelve have proved loyal to the old ways, and of them half have given themselves away, by attacking a priest or profaning the temple, and the rest of us serve to encourage each other. As for rising up against Bucyon, though—which I assume is what you hope to hear news of—I don't see how it can be done."

He pointed at Spartak. "Why, even your friend here has been so deeply affected by what happens in the temple that his mind's adrift in space! First it was a wonder, and the curious talked about it and attracted the reluctant; then suddenly it became the only thing that mattered in the lives of the citizens. I escaped, as I said, because I already had a reason for hate—my wife and boy were the first of all to offer themselves in Penwyr. But that apart, I'd have become as bemused as he is."

Worried, Tiorin nudged Spartak as he sat with pale face and staring eyes on the chair next to him.

"Tharl is wrong," Eunora said timidly. "What's affected him isn't the power of Belizuek, but something else."

"What?" Vix snorted, ready to fall back into his long-time assessment of Spartak as a dreamer and a ninny.

"He— Let him tell you himself," Eunora said, and tugged at Spartak's sleeve.

"Yes?" the bearded man said, coming to the present like a sleeper rousing. "I—I'm sorry. I've been thinking over what I learned down there at the temple."

"That's what we all want to discuss," Tiorin said. "We know what's being done to the people now, and if we can discover how it's being done we can try to counteract it."

"You've missed half the point," Spartak said. "Don't you know what Belizuek is, now you've seen what he can do?"

There was a blank silence. Eunora smiled to herself as though enjoying the secret knowledge she could pick from Spartak's unspoken thoughts.

"Well, go on!" Vix burst out when the suspense had become intolerable.

Spartak shook his head. He seemed bewildered. "Then—well, possibly I'm mistaken, since you haven't reached the same conclusion that I have." He shivered, as if he were

still out in the street instead of in the comparative warmth of Tharl's home.

"I must go back and make sure," he added, rising without waiting for objections and on the point of starting for the door.

"Just a second!" Tharl jumped up and strode to stand in front of him. "Back to the temple? What for?"

"I shall have to get a direct look at Belizuek," Spartak explained with the sweet reasonableness of one addressing a child.

"A direct look—!" Tharl was thunderstruck. "How do you propose to manage that? Nobody has ever gone behind the screen they keep around him, except for sacrificial victims and the priests who escort the poor fools. When the temple was new, there were several who tried, and rumor says they were killed by a deadly charge on the metal mesh."

"When the temple was new," Spartak repeated, apparently struck by a new idea. "Tell me, how was it—well—consecrated?"

Tharl curled his lip. "That I know only too well. Some priests came from Gard in a skyboat—Gard, the old royal island, is the site of the chief temple now—bringing some great chest or case affair which was unloaded with much ceremony. It was transported to the market—what's now the temple—and they held the first big sacrifice, with two victims. My wife and my son."

Tiorin, seeing the man was almost overcome, moved to his side to comfort him. He flashed a scowl at Spartak, who remained quite unaffected. Lost in his own thoughts, the other muttered, "It might be the oxygen. . . . If only I knew where we found the ships we appropriated! But there's that blank wall of ignorance supposed to be because it was bad for our self-respect to admit the real source of our skills—"

"You're maundering," Vix cut in. "If you have a point to make, make it!"

"Shut up!" Spartak ordered. This was so different from the usual meekness of the younger man's manner that Vix was taken aback; while he was recovering, Spartak rounded on Eunora.

"Do you think I'm right?" he demanded.

The girl blushed. She said, "I can tell you what I felt,

if that's any help. . . .Well," she licked her lips, "I thought there was somebody behind the screen who went—uh—who went an awfully long way. Like very old, but also very big. Sort of connected to other places. Do you see what I mean?"

Tharl's puzzled eyes roamed around the strangers, but he said nothing.

"It fits, doesn't it?" Spartak urged.

"I don't know," Eunora answered helplessly. "You've studied so many things I've never even heard about, and it would take ages to track down all the ideas and possibilities which you're considering."

"Then we must go back to the temple," Spartak concluded. "As soon as possible. Tharl, you must have been there at other times than the—the duty services. Presumably you've wanted to appear to be a loyal Bucyon man, to divert suspicion."

Tharl nodded dumbly.

"Then tell me what the routine of the temple is, and how we can get close to Belizuek without the priests driving us away."

## XIX

"YOU CAN'T," Tharl said shortly.

"But we must," Spartak countered, making a movement as if to brush aside all objections. Eunora, however, caught his eye.

"He's probably right," she said. "Let him explain."

More puzzled than ever at the attention they paid to this slip of a girl, Tharl did so. Listening, Spartak came back by degrees to the realities of the problem. Ceaseless supervision, eavesdropping by priests, traps for the unwary—it sounded as though the temple had been prepared to meet just such an intrusion as he had planned.

The solution, however, came from Vix. He gave a shrug. "How about remote detection devices? Won't they do to settle your doubts? I have instruments aboard the ship which could probably be demounted temporarily, and you



could probe the back wall of the temple and get some hint of what lies beyond."

"Of course," Spartak muttered. "It must be the depressing effect of coming back to this ruined world, or I'd have thought of that myself. How long will it take us to get the equipment?"

Vix frowned. "We'd best move under cover of dark," he suggested. "It'll be hard to conceal the gear by day."

"That'll be still more difficult," Tharl put in. "There are strict curfew laws now. Even street-lighting has been abandoned—every drop of power and fuel is devoted to Belizuek's cult."

"We'll have advance warning of any patrols we run into," Tiorin said, not offering to give details. "I wish you'd explain more fully, though," he added, turning to Spartak.

But the bearded man was engrossed in some calculations conducted on a memo board from his belt-pouch.

With infinite care and in complete silence they stole back towards the dead-seeming town in the pitch blackness and icy cold of the winter's night. Half the sky was cloudy, but in the other half the stars burned like the points of white-hot needles.

It had proved necessary to bring from the ship not only the instruments which Vix had mentioned, but means of powering them too—accumulators and a portable generator. When Tharl said all power went for Belizuek's cult, he meant it; there would not be a power source for them to draw on for half a mile in any direction from the temple. Consequently they were all heavily laden, even Eunora, slipping and stumbling along gallantly at Spartak's side.

They had had the greatest possible difficulty in dissuading Tharl from accompanying them, but he was already in possession of a good deal of information about them, and it was judged far better that he should remain at home. Undoubtedly he was both loyal and eager to help, but so—once—had Metchel been.

Reflecting on that traitor, Spartak realized that Tigrid Zen had been deceived even more thoroughly than he knew: he'd been told that the volunteers for sacrifice to Belizuek came forward of their own accord, yet he had

accepted Metchel's tale of being a fugitive from a threatened sacrifice.

Or was sacrifice also the fate of the condemned criminal—defining crime in its current sense here, to include activity against Bucyon?

They reached the edge of the town and went between dark walls which afforded a little shelter from the wind. All the windows were shuttered, many with crude hand-carpentered wooden panels instead of the original plastic power-operated ones. An occasional handlamp gleamed through the cracks, or even a primitive candle.

Once, Eunora gave the faint whistle they had chosen as an alarm signal, and they dodged into an alley between two houses as a woman emerged to empty some foul-smelling garbage into a street drain. It seemed there was no limit to the degree people could regress under Belizuek's domination, Spartak told himself wearily; next they'd be back to open-pit latrines and epidemic diseases.

He ached to find out whether his guess about the nature of this "diety" was accurate.

They had settled on a street behind the temple as the best site of operations; it was usually unfrequented at night, for this had formerly been Penwyr's busy commercial quarter, and all the nearby stores were empty and neglected except one which had been turned into a comfortable residence for the temple staff. The curfew patrols, Tharl had assured them, were negligent in this area, for few people would risk going out under the priests' very noses.

They reached it without trouble, and walked along the far side opposite the temple wall, on which the slogans glared luminously for the benefit of—of whom? Any priest who might glance out, Spartak decided with a curl of his lip.

As nearly as he could tell, he had come to a point opposite the end of the screen inside the temple. He beckoned to his companions to assemble the equipment. Metal stands clinked on the hard-frozen snow as they set down their burdens, and he fumbled with numb fingers to make connections between the power supply and the detectors themselves.

Tiorin headed towards one end of the street, Vix and Vineta towards the other, to keep wary watch. Eunora could

do that equally well from where Spartak stood; besides, her tiny hands were deft at the awkward work of organizing the equipment, and she did not have to be given spoken orders.

It was the eeriest task he had ever undertaken. His chief and burning hope was that Belizuek's powers did not extend to the perception of the various probe frequencies he planned to employ.

He coupled in the last device and silently handed the long flex attached to it to Eunora, who dashed across the street and clamped its terminal to the wall of the temple.

That automatically reported the structure-phase of the wall to the other instruments; so guided, they could look through it almost as easily as through glass. Heart pounding, Spartak adjusted the controls and bent to peer at the tiny self-illuminated dials and screens before him.

The range was excessive. He was getting a trace which could only be the nearer side of the concealing screen—irregular metal, probably in mesh or link form. He turned a knob with stiff fingers, and began to get suggestions of something less commonplace.

A mass of complex organics—not quite protoplasmic, but similar. That fitted. He set another knob for the characteristic vibration-modes of oxygen, and read off the data from a quivering needle against an arbitrary scale.

Low oxygen pressure. Very low. But a good deal of carbon dioxide, and nitrogen and a blend of inert gasses. *Right!* He began to look for the walls which must enclose this humanly unbreathable atmosphere, and almost at once found the traces which defined it.

Beside him, Eunora was fascinated by the vast amount of information the instruments afforded through a featureless wall; every new conclusion he drew brought a gasp of excitement from her.

"It fits, doesn't it?" he whispered, daring to make the sound which after all was no louder than the chinking and scraping that had accompanied the setting up of their gear.

She gave an enthusiastic nod.

Yes, Spartak thought. *Enclosed in a special atmosphere—organic, but not giving the same traces as a creature from one of our planets—a Thanis bull, say, which would have*

*comparable mass and dimensions. . . I wonder if I can get any of the internal structure!*

Eunora's teeth threatened to chatter from the cold; she clamped them firmly shut to avoid distracting him.

Two traces came up on the panel—similar, but not identical. An internal reflection, offering a clue to the details he was after? He checked again, and started. No: it was the same trace from two different points in space. In other words, the thing beyond the wall had moved.

*I am right!* Jubilantly he recognized the final confirmation of his suspicions. Eunora could not repress a chuckle as he hastily continued his examination.

And that was why she failed to give him warning.

The first he knew of their discovery was when lights bloomed like suns all down the front of the building occupied by the temple staff, and a door opened to disgorge about a dozen frantic men. Spartak jerked upright, heart seeming to stop its beating.

The horrified Eunora let out a stifled cry of dismay.

"There they are!" a voice yelled, and feet hammered the icy ground.

The equipment would just have to be abandoned—there was nothing else for it. Spartak snatched Eunora into his arms and fled towards the end of the street at which Vix and Vineta had been standing guard. There was no sign of Tiorin; handlamps had been brought out by the emerging priests, and their dazzling glare concealed the far end of the street.

Nonetheless, he also must have been spotted. Two of the new arrivals were dashing in that direction while the rest came on.

"Spartak!" Vix hissed. He had drawn the concealed side-arm Tigrid Zen had provided, and was hiding in an embrasure that had once been the entry to a store. "Go around the corner and turn left—I'll give them something to think about and then we'll make off to the right. Split them up!"

"Where's Vineta?" Spartak gasped.

"Right here!" the girl replied from the shadow behind Vix. "I'm staying with Vix, so don't argue!"

Spartak hadn't thought of arguing. He ignored the remark.

"Vix, try and destroy the equipment! Maybe they won't learn just how much I now know!"

"You got what you wanted?" Vix was peering towards the brilliant lights, sighting along the barrel of his gun.

"Practically everything!"

At that instant a bolt seared along the street; why it had been so long delayed, Spartak could only guess—presumably the priests hadn't expected to need weapons when they were alerted. Who had done the alerting was one of the many matters to be left over for later. He ducked reflexively as splinters of stone flew from the spot where the bolt struck.

"See you later at Tharl's!" he whispered, and dived around the corner with Eunora. Behind him, Vix coolly took aim at the abandoned equipment, and fired his first bolt in reply to the priests'.

This district was laid out in conventional grid pattern, so that when Spartak came to the next intersection he could glance back and see clearly the end of the street near the temple. The light there was almost blinding by contrast with the general darkness, but he made out two figures ducking away in the opposite direction from that which he had taken.

Eunora had hidden her face against his chest, satisfied to perceive everything through his eyes.

Vix had obviously kept his promise to give the pursuers something to think about. It was long moments before anyone followed him and Vineta around the corner. The first person to do so was an armed man who fired one random shot; Vix let off another in reply, and provoked a scream, through whether it was of fear or pain Spartak could not tell. Then he ran on again, overtaking Vineta easily, and came to the intersection corresponding to the one at which Spartak himself had paused.

It was foolish, he told himself, not to make himself as scarce as time allowed, but something held him magnet-fashion; later, he decided it was a true premonition.

Vineta stumbled on the icy street. One of the pursuers loosed a bolt at her; it struck within arm's length of her, and she went sprawling. Spartak gasped, and felt Eunora tense against him till she felt like a wooden doll.

From his inadequate cover Vix darted forward, gun in

one hand, the other outstretched to seize Vineta and drag her to safety. He fired twice, so that the pursuers held back, and by main force got the girl on her feet, her arm around his shoulder so she could use him as a crutch.

It was a brave thing to do, a good thing to do, but so foolhardy Spartak winced. For with the weight of the injured girl delaying him, they caught him up at the end of the street and he went down under a mob of yelling priests.

Sick at heart, but driven by cold logic to the decision that he could do nothing more practical than ensure that he at least got away, whether or not Tiorin did so, he ducked around the corner and made his way unchallenged into dark and empty streets. It was so unfair that he should get away; why not Vix, the brave fool?

"What shall I do?" he whispered to the stars. "On my own, what shall I do?"

And neither the stars nor the sobbing Eunora offered an answer.

## XX

FOR THE last half mile of their trip back to Tharl's home Eunora stumbled along beside him. She no longer had difficulty keeping up with the man's longer strides; he had brought himself to the verge of exhaustion.

"Is Tiorin here ahead of us?" he demanded as they came in sight of their goal.

She shook her head. "No one is there but Tharl, and he's in a terrible state of anxiety. He's wondering all the time whether he was right to reveal himself to you."

"But he's dependable?" Spartak insisted.

"I'm not so sure as I was," Eunora muttered. "Fear has been working on him ever since we left."

Spartak glanced at her, and for the first time in their headlong flight noticed that she was clutching something to her with both hands. He didn't have to ask what it was; he recognized it in the same moment that she realized telepathically he was wondering about it. His medical case, which he had brought away from the ship and assumed to have

been left on the street with the rest of the abandoned equipment.

"I was holding the handle while you were working," she explained shyly. "And when you picked me up I clung on to it."

"Well, it's something," Spartak sighed. "Go and tap on Tharl's window, will you, and get him to let us in?"

It was painfully clear from Tharl's face that fear had indeed been giving him second thoughts since their departure. He hastened to shut the door as they came in, and demanded at once why they were alone.

Spartak told him with crude brevity, and Tharl literally wrung his hands.

"Then you must make off at once!" he exclaimed. "They'll search the whole town, house by house, and if they find you here it'll be all up with me, and you as well. You say you have a ship—you must go back there at once and leave Asconel for somewhere safe—"

"I'm not leaving," Spartak grunted, dropping into a chair. "Not until Tiorin gets here."

"But if he's been taken too—"

"If he's been taken too, there's no chance of my reaching our ship—they'll pry the location of it out of my brothers' minds."

"Your—your brothers?" echoed Tharl uncertainly.

What point in keeping the secret any longer? If Bucyon's men had both Vix and Vineta, and possibly Tiorin as well, no disguise could conceal their identity for long. He said wearily, "I'm Spartak, Hodat's half-brother, and the others were Vix and Tiorin."

Tharl's eyes grew round with wonder. "Forgive me!" he babbled. "I didn't know, I didn't guess!"

"You weren't supposed to," Spartak told him curtly, and leaned back, closing his eyes. "Eunora, you can warn us of approaching search parties, can't you?"

"I was supposed to warn you of danger down at the temple," the girl answered, eyes filling with tears again. "And I failed. I'm—I'm terribly sorry, but I was so fascinated—"

"You're forgiven," Spartak interrupted. "Just don't do it again."

"Excuse my asking," Tharl ventured, "but how can she—?"

"Warn us? She can, I promise you. She's a mutant."

"A mutant!" Millennia of Imperial prejudice sprang up in Tharl's mind, and he looked terrified.

"Stop it," Spartak ordered angrily. "She's of human stock, and that's more than you can say of Belizuek."

Curiosity and alarm struggled in Tharl's mind; the former won. "Did you find out what he is?" he demanded.

"I think so. He's a living creature, presumably capable of being killed; he requires to be housed in an air-tight compartment in which the oxygen is far below our normal air; he's very large, and I suspect he's effectively larger than any creature we've ever had to deal with before. And he's intelligent.

"But he is also insane."

Tharl turned that over and finally shook his head.

"What he is, in fact," Spartak amplified, "is the last survivor—in our galaxy at least—of the race from whom we inherited our starships."

Tharl stiffened. Spartak foresaw the objection he was about to voice, and went on crossly, "Oh, don't give me that nonsense about an insult to human achievement! The idea that we built our own is a piece of Imperial propaganda. I've studied ten years on Annanworld, and I'm satisfied that we went out from our original system—wherever that was—and found a cache of starships left by a previous race. We converted them to our own use and spread through the galaxy, finding more of them wherever we went, but no other trace of their builders. Not that it matters, really, except that it gives us a set of parameters to define Belizuek."

He ticked off points on his fingers. "Low oxygen. We have vague records to indicate that our predecessors were oxygen-breathers, as we are, but that they literally used up the resources of their own planets and went elsewhere before they needed to colonize the ones we eventually took over. Telepathic control of another species. This had been proposed as the ultimate in the domestication of animals. It fits. A view of the galaxy—and that's perhaps the most important thing of all!" He jerked upright in his chair.

"You've seen the picture of the galaxy which accom-



panies the 'proof' during the temple services? Of course you have; it's a key element and must be received by everyone. Didn't you notice that it's an Argian map that it's based on?"

Tharl could only mumble his answer.

"I tell you it is. Because it shows the Big Dark, and the Big Dark is a recent phenomenon; it's anomalous, so it's been carefully studied, and it's only some ten to twelve thousand years old. And at its present size . . . well, I'm convinced that Belizuek has only seen human representations of the galaxy. That's the clincher for me.

"I said he was insane. Why else would he have been left behind when the rest of his species took off for—for wherever? Why else should he descend to this petty shift of domesticating human beings, to move him from star-system to star-system? I got it direct, down in the temple. Conceit! Illimitable megalomaniac craving for power! And he couldn't get it from his own species, because when he tried he was made an outcast and abandoned on—well, somewhere, presumably on Brinze where Bucyon and the rest came up against him. It's going to be a very interesting story when it's told: how he overcame his first victims, how he plotted to spread through the galaxy again . . ."

"He?" The word was almost a squeak from Tharl.

"I know what you're trying to say," Spartak nodded. "If there's a living creature in every temple of Belizuek, why not speak of 'they'? This is the final evidence I have for his insanity.

"Equipped with the kind of knowledge and techniques which the Empire enjoyed at the height of its power, it was estimated that a man could breed his kind from his own germ-plasm, artificially, to repopulate an abandoned planet. I have no doubt that Belizuek could do the same if he wished. But he doesn't wish. He's afraid of competition. The part of him which is in the Penwyr temple is a second self, not a bred descendant, an offspring. Ten thousand years ago, before we spread through the galaxy, it was open and empty before him! And it took him that long to make up his mind that he could trust himself on one single other planet besides Brinze! I say he's insane."

"I see!" Eunora breathed. "That's why I had the impression that he was so large in time and space!"

"Exactly. With a vast number of identical selves, he's consequently telepathic between all of them. The Imperial policy of kicking mutants out to the rim has prevented much study being done on the subject, but it's known that identity of receptor and transmitter is essential."

Eunora blinked, but Spartak shot her some wordless qualifications that satisfied her. Not so Tharl.

"Then how does he communicate with us? We're different!"

"Do you think he eats the sacrifices he's given?" Spartak said with monumental disgust. "Never. He uses them as a biological amplifier till their brains are burned out, to provide a link between himself and his audience."

Tharl felt for a chair and lowered himself into it without looking. "And you worked all this out since you arrived? Within the space of a day?"

"I—" Spartak checked. He stared at Eunora, who was giggling.

"You?" he said incredulously.

"Not really," she countered. "It took your knowledge to solve the problem. But all day since we were in the temple I've been asking questions of your subconscious to find out why I felt as I did during the ceremony, and I guess that sort of—well, brought things to your attention."

Spartak felt sweat prickle on his forehead. "What you're going to be like when you grow up, I just don't know! And if we've been deporting people like you to the rim ever since the foundation of the Empire, what *can* be going on out there?"

Still, that was irrelevant. He glared at Tharl. "Well, now you know what became of your wife and son; now you know the nature of the beast we're up against. What are you going to do—order me to leave here and hide like a criminal, or help me further?"

"I don't see what I can do!" Tharl said helplessly. "If your brothers have been captured, it'll be known who they are, and—"

Spartak cut him short. "Are you in touch with any centers of resistance on Gard Island? I think you said the main temple, the original one on the planet, was there."

"Yes—yes, that's right, but . . . No, I know of no resistance movement there. It's become Bucyon's private preserve."

"You know the city itself, perhaps?"

"Oh yes. When your brother Vix celebrated the completion of his campaign, he honored me by including me in a party to stand honor guard and general security duty at the Warden's palace."

"In that case, we should make for Gard," Spartak said. "In *any* case we should make for Gard, is what I mean! I can think of nothing else to try except a direct attack on the original Belizuek that was brought to Asconel. A simple breach in the air-tight container should be enough."

"So simple?" Tharl breathed. "Why, if I'd known—"

"You'd have gone to the temple here yourself," Spartak finished for him. "But I doubt if that would have helped; the local Belizueks will only be reflections of the original. No, that's the key point." He checked, struck by a sudden thought. "What means would you have used?"

"I'll show you," Tharl said eagerly, and went into the next room. There were scraping sounds.

"Under the floor," Eunora whispered. "A secret cavity."

And Tharl was back, cradling proudly in his arms a shiny energy gun. "The same with which I served your father and brother, sir," he announced. "And charged ready for use."

Spartak pursed his lips. "Here now is your chance to do a far greater service. Will you undertake it?"

Tharl looked extremely unhappy, but he didn't say anything.

"You must hide us here for at least a day, to give Tiorin a chance to rejoin us—this is the only meeting-place we have. During the daytime, however, you must go out, ask what means we can employ to get to Gard—anything, a boat, a skyboat, whatever can still be hired. And as soon as possible, we'll go."

"We, sir?" Tharl ventured.

"I understood your wife and your son—"

"And your brothers, sir." Tharl placed the butt of the gun on the ground and leaned on it, gazing into nowhere. "I don't wish to appear a coward—I'm not, believe me!—"

but after such a long time, to have a plan of action offered . . . It takes me aback, you might say."

Seeing his lower lip tremble, Spartak refrained from pushing him any further. He yawned cavernously. "I must sleep," he muttered. "Though I'm not sure I can. Eunora—?"

But she had already closed her eyes.

## XXI

"SOMEONE'S COMING!" Eunora whispered. "Officials!"

Spartak jolted out of uneasy slumber. The long winter night had not yet given way to dawn, but the first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was Tharl, up and dressed and carrying a tray of breakfast: hot broth and bread. His face was pale with alarm.

"Searching for us?" Spartak rapped.

Eunora, puzzled, shook her head. "Apparently not. There are four of them going from house to house—one's a priest, I think, because he's so arrogant and self-satisfied. . . . But they aren't searching any of the houses, just knocking at the doors and telling the people that . . ."

"Telling them what?" Spartak urged.

The girl bit her lip. "Both Tiorin and Vix were captured. Bucyon's men know who they are. There's going to be a grand ceremony at the chief temple on Gard—is that right?—at which they'll voluntarily give themselves up to Belizuek, and everyone who can is urged to go there and witness this final triumph of Bucyon over those who support Hodat."

Spartak sat rock-still for long moments. Finally he said with ghastly humor, "At least it means we shan't be conspicuous if we go there. But do they not know about us?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? If they've got an admission of their identity out of them . . ." Eunora knitted her brows. "I think I understand, though. The priest was already aware that there were three brothers, including you, but he's taking it for granted that you'll make a false step and reveal yourself. Then anyone who notices will at once report you."

"That sounds like them, all right," Tharl said sourly.

"They know how their dupes behave nowadays. Utter one false word, make one wrong move, and some favor-currying bastard will be off to inform on you."

"They're coming closer," Eunora warned. "Only three or four houses away. We'd better get out of sight."

Tensely, crouched in the concealment of a closet, they strained their ears for auditory confirmation of what she had detected, and when he let them out again Tharl gave it fresh emphasis.

"Just as the little girl says," he muttered. "Everyone who possibly can is expected to travel to Gard and see your brothers sacrificed, sir. We'd best make haste, hadn't we?"

"Not too fast," Spartak sighed. "Give them a chance to get over the hill, then take some of my money—here—and go book us passage on the fastest available transport." He took some Imperial coins from his belt-pouch.

"As you say, sir," Tharl conceded, and served them the meal he had prepared.

He must have been slightly ahead of the rush; he got them all passage on one of the fastest boats left in the northern hemisphere, an elderly skimmer whose engines wheezed so badly she could barely get up on her foils with the load of passengers that crammed aboard, but which was at any rate better than some of the half-rotten fishing-boats in which the latecomers embarked. They must have known, Spartak reflected, that they stood no chance of getting to Gard in time for the ceremony, but either they'd be satisfied to get away from drab poverty-stricken Penwyr for a while, or else the fear of not "showing willing" compelled them to make the gesture and impress the priests. He hoped it was the former, which might indicate they still retained some normal human feelings, but he feared it was more likely the latter.

There was a very bad moment as they approached the dockside towards sunset, shivering in the chill blasts of icy foam that the night wind whipped off the estuary; two priests stood beside the gangway to their skimmer, searching the faces of all those that passed.

"Are they looking for us, Eunora?" Spartak whispered.

"Luckily no," she murmured in reply. "They're turning

away people notoriously lax in their temple attendance—this trip is supposed to be a reward for loyal homage. I don't know what they're doing about strangers. So few people travel nowadays, they hadn't considered the problem."

Tharl drew a deep breath. "Leave this to me, sir," he suggested, and as they drew near the priests, he pushed his way forward.

"Forgive me, sirs!" he shouted, and their heads turned. "Perhaps you'll remember, sirs, that when Belizuek first came to honor Penwyr with his presence, my wife and my son were the very first to give him their total service. And I was bitter!" He shook his head in a parody of regret. "I know now it was foolish of me. Why, if the Warden's brothers themselves have returned and agreed to offer themselves up to Belizuek, what more powerful proof could anyone want that he is indeed the master of us all and truly superior?"

"Clever!" Spartak whispered. "Is it going to work?"

"Oh yes," Eunora said with a twisted smile. "They're lapping it up. He'd only better be careful he doesn't overdo it—one of them is thinking of singling him out for some special temple duty."

If they had been aware that the long bundle of clothing and provisions slung over Tharl's shoulder contained the energy gun he had produced last night, they would have been a deal less eager. But Belizuek was far away from the docks, and these were only human dupes.

Tharl came to rejoin them when they were securely aboard, wiping sweat from his face, and blushing faintly at Spartak's warm compliments.

"Too early for that, sir," he countered. "We haven't even cast off yet."

In one way at least he was right. That voyage was among the most dreadful experiences of Spartak's entire life. To be with these three or four hundred people who laughed and sang ribald songs while they passed canteens of precious wine and the typical Penwyr sour beer as they might on any festival excursion—then, to remember with a jolt the excuse for such jollification: the planned sacrifice of his brothers, including Vix whom many of these people had served in the old days, whom they had cheered as the

son of his father, the late Warden, and brother of Hodat the heir-apparent . . . that was like living a nightmare. And all the time Eunora was alert for some keen-eyed person to pierce his disguise.

The chances of his being betrayed receded somewhat when the word got about that he was a doctor, and a mother whose child was sensitive to seasickness came begging his help. The little boy recovered at once when Spartak tended him, and after that a shy succession of patients surrounded him, asking help and advice for an incredible range of complaints.

Spartak's fury burned inside him like a coal. When he left Asconel for Annanworld, there had been no one hungry, no one sick except with mild infections which could never be wholly eliminated, and certainly no one suffering from the deficiency diseases. Yet time and again when he examined those who now presented themselves, he saw that their need was not for drugs, but for soap and water and a proper diet.

Weeping sores. Ulcers. Gums sickly-sweet with pus. Children's bones twisted into awkward curves. Eyes matted with a dirty yellow discharge. So the tale went on. More than once, as he was on the point of bursting out at some silly fool about the true reason for his condition, Eunora caught his eye and gave an almost imperceptible headshake, implying, "Don't! He'll go to the priest at once."

The priest—there was apparently always one aboard any passenger vessel on Asconel nowadays—came to Spartak in the end; that encounter was hardly to be avoided. He put a number of curious questions which Spartak deftly dodged, trying to give the impression that the priest was making himself look ignorant by not knowing the answers already, and in the end the trick worked and the priest made off, embarrassed without being sure why.

It was established beyond a doubt that half the people who had set off from northern islands like Penwyr would never get to Gard in time, when they started to raise the traffic from the nearer ports the next day. The sea seemed to be crawling with passenger vessels; there were even skyboats overhead, the first Spartak had seen since

his return. All were converging on Gard for the ceremony. Winter was behind them at this latitude; the sky was blue and the sun mild and warm.

The tremendous strain the influx of visitors—pilgrims, perhaps, would be a closer term, Spartak reflected sourly—put on the resources of Gard city worked in their favor. With boats crowding into the port and disembarkation reduced to a panicky rush down the gangplanks so that room could be made for the next vessel, the guards and priests who supervised the travelers could not hope to keep control. Moreover, here was no poverty-stricken provincial town; Bucyon clearly liked his luxuries as much as anyone, and everything worked, to the wonder of the stranger children. Food was abundant, on quayside stalls and in the city's stores; gaudy posters, banners and streamers decorated the buildings for the great day tomorrow, and relic hawkers offered—when there were no priests in sight—such precious items as hairs from Bucyon's beard and Lydis' nail-clippings.

Spartak, taken in at first by this deception, was half-minded to buy one of the relics and put it under the microscope to see if Lydis' alleged mind-reading powers were due to a cellular mutation; then he realized these were frauds to trap the credulous.

His heart ached as he beheld his former home. His knuckles whitened on the handle of the medical case he carried, now much depleted after the voyage.

"If I could only get next to Bucyon!" he whispered.

"Not a chance," Tharl muttered, glancing around to make sure they were not overheard as they trudged, with thousands of others, towards the center of the city. Ahead, the streets were in full operation, and there were delighted squeals from the youngest children who had never seen a molecular-flow street before. "He's always guarded very strictly. And Lydis, who can read thoughts, never leaves his side."

"Where is the temple?" Spartak demanded.

"It used to be the Place of Grand Assembly," Tharl told him. "You know it, of course."

Spartak did indeed. There he had witnessed the seating of Hodat in the Warden's chair, the last day he had stayed on Asconel before his departure, and Vix's and Tiorin's too.



It was a vast open horseshoe of seating: the inner rows for dignitaries, the outer for the public.

He came to a decision, arranged a meeting-place with Tharl for later, and sent him off to find them a place to stay. Then he and Eunora went straight to the temple.

It had not been altered much to accomodate its change of function. Behind it loomed the dark shape of the Warden's palace, now Bucyon's home. The Warden's chair had been moved forward to make room for a huge gilded dome. Inside there dwelt Belizuek: the original self of which all the local Belizueks were only reflections. The size of the dome took him aback. Either this Belizuek was a monster, or there were several layers of armor around him, in which case would even an energy gun . . . ?

He checked himself. Before making any more plans, he needed to get details of the planned ceremony. There was a gang of men at work assembling a high dais close to the Warden's chair; it only required a few friendly words and the flash of a five-circle coin to get one of them to part with the full program.

This was to be the place where Vix and Tiorin were displayed to any in the crowd who might doubt their identity, and from which they would state their intention of entering voluntarily into the "full service" of Belizuek. Bucyon and Lydis would be present; they would leave the palace in ceremonial procession at such a time, reach the temple at such another time, begin the ritual at such another time. . . .

Spartak seized on the crucial point that they would leave their groundcar at the far end of the horseshoe. He tipped their informant and returned thither. There were many idle sightseers around, so they attracted no special attention.

"I have it!" he whispered, and snapped his fingers. He shot a glance at Eunora. "Will it work?"

"I—don't know." She was very pale. "Can you get Tharl to the right place with his gun?"

"I'm sure I can. I was raised in the Warden's palace, remember, and that dominates the far end of the Assembly. But am I asking too much of you?"

"I don't think so," Eunora murmured. "Until I meet Lydis

face to face I can't be sure. But I had a lot of practice in dissembling back home. I think even to a mind-reader I may—may!—be able to tell a lie.”

## XXII

THE FOLLOWING day, the great day when the last traces of the old order would be wiped away forever as the late Warden's brothers acknowledged the dominion of Belizuek and entered freely into his full service, dawned mild and sunny, and grew rapidly hot. Long before the scheduled time of the ceremony people were thronging into the streets; those fortunate enough to view it in person crammed the horseshoe seating of the Place of Grand Assembly, where music and songs in honor of Belizuek whiled the time away, and the ordinary populace put on what they had left in the way of presentable clothing and made do with the public watch-screens and amateur tumblers fooling around in the gutters.

The dais was completed. Covered in gaudy banners, it stood waiting for the victims, like an altar readied at the shrine of a bloodthirsty deity.

Punctually on schedule, Bucyon—gorgeous in ceremonial armor that shone chrome-bright and dazzling—entered his groundcar. Beside him, pale, very beautiful and dressed as always in a floor-long black gown, sat Lydis. The people who gathered to cheer disciplined their minds into adoring patterns, fearing the rumored talent which had brought her to her present eminence.

Everywhere the procession passed, there were yells of delight and applause, and chanting in honor of Belizuek and of Bucyon, who had blessed Asconel by bringing him here. Occasionally a visitor from elsewhere on the planet, who remembered the old days well enough to have a spark of envy kindled at the continuing luxury of Gard contrasted with the poverty at home, shouted less fervently than the rest. But soon the pressure of anxiety lest he be discovered drove him to out-bellow his neighbors.

It was a spectacle to dim the most vivid memory of the old days, anyhow: the guards, the priests in their most

brilliant robes, and at the center the lovely Lydis and the handsome Bucyon, acknowledging the love of their subjects with an occasional gracious wave.

Certain unscheduled events also took place.

Not long after the honored dignitaries began to fill their seats in the Assembly, a fat man in the frontmost rank not reserved for priests—who occupied the first dozen banks of seating in the official plan, but who had not yet shown up—clapped his hand to his nape and looked to see if he had killed a stinging insect. There was nothing on his palm.

Another minute or so, and he began to complain loudly to his neighbors that it was terribly hot. Sweat ran from his face; he fought for breath, loosening the neckband of his coat, and swore at the sun for beating down so fiercely. It was not long before he closed his eyes and began to breathe in enormous gasps. Alarmed, those around him sought help, and were relieved at the approach of a fair-bearded man who identified himself as a doctor.

Instructions were crisply issued to carry the fat man to shade, rest him, and let him recover his spirits. That attended to, the fair-bearded man fell talking with those who had appealed for his aid, and it was entirely natural that, as the arrival of Bucyon was signaled, he should slip into the place the fat man had left vacant.

It had not all gone so smoothly. As he tensed to see Bucyon enter the vast stadium-like Assembly—he could not refer to it as a temple, the way everyone else now did—Spartak was vaguely surprised to think that he was here exactly as arranged. Yesterday afternoon, when he found that Tharl had been over-anxious to please, and provided them with accommodation in a place he felt fit for a Warden's son, there had been a lot of trouble, and ultimately they had had to settle for the rooms after all—Gard was packed to overflowing with the pilgrims from overseas. To the Big Dark with fears of appearing conspicuous, anyway. The short conversation he had had with those around him here had satisfied him that Bucyon did not rule wholly by the power of Belizuek. Here gathered were men and women who were conscious traitors; they would never be called on

for the full service of Belizuek! They were Bucyon's willing-accomplices in the business of raping Asconel.

It was only to be expected. Bucyon's own forces—even if, along with the priests, you counted in the crews from a respectably sized spacefleet—wouldn't suffice to administer a population of nine hundred million, no matter how pliant.

But proof of his suspicion made him feel sick.

At least they hadn't suspected him in their turn. He was acknowledged as a fit companion, a tribute to the glibness of his tongue and his courtly manners. It almost seemed that it was easier to conduct nefarious business in broad daylight than under the cover of night. The trouble they had had sneaking Tharl into the Warden's palace, even though his memory held a clearer picture of it than had ever been given to the old soldier when he was assigned to security duties here in the capital. . . .! With Eunora keeping watch for patrols so that they could dodge into shadow every time, they had still spent better than four hours getting Tharl inside.

Spartak's eyes strayed towards the palace. Was the man safe where he was supposed to be?

Tharl twisted himself into a marginally more comfortable position. The hot, clammy air from the discharge pipe of the air circulators coated his skin with dirty moisture. But he had gloves, and his hands would not slip on the switches of his gun. Lovingly he sighted it for the hundredth time on the distant golden dome shielding the alien monster Belizuek.

He felt himself a changed person since the moment he met Spartak and his brothers. He had been given back his sense of purpose in life; he had been offered a chance to avenge the slaughter of his wife and son. He lowered the gun to a resting position and gave a sigh of contentment. Nothing else mattered. He was still bruised from a fall he had taken trying to get up into the interior of this ventilation pipe, still retrospectively anxious about the noise he'd made which might have alarmed a guard—but apparently had gone unheeded—and both hungry and tired

in the bargain. To the Big Dark with such complaints! He had the important thing: a job to do.

Once more he lifted the gun and peered through its telescope. His heart quickened. Spartak was in position among the dignitaries on the steeply banked seating. It couldn't be much longer now.

If only the little girl played her part—!

The next in the sequence of unscheduled events didn't come until Bucyon and Lydis were getting down from their groundcar. The archpriest Shry—a curiously horrible figure, his back enormously bulging with some soft outgrowth of tissue—came to greet them, bands played and the watchers cheered.

Under the arms of the guards who held back the crowd, a little girl slipped like an eel, clutching a bunch of flowers. A cry of alarm went up, and guards leveled their guns; then they hesitated, seeing how tiny she was, how well-scrubbed and attractive in her too-small, faded frock, and how innocuous the posy was that she now shyly offered to Bucyon.

The tyrant scowled for a second, wondering who had arranged this "spontaneous" gesture of affection and why he had not been warned. He glanced at Lydis, who was frowning, but when after some seconds she did not tell him to desist, he put on a smile and accepted the flowers, afterwards patting the girl's head. She was by now almost overcome by the strain of her great moment, and when Bucyon had gone on she slipped out of sight. Under one of the temporary stands erected to watch the procession she keeled over and slept for more than half an hour.

The posy had contained the last of Spartak's precious supply of the drug with which he had restored her to sanity. Handing it to Bucyon, she had triggered an injector that shot the entire dose into the fleshy ball of his thumb.

And all the time she had slid away from the probing of Lydis and Shry. To resist them, to lie and deceive them for about ninety seconds, had cost her every ounce of her energy, so that when she fell down in a faint she knew neither where she was nor whether she would ever wake up.

Spartak felt a lurching sensation of relief. Bucyon was coming up the main aisle of the Assembly holding the posy he had given to Eunora. Provided the injector hadn't misfired, he was going to be extremely tractable. . . .

And that, presumably, was Shry. He shivered as he studied the gross misshapen form of the archpriest. Yet Lydis found nothing distasteful in him; she accepted his arm as he helped her to a chair, to one side of and behind the Warden's, that Bucyon sank into. Fanfares made the very sky resound, and were themselves scarcely louder than the bellows of applause that issued from the crowd.

Then they brought Vix and Tiorin down the aisle.

Silence fell, for which Spartak was eternally grateful. He ached to see his brothers treated thus. Their disguises had been stripped—their hair restored to its original flaming red—and they were clad in plain white suits, with their feet bare in an age-old penitential gesture.

And there was apparently no sham about Bucyon's claim that they were to sacrifice themselves voluntarily. They were neither bound nor very closely guarded, and as they came down the long aisle they held their heads high and walked like heroes.

The horrifying idea struck him that if they spotted him they would feel it an honor to give him away. He cursed not having found time to change his appearance once again, and made what shift he could to hide his face behind a raised hand.

But they passed on, to take their places on the altar-like dais, and all was in readiness for the great moment.

The only explanation he could think of for their obvious willingness to come to their own funeral was that Belizuek's emanations were already in control of their minds. And indeed, now that he turned his attention to it, Spartak thought he could feel the same awe-inspiring presence which had impressed the Penwyr congregation.

For a moment, indeed, it tempted him to yield, seeming to say, "Fool! Even if Belizuek is in truth a living creature, is he not the last of a line greater than the human race—those squabbling borrowers of another's power?"

And further: "What can I do to thwart the destiny of

this whole planet? I, one man, with a feeble plan that depends on a dozen outrageous coincidences to succeed!"

He hoped Tharl was going to be on time.

People had recognized Vix and Tiorin, and their faces reflected their complete conviction about Bucyon's claims. He really did have them here; they really were about to enter Belizuek's service. Some, especially those near Spartak, had harbored doubts till this very last moment. Now they were mentally congratulating themselves on having thrown in their lot with the winning party.

Shry stepped to the front of the dais and began to address the crowd in a whining bleat of a voice, describing the event they all knew they were about to witness. But no one complained; behind the words there slowly grew the sense of Belizuek's presence, the aura of a master of galaxies, the sense of being in a supernatural creature's power. Spartak sweated and fidgeted. He had told Tharl to fire arbitrarily five minutes after the commencement of the ceremony. Never had five minutes been so long! Already the waves of mental control were battering his defenses; most of the crowd had succumbed willingly and instantly.

Something must have gone wrong.

Tharl must have been discovered.

The plan was a failure. Asconel was doomed and he with it.

Shry reached the climax of his introduction, turned his twisted body and threw up an arm in a dramatic gesture towards Tiorin and Vix—

And with impeccable theatrical timing, Tharl loosed the first of his energy bolts against the golden dome enclosing Belizuek.

## XXIII

THE SECOND bolt followed, the third, fourth and fifth, with the impersonal regularity of a clock's ticking, and on the fifth the golden dome was breached. A noise like a scream was heard, half with the ears, half with the mind, and a foul stink oozed out over the crowd. It reminded Spartak of

the stench from mud exposed by an exceptionally low tide at the mouth of a river much used for the disposal of sewage.

Paralysis overtook everyone present for the space of long seconds, except himself. The first shot had brought him to his feet; before the last had struck, he had fought his way down the nearest transverse aisle and was clambering over the barrier separating the seats from the longitudinal aisle up which his brothers had so lately been marched on show.

His head was ringing with both sound and soundless cries: the yells of dismay that had now broken out among the crowd, the incoherent jabbering of orders to the guards, something being shrieked in a high panicky voice by the woman Lydis—all these were commonplace reactions to what had happened. But overlying them, permeating the very air, was a sudden terrible sense of doom, the emanation from Belizuek's mind as his body was exposed to the oxygen-rich air of this planet preferred by men.

Spartak thought of the tens of millennia through which his species had used up the atmospheres of their old worlds, adapting little by little, growing used with every passing generation to a higher concentration of carbon dioxide, a lower percentage of available oxygen, until the contact of this rawer air was like acid poured on naked flesh.

But that was nothing to occupy his mind right now. For the present he had the single advantage of knowing what had happened; it was a slender weapon to offer against Bucyon's armor, but he had to make the most of it.

He glanced at Vix and Tiorin. As he had hoped, they were standing bewildered, blinking at each other and the familiar Place of Grand Assembly, like men newly woken from a bad dream. But it would take Belizuek a while to die, and until he did die, the invisible talons would remain fast on their minds.

Now: action.

Spartak drew himself up to his full height and confronted the man who till this morning had been only a name to him—Bucyon, who had come from space to rape and ruin a beautiful world in the name of an obscene monster. And



who now, if he was human, must be open for mastery by the first who seized control of him.

"Bucyon!" Spartak bellowed, hands cupped around his mouth. The name seemed to plough through the oppressive mental aura as the energy bolt had sizzled upwards in the rain of Gwo, leaving a visible track of white steam. "Bucyon, *speak to your people!*"

Spartak had spent long on his choice of phrase. That was his ultimate selection: a command both innocuous and deadly.

Shry had gone wailing to see what harm was done to the golden dome; half out of sight from Spartak, he was waving his arms frantically, trying to make guards and other priests come to him and help repair the damage. But the woman Lydis—doubtless aware of the drug now coursing through Bucyon's body—had jerked to her feet and now stood rockstill, her eyes burning Spartak.

The call he had uttered took effect. Hoping for some guidance from Belizuek's human deputy, the crowd quieted, the guards tensed for anticipated orders, the priests hesitated as they made to obey Shry's beckoning signals.

"Speak to your people, the people of Asconell" Spartak shouted again. "*Tell them—what is Belizuek?*"

But he was watching Lydis, not Bucyon, and was prepared when she gasped and tried to clutch at the big man's arm, wanting to prevent the betrayal which he could not because the drug compelled him to total honesty.

He jumped forward, hurling himself at the overhang of the dais and rolling onto its boards like a high-jumper clearing a difficult mark. As he moved, he was still calling: "Bucyon, Bucyon, tell them, tell them—the people of Asconell want to hear from you—*tell them about Belizuek!*"

On the last breathless yell he was at Bucyon's side, and his shoulder slammed against Lydis', heedless of her sex. Fragile as a foamed dummy, she staggered back and fell against the chair from which she had risen, and remained dazed for a few precious moments during which Spartak alone had Bucyon's ear.

The drug took over his will, and he spoke helplessly to the attentive audience.

"Belizuek is the last survivor of the species that ruled the galaxy before man."

The oppressive aura of hate and desperation redoubled its intensity, as if a stormcloud had settled over the Assembly. Spartak risked a glance behind him, fearing that Shry might have contrived to effect repairs.

"He's a material creature, isn't he?" he shouted. "Not a mystical spirit, not a supernatural being, but a creature that had to feed and breathe as we do!"

"Yes!" Bucyon agreed, helpless to deny it.

"And that can be killed as we can!"

"Yes!"

Already the impact of this revelation was having its effect among the crowd. Those who had believed otherwise were pale with dismay; the conscious traitors who had never been duped were yet paler, for some of them thought they recognized a familiar countenance behind the new beard on Spartak's face, despite the dyeing of his hair.

"Why is he still with us, when the rest of his kind have gone? Tell them that!"

"They cast him out," Bucyon answered. "They exiled him to the world called Brinze, where men found him."

"Why?"

"They said it was because he was insane, but he isn't." Spittle was gathering on the corners of Bucyon's mouth and running down into his beard. His eyes were rimmed white as he strove and failed to stop his tongue from speaking.

"Ah, but he was supposed to be immortal, wasn't he?" Spartak thundered. "And he's not! One breath of Asconel's clean sweet air, and he's dying!"

*But so slowly!* Was there not another charge in Tharl's gun, to burn directly into Belizuek's substance? Spartak could feel the maddened will to survive which the creature was now broadcasting like raw energy, and so too could everyone else. In the living brains of those who surrounded him, human and alien thought were locked into terrible conflict, and—

And it stopped.

Exactly as though the sun had come out, the sense of death and disaster ceased, and Spartak allowed himself to

hope for victory. He half-turned, and was met by a scream from the cripple Shry.

"Belizuek lives! It's only the servant who's died—burned out—his brain failed! Bring the captives over here!"

Guards, still blindly obedient to Shry's command, made for the passively waiting Vix and Tiorin.

"Tell them to stop!" Spartak gasped at Bucyon.

But Lydis was on her feet, thrusting herself between her overlord and the man who had dared to stand against him.

"No!" she hissed, so close to Spartak that tiny drops flew from her rage-contorted mouth and struck his cheek. "Belizuek is All, Belizuek is a Master, Belizuek was before the galaxy was!"

Time froze. The guards were poised to pinion Vix and Tiorin, the people were still too confused to act, and he could say nothing. Even crippled by the breach in his protective dome, there was no knowing what Belizuek could do if he were given a fresh victim to serve as a telepathic link between himself and his slaves.

An idea? A glimmer of hope? Spartak pushed Lydis aside roughly and addressed Bucyon once more. "Tell the people what Belizuek does with his servants! Say what becomes of those who go behind the screen into his presence!"

"He won't answer," Lydis spat. "Your drug has spent itself, and I control his mind. Guards! Guards!"

Indeed, Bucyon's face had taken on the vacant look of an idiot, and he stood swaying and gazing out over the Assembly without seeing it.

A sense of defeat which had nothing to do with Belizuek's emanations overcame Spartak. The guards closed on his brothers. Lydis laughed madly in triumph—

And Tharl let go the last charge from his energy gun.

Like a white-hot steel bar it blazed down towards the rent in the golden dome, and in the final yard of its passage it speared Shry and turned him into a staggering horror wrapped in flame. Beyond him, only half spent on such a petty target, it burned deep, deep into the vitals of Belizuek, and Lydis screamed as though the pain were hers alone.

A unison shock raced through the crowd. The guards

about to seize the captives turned, the priests cried out in terror, Spartak in relief.

Then Vix moved.

He shook himself as though rousing from a long sleep, clubbed both fists together, and brought them up into the kidneys of the guard who would have seized him. The man gave a yell of agony and clapped his hands to the seat of the pain. Vix reached past him and took his sidearm and his sword in simultaneous precise movements. The sidearm he thrust into Tiorin's hand as the other man also came to himself, and without a pause jabbed the sword's point home in the exposed neck of the disarmed guard.

He opened his throat in a cry which had not been heard except ceremonially since long before Bucyon usurped the Warden's chair, and it was like turning back the pages of the past.

"For Ascone-e-e-ell"

And he was away.

Spartak was giddy with the speed of it. His eyes could not follow the instant blur that his half-brother became, a red-topped living torch of disaster for those who stood in his way. Behind, calmer, Tiorin weighed the gun he had suddenly acquired, then with a thoughtful look raised and aimed it. A bolt scattered the priests from around the golden dome, sending them tumbling off the edge of its raised platform. Another dispersed those muddled guards who thought to come to the rescue of their fellows. Another discouraged a group of conscious traitors who were trying to get out of the far end of the Assembly.

But by then Vix had cleared a path all the way to Spartak's side, and five men lay coughing the same blood which smeared his blade. He clapped Spartak on the arm and yelled at him, "A miracle, brother, a miracle! I love you for it!"

And he was after Bucyon himself, the sword swinging high to split the bemused usurper's skull.

"Stop!" Spartak cried. "He's no more than a booby now—his mind's gone!"

"Let the people see!" Vix answered savagely, and struck.

With that final blow, even before Bucyon toppled headlong, the berserk madness left him. In its place, there was

a cold white fury that made Spartak shiver as he looked on it.

Tiorin came forward to stand with his brothers. No one lifted a hand to prevent him.

"I'm Vix of Asconell" Vix roared at the frightened people. "Here's Tiorin, your rightful Warden! Here's Spartak our brother to whom we owe our deliverance and *yours!*" He pointed with his sword, and the blade dripped red. "There lies a tyrant who had you in his hand—look at yourselves and think, think, *think!* You're underfed, you're dirty, you're lousy, you're like savages and not civilized citizens!"

It began to penetrate. People looked at one another, seeing not so much those present, but the millions of starving and diseased who had appeared on Asconel since Bucyon's arrival.

"And here's the last of those who led you by the nose!" Vix bellowed. "The woman Lydis who betrayed my brother!"

He whirled, and was quick enough to grasp her by the robe as she made to flee. The robe tore, fell away, exposed her maggot-pale body to the pitiless glare of the noontide sun.

There was utter silence. During it, Spartak felt nausea rise to choke his throat.

Lydis was not a human mutant, accidentally gifted with the power to read minds. She was a tool of Belizuek. And instead of breasts on the front of her torso, she had a black pulsating growth that squirmed and leaked a stinking ichor as it followed its alien parent into the doorway of death.

The crowd saw. The crowd rose up, and panicked, and fled, and left the brothers to their solitary triumph.

## XXIV

A SHORT eternity later they were together again, in the Warden's suite of the palace: the brothers, and those who had most signally served Asconel during its time of terror, among whom were Tigrid Zen and Eunora. The mutant girl sat a little apart, clutching in both hands a big cup

of sweet fruit-juice, while the men relaxed over wine of Asconel's finest vintage. Tharl had taken a place next to her, as a symbol of apology for the way he had first reacted to the news of her talent.

"That's what turned the tide for us," Spartak murmured, thinking of the way Lydis's robe had fluttered to the ground.

"Well, obviously," Tiorin agreed from the head of the table around which they had gathered. "It turned my stomach, I tell you frankly, and I'd already begun to suspect something of the sort."

"But how could Hodat not have known?" Vix snapped. It wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion, but it was the first time they'd been able to relax during it; up till a few days previous, the business of setting to rights the chaos of a whole planet had kept them busy from waking to sleeping.

Tigrid Zen cleared his throat. "I've been making some inquiries. If you'll forgive my admitting that I probed into the private affairs of your family . . . ?"

"Go on," said Spartak. "It's one of the chief penalties of being born into a position like ours that our private affairs are of public interest to a good many people."

"Well put, sir. In fact, what turned up was to your late brother's great credit. There was no foundation for the common gossip about a liaison between him and Lydis. He'd stuck strictly to his original intention of marrying a woman who'd advantage Asconel's future by allying us with some other prosperous world. He was deluded into believing that Lydis's mind-reading was—well—at his service, so to speak, and he flattered and bribed her to make her stay on his side."

"Where did the marriage story get started, then?" Tiorin asked.

"Who can say?" Tigrid Zen shrugged. "Perhaps she planted the rumor herself. We'll never know now."

True enough. The death of her alien parasite had killed her within an hour.

"Speaking of things to people's credit," Tiorin murmured, "I don't believe I ever got around to complimenting you, Eunora. I'm sure Spartak and Vix have stood deputy for

me, but now things are less hectic than they were, I must thank you. And ask you something, too."

He paused. Everyone grinned broadly. They had become perfectly accustomed to Eunora's talent, and the last trace of the Empire's anti-mutant policy had faded even from Tharl's mind.

"How I withstood the probing of both Lydis and Shry while I was giving the flowers to Bucyon?" Eunora nodded. "I don't think I shall ever know. All I remember is the sense of shock which I had when I realized the two things I hadn't known beforehand: first, that Lydis was directly in contact with Belizuek, and second, that Shry was also, but far more—more firmly."

"The parasitic growth on his back," Spartak put in, "must have weighed as much as he did."

"And felt like it," Eunora agreed grimly. "All I can say is that when I reacted to the shock, I must have forced myself into the identity I'd taken on. I was just a simple-minded little girl, over-awed at being in the great man's presence, scared at my own daring in offering him the flowers. . . .I blanked out until I came to under the stand half an hour later, and then I had to hide to keep out of the way of all the people who were fleeing from this final horror, the exposure of Lydis."

"But that's what turned the tide, as I said," Spartak repeated. "Even with Belizuek dying, and cut off from mental contact with his slaves; even with Bucyon killed in front of them, there were people in that crowd who'd staked their futures on Bucyon, and to the Big Dark with the rest of the citizens—let 'em rot!"

Tiorin's face darkened. "Don't I know it! Most of them came fawning to me directly, saying didn't I want the cooperation of those who had been administering the planet under Bucyon because they knew all the ropes now. . . . Some of them were men I'd known in father's day, too. And of course, a lot more of them tried to bribe their way off-world. But we caught most of them, I think."

"And got their cooperation," Tigrid Zen rumbled. "If not exactly in the way they hoped. We're going to have the best harvest in years, both by land and sea, thanks to their bare-handed efforts."

"Excuse me, sirs," Tharl put in diffidently. "Something I've been wondering . . . How *was* it that killing the—the main Belizuek got rid of all the others so easily?"

"Hmmm?" Spartak turned his head. "Oh, yes. I wasn't absolutely right in what I told you back at Penwyr, but nearly so. Remember I told you that Belizuek was insane, and especially afraid of competition, even from his own derived images?"

Tharl nodded, frowning with concentration but making a gallant effort to follow Spartak's exposition.

"For fear that one of his—ah—duplicates should achieve independence and usurp his uniqueness, he'd made sure the mental linkage between them was very tight. It proved too tight. The effect of death on the central organism was reflected in a sort of psychic paralysis of all the others; they could have existed as separate entities, but he'd forbidden them to. They weren't actually dead till they were exposed to the air, but effectively they were in a sort of trance due to the shock of telepathically experiencing death."

He shrugged, and Tharl muttered thanks.

"I'll tell you something, sir," he added after a moment. "You came to me later and congratulated me on the uncanny rightness of the timing for the last bolt I fired, yes?"

"Agreed!" Tiorin said warmly. "It was a real crisis point—"

"Well, sir," Tharl broke in, looking unaccountably depressed, "I'd saved that bolt, for a mixture of all sorts of reasons. First, I was going to save it for myself; then I thought, if I'm discovered, all I need do is jump down this shaft I'm in—a fall of a hundred-odd feet to a rock-hard floor should finish me off. So instead I saved it in case you were wrong about the way to kill Belizuek. I figured I could at least kill Bucyon if he went through with his plan to sacrifice you."

"But you fired again before I struck Bucyon down," Vix objected.

"Yes, sir. I thought and thought, and for a long time I was worried because Spartak was standing so close to Bucyon, I couldn't get a clear shot. Then finally I decided it was taking too long for things to settle down—I couldn't have completed the job—and there was a clear shot at Shry, who was after all Belizuek's chief spokesman and chaplain to



Bucyon and all the rest of it. I figured if Belizuek was already dead, he'd be in a really frantic state, and he wasn't—he was calling people up to help him, and peering into the hole my bolts had made, as I could see clearly through the telescope on my gun. . . . So I said, 'What's more likely to put a stiff dose of fear in their guts than to see Belizuek's best-beloved shriveled like a leaf in a fire?'—and I let the last bolt go."

"To which decision we owe the fact that we're here now," Tiorin said soberly. "Along with some other things, such as that Bucyon wasn't an able man, just a greedy and power-hungry one. And careless! Look at how far we've managed to come in the short time since we took over again! I swear, there's more talent, more know-how, more skill on Asconel than any other world this side of the present Imperial boundary. If he'd made use of the resources under his hand, no one, not even the Empire at its height, could have toppled him."

"That was Belizuek's fault, not his," Spartak contradicted. "Belizuek liked to push his subjects down to the mud. Ignorant, blindly adoring, they'd take anything he offered and come back pleading for more."

"In any case, it's due as much to Spartak as to anyone that we have regained so much lost ground," Vix put in. "For an unpractical person, he's worked miracles of organization and administration."

Tiorin gave a nod of agreement, suddenly looking very tired.

"May I ask a question, Warden?" Tigrid Zen said formally.

"Go ahead."

"Are your brothers going to stay here now? I feel Asconel needs them still."

Tiorin glanced at the other two, inviting them to speak for themselves.

"No," Vix said gruffly, and got to his feet. He paced across to the window and stood with his back to them as he went on. "No, a fighting man is a center of discord on a peaceful world, and that's what Asconel is going to be from now on. I'll away back to my roving. And—and there's something else, too."

He didn't elaborate, but neither of his brothers had to ask what he meant. Vineta had died during the day following their capture by the priests from the injuries sustained when she was shot down. And for the first time in his life, the loss of one of his women had touched his heart. He had said privately that even if it was his home, he could not bear to remain on the world where Vineta had died. . . .

"You, Spartak?" Tiorin said, to distract them from the vaguely embarrassed silence that followed.

"No, I shan't stay here either," Spartak said at length. "Oh, I'll not be leaving till I'm sure Asconel is on the proper orbit again, but in a year or so I'll say farewell."

"I shall regret your loss," Tiorin said quietly. "But—as you wish. Back to your studies on Annanworld, then?"

"Annanworld? Oh no." Spartak gave a smile that made him look briefly like a wild beast.

"Why not?" Vix demanded, surprised. He turned away from the window to face them again. "The way I understood it, your order would take you back if you didn't soil your hands with violence while you were away, and everything you did to help overthrow Bucyon was of the nature of—well—of scheming rather than fighting. Or are they so super-subtle they'd define what you did to him as violence?"

"No, we distinguish force from violence, and force is occasionally unavoidable. . . . But why should I say 'we'?" Spartak leaned back in his chair. "I'm not returning, I'm sure of that.

"No, you see, after much cogitation I've come to a conclusion. My Superior, Father Erton, was half right as well as half wrong when he warned me against leaving for Asconel. The rightness lay in his saying that to stand against the—what do they call it?—the onset of the Long Night was beyond any man's powers. What we've done here on Asconel is good, and worth it, but it's not turned the tide of galactic decline, has it? Only built an island around which the tide will flow. Perhaps the clearest warning lies in the fact that one mentally sick survivor of a race which grew weary and departed before we left our original system could bring one of our finest planets into total subjugation.

"I'm going to look for the seeds of the first truly human galactic conquest. I'm going to the rim, to the worlds where for ten thousand years the Empire shipped its mutants and its misfits, and where rumor says men—yes, men, for they're born of human loins—build their own starships instead of borrowing the leavings of another species. I don't know exactly where to make for, but a good start might be to resume our interrupted journey to Nylock—hm, Eunora?" He shot a twinkling grin at the mutant girl.

"And when I find someone in a position to do something, I shall report on the existence of a world called Brinze. For the priests of Belizuek were human too, though they'd sold their birthright and their power of free thought. And before I die I hope to see the people there set at liberty as those of Asconel have already been."

The words died in the silent room. Finally Vix went to Spartak's side and stood gazing down at him.

"You're right," he said. "And if you want a ship and a pilot, say the word." He put out his hand.