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John Rackham



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# **THE DOUBLE INVADERS**

**by**

**JOHN RACKHAM**

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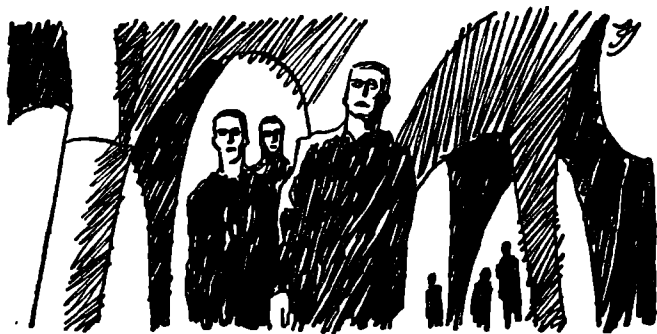
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**THESE SAVAGE FUTURIANS**

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## PROLOGUE

**E**VEN THE BEST rule may have to be broken eventually. By the time men of Earth had made cave-homes on Luna, pressurized bubble-cities on Mars, and air-cooled dehumidified residences on Venus, a whole code of hard rules had been made. By that time Man was no longer Earth-man, but Solarian, and the Solarian Union was a seven billion strong free-wheeling federation of every race, creed and color, managing to exist under a wide spectrum of environmental conditions. The code was respected; it had to be. By that time the spirit of adventure was not dead, merely a trifle subdued. When, with many a falter and abortive attempt, Solarian Union ships began to cast wider, stepping off into the big dark of interstellar space, the code went along.

Part of it went "Thou shalt not interfere . . ." and was modified to mean, "If you come across any planets already settled by an intelligent life-form, lay off!" That rule was underlined by the tragic and bloodstained history of Man's past, of the multitude of minor races and cultures that had been defiled, diseased, and eventually destroyed by contact with some "advanced" culture. So the watchword was "Ap-

proach with caution; keep clear; observe—first! If somebody already lives there, go on by.”

Marching alongside that rule was another, the product of hard-won maturity. Solarian Man's leap into space was in no sense a prelude to conquest. At most it was a technical achievement serving the oldest instinct of all: to see what was on the other side. So every ship that stood off and warped into the big dark was equipped with the finest and most efficient long-range snooping facilities Solarian science could provide out of many centuries of experience in such things. If a few nice new shiny planets could be found, vacant, there would be colonists to follow. But Solarian Man was just that little bit too sensible, now, to want to fight somebody else for living room.

Rules make sense only if they are known to and respected by all parties involved. It happened that as S.U. ships leaped further and further into the unknown the time came when they discovered Zorgan. And Zorgan had a different set of rules entirely. The first ships to brush the fringe of the expanding sway of Zorgan performed precisely as the code directed. They kept discreet distance; they observed and recorded, studied and understood. And then they came home with the news. They conveyed their own shock and horror to the billions of the Solarian Union, who were equally shocked and horrified. Out of the shock came urgency, and a decision. Certain rules would have to be bent, even broken. There would have to be a plan. There was—a plan that went against everything that had been so painfully learned. But there was no other way.



"It's a pretty little planet," Otto Karsh remarked, not trying to make a point or contradict anyone else's, just letting it go as a statement. He was the right-hand man of three who sat in the super-control cell and studied the strategy-computer's recordings and evaluations. Mike Swann, left-hand of the three, spared a moment from watching figures to agree.

"Pretty now. It won't be when we're done with it."

Between them, Denzil Bragan sat silent, watching the displays, now and again turning his dark eyes on the main-screen picture of the planet itself. If he heard their comments, he gave no sign. At just the right angle he could see the ghost-reflection of his own face in the glass window of an instrument-box where moving fingers of infrared painted symbols on sensitive paper. A long-jawed, lean, saturnine face, not designed to smile very readily; the face of a hard-minded ruthless man. The face fitted his job, and he reminded himself, again, that it was no more than that. A job that had to be done, pretty planet or not. He said as much, dividing the comment indifferently between his colleagues.

"We have a job to do. Nothing else matters."

"I know it's a job." Karsh took him up stolidly, hunching his thick shoulders. "It'll get done, but there's no law that says I have to like it."

Bragan let it go at that. At his back the critical-analysis elements of the computer kept up an erratic dit-dit . . . dit-dit-dit . . . of activity as they swallowed, digested and regurgitated the last few thousands of data-bits about the planet down there. It was not strictly necessary to have the very last fractions of that information. There was more than enough on the strategy board now for their purpose. They had a workable picture. But they waited, just the same, for Bragan to give the word. And he waited for the last dregs to come up, because this was an operation that had to be done exactly by the book, like it or not.

On Bragan's left, Swann stirred restlessly in his seat. "They are not going to like it, down there, when we hit them. They are going to think the sky fell in on them."

Bragan didn't even spare him a glance. Swann was the youngest of the triad command, volatile, handsome in a flashy dark way, an impulsive extrovert. He was the expedition's expert on manpower and personnel, the trooper's angle on actions. Bragan said "Study your data, mister."

"I already have. So far as I'm concerned, it's all in. All right, so the computer is still chewing out the tenth decimal places, but who needs it? We know everything we need to take that planet—like that!" and he extended one hand and curled the fingers into a fist.

"This is no time for heroics, or stupid gestures. We will take the planet according to the technique of Zorgan, modified by the computer in accordance with the data as found. All the data." As if spurred by his words, the analyzer let go with a burst of clicking, clanged completion, and fell silent. Bragan scanned the final readings then sat more erect.

"That appears to be satisfactory. Now for Stage Two." He reached for the general address microphone, pushed a button for attention.

"Hear this, all units. Denzil Bragan, Supreme Executive, speaking. Stage One is complete. I will summarize. The planet is Scarta. It has one culture and one race who call themselves Scartanni. We have had time to learn most of their folkways, values and habits. You have all studied their language and can speak it. They appear to be a peaceful people, with no weapons. They appear to pose us but little in the way of threat or resistance. But, I remind you, we do not know *all* about them. We have rehearsed our strategy and plan of attack several times and you are all familiar with it. But, I remind you again, there is much we do not yet know. I warn you to be on the alert at all times, ready to modify, to adjust, to adapt to novel situations. Keep your strategy-computers fully operational at all times. Leave nothing to good fortune or chance." He paused for effect, then went on. "You all know your targets. Five major continents, six principal cities, one to each ship. The cities are to be taken, subdued and held, with minimum damage, no unnecessary violence or killing, and no heroics. This is a job of work. Unit Commanders take over and go when ready. Out!" He moved a switch to connect him with the commander of the ship he was in, and said, "It's all yours, Captain Slatt."

Then he sat well back in his chair and fell to brooding over the situation, the broad picture. He knew it better than anyone, and it was his job to coordinate the entire operation, and accept responsibility for it. Swann was responsible for the troop-movements and handling, Karsh for the technology and armament, but Bragan was the supreme arbiter of all. And he was not at all happy, although he would never have admitted it, and his unease was no more than an intuition. In theory the operation ought to go like a well-oiled wheel as the result of expert observation and planning.

Scarta had been diligently studied. The planet had no moon. It may have had one, a long time back in its formative history, but now it had three loose globular clusters of fragments, balls of rubble and dust spaced equilaterally in orbit slightly less than a quarter of a million miles out from the surface. Linking those glowing rock-aggregations was a broad semi-luminous band of fine dust like a ribbon of moonlight across the sky. Hidden just beyond one of those clusters the six ships of the invader had watched and listened to and studied Scarta until they had everything they needed to know. Now, in his mind's eye, Bragan saw them move, to separate in silence and begin the long spiraling drop down into the atmosphere, down to the surface. Black, those ships were, black as the cold night they came from, with neither insignia nor name, only a number.

Bragan's ship, Unit One, was slightly larger than the rest simply because it had to carry this chamber that was set aside for the triad of command, the men who were ultimately responsible. Because Unit One was larger, and because it carried the masterminds and was flagship, it had chosen for target the largest city on Scarta, the city of Stopa. It was, Bragan mused, the planetary capital, if there was such a thing on this planet. He caught at the qualification and wondered about it, and about all the other little oddities their study had turned up, about Scarta and its people. Spy-devices had seen, the computer had recorded and shown, but it had offered no comment, nor rational explanation. For six ships to plan and execute the cold-blooded conquest of an entire and nonoffensive planet, Bragan mused, was a hell of a nerve. But Zorgan techniques, strategy, power and skill had done it before a hundred times

and more, with never a miss. Zorgan couldn't miss, because Zorgan was geared for just about anything. For all its oddities, there was no chance that Scarta would prove to be an exception.

Bragan tied the end of that train of thought, took up another. He felt the first sway and surge of thrust and control as the pilot juggled for an approach attitude. This ship was a fighting-machine from the core on out, heavily armored and formidably armed. It held a hundred highly-trained, trigger-fit fighting men, every one capable of being a deadly menace on his own, or cooperating as one of a squad, as needed. As Swann had said, the Scartanni would think the sky had fallen in on them. Still unhappy, Bragan shifted to the long view, of the planet itself. It was a jewel in every sense. The axial tilt was negligible, seasonal variation minor, the overall climate close to ideal.

In a flight of fancy he imagined himself standing down there looking up at the night sky. No moon, but three glowing clouds of cool fire and a broad ribbon of phosphorescence. It would be attractive for anyone with eyes to appreciate. No near neighbors in the system. One small semi-molten lump close in to the primary, and three gas-giants far out. But that night sky also mounted the great red lamp of Betelgeuse, only thirty light-years away, and the hard blue glare of Rigel two hundred and fifty lights further off. He thought, with that kind of sky and nothing close at hand to offer temptation, those people down there had never even begun to develop space-flight. A sudden squeeze of deceleration made him grunt and sag into his chair and he wasted a futile moment wishing that his own race had been similarly spared. It would have saved a lot of trouble for everyone.

If they had been so restricted, he mused, his people might have been driven in on themselves to solve some of their more personal problems. By the surface evidence the Scartanni had done it. A whole planet of people with only one speech, one culture, one broad set of social values, with only minor variations here and there. And nowhere in the vast hoard of data gathered so painstakingly over the weeks was there so much as a sign of violence, conflict, rivalry or war, not in speech, custom or attitude. That was one of the oddities for which the computer had no solution to offer. Not a

superstitious man, Bragan resisted the temptation to feel awed at such perfection. *We*, he thought wryly, *are about to change all that, once and for all!*

The ship was bouncing now, riding the gathering shock-waves of impact with the atmosphere, and he abandoned his meditations and gave attention to the picture on his screen. It shimmered with heatwaves as the tortured air screamed past. The ship slid down and moved rapidly across a broad continent, running delicately and with deliberate intent just within the dark fringe of dawn. Over the shuddering and bouncing he felt a thud, and again, and a third, in rapid succession.

On his left, Swann murmured, "There go the gas-buckets now."

Peering, Bragan could just make out the fine lines, and then the discreet and momentary blue glow as three large projectiles exploded quietly and dispersed knockout gas into the prevailing wind. And there, dead ahead now, was Stopa. Although it was the largest city Scarta had to offer, it was not big in itself, and its population was little more than a million people. This, too, was characteristic of the people. They didn't gather into city-masses, or extensive conurbations. Nor did they seem to favor anything in the way of industrial extension. From the data gathered in preparation for the invasion, it seemed the Scartanni could put up a high standard of manufacture, but they made only those things they had immediate need for, and only as many as required. Not the other way around. The idea of making things by mass and then trying to drum up a market for them had never taken root here.

Bragan remembered the long and trenchant discussions that little item had provoked among his staff. There were those, like Swann, who claimed it proved the Scartanni simple and stupid, missing the good thing that was under their noses. But others, like Karsh, maintained that this was the rational and logical thing to do, and was evidence of intelligence. Bragan took neither side, nor did he express an opinion. He merely noted and filed it away for some future time.

Now, as the ship slid over Stopa, the pilot stood on his retrojets and threw in multi-gauss braking fields to check the

headlong flight and bring the ship around in a swooping arc. Out went three more gas-charges, flooding the sleeping city with invisible vapor. Keen eyes scanned the scene down there for a suitable place to land. Bragan began to feel tension as the ship heeled, rolled and went around, then zoomed down, neatly and efficiently, onto the broad green expanse of a park-like area close to the center of the city.

In the central control-room three pairs of eyes watched the brisk and workmanlike behavior of their own ship, and gave a careful eye to the relayed information from the other five. This was part of the pattern. The overall plan was definite, but permitted minor variations, and all ships checked with each other so that information and experience might be shared and multiplied. With a gentle jar the ship sat down, and noises dwindled, changed, set up a new feel. Not wasting a moment, the ramp-doors slid open and the troopers went out, by fives, leaving one squad of five to keep the ship. There would be little or no opposition yet. Dawn was half an hour away. Karsh swung his chair to study a profile and plan of the city as the computer rendered it, amending and refining on long-distance studies with the new data gathered on the run-in.

"That looks like City Hall," he said; "that big gray-white oval building. It's a natural for zero-reference." He took up a microphone and relayed the suggestion to Captain Slatt. Now every man out there would be able to locate himself precisely in his reports.

"This part is simple," Swann declared, sitting back and watching the symbols come up on the screen. "Four gas power stations, one transport H.Q., one radio station, one water plant, two airfields, three major food-processing complexes, three hospitals. . . ."

Bragan watched with only half his attention. He knew what was happening. The troopers out there, each one encased in rugged fiber-armor, aided by lift-jets, armed with an arsenal of weapons, and in constant touch with the rest of his five, those men knew what to do, and were doing it. Take, immobilize, put out of action, take the control-staff, take hostages, take charge! And they did it. By the time the pearl-pink dawn had come to tint the sky, Karsh could click

his tongue and express satisfaction. Swann had his own characteristic reaction.

"Smooth as a snake's belly. No opposition at all!"

But Bragan had his ear cocked to the Scartanni radio bands. These people had a planetwide radio network that operated on a bunched-pulse F.M. system, a method that had given the invaders considerable trouble to crack and listen to. Instead of a continuous carrier-wave with superimposed modulations, their transmitters fired a one-every-second burst of signal compressed into a one-tenth second "beep" that didn't mean a thing unless and until you had the receiving equipment to trap the signal packets and stretch them again. Nor were they easy to trap, because there was no constant signal to give a lead. As Bragan listened now there were calls coming in all over the bands. He could catch names of villages and even place some of them on their spots on the map. Feldeen, Petwin, Lettree, Gorset, Tarat, Illsine . . . the whole northern half of the continent was in a ferment.

"And they're all trying to talk to Stopa," he muttered. "They get up early here." He moved a switch and asked the radioman to get him one station at random and hold it. In a moment his loudspeaker made a bell-tone call-signal and a brisk female voice, carrying anxiety but nothing more, yet, said:

"Stopa Central. This is Tarat calling Stopa Central. Are you hearing me?" Bragan reached for the microphone that was linked in to the same band. The voice went on. "Tarat to Stopa. We registered a large mass descending, to strike in or close to your area, but have detected no impact. What news? Tarat to Stopa, please reply, if you hear me."

Bragan cleared his throat, readied his tongue for the unfamiliar sounds of the language, and said: "This is Zorgan. Hear me, Tarat, and anyone else who may be listening. This is Denzil Bragan, Supreme Executive of the Zorgan Fleet now on Scarta. The object you saw was a vessel, a ship from space. Unit One of our fleet. Zorgan has taken your city of Stopa. Other ships of Zorgan have taken your other major cities all over your world. I call on all of you to surrender."

"Surrender?" The female voice from Tarat repeated the

Scartan word as if she had never heard it before. Then, abruptly: "If we refuse?"

Bragan scowled at the instrument in his hand. That, he thought, was a very fast reaction. No time wasted in doubt or recrimination, or even shock and surprise. Straight through to the key point.

"That would be foolish. You have no choice. I repeat, we hold Stopa. We have and hold the power and water supplies, the food stocks, the radio station, and the transport center. We hold prisoner almost all the city's leading citizens and people in authority. Also many women and children. As I speak, they are safely held. Unless you surrender, everyone, they will be killed." He made no attempt to soften the harsh words, but waited a breath for them to sink home, then added: "I give you one day. Until sunrise again, tomorrow."

Tarat was silent for as long as he could have counted five slowly, then the female voice declared, flat and positive: "We will not surrender!" And there was a single chime, and then silence.

"She hung up." Bragan pushed the microphone away and frowned at it, shaking his head. "Whoever she was, she made up her mind fast. Too fast. If they all think that rapidly we could be in for a shock or two."

"They are going to need something more than fast reaction-time to bother us!" Swann snorted. "Take a look at the board. Effective resistance, nil. One or two have needed an extra whiff of gas, or a mild stun-bolt to make them behave, but that's all. Not a weapon among them!"

"I'll go with that." Karsh nodded. "Mind you, there are queer features to it, but the whole planet is queer in some ways." He furrowed his square hard-planed face and scratched his jaw as he went on: "You take that gas-power setup they have. Fully automated on a feedback principle against use. It's hydrogen. Simple enough to make. They pump it to individual fuel-cells all over the city, so every block and street, every big building, has all the electricity it could ever need. It's safe, and clean, and efficient. And yet this is an agrarian economy! They have technology and don't use it. They have radio. And air transport. And yet they're almost all farmers! And look at this city! With that



kind of technology and resources it should be huge. But it's little more than a village. Less than a million people. And no police, no military, no weapons, nothing! I don't get it."

"Why grumble?" Swann grinned. "Makes it all the easier for us, doesn't it? We have them by the throat already. When the rest of them wake up from the gas, they'll know it, but by then we'll have them nailed down so tight it will hurt. It's a breeze!"

"It is an operation," Bragan reminded them coldly. "Karsh is right to be anxious. What we can't explain we can't predict. It is not so much the fact that they are agrarian. That is a puzzle, not a problem. They have obviously chosen to keep their technological development within bounds. It can be done. It is not an inevitable process that automation and cybernation must dominate to the exclusion of all else, but a matter of choice. We could have made the same decision, once. What must concern us is why they so chose. And that is a matter of understanding them as a people. We already know this much, that they think and react extremely quickly. That woman of Tarat—it is that little village there, about forty miles north of the city—she heard and understood me instantly. And she stated, with barely time to think, 'We will not surrender.' Brief and to the point."

"She doesn't know the score yet," Swann scoffed. "None of them do."

"No? I thought I explained it adequately. Very well, think of this point, then. They have no space-flight technology whatever; we know that much. Yet she spoke of an object descending, estimated its destination and remarked that there was no impact. I told her that we were from space, were alien. And she accepted it without bothering to comment. Think what you like, I tell you that is a fantastically unorthodox reaction, in these circumstances!"

"All right." Swann shrugged. "Karsh said it for you. They're queer. But we still have them by the throat, and come nightfall they'll know it, and they will sing a different tune."

Over the next few hours a steady stream of reports came in to back up Swann's optimism. All the pre-planned objectives were taken and their key personnel, where present, were secured and bound against the time when the sleep-

gas wore off. From cues and clues, pictures and documents, many citizens of authority had been taken, identified, and held. The radio station was now transmitting at regular intervals a slightly expanded version of the speech Bragan had made. There could be little doubt that the grim message was now covering the entire planet. But there was no detectable reply of any kind.

"Thinking it over," Karsh guessed. "A thing like this takes time to sink in."

Bragan didn't agree, but he kept his doubts silent. To him the flat contradiction did not make sense. Lightning-fast reactions one time, drawn-out delay the next; that just didn't add up. He preferred to think that the Scartanni were hatching something. He wondered what? And how, if they were maintaining radio-silence, could they possibly coordinate their effort, whatever it was? He wasn't apprehensive, just curious. There was an itch at the back of his mind that he couldn't scratch, a conviction that somewhere amid the mass of data was a fact, or several facts, which, if shuffled into the proper pattern, would provide a clue to the mystery. He felt it. He didn't strain at it. It was one of those things the subconscious could handle far better than any amount of conscious effort. He would just have to wait.

## II

THE SCARTAN SUN had climbed high and was standing almost at noon when the first cracks in the serene perfection of the operation began to show. The overseeing triad were still at their posts, but had relaxed enough to take a scratch meal, and were now listening to the sporadic reports coming in to Unit One's operational control. They heard the appeal come in from a squad working the northwest boundary of the city.

"Squad-leader Four-B, mopping up as instructed"—the voice sounded good and irritable—"area Northwest Six, close to hospital, approximately three miles the far side of it. We are stuck with a complex of buildings, semi-isolated and seemingly related to each other, yielding high-power energy readings all over the dial. Two men hit and out of action

with what looks to be severe burns from some kind of beaming device. Could be laser. Need a back-up and advice." There was a moment of flurry as acknowledgments and instructions whiplashed to and fro, and assistance was re-deployed. Karsh sat up, hoisted an eyebrow.

"That sounds like some kind of laboratory, or research outfit."

"The wonder is," Bragan murmured, "that we haven't struck one sooner. There must be several. Technology doesn't just happen."

Swann's reflex grin grew hard edges. "So—they can hit back when they have a mind to. I wonder how they came to miss the gas?"

"Could be any one of a dozen ways," Karsh hazarded. "If it is a research outfit they'd have protective clothing, masks against fumes and acid vapors, probably air-conditioned chambers. And so on. Point is, we need to know just what they have there. Pass the word to your side not to smash up that plant any more than they have to."

"Just like that?" Swann sneered. "How would you feel out there, knowing some gook is trying to burn out your guts, and head-office says treat 'em gently? Gently! We're kid-gloving them as it is!"

Before Karsh could snarl back a retort another thickly-disgusted voice growled for attention.

"Squad-leader Eleven-A, section West, three miles up-river from the last bridge. We have turned up something that looks like a heavy engineering plant. The Scarts are throwing things at us in quantity. Steel rods, solid slugs, small canisters with explosive charges, stuff like that. Stand-off. We can't get closer without getting rough. Advise!"

The triad hushed to listen to the prompt instructions. "Stay on the ground. Employ all available cover. Try gas and smoke screens. Am sending Eleven-B, Nine-A, Nine-B to reinforce. Set stunners to maximum. Power stepped up this end. Do not demolish or incendiarize unless absolutely necessary."

Swann made a sour face and squinted at Bragan. "Making your point for you," he muttered. "For a people with no record of war or weapons, they catch on real quick. What the hell kind of weapons throw solid slugs?"

"Old stuff!" Karsh told him promptly. "Primitive, but effective. The logical extension to heaving rocks with the muscles. All sorts of ways of doing it, especially if that is an engineering shop. Gas-expansion devices such as steam, compressed air or explosive chemical mixtures, even hydraulics. Or they could be using springs. Centrifugal force, even. A good engineer could dream up a dozen offhand. And they'll have oxygen on tap, to counteract the gas. Also protective clothing. But so what? Wait until they stop a full-voltage stun-bolt or two. Then you'll hear them holler. We have plenty in reserve yet." He glanced up and back to a master-dial set in the wall, and Bragan followed his gaze.

On that dial a slim black needle swung to indicate the total quantity of power being beamed out from the ship to all the trooper-armament out there. Power for stun-guns, for beamer-burners, for armor-lift-and-assist servo-motors, for jet-jumpers. Gross quantities of power going out by microwave, yet it was only a fraction of the quantity available, of the raw power that the ship was receiving by a similar microwave link from high above. Anchored up there, one to each of those glowing rock-and-dust aggregates, were three big collector dishes, each one drinking in power from the planet's primary, and beaming it down to the invading ships on the surface.

Zorgan thought of everything, Bragan mused. That dial back there had figure symbols climbing by powers of ten, and the needle, at this moment, had moved barely the first fifth of its sweep. Moreover, had this been a full-scale Zorgan operation, mounted against a known opposition likely to prove obstinate, there would have been a hundred times the back-up. Multiples of collector dishes, ranks and relays of troop-carriers and heavy weapons, huge monitors and parent-ships, with troops and weapons and resources gross enough to smash any opposition, even to split the planet if necessary. In this case, against one peaceful unarmed planet, they had enough and to spare.

The day dragged on to the accompaniment of sporadic reports and the irregular chatter of the systems-analyzer computer as it put up the pattern of conquest for everyone to see. But those two trouble-spots continued to hold on doggedly. Swann kept his attention on them, itching to advise

but not wanting to interfere unless called on. And Bragan kept a covert, uneasy watch on Swann. He had no question about the man's abilities. Swann was brilliant in his field, or else he would not have made the grade this far. But he had a tendency to get passionately and emotionally involved in the action. And, for this operation, that was not a good thing to do. This was more a time for being withdrawn and impersonal, for concentrating on making the operation work like the machine it was. Like Karsh, for example.

The technology expert had his problems, but he was handling them in the approved manner. A sub-headquarters was being established in the Stopan City Hall. Squads reported they had captured the senior landholder and seven lesser landholders, who, between them, owned virtually all the ground the city stood on. There was also a swarm of other involved people, mostly staff and assistants. And more than a hundred women and children. Reports and recommendations flashed back and forth in a steady stream. The hostages were being brought out of the gas by twos and threes, for questioning. But there was a growing dilemma. The sub-headquarters senior officer reported back, sounding thoroughly frustrated.

"They are a stiffnecked bunch of beggars. All of them! We give them the situation as it stands. And they understand us perfectly, no doubt about that. They *say* so, dammit! But beyond that, no comment. They just clam up!"

"Passive resistance," Captain Slatt assumed, but the reply came back fast and firm.

"Not them! Every damn one of them is boiling inside. You daren't turn your eye off them for a second if they're loose. We lost a few that way, in the first few minutes. Now we bind them and keep them bound. They're holding in. Clamped down. You can see it. Like bombs waiting to go off. Looks like they don't even know *how* to be scared!"

Karsh hunched his shoulders and offered a stare to Bragan, who reached for a switch to talk to Captain Slatt.

"Carry on with routine, Captain. If they won't talk, all right; let's not waste time trying to force them. Perhaps they won't be quite so stubborn by dawn."

"Very good. This senior landholder seems to be their most prestigious personality in the area, and as this is visibly their

largest city, it could be that he is equivalent to their president, or leader of some kind. If they have such a thing."

"It's worth noting, Captain. Keep him isolated."

"Name is Mordin. Hallex Mordin."

"Right. I'll talk to him myself, in the morning. If I can break him it might induce the rest of them to be a bit more rational. We do not wish to execute them unnecessarily. That would be wasteful."

Bragan pushed the microphone away and relaxed back in his seat. That was part of the Zorgan way of doing things too. If there was no other way, you collared the top people and brought pressure to bear. You executed them, eventually, if they would not bend. But you tried to bend them first, and then use them. It had nothing to do with tenderness or compunction, just plain efficiency. There was very little worth in a dead man.

The Scartan sun crept halfway down the sky and still those stupid small pockets of resistance held out. Bragan noted them on the display and shook his head. To Swann he said, "Intervene. Stop that. If they get the notion they can hold us up we'll have nothing but trouble from here on. Get them!"

Swann bared his teeth in a ferocious grin and buttoned for a report on the current state. Slatt put him through to Eleven-A squad leader. The trooper came through sounding disgusted.

"We made a few small gains at first with max stun-power, but in the last two hours—nothing! This is the damndest kind of place to get your back covered without risk. No usable cover at all. Their building materials are all of some kind of compacted powder-brick, fragile as hell. No guts in it. A man can punch his way through easily. The Scarts have whipped up some kind of screen, body-screen of wire-mesh with a trailing earth, so that it shorts out most of the stun-bolt kick. They still feel it. We can hear them holler and see them run, but we can't knock them down!"

"How do they hit back?" Swann wanted to know.

"A new gadget, a lulul It's a thing something like a welding-torch with a ten-foot flame hot enough to melt sheet alloy. And they have it out on the end of a telescopic rod,

up to thirty feet! So far as we can tell, there's thirty or thirty-five of them still going, and they all have one!"

A report was ready from the Four-B squad leader, and his tale was of a similar hazard. Again there were the flanged-up body screens to cancel out the stun-bolts, and a lively resistance of all kinds of irritations, ranging from corrosive and odoriferous sprays to odd and obviously spur-of-the-moment incendiary and explosive projectiles.

"No more laser-burners, though," the leader declared, "because they don't have power anymore. We cut their gas supply." He sounded aggrieved. Swann turned his fierce grin on Bragan.

"You called the turn, all right. These people are quick on the draw. Stiffnecked too. They must know they haven't a prayer, but they keep right on. They must be thinking we are slow. So we will change that right now."

Bragan nodded. This was the book according to Zorgan. A valiant and resourceful slave is worth much, but a conceited one is dangerous. He saw Swann link-in his microphone with Slatt and the two squad-leaders, and order:

"Up one stage. Cancel stunners, switch to ultra-sonics, dazzlers and peace-gas where indicated. Liquidate those two areas fast. Grab as many good-condition prisoners as possible!" He snapped the switches over and murmured, "Anybody want to bet they don't cook up a fast defense against these in a hurry?" He got no takers, and that was his loss, because his estimate was accurate. Within the hour those two red spots had been eliminated from the battle-board, and the rest of the action was strictly routine.

Bragan listened detachedly to the constant stream of reports and information coming in, watched it being broken down and fed into the system, to reappear as computational symbols on the big board. Data was coming in too from the other five ships. With minor variations, the pattern was the same in all cases. The invaders had barreled through with only fractional losses, no more than a score of men injured and out of action all told. And about three times that number of casualties on the opposing side. *Great strength can be gentle*, he thought, listening to sunset watches being set up and the routine thousand and one items of settling in. But, for all the many hundreds of captives and hostages, again

the routine was the same. No comment. He scowled at that. It was all wrong.

A peaceful planet, with no history of war at all and no experience of punitive weapons or techniques, such a planet should be helpless. Defenseless. By all accounts they *had* been. But now? Their reactions were lightning fast, their ingenuity enormous, and they were seemingly immune to panic or fear. And he just did not believe it. There had to be some bitter reason why *all* the Scartanni hostages, without exception, stubbornly refused to talk, or bend. They were highly intelligent, therefore they must know what the score was.

"They are waiting for something," he mused, "anything, waiting for—what? Any man who refuses to give up in the face of certain destruction must have something to prop his hopes on. But what?"

Swann, as always, had a simple answer. "It's shock!" he explained in the tone of a man who firmly believes all psychosociology is no more than applied common sense. "Stands to reason, doesn't it? What else would you expect? We fall on them out of a clear blue sky, like nothing they have ever seen before, and we smother them. They try to kick back—naturally—and we smack them down good and hard. So they fold up in shock. Obvious. We give them a night to sleep on it and think it over, and you'll see, in the morning they will start falling apart at the seams!"

Bragan didn't argue. It wouldn't have achieved anything except bad feeling from Swann. In any case, it was no part of his task to delegate the thinking on decisions. Those problems were his own and he kept them to himself. It was a lonely task, but the man at the top is always lonely.

"We will post watches," he said, all at once. "Karsh, put me down for the middle trick, from midnight to four. I have some work to do with the computer."

"Watches? Us?" Karsh opened his eyes wide for a moment then shrugged. "All right. I have some data I'd like to break down myself. That will keep me till midnight. Mike, you're elected from four in the morning."

Bragan pushed back his seat before the bickering could begin and announced: "I'm going topside to have a look at some fresh air. I'll be back in time to take over." He stretched



wearily then made his way up through the many ramps of deck levels to the topside blister. Here, from under a glass-ite bowl-roof he saw the evening sky just darkening into sunset. The one-man lookout stiffened into attention at sight of him, made a salute, then relaxed again, visibly bored. That, Bragan thought, symbolized the whole operation. Straight-forward routine, and easy. Too easy. But what else would anyone expect, here? One planet, unified in culture and speech, with no internal factions or nationalism. And no space-travel. With that sky, why would they bother? He stared up at it now as dusk marched across it. There was a great glow-mass of silver just setting, and another just rising over his shoulder. Between them, like a scarf of light flung across the purple dusk, was the trail of dust, glowing softly. A pathway of silver across the sky. He wondered why there was no mention of it in the Scartan speech? One would have expected a complex and involved mythology employing these great sky-wonders.

And they were wonders. Now with the great red lamp of Betelguese on one edge of the ribbon of fire, it shimmered with ghost-rainbows in pastel tints, and was silvered bright under the bow by the harsh white glare of the beacon of Rigel. Bragan's stare settled on Rigel and he forgot about beauty. There, in that direction and beyond, lay the territory of Zorgan. The dread hosts, humanoid outwardly, but totally and utterly dedicated to one end, one drive. To grow and spread and take. To find, and strike, and overthrow, and take. Zorgan the mighty, the inflexible, the irresistible, the eventual rulers of the whole Galaxy. It was in their history.

Once, long ago, by some freak of evolution, a small race of people on a small planet had grown great in wisdom and understanding, just for one glorious moment in time. They had been wise and peaceful. They had passed away, leaving their heritage of wisdom to a different kind of people altogether. Knowledge is impersonal, is good or bad depending on who uses it. Zeeral left knowledge. Zorgan applied it. And now Zorgan was a wide-flung fringe of might that enclosed and fed on a hundred or more planetary systems like a virus on a body. But a cunning virus, that took care to keep the body alive to provide sustenance.

Bragan shivered and withdrew his attention from such somber thoughts, narrowing down to the immediate objective. The gray masses of Scopa lay all around him, dark bulks in the twilight. Scartanni architecture, he thought, peering at it. There was a school of thought that maintained you could deduce a lot about a people by studying the way they built. Bragan knew that down under his feet, in the systems computer, was a great mass of data bits about these people. And out there were their artifacts.

But understanding—that was something else again, something utterly beyond a computer. A machine, no matter how sophisticated, cannot achieve understanding. No man living could hope to learn more than ten million statements in a lifetime. A good computer could start with that many in its store and go on to accumulate ten times as many, but it could never achieve understanding. Only a man could do that, and he could be wrong.

Bragan shivered again. From his memory came a line of wisdom from an ancient writer, "They well deserve to have, that know the strongest and the surest way to get." It might well be true, but his memory also served up the line, from the same source. "The lion thrusteth forth his paw and wounds the earth, if nothing else, with rage to be o'er-powered." That was the reaction to be expected, and for which he was prepared. But the Scartanni were not reacting to plan. They had hit back, true, at first. But now? Were they going to stay buttoned up and stubborn? He peered again at the shadowy skyline of the city. Nothing big here. Plenty of clean lines and even some grace, but the emphasis seemed to be on open spaces and room to move. Hardly a city at all, by his terms. It was too scattered. For a moment the wisp of an idea tickled the back of his mind, the soft-fingered hint of understanding, and he made himself *not* concentrate on it, hoping to let it come through by itself from some unconscious level. Then he became aware of sound.

It was a far-away muttering, just audible, but it grew louder swiftly. He lifted his head. So did the lookout. Both men stared for the space of a breath, then the lookout cursed feelingly.

"Ask you to get below, sir, fast. That's aircraft—a whole flock of them!" Bragan dived for the down-ladder. Before he had gone down one deck the klaxons were blaring. By the time he had regained his seat in the master control the entire ship was humming softly to the sixty-cycle alternation of the multi-megagauss screens that were encircling it. Those screens of energy, dense enough to lean on, were in many layers, yet they built up and broke down sixty times a second, thus giving synchronized passage to the power-beams from the collector-dishes and the energy supplies going out to the troopers in the field. Those men would hardly notice the switch from D.C. to A.C. unless they had occasion to revert to stunners, where the difference in sound was easily recognizable. Karsh grinned wryly as Bragan fell into his seat.

"Lively group, the Scartannil"

They heard Captain Slatt, cool and terse, instructing the ship's squad. "Topside beamers ready. One-third power, focus twenty degrees intensity. Pick your own targets. Scorch them as they go by."

"Shock, eh?" Karsh growled across at Swann. "You got any more easy answers? By the screen they have twenty-five units in this first wave, and there are so many far-out blips I can't count 'em, coming in from all angles. Shock, hey? The damned sky is full of 'em! Hold onto your teeth; here they come now!"

The many-engined mumble grew suddenly into a snarling roar and one long array of gauges danced and shivered in agitation as the screens repelled whatever it was that impinged on them.

Bragan, squinting as he stared at the fireworks on the detector screen, raised his voice over the racket: "What the hell are they throwing at us?"

"Dropping!" Swann laughed, one sharp hard bark of humorless sound. "Not throwing. And, by the registers, I'd say it was rocks. No—take that back—that was metal!"

The ear-aching shrill whine of disrupting metal atoms was clearly to be heard over the other uproar.

"I want a picture!" Bragan shouted. "Something that makes sense to me. I can't read your damned electronics. A picture!"

Karsh moved a long arm, adjusted controls and produced

a full-color view of the night sky up there. It was quite a display, with bursts and spurts of short-lived flare against the distant glitter of the stars. The thunder of engines faded away, the fire-flares dwindled into fireflies and were gone. Captain Slatt spoke to the beamer-gunners.

"Tighten focus to ten degrees. They're high!"

"Amateurs!" Swann grunted. "Quick on the way they may be. And they can fly. But it takes experience to know the strategic value of hedge-hopping, and lots of practice to be able to do it. These boys are wide open, flying high like that. Whup! Here comes the second wave!"

This time the engine-roar was louder, and Bragan stared in fascination as great swaths of star-images were blanked out by the dark flying craft in wave after wave. The Scartanni were piling it on. The fireworks were something spectacular this time, great spouts and fountains of searing fire and flash, with massive shockwaves filtering through the screens enough to shake the ship gently. Karsh hunched over his instruments, calling the score.

"Those great blooming yellow ones are oil-bombs. That one—and that—those are nitroglycerine or something very like it. And that eye-blinder is incendiary. No mistaking that one. Magnesium and iron-oxide. Thermit, to you. And ferrous shrapnel; look at those sparks! They are really throwing the book at us!"

It must have been even more spectacular from outside, Bragan thought. The assorted debris that slid down around the screens began to accumulate on the ground. It blazed, banged, smoldered or flared according to disposition, as wave after wave of vengeful aircraft came roaring out of the dark with no more than a second or two between each assault. As an example of cooperative effort it was splendid. For results, it was pathetic. And not all the action was one way. Red glows and trailing smoke in the night sky showed that the beamer-gunners were taking their toll. And obeying orders, too. Bragan could appreciate the thinking. Skilled and valiant pilots were valuable. So were aircraft. But prestige counted for something too. There had to be a limit to these passive, cat-and-mouse tactics. After an hour of the inferno, of the senseless and hopeless bombardment, he made

a finger-signal to Swann and took hold of the Scartanni microphone again.

Swann relayed the warning, "Stand by to get rough, Captain. We're going to call 'em."

Bragan cleared his throat, brought the microphone close to shut out the clamor from outside. "This is Zorgan. This is Denzil Bragan, Supreme Executive of the Zorgan Fleet. Your airborne attack on this ship, Unit One, has been allowed to continue long enough to convince you that it is futile. It is a nuisance, but nothing more. I order you to cease. You have one-tenth of a time-unit to withdraw your attack. Any aircraft attempting to injure the ship after that time will be destroyed!" He shoved the microphone away and sighed, "Now we will see just how smart they really are!"

The three men sat and watched the screens as the brief period of grace ticked away. There was no visible letup in the holocaust out there. The black sky was full of snarling craft, storming in from all angles and hell-bent on hitting the ship with anything and everything that came to hand. At last Swann glanced at the clock, saw the sweep-hand click into zero.

"And that's it!" he muttered. They heard Slatt's terse command.

"Full power. Needle-beam. Hit 'em!"

The beamer crews knew exactly what to do, and did it. As the triad watched, five oncoming aircraft burst into flame and flew apart. Then five more. And again five. Bragan set his jaw and counted mentally, until the total had reached two score. And then, abruptly, there were no more aircraft. The night sky grew quiet again. Bragan nodded to himself as he analyzed the result. The Scartanni could learn, and fast! No matter how they ignored his words they had a keen respect for facts. And that was all to the good, was valuable. But the underside of the problem was a different kind of picture. The Zorgan technique for conquest was infinitely flexible and all-embracing, but it depended in the basic sense on a thorough understanding of the people to be conquered. And Bragan felt he did not understand this people at all. There were too many contradictions, too many pieces that didn't fit.

He worried at it from all angles all through his watch

from midnight until four, and slept on it until Karsh called him to a scratch breakfast at eight, but neither method got him any happy solutions.

### III

DETAILED REPORTS had been trickling in all night. Karsh relayed him some of the more choice ones.

"Unit Two had it lively," he said, "when they picked Bafar Down there on the southwest tip of that land mass there. Seems it's oil country. The locals managed to jury-rig some sort of high-pressure spray-supply, almost swamped the ship in crude and then set fire to the whole thing. It took two squads to cut off the oil-jets and three more to douse the blaze."

"Did anybody else have the aerial bombardment?"

"Yes. Three and Four. They handled it the same way we did." Karsh masticated a mouthful, then added: "They've got guts, these Scartanni."

"They have more than that," Bragan growled, and Swann rushed unwisely in with a suggestion.

"I've been thinking," he announced. "This whole puzzle could be simple and obvious; maybe that's why we're missing it. Look; this planet has millions of square miles of untouched countryside. Mountains, hills, forests—and it could be, almost certainly is, crawling with various wild animals. Dangerous. Predatory. Get my drift? All right, the Scartanni are agrarian, a bunch of farmers. But they do know about natural enemies. And I would bet you they know about hunting. So they know about weapons, in that sense. And all you have to do is multiply that up a power or two, and what's so surprising they can whip up heavy weapons off the cuff? Isn't it logical?"

"You talk like a fool!" Bragan had had a bad night and a restless sleep, and he was in no mood to tolerate Swann's ingenuous theories. "Multiplication increases. It does not modify. Multiply one man and you get a mob. No possible exercise of multiplication will get you a coordinated and skilled force! One doesn't arrange and stage a large-scale aircraft attack on a single target by simple multiplication. At

one time or another there must have been almost a thousand aircraft over our heads last night. Just to assemble so many is a major effort in organization. Furthermore, the technique they used was not, in any sense, a multiplication of some hunting technique against a predator. Does a huntsman drop bombs?"

Swann set his jaw and looked sullen against Bragan's withering scorn. Bragan pushed his denunciation further. "Is it a huntsman's technique to instigate and maintain radio silence?"

"Hey!" Karsh sharpened his ears. "That's a point. That's true. But they were organized, all the same; no doubt about that. So how the hell did they do it? What's your theory?"

"I haven't one. There's no theory that will fit. By all the current signs, this is a people ready and waiting for attack, and instantly ready to deal with it within the limits of their abilities. Right? And yet there is nothing in their social framework, habits, or speech-forms, to indicate that they have ever known such a thing. A flat contradiction." He chewed on hard rations for a thoughtful moment then added, "It can only mean there is a hole in our knowledge, something we have either missed or misinterpreted. Something we don't understand, can't explain, and therefore is dangerous!"

Swann bristled at once at the mere hint that the Scartanni could present any kind of menace against Zorgan force, but before he could put his thought into words the intercom sizzled and Captain Slatt came through, his voice indicating unusual tension.

"A highly abnormal situation, sir," he reported. "The sub-headquarters and all hostages there is still secure, but the remainder of the squads and scouts, out on early patrol, all report the same thing. Stopa is deserted!"

"Repeat that last part."

"So far as we have checked, the entire city is deserted. The scouts can't find anyone, anywhere!"

"Understood," Bragan muttered. "Swann?"

The fieldman took over instantly. "Warn all scouts and squads to keep grouped. Do not attempt any deep investigation, tracking down; do not get dispersed. If necessary we can use our own skimmers for anything like that. This may

be a dodge to spread us out. So long as we have the hostages we can afford to let the rest run." He sat back but his face showed he wasn't at ease. Nor was Bragan.

"Dodge, hell!" he snarled. "This is no dodge. Somebody spread the word 'Take to the hills!' And they went, fast. Somebody must have worked hard to coordinate that effort."

"But we've got their head man!" Swann protested, and Karsh nodded.

"All their leading personalities, *and* staff, safely tied up."

"All right," Bragan snapped. "Then they must have some kind of second-string, some underground organization. And good, too. We never heard so much as a whisper of it. Which means"—he hardened his tone—"that this is going to be quite a bit tougher than we thought. We'll have to turn the screw a little." He climbed to his feet. "I'm going to talk to this senior landholder of theirs. Hallex Mordin. If there is an undercover organization, he will know about it. And he'll talk. There are ways to ensure that. Pass word to sub-headquarters that I'm on my way. I'll go and get ready."

The time it took him to struggle into body-armor and to make sure he had a full kit of weapons also gave him an interval to think over the situation. He didn't care for it at all. Why vacate the whole city? Whatever else it might signify, it seemed to indicate conclusively that the Stopans were far from surrender, and that they obviously had a lot more tricks to play. He desperately needed to know just what. But once he was out of the ship, with one trooper along to drive the skimmer and act as guard, he pushed the big problem from his mind and used this chance to observe details.

At first, it was no more than reinforcement for what he had already known. The buildings were widespread, not closely grouped. Thoroughfares and roads were wide. The buildings themselves were not large; none of them high. Even the tallest were no more than four floors, if that. And there was a curiously pervasive subdued quality. Clean lines, simple angles, nothing fancy about the facades and fronts. Even the colors, such as there were, ranged in the lesser pastel hues from gray to green.

He requested the driver to pull in close to one building and stop. He dismounted and went close enough to touch



the stonework. It was as the men had reported last night. A chalky, friable stuff, rough-textured, more like expanded plastic foam than anything else he could think of. Yet it was stone-dust, which would have been easy to aggregate into something much harder. So why did they choose to build with this? He stood back and looked up, then went further back, into the roadway. It wasn't lack of know-how, he decided, because the road and sidewalks were as solid and durable as anyone could want.

He turned away, frowning, and was brought up short by a deep gutter between sidewalk and road. It was about four feet wide and so deep that the bottom was obscured in shadow. Three steps away to his left there was a solid stone bridge across, which he used, then scanned as far as he could see in all directions. The gutters were common everywhere. And the little bridges. That, he scratched his jaw and thought, seemed to indicate provision for torrential rains. In the season. He had seen that kind of thing before. But he would have guessed that one good tropical downpour would just about wash away the dust-block structure.

He climbed back on the skimmer and gave the trooper the go-ahead, his mind full of bewilderment. In a short while he reasoned out that the buildings must be supported by steel corner posts, or something similar, with the walls hanging from them, rather than standing of themselves. It was the only way possible to erect buildings, using that stuff. But why bother? The ever-growing string of questions began to irritate him and he left them gladly as they encountered a quick-marching squad of troopers at a crossroad. He hailed the squad leader and asked about progress.

"Not a soul, sir. Not one man, woman or child. Queer!"

"Did they take things with them, so far as you can tell? What I mean, did they just bolt, or was this orderly?"

"Hard to tell, sir, not knowing what the interiors looked like before. But every place we've been into, they all looked neat and tidy. No signs of upset or damage. Looks like they just walked away and left everything."

Bragan dismissed him and ordered the skimmer on, chewing at the puzzle with even greater irritation now that he could appreciate the impact of its sheer physical size. By comparison with other cities known to him Stopa was small,

but comparison or not, to evacuate something like half a million people in one night, in the dark, silently, is a gigantic feat of organization by any standards. And, over everything else, why?

The skimmer went on to halt in a large open square before a massive gray-white building that was in its own way unique in that it had a flight of solid stone steps leading up to a mighty pair of double doors, elaborately carved. Outside, the troopers of Squad Two stiffened into attention as Bragan went on by and in, into a magnificently proportioned hall. Eyes alert, he noted the same clean lines and lack of ornament, the restrained colors. Size and proportion alone made it a place of dignity and importance. Even the furnishings were starkly plain, solidly crafted of straight-grain dark wood, nothing fancy.

Over against one wall the troopers had set up a multi-channel radio station and computer-access-and-readout. Further along and herded into a corner awaiting him were half a dozen Scartanni prisoners. Bragan exchanged silent greetings with the group-leader lieutenant, then stood awhile to study the prisoners. The first thing he noticed was that they were all, still, securely bound. A plastic cable linked elbows behind and another linked wrists in front. Simple, effective, and uncomfortable. Also they were all linked to each other in a chain, with barely room between them for movement. Bragan returned his gaze to the lieutenant, raised a brow.

"They don't give us any choice, sir. They just don't grasp the notion of parole, or behavior, or anything like it. We've tried. As fast as we turn one loose he tries to make a dash for it, and we have to stun them or club them to make them stop. They don't know when they're beat. It's exactly the same with the women and kids. We have to tie them down, and then tie them together. And then watch them like hawks!"

"Yes. And you can't put them into something secure, can you, not with this queer building material of theirs?"

"We found that one out the hard way, sir. Locked up one bunch in a small room and they went straight out through the opposite wall!"

Bragan nodded. For one awful moment he had the dream-feeling that this whole situation was rapidly becoming as in-

substantial as the stuff of the odd buildings, that it was crumbling between his fingers as fast as he tried to grasp it. He shook off the thought uneasily and swung his gaze back to the line of prisoners.

"Which is Mordin?"

"At the far end, sir."

Bragan nodded and paced slowly along the line, taking his time to study the specimens. Long-range observation had told him that these people were in the human category to within one tenth of one percent. This close he saw that the correspondence was even closer, the differences nonexistent. They were as human as he was. But here again—he was feeling for nuances now—there was that impression of plain simplicity, lack of frills and ornament.

The three women in the lineup were handsome, could have been beautiful with just a little artifice, were attractive without it. He studied them candidly, saw only chill indifference in their faces and eyes. Clean, he thought, and well-groomed, but confined to essentials. No trimmings. Clothing, for example. Shoes made by the simple method of cutting a piece of hide some inches larger than the foot outline, threading a thong, and pulling the whole thing tight in front. Dress—all alike—of some fine-knitted wool-stuff, very fine and white for the single undergarment that he labeled unglamorously as "drawers," and thicker knit and various colors for the single overpiece that was made—he considered one—by taking a long strip two-and-a-half feet wide, making a hole in the middle for the head, and catching it together at the sides with buttons. A kind of tabard-tunic. He had reached the end.

He stood and stared at Hallex Mordin the way he would examine a prize animal. Mordin stared back at him with indifference, a big broad-shouldered man with something reminiscent of an oak tree about the way he stood. Gray in his thick hair and deep-grooved lines on his face marked him as about sixty years old, maybe more. That face was square, hard-planed, but by no means obtuse. There were hints of intelligence and quiet watchfulness. Bragan took out the notion of "oak tree" and substituted "coiled-spring" as he sensed the atmosphere of explosive power here. A man to be reckoned with.

"I am Denzil Bragan," he said, suddenly and flatly, without emphasis, "Supreme Executive of the Zorgan Fleet on Scarta. You are Hallex Mordin, the senior landholder of Stopa. Will you talk with me?"

"Why should I?" Mordin demanded instantly, but in a surprisingly mild tone for such a big man.

"Because you are the most important citizen on the whole planet at this moment and I wish to discuss matters with you which affect the well-being of everyone on the planet."

Mordin took a moment to look at the statement, and Bragan got the impression of ruthless thoroughness, that every word and shade of meaning was scrupulously examined. The reply came.

"There is no such idea as the 'most important citizen' in our way of thinking. You, who seem to know our language and our ways so well, should know that much."

"There is a great deal about your people that I do not yet know, just as there is much about us that *you* do not know. For one thing, I *am* the most important person in this force of the Zorgan Empire. I am in command here, over all the Zorgan forces present on the planet. We *do* have such an idea. I am the embodiment of it. I suggest that a discussion between us will be of mutual benefit. But first a question. Have you had anything to eat and drink this morning?"

"My needs have been met. I thank you."

"All right. Now, let me put the large picture to you, as it stands. We have taken your planet."

"All fifteen million of us?" Mordin's voice, still mild, held a tinge of sarcasm. Bragan sailed right past it confidently.

"All fifteen million. Like this. Stopa is your largest city. My ship, Unit One, holds it fast. Five other ships hold your next five major cities in the same manner. We also hold securely all your chief citizens, your people in authority, and many hundreds of women and children. The rest of you, *all* the rest of you, will obey us, will do as we say."

"Or what?" Mordin queried, and again Bragan was shaken by the sheer speed of the response and its lack of emotion.

"If there is trouble, resistance, refusal, call it what you like—if the Scartanni refuse to work for us, to obey our orders, then you will suffer. We will broadcast our instructions

over your radio network. If those instructions are not obeyed, we will count one in every ten of the prisoners we hold, and kill them. And then again, one in ten, and so on. Understand that." Bragan waited a moment for it to penetrate, then went on: "Should the resistance be troublesome we will smash Stopa flat to the ground, destroy it totally. If that does not convince, we will select the next largest city and destroy that. And so on. And the other ships will act in a similar manner. Do you still understand me?" Mordin nodded, his craggy face still watchfully intent.

"That is the general pattern. We can vary it, of course. I tell you all this because I know you are powerless to stop us. This you know, because you have tried and failed. You cannot stop Zorgan. Well?"

Mordin took a full minute to consider, his face giving no clue at all to his thoughts. When he did speak, it was a question. "How long do you think you can keep it up?"

Bragan gave him a hard stare. "When a man is killed do you ask how long he will be dead? Why ask such a question, man? If your people do not see reason, you will not see tomorrow. Could it be any simpler?"

Mordin moved his shoulders in a shrug. "They are not *my* people. I have no people. Such talk means nothing." Bragan digested that, tried a sharper attack.

"You have a wife?"

"There is a woman who shares my life, yes." Both men had used the same Scartan phrase, but Mordin's inflection gave it a subtly different meaning from that which Bragan had intended. He glanced interrogatively at the lieutenant.

"Third one along. Her. Name's Edina cal-Mordin."

Bragan paced along to stand before her, to study her face. Years had been kinder to her than to the old man. She must have been comely once, was attractive still.

"I want your man to cooperate with me," Bragan told her, "to do as I order. If he refuses, you will be killed. What do you say?"

She looked puzzled for a moment, then composed herself. "He will do whatever he thinks best. Why ask me?"

Bragan controlled his face, swung back to Mordin. "You heard? You will obey my orders, or this woman will be killed."

For a moment it seemed that Mordin smiled. Then he shrugged again. "This is fool's talk, meaning nothing. How can I obey what you say, when I have not heard yet what you say?"

Aha! Bragan thought, but kept his face bleak. "Very well, I will tell you now what I want. You will be taken to the radio station. You will speak to your people, to the whole of Scarta. You will make it known to them who you are. Then you will command them to return, in good order, to surrender and do as we order them. You will explain to them that if they do not—"

Mordin shook his head heavily. "This is still fool's talk. No people will obey me, or you. They will not heed my words any more than they have heeded yours. Why should they?"

"Then your woman will die."

"What of it? We must all die sometime."

So far as Bragan could determine, the man was utterly sincere. He felt baffled, but only for a moment. Zorgan had several depths.

"All right," he nodded. "Now I know more about you than I did before. You claim not to fear death. It is a big claim and death can come in many ways. We shall see how true the claim is. Perhaps we can find some way to make you bend, to change your mind. I ask you to think of this. You are a conquered people, whether you realize it yet or not. In the end you will come to know it, and admit it. It lays within your power to choose whether the lesson is hard or easy. Last night some forty of your aircraft, with crews, were destroyed before you learned you could not hurt us. You were warned. That loss was unnecessary. It is no desire on the part of Zorgan to inflict unnecessary suffering or destruction, to kill without reason. That is not the Zorgan way. But what we take we hold, even if it means reducing every city on the surface and killing every last Scartanni. Is that understood?"

"Why tell me?" Mordin retorted evenly. "Tell the people. You talk large words, Bragan of Zorgan. Tell the people!"

"I will. By this time tomorrow I will have something else to tell them. This talk is finished." He turned abruptly away, hooking the lieutenant with a gesture.

In a voice amply loud enough for the prisoners to hear he said, "No more food and drink for them. Nothing. Let them go hungry and thirsty for a while and see what comes of their stubborn manner."

"You mean that?" the lieutenant murmured. "No grub, nothing?"

"They look well-fed to me. A bit of starvation won't hurt. Now, on the matter of this sub-headquarters. This building is useless. They all are, for our purposes. Move out, out there into the square."

"I'd already begun to think something of the kind myself, sir. Stone walls do not a prison make, not this kind anyway."

"Yes. Makes you wonder what the devil the Scartanni do with their jailbirds. Maybe they don't have any. Anyway, you'll have to build, out in the square. You can make a start right away, laying out the site-plan. You'll need ample space for accommodations, and a big stockade, a *big* one. It must be escape-proof and requiring the minimum guard. You know the kind. I'm going back to the ship and arrange for personnel to be sent out to help. And the equipment. Mark me, now! I want that stockade big enough to hold a lot of prisoners. A lot!"

Bragan got back to the ship to find Karsh and Swann keenly interested in how he had managed. They had been studying data from the other ships and had begun to realize just how twisted the situation was. They listened as he gave them the gist of his interview with Mordin.

Karsh commented, "It's a tough one. These laddies don't bend!"

"It's a bluff!" Swann offered. "It's got to be. Nobody holds his life as cheap as all that. Still less his wife's. And that guff about him not being a boss won't work either. They are organized, we've seen that, and you can't have organization without somebody in charge. So it's a bluff!"

"If it is," Bragan pointed out coldly, "we are going to have a hell of a time calling it. I want you two to understand exactly what the position is, because the next and most logical step won't be pleasant, and you need to know why it's necessary. So think of this. What good are reprisals, unless they are known? I can threaten Mordin, or others. I can even

line him and a lot more up against a wall and have them all shot. But what does that achieve, if nobody sees it done?"

Out of a thoughtful silence Karsh muttered, "If only they hadn't all lit out that way!"

"It raises two points," Bragan said. "First, that they really did go, and thus very efficiently got themselves out from under our thumb and out of our reach, not caring one damn about any hostages. That makes Mordin's claim sound valid, doesn't it?" He eyed his companions keenly, then went on.

"Second, let's look at that fact again. Half a million people picked up and went, in a few hours, in the dark, and left never so much as a trace, nor made a sound. Very nice teamwork. Nobody is going to convince me that such a trick was done on the spur of the moment. That took organization!"

"Checks with all the other ships," Karsh whispered, scratching his jaw. "What do we do?"

Bragan scowled as he reviewed his own mind. "We adjust. We are up against a wily and ingenious opposition. They are fighting us not with weapons, or force, because they haven't much of either, but with brains, intelligence, and imagination. So we have to hit them on that level. And here's how. We will first remove all sub-headquarters establishments out of their buildings and into our own. And each sub-station will have a stockade that needs no guarding, or at most just one man on patrol. A big stockade."

"For the hostages," Karsh nodded. "That makes sense. We can't tie up our troopers just keeping watch on balky prisoners. But—"

Bragan halted with a palm. "Then we turn the prisoners loose into the stockade. Solid stone, fused smooth, with no doors. We gas them first, strip them right down to the skin. And leave them. We also wire each stockade with micro-pickups and feed the noise into the Scartanni-network. Then skimmer-patrols go out and quarter the countryside and pick up more and more prisoners. Anybody they can grab. And we strip them, too, and dump them in the stockades. And leave them. No food, no water, no shelter, no clothes—and no out, either. And we will see just how long the Scartanni can hold out."



Swann's face was a study in unbelief. "You can't *do* that!" he protested. "Women and kids, starving?"

"You seem to forget"—Bragan stared him down—"that I am in charge here. I can do it. My job is to take, break and remake this planet, and that is exactly what I am going to do. The first thing is to show the Scartanni so there can be no doubt, that they haven't got a chance, that we are master here."

"But condemning women and kids to starve!"

"Fool! *I'm* not starving them. I am not going to do a thing to them except confine them behind walls. If the rest of the Scartanni want to feed their friends, I won't stop them. Let them come, and bring food. They will be welcomed. That is what I intend to tell them, on their own radio. They have the intelligence, and the imagination, to take it from there."

#### IV

BRAGAN WENT on the Scartanni air at noon, Stopa-time. Activities in the wake of his talk with Mordin had been fast and efficient and he was able to talk over the radio in the sense, mostly, of "this has been done." A people with fast reactions ought to appreciate just how fast he had reacted in his turn. He wasted no time in elaboration.

After introducing himself as before, as the Supreme Executive on the planet, he told them, "I learn that as a people you do not have any great respect for those in authority over you and that you do not feel obliged to obey their orders. That attitude will change. How quickly it changes will depend on you. At this moment Zorgan holds some seven thousand of you prisoner. *From* this moment all prisoners will be held in open stockades, without food, water, shelter or clothing of any kind. If they cry out, or complain, or appeal to you in any way, you will be able to hear them. I cannot make you listen, but I can tell you now that they will remain thus until they die of hunger and exposure, or until you return to your places, until you come to feed them and save them. Their fate is in your hands. The decision is up to you. Make it soon!"

He could keep his voice calm on the radio, or when talk-

ing to his two colleagues, and no one would have guessed from his exterior that he was anything but calm. Yet it was part of his training to be sensitive to moods, and he felt the change in mood, not only of his immediate colleagues, but of all the men under his charge. Karsh had plenty of technical detail to busy him and was not so obviously bothered, but Swann made a poor secret of his feeling that this was *not* the way of a fighting man. Risk and danger, the cut and thrust of action, yes. But the slow wait-out of starvation was not to his way of thinking at all.

Bragan knew exactly what was wrong. This was typical of the fighting man-in-the-field at any time. Muscle-heads, substituting action for thinking. Countless painful and disastrous experiments in the past had demonstrated beyond all doubt that the mentality that is prepared to gamble life and limb in physical combat with an enemy is *not* the mentality to handle dispassionate decisions affecting abstractions like the fate of nations. Bragan knew that his men were uneasy, and he knew why, but he could do nothing about it.

He couldn't even corner his own companions and explain to them, to say to them, "Look here—you feel rotten about what is being done simply because it is immediate, and deliberate. That's natural. But I have to think ahead. A few thousand people now, feeling the pangs, and you can see and hear them. But think what will inevitably happen if we fail, here and now. *That* will be a disaster a hundred times more horrible, and you'll be the prime actors in it!" He couldn't explain, and even if he had, it would have made little difference. No abstract future has half the impact of the here and now.

That was a long day, and he spent a very poor night, his second with little sleep. At breakfast the next morning the atmosphere was bleak. The first skimmer-parties of raiders were due out in an hour. All night, at intervals of an hour, the Scartanni radio had carried a tape of his grim message, with the time between given over to noises from the stockades. The other ships, all over Scarta, had duplicated this pattern. Back from the radio-network, from Scarta, came nothing at all, not a sound. It was to be a war of nerves, and Bragan felt confident his own were tougher than the opposition. *His* problem was his own men. If they failed him he

was done. That was one eventuality not covered by the fabulous Zorgan technique.

He kept a sharp eye on his breakfast companions. Swann was openly restive and truculent in manner, but not to the point yet of open defiance. Karsh, solid and stolid, was harder to read but he looked unhappy. Bragan began to feel a sense of impending doom. That, or something was due to break soon. By the time he had chewed his way through an untasted breakfast he was in the mood to try anything rather than just wait.

He radioed a warning to the stockade, asked them to have Mordin hauled out and brought to the original meeting place. Then he went and got himself into body-armor again, took a skimmer, driving it himself this time, and went once more to the City Hall. Arriving there, he dismissed the trooper who stood guard over the prisoner.

"The man is securely bound," he snapped, "and helpless. I am in no need of protection from him."

Mordin stood as sturdy and unbowed as ever, still as watchfully blank, making no effort to strain against the cables that held him. Naked he looked somehow more powerful than before. Bragan glared at him grimly.

"You are a strange people, Mordin. Would you all rather die than submit? All of you?"

"The question is without meaning." Mordin showed his teeth in what could have been a grin. "Submit to what?"

"To me. To my troops, my superior strength, my orders, my wishes. To Zorgan!" This time Mordin showed some sign of deep thought, and bewilderment.

"You know very little of us, Bragan of Zorgan. I have thought much on what you said before, trying to understand. It seems we Scartanni do not think the way you do. I accept orders and commands from no man, ever. Nor does any man look to me for orders, nor would he take them. We do not tell each other what to do. It is not the way we do things."

"Rubbish!" Bragan barked at him impatiently. "You speak nonsense. You have here a city, and a culture. There are many of you and you work together. You are organized into one people. And where that happens there must be a set of rules, a plan of some kind. There must be those who give

orders and those who carry them out. What other way is there of doing it?"

Mordin looked even more bewildered now. "We do not work like that," he declared, as thoughtfully as if this were some abstract debate. "I can see it would be possible to do things in that fashion, but it is not our way. If I wish to do something, I think about it first, then, if I so decide, I do it." He sounded like someone giving lessons to a child.

"And if you wanted to put up a building like this one we are in now?" Bragan challenged. "You would think, and then decide, and then build it, all by yourself? Old man, do you take me for a fool?"

Mordin furrowed his craggy face in wonder. "Many of us talked a long time about this building, many of us with varied skills. Then we decided together. And then we built it. What other way is there?"

Bragan felt it was his turn to be baffled, but he kept his face stiff, and filed that line of thought for future reference.

"When Zorgan rules here," he declared, "we will teach you other and better ways. Faster ways. We will teach you how to construct buildings ten times as big as this and more durable. And many other things. How to make better and faster aircraft, better road transport, many skills. We will show you how to generate more power. We will make everything better, and with less work, because we know a great deal about how to make machines which will do the work for us, and for you."

"And weapons for killing?"

"Those too," Bragan nodded, suddenly intent. Mordin shrugged.

"We have no need of them. Or of any of the other things. We have all the buildings we need, all the food we need, all the power we need. We do not want machines to do our work for us. What would be the sense of that? And we have no need of weapons, either. We do not kill, except sometimes when we hunt for food."

Bragan took the stunner from its pouch in his belt and laid it on a table close by. A small neon glowed in its recess above the firing stud, to show that it was powered. He gestured to it, eyed Mordin. "Think, man," he suggested, "what you are saying. That small object there, is power! It has no

bottom. With it, with that one weapon alone, I could destroy every man, woman and child on Scarta, one at a time, and it would still be working at the end. Think of that!"

Before Mordin could fashion a reply the personal radio on Bragan's wrist tweeted an urgent summons and he raised it to his mouth.

"Yes?"

"Bragan? Karsh here. Something's gone wrong, damned wrong! We've lost Unit Four! Blanked right out. Not a peep out of her!"

"Without warning?" Bragan demanded, incredulously.

"Not a glimmer! Reports trickling in steady—and then nothing! Hold on! Oh no! There goes Two, exactly the same. Total blackout!"

Karsh was babbling. Bragan put an edge on his voice. "Get a grip on yourself, man! There must be an explanation. Sound the alert—" He let the sentence die in mid-air as he saw the little neon telltale on his stunner wink out.

He felt all the complex of servos and services of his body-armor dwindle and go inert, and know, split seconds before the ground shockwave came to hammer his feet and shudder the building around him, that the ship was gone. Unit One was dead! For one sagging moment he was shocked still. Then, desperately, he threw the idea away. It didn't matter now. Time to think about it later. Accept it. Face it. What now? He surged back from Mordin, and the single step brought one urgency hard into focus. The body-armor was now a hindrance, not a help.

He reacted instantly, slapped buckles and fasteners, tore the inert equipment clear, then hesitated in momentary indecision. Mordin curled a lip at him in grim understanding.

"What now, Zorgan?" he challenged.

Bragan had no time for badinage. His mind spun frantically, juggling a thousand possibilities at once, seeking a pattern. He stepped rapidly back to the discarded armor and grabbed a long-bladed chrome-steel machete, the only weapon still operable. Sparking intuition warned him that the Scartanni must have planned further ahead than just the simple destruction of the ship, however they had done it. They would attack in some way. No point, then, in joining up with troopers. They'd be an obvious mark. He had to get away.

Alone! He spun and caught up a heavy chair, clasped it to his chest with the legs aimed in front, and ran full-tilt against the far wall.

The impact winded him and hurt his ribs, but he went through, snorting and coughing in a shower of shards and dust, to find himself in a smaller and deserted room. Memory served to help him guess where he was. He aimed at a wall again, full-tilt, grunted at the shock, blew the clouds of stone-dust from his mouth and nostrils, and he was outside. He discarded the chair, made another fast guess, and ran. Across the sidewalk, leaping the gutter, and off to his left down the road. He hoped, was reasonably sure, that he was heading directly away from the ship. If so, then not too far ahead there should be the river, and a bridge. Then some lesser buildings, a warehouse or two, more small buildings, and then open country. There was no point, now, in thinking any farther than that. If he got that far he would be lucky and it would be time to plan again.

Spitting stone-dust from his mouth and slapping it from his clothes, he ran steadily, not too fast, knowing he had a long way to go. As he ran he had time to harry his mind with the big question. How—had they managed to scupper the ship? He could imagine all kinds of threats, as any good commander must, but never for one moment had he imagined the loss of the ship. Of all six ships, in fact. It was safe to assume that, he thought. If they could knock out Four, then Two, then One, in rapid succession, then the rest were out too, by this time. A coordinated effort, obviously. But how, and with what? The question bubbled in his mind and brought fear, but no answers. He let it go and concentrated on his running.

And braked to a skidding halt at a corner, warned by the noise of conflict. Carefully edging, he peered around and saw a skimmer flat down on the road, powerless and useless. And five troopers, backed into a huddle and struggling clumsily in armor to defend themselves against the agile onslaught of about thirty Scartanni. There were men and women in even proportions, and each one armed with a metal rod of some kind, dodging and leaping in and out, pausing only to deliver a hefty wallop and away.

The troopers had no chance at all. The armor that took

some of the sting of the blows also took all the spring out of their movements. As Bragan watched, heaving for breath, he saw one man go down heavily. And he couldn't get up, not with that dead load on him. The Scartanni pressed harder. A faceplate shattered, and another man went down.

Bragan turned away, chose a side-turning, and ran on, laboring for breath and with sagging hopes. He was not a superstitious man, but the dread fingers of fear began to reach for him now, to tell him that this was unnatural work, that these odd people must have some strange powers. All at once he heard a whooping cry away to his left and one frantic glance showed him a whole pack of them after him, running like deer.

He wheeled away and fled down a side street with the splatter of leather-shod feet loud at his heels. Scrambling around the far corner he almost ran headlong into another swarm. Backing, sobbing for breath, he wheeled away into another lane and ran on, hopelessly. Reason told him to stand still and give up, but panic had his legs and kept them pumping and plunging, dodging and staggering, with always the *pad-pad* of soft feet close behind. Until he could run no more. . . .

He shambled to a wall, turned and set his shoulders against it, held out his nine-inch blade and waited for the first one rash enough to come close. But they weren't so easily drawn. They held off, ringed him, mocked him with feints and gestures.

One white-toothed blonde woman shook the hair from her pretty face and jeered, "Surrender, Zorgan! Surrender!" and the rest took up the cry. He wasted no breath in trying to reply.

Braced against the wall, he held the razor-edged blade ready, heaved for oxygen, and waited for the first one to come close enough. Then the wall crumbled at his back and a brawny arm went around his neck, jamming his chin high and up. Something hard struck the back of his head and all his thoughts went dark. It was all over. . . .

In such a moment, and with a man like Bragan, the assumption of death is very strong. He came out of a painful darkness with great reluctance, unwilling to believe that he

was going to live again. It took considerable effort to force the conclusion that he was not yet dead. They hadn't killed him.

Accepting that, he worked at breathing, at gingerly moving his arms and legs, wincing at the pain until he could gather it all together in one pounding lump and locate it in his head. Then, by degrees, he established a few more things. He was lying flat on his back on something firm but yielding. He was not bound or fastened in any way. He was in gloom but not darkness, and on the inside of what seemed to be a stone box.

Making the effort, he sat up, swung his legs to a stone floor that was cool to his feet. Investigating more, he found the walls smooth and hard to touch, with no opening that he could see, but a steady fresh draft slid in from under the shelf he had been lying on. The faint light came from a glowing panel in one wall. When he leaned on it, it gave fractionally, indicating that it might be a door of some kind. Calling it a door, he found a metal ring set in it, but it did nothing in response to pull or push or twist.

He returned to his bed and sat, and tried to think. He was a prisoner, in a solid and substantial cell. That, all by itself, was a facet of the Scartanni people that he hadn't known of, nor even suspected. He had no idea where he was, and no point from which to start guessing. Nor had he any idea what was in store for him, and no point in guessing about it, either. He sat and ached awhile. He had no idea what had happened to the ships. He had no idea where the swarms of Scartanni had come from, all of them so suddenly. In fact, he hadn't much idea about anything anymore. He tried delicate fingers to the throbbing lump at the back of his head, and felt cloth. A dressing of some kind? That was reassurance, at least. A little.

He had almost dozed off, despite the pain in his head, when a light flared in the roof of his cell, and seconds later the panel-that-was-a-door swung open, outwards. In the opening stood a youngish woman. Her tabard-tunic, hip-long, was dark blue. She held a tray and looked at him over a thin vapor that rose from the pots on it.

"Will you eat?" she asked, and the question had its wry side.



"If it is all right, yes, I would like to. You're very kind."

She came on in, set the tray down beside him and seated herself on the far side of it. She looked at him curiously. "We have little experience of keeping prisoners, except what we have learned from you. And we think the starvation idea was unwise. To lose freedom is enough."

"Enough for what?"

"To provoke desperate action. Several of your people have been hurt, some killed. That is regrettable, but you gave us no choice."

Bragan stared down at the tray while he thought that one over. He saw a kind of biscuit or cake, a bowl of thick soup, another bowl of what looked like fruit, a jug from which vapor was curling, and two mugs.

"Will you join me?" he invited. "Unless you have objections to eating with an enemy."

"You are no longer an enemy," she told him, grabbed the jug and began to pour a creamy white liquid into the mug. "You have a number of wrong ideas about us, that's all. They can easily be put right."

"Indeed!" He took a biscuit, moistened it with the soup as she did, and tried a bite. It was good. He shook his head at her. "You know," he said, "I speak your language, and I have studied you as a people, as far as possible. It is my job to understand people, but I confess I don't come anywhere near understanding you. I *am* your enemy. I am Denzil Bragan—"

"Supreme Executive of Zorgan," she completed promptly. "Yes, I know. I am Ryth o'Mordin."

"Hallex Mordin's daughter? I think I would have guessed."

In fact she did have something of the old man's look, and his air of utter competence, the same cool resolve in her gray eyes. But, for all the resemblances, she was different. She was attractive. Her thick blonde hair was caught back from her face with a blue cord that matched her tunic. When she smiled, showing a dazzle of white teeth, Bragan caught himself in the act of smiling back, and wondered what was happening to him.

"I may look like my father," she said, "but I think my own thoughts. He thinks you are dangerous. I think you are just wrong. Confused."

"Oh! About what?"

"So many things. It is in the way you think. How can one man, or many men, *take* a planet? Or hold it? Or own it? No one owns this planet. The words do not mean anything. We, the Scartanni, do not *own* the planet; we merely live here. It could have been anywhere else, or any other people. It was none of our doing. It just happened!"

"You are aware of other planets, then?"

"Of course!" She shrugged the question away. "Suppose," she advanced, "you did own this planet, as you term it, what would you do with it? What *could* you do with it, apart from live on it?"

"I would change it. A planet such as this can support ten times, a hundred times as many people as it does now. And great industries and products of all kinds."

"For what?" she demanded, just like her father. "We have enough, and more than enough, for everything we need. Why bother with more?"

"Why bother to argue?" he retorted quietly. "You are going to have to bother with more soon, like it or not."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind. If I told you, you would just put it down to more wrong thinking on my part, so let it slide. What's more to the point, what happens to me, now?"

"That will depend. When you have eaten enough I will attend to your injury, and then it will be time to take you to a session of our grand council. There we will decide what is to be done."

*The trial!* he thought, but didn't bother to comment. It was an inevitability, and there was nothing he could do about it now. He drained his cup of creamy stuff, savoring its faintly yeasty flavor, and declared himself satisfied. She rose promptly and went out and away with the tray, leaving the door standing open. He noted that, then looked at himself ruefully. He had nothing but his leather jacket and pants, and boots. Where would he run to? In a moment she was back with another tray and dressings.

"Just sit still," she ordered. "This will hurt a little, but no more than is necessary." She had to come close in order to deal with his scalp wound, and he became aware, again, that she had some mysterious kind of power to affect him. The

only thing he was sure of was that it was not deliberate on her part. He estimated her age as about twenty-five. Her shape was all that any mature woman could possibly want, and the brief blue tunic-dress flattered it effectively. Yet it wasn't her shape, her full curves that were revealed every time she moved, nor the silk-satin texture of the skin so close to him. Bragan had seen more, and better, and had been the object of deliberate enticement often. He had learned to disregard such things, to consider himself immune to them. Yet now he found his pulse unsteady and his breathing upset.

He clenched his fists and found them sweaty, and cursed himself for being so foolish, now of all times. And he wondered why? It was not intentional on her part. Her attitude was one of blithe indifference to the fact that he was a man at all. And she was by no means tender. Once she had lifted the edge of the plaster on his head enough to get a grip on it she had it off with a quick heave that brought a yelp as far as his throat and halted only by his clenched teeth.

She proceeded to bathe the lump with hot water and massage it with strong fingers. Then, to his relief, she applied a cool ointment and a new dressing. Nothing tender there, indeed, and yet she had something—he veered away from that thought in a hurry, to choose something less hazardous.

“Ryth—tell me—how are your people so well-organized? In touch with each other? Obviously, however you knocked out our ships, you did it to some prearranged plan. By some signal. Yet your radio was silent.”

“Oh, that!” She patted the dressing into place and subsided briskly by his side. “You didn’t know? We have a way of talking to each other over a long distance by wires from one place to another. It is just as quick as by radio.”

*Telephonel* he thought. But then, “What wires? We saw none!”

“Of course not. They are underground.”

So simple and so obvious. He felt foolish as he echoed, “Underground?”

“Of course underground,” she said with great patience. “Where do you think you are now?” He felt more foolish than ever.

“This is part of an underground system?”

"It is. All our cities and all dwellings have an underground part where we can live when it becomes necessary. Now, I will just put this stuff away safely and then it will be time to go. Be ready!" She took the tray of dressings and was gone before he could think to ask her just what she had meant by "necessary."

## V

HE FOLLOWED HER at a brisk walk out of the cell, into a long tunnel that was just wide enough for two people to pass, and about seven feet high. It was surfaced on all four sides with smooth stone and lit every yard with inset lamps that glowed like pearl. He didn't know which was the bigger upset to his mind, this seemingly endless warren of galleries and cubicles, or her distracting self, striding and swaying fascinatingly in front of him. He tried to rationalize her charm. It was because she was artless, natural, real, unstudied—and he blundered on from one inadequate word to another until he was utterly confused. He shunted away from the topic altogether and concentrated his attention on the cellar-warren.

Every so often, at regular intervals, there were marks and symbols in various colors, and now, from all sides, other people began to join the quiet march, falling in at his heels. *All these tunnels, he thought, they must cover whole acres of area—and yet there was never so much as a mention of them on the surface. The Scartanni had never discussed this, nor spoken of it. Not at all.*

*Why? Why keep it secret?* The question nagged. Secrecy after the event, yes. That made a kind of sense. But Bragan and his invaders had studied this planet for weeks prior to invasion, and there had been not a word about an underground. And why have it, anyway? Why would these people go to all this trouble to live underground—when necessary? The silly and senseless questions were all the more irritating because he felt that somewhere in the back of his mind was an answer, a datum that he had missed.

Groping for it distracted him so much, not only from the enticing shape in front, but from everything else, that it was

with a shock of surprise that he found bright daylight overhead. Then, just ahead of him, Ryth was stepping nimbly up a ladder to the surface. He followed, not quite so nimbly, and choked up when he looked around and saw where he was. This was the main square of Stopa. There was the City Hall. And there was his abortive sub-headquarters, with the troop-shack and the stockade. Looking back he saw he had just emerged—from a gutter!

Bits of various puzzles began to fall into place now as he followed his dance-footed guide. All the floors of these houses and buildings, even the good solid roadways, were simply stout roofings for the fantastic underground galleries. That much was plain, but he was no nearer knowing why the whole thing existed that he had been before. And there was no more time to gnaw on it.

The big chamber of the building was almost full. The Scartanni assembled stayed on their feet but packed in close with a minimum of fuss and an efficiency that showed they had done this kind of thing many times before. Hallex Mordin and seven other notables had made themselves prominent by the simple expedient of standing on tables that were pushed right back against the far wall. Other tables lined the walls to right and left, and Bragan saw the sorry remnants of his force standing there. Troopers and squad-leaders along one side, ship's crew, officers, and Otto Karsh on the other. Bragan stared up, blundered and almost fell. Ryth grabbed his arm and escorted him firmly to the end of the table where Karsh stood.

"This is your place," she ordered. "Get up!" and she gave him a trim shoulder and arm as boost. When he was standing, she put her back to the table and stood facing her father. Bragan ran a fast eye over his men, what remained of them, and they were a sorry-looking bunch, battered, bruised and bereft of everything but their body-leather. He turned to Karsh finally.

"What the hell happened?" he muttered. "How did they scupper the ship?"

Karsh had the look of a man who has been hit hard in the face with a blunt object. His nose was rosy red and beginning to swell and there were purple patches showing around his

eyes. He growled, "They somehow managed to dig a hole under us and then kicked away the props."

"As simple as that?"

"Simple, hell! The ship fell, a dead straight drop, about fifty feet onto concrete. It's scrap, right now. A total write-off. The Scarts dug me out, several of the others. For some, there was no need. Swann—never knew what hit him."

"That's a good way, quick like that."

"Yes. We should be so lucky. What happened to you?"

"Tried to make a run for it, but they nailed me. Crack on the head, that's all. We have to switch plans, quick; move to the cooperative stage."

"Right. You?"

"No." Bragan grinned sourly. "Somebody has to stay true to Zorgan, and who better than me?"

"Watch it!" Karsh warned. "The old man is giving us the eye!"

Bragan turned to see Mordin regarding him with a frosty stare. Then he turned to the throng and asked, in a voice that rang: "Are we ready to begin the council? Any dissent?" There came none. Bragan scanned the audience, estimated it at around a thousand. Then his eye caught the glint of light from metal, high up, and he saw what had to be a microphone. That immediately multiplied the audience by several orders of magnitude. Mordin raised his hand in an intense silence.

"Because we have one here," he began, "who styles himself the Supreme Executive of Zorgan, whatever that may be, and because he himself has told me that he regards Stopa as being above all other cities, and myself set above all other Scartanni—" Mordin paused to let the surf-roar of scorn and amusement sweep the chamber, and Bragan shivered. If he was any judge, this audience was in a grim-jovial mood, and that was bad. Anger was simple, or mirth, or mockery, but this crowd was in a state of whimsical imbalance where anything could happen.

"Because of these and other things," Mordin resumed when he could be heard, "we of Stopa will debate first, so that others may listen and learn from what is said. Dissent? I hear none. Very well." He swiveled his cold stare on Bragan. "You name yourself Denzil Bragan. You say you are the

Supreme Executive of Zorgan. Will you now tell us what that may mean, so we can understand it?"

"I will, gladly." Bragan could turn on a platform voice and manner when it was needed. He had delivered many a lecture to a less promising audience than this. He turned now to have the corner at his back.

"First a small correction," he said. "I am not Supreme in Zorgan. I am nothing so grand as that. Zorgan is a mighty empire that bridges the stars. Tonight, when you look at the sky, look at that part which lies between the big red star and the bright white one. That is Zorgan. Let me describe it for you. You have a sun. This is one of its planets. Many suns have such planets, some more than one. Imagine as many suns as there are Scartanni in this chamber now, and each one with at least one planet like Scarta, with as many people on them, or more, as Scarta has. Now try to imagine how many people there are. And all are Zorgan."

"You mean they are all of one kind?" Mordin demanded.

"They are now. Once there was just the one planet, the birthplace of a powerful and mighty people, the Zorgan. By degrees they perfected all the skills and arts of war and weapons. They traveled in space to the next near planet and conquered it, and made it work for Zorgan the way my arm works for me. Then another planet—another arm." He had them, and he knew it. They were silent and intent, following his pictures.

"Now Zorgan has many hundreds of arms, but only one head. That is the control, is Zorga itself. *That* planet is ruled by the Grand Council, like this one, only a thousand times greater. That is where the Supreme Executive of Zorgan is. Me, I am no more than the finger on one hand of one of the smaller arms. But I am—as I said—the Supreme Executive of Zorgan, on this planet. Now! You see these men, and others of my men in other places? All of them do what I command!"

"Not now, they don't!" some joker shouted from the throng and got himself a quick storm of laughter. Mordin quelled it with an imperious hand.

"Say more, Bragan of Zorgan," he offered. "Tell us what would have been done, what you would have done had you succeeded with your plan."

"In all its detail it would take a long time to tell, but I can give you the broad outline very simply. I would have set up command posts and training places, to teach you many things. How to grow ten times as much food as you do now, and then ten times as much again. How to build great machines to make weapons and build ships like those we came in. How to make proper places for such ships to land. How to prepare fuel for them. How to organize yourselves so that one man could do as much as a hundred men do now, in less time—and have more time free to enjoy for himself. And much more. How to make fine clothing such as you have never dreamed of. Devices—a radio with pictures! Aircraft that fly higher and faster than anything you have ever seen. New metals, stronger than any you know. Many other things."

"It sounds large," Mordin commented dryly. "Say now, who feeds and keeps the teachers?" That struck home to the audience, who responded with a roar. Bragan waited for it to die down.

"You keep and feed those who teach you, in return for the great wonders they teach. We of Zorgan will make you great, and powerful, and rich. In return you will give us one tenth of everything you make, and"—he had to save it until the derisive roar dwindled a little—"and you will become a part of the mighty Zorgan Empire, sharing in its strength and protected by its power!"

As soon as it was practical again, Mordin raised his hand for quiet. The crowd tittered into silence and the old man showed his teeth in a ferocious grin. "We have seen something of the might of Zorgan. Enough. And we have heard enough of you, I think. I want words with these others." He ran a cold eye over them, came back to aim a finger at Karsh. "What do you do?"

"I am responsible for directing the technical side of the operation, the devices, methods and means used. And the weapons."

"And you?" The finger moved to Slatt.

"I am Captain of the ship, Unit One, responsible for that ship, the men on it, and that part of the operation in which the ship was involved."

"Hmml!" Mordin frowned, and so did the audience, men



and women alike. The old man fingered a trooper next, then another. Bit by bit he began to assemble the complex pyramid of authority and responsibility of the whole force, the chain of command, the hierarchy involved. Then, at last, he called a halt.

"Out of such a confusion," he growled, "one thing is plain. Not one of you thinks for himself. Not one. Not even him. You were sent here by some other person, and you do what that other person says, what you have been told to do. That is no way for a man, and we will have no time for it. Here on Scarta every man thinks for himself and decides what he has to do. Then he does it. If it is a big thing, then many men think together and decide, as we are doing now. That is our way, here on Scarta. And you men are all here now with us, so it will be the same for you. You must think for yourselves and decide what you will do. What say you to that?"

They said, each and every one of them, exactly what Bragan could have predicted they would say. Nothing at all. Nothing in their previous experience had prepared them for such a shattering question as this. He watched them, saw the shifting eyes, the uneasy feet, the bewilderment, the way they looked to one another for inspiration. And he saw how all the glances and unspoken questions gradually shifted and found a focus, on himself. Mordin saw it too, and glared at Bragan.

"Are these men? See how they look to you for their thinking, to be told what next. Can't they think for themselves?"

Bragan smiled. "Such is the power of Zorgan," he said softly. "You see? These are my men and they do as I say. I tell you this, old man. We are your enemies. We are your prisoners now, true, but we will be your masters some day, be sure of that. And until then, we are enemies. You will have to keep watch and guard on us, keep us secure and prisoned, and worry in case we escape. Or, of course, you can kill us."

"We do not kill!" Mordin growled. "We leave that to the whim of the gods. You still mean to resist, Bragan?"

"All the way."

"I see." The old man scratched his jaw thoughtfully, then turned to confer a moment or two with his fellow seniors. A buzz of talk came from the crowd. Bragan kept a critical eye on the throng, trying to guess its shifting mood. It wasn't

easy. The thinking was alien here and he had a hard part to play, with little or no script. In a while the old man turned to the audience and raised his hand once more for silence.

"We are dealing with strange people here," he announced. "It seems the sons of Zorgan cannot think without help. I propose to offer such help. Now"—he swept the assembled prisoners with a searching eye—"which of you has skill in the working of metals, of iron and copper and such things?"

After a long breath Bragan saw one trooper raise a hand, then another. The old man nodded. "Good! And which of you is skilled in the handling and use of electricity?" That got him more hands. He went on to ask about food-preparation, about the design and flying of aircraft, even about farming practice, and each time he got more hands. Bragan knew what the game was. Divide and rule. Mordin was no fool. After a long string of questions he called a halt again.

"Very well. Scarta can use men like you. We accept that you were obeying the order of this man according to some insanity called Zorgan, but that no longer has strength here, as you can see. We offer you the chance to do the work you can do, that you are best fitted to do, here with us, and to become self-thinking self-deciding Scartanni, like us. You have seen our planet, and us. What say you?"

Before any of them could respond, Bragan shouted, "Tell them the alternative, Mordin. Tell them what will happen if they reject your offer!"

"I think you know that already." Mordin shrugged. "If they do not accept, then we put them in the stockades you so thoughtfully built for us, and leave them."

"Without food or drink, clothing or shelter. Some choice!"

"You cannot blame us." Mordin was mild now. "You taught us this way of dealing with awkward situations. Now, you men—"

"Wait!" Bragan hurled the order into the uneasy faces of his men, and added a sneer. "Think before you decide. Think. You know what will happen in the long run, whichever way you choose. Death by slow starvation now—or the other kind, later!"

"What twisted idea fills your skull now?" Mordin demanded, and Karsh came in on cue perfectly.

"I'll tell you," he said, and there was instant quiet at the

sound of his thick voice. "Bragan is right, in his way. You think you're finished with Zorgan. You're wrong. You've broken us, yes, but we are only a small part, a fraction of the real thing. We judged we were big enough to take this small planet. We made a mistake. At least, *he* did. But the mistake, the failure, that was all ours. Zorgan doesn't fail, ever, not in the end. When we fail to report back there will be others to want to know what happened. And they *won't* fail, I promise you that!"

The mood of the meeting switched abruptly into cold tension.

"How soon?" the old man demanded, and everybody knew exactly what he meant. But Karsh hunched his shoulders resignedly.

"Not my field. That's higher strategy. He's the only one knows the answer to that question."

Now all the faces were hard on Bragan, and he could afford to laugh at them in scorn. "Fools!" he cried. "How soon? What does it matter? What can you do? If you had a hundred years—and you haven't—what difference would it make? Could you organize your silly system, teach yourselves the arts of war, build weapons and defenses strong enough to stand off Zorgan? Never! Not in a thousand years! When the word gets back and the big fleet comes, as it surely will, and when they learn that you have broken us, defeated us—then will be the time for all of Scarta to shiver with fear. Because Zorgan will crush you, like that!" and he stuck out his hand and curled the fingers into a hard fist.

"We stopped you!" Mordin retorted. Bragan laughed again.

"Six small ships? Yes, you broke us, and I admit it freely. But you won't stop the big fleet, old man; don't think it."

"Hold on a minute." Karsh came back into the picture. "That's not necessarily true. Look; they stopped us cold, didn't they? And they didn't know a thing. All they had was determination and wits."

"What are you trying to say?" Bragan challenged him. "Are you hoping to suggest that these primitive people have any hope of standing out against the full weight of Zorgan?"

"I don't see why not—with help!"

"You must be out of your mind!"

"I don't think so." Karsh was stubbornly determined. "As

I just said, they stopped us, with no help. And they now have several hundred trained men—us—to pass on all the know-how—”

“Traitor! Turncoat!” Bragan spat at him. “You expect these men to throw in their lot with the Scartanni against Zorgan?”

“Why not?” Karsh retorted sharply. “What have we got to lose?” He turned to the bewildered troopers and ship’s officers. “You know the score. You know that Zorgan will come, eventually. And you know what happens to us when the next fleet comes. They will tread this planet and its people flat—and then they will deal with us. And you know how Zorgan rewards failure.” He had their ear now, with a vengeance. “If we stand out now, we starve to death. If we throw in with the Scartanni—well, maybe we will get blasted down, and maybe we won’t, at that. But at least we’ll have a fighting chance.”

He scanned their wavering faces and added, “Who knows better than us just how Zorgan works? Who better to build a few shocks for them? At least we can try!” He spun on Bragan again. “Why don’t you throw in with us? What have you got to lose?”

For answer Bragan launched himself in a wild spring, caught Karsh by the throat and the pair of them went crashing to the floor among a crowd of stumbling Scartanni.

As they struggled vigorously, Karsh muttered, “This should do it. Sure you won’t switch sides?”

“I can’t. They have to be convinced that Zorgan has fanatics who don’t give up. Which is the truth, anyway. So it has to be me.”

“They’ll stake you out to starve to death!”

“That’s a chance I have to take. Unless they think I’m worth saving.”

“I think we can work that. Shh—strangle me harder!”

It took seven or eight Scartanni to tear them apart. Moridin glared as Bragan was put back on his platform.

“So, you don’t like it when your men think and speak for themselves? You would silence him, eh? Well, hold your peace a moment, or you, too, will be silenced. Now”—he turned to Karsh—“how much of what he says is true? Can this big fleet be stopped?”

"It never has been yet, but there always has to be a first time for everything. And we can teach you all the tricks. We know them."

"You go too fast. We have not yet decided whether we will fight or not."

"You will!" Captain Slatt put in, crisp and positive. "No matter what you may decide here and now, one thing is absolutely certain. The big fleet will come. Ten times as many ships as you have seen and each one ten times as big as ours. Nor will they be as gentle as we were, not once they know you have already broken us. You'll fight—or be smashed flat!"

Bragan watched the byplay critically. Slatt was making a good impression by being calm and simple. They believed him. Mordin took a moment to confer again, then brought his bleak gaze back to Slatt.

"You—" he said, "sound like a man of sense. What of it? Can the big ships be beaten, the big weapons resisted?"

"Who knows? They are big, and powerful. But nothing is too big to be defeated, somehow. It's possible."

"You know all that Zorgan knows?"

"I don't, no. I am only the captain of one ship. But if that ship can be carefully salvaged there is in it a machine which carries information, all the working information on Zorgan methods and weapons. A memory machine."

"I know of those things," Mordin nodded. "We have them, too."

*The hell you do!* Bragan thought, but kept the astonishment from showing. Instead he shouted his way back into the debate violently.

"You're all wasting breath on fool's talk. You will never stop the big ships!"

"Never is a long time," Mordin growled. "What does *he* do?"

"The Supreme Executive is the one who decides how a battle is to be fought, who has special training and skill in ways to outwit an enemy, and hit him to the best advantage," Slatt replied. "We call it strategy. It calls for cunning and a certain kind of devious thinking."

"Hmml!" Mordin sniffed, scratched his jaw, then directed a hard stare at Bragan. "It seems we are split on you. I

make you one more offer, a chance to decide. Which is it to be, for Zorgan—or Scarta?”

Bragan raked him with scorn, then cast his gaze over the rest, his recent command, what was left of it. It needed no skill to read those faces. Not one of them would meet his eyes. He was alone. He turned back to Mordin arrogantly. “Get it over with, old man. All it means is that I shall die a little sooner than you. What’s the difference? You can’t win!”

Mordin’s face set like granite. He motioned to two or three men by Bragan’s feet. “Take him. Strip him. Put him in the stockade. And leave him. Quickly, there is much to do.”

They dropped him down with a looped rope under his arms, and whipped it away as soon as his feet touched the bottom. And as soon as he was alone he made a point of inspecting his prison thoroughly. That was habit and thoroughness. Had there been any weakness he would have found it. But there was none, and he wasn’t surprised. *Efficiency in all things*, he thought, as he squatted in a corner away from the high sun. All to himself he had a space that was a perfect square fifty feet a side, with solid substantial walls ten feet high. And all of it was stone and rubble aggregate fused to glass-smooth hardness. There was no door, no break in that surface at all. There was no point in even beginning to think about contriving a cunning way out, not in view of the fact that he had only his skin to work with.

He spent a moment or two wondering wryly how the famous escapologists of history would have set about bursting out of a situation like this. And then a few more moments reviling the clown who had penned the immortal words, “Stone walls do not a prison make!” These did, absolutely. The sun caught up on him, and he moved, settled, and set away to think in earnest, weighing his chances as dispassionately and critically as he could. His only card was a weak one, almost negligible, and he had to rely on someone else to play it for him at that. He was a master strategist, and they needed him. He was worth a dozen weapons. If they could appreciate that, he had a chance. If they came to realize his value, they would try to break him down. That was all he had to hope on. It wasn’t much. How do you convey the idea, the value, of strategy, to a people with no

experience of war? He pondered it, shifted as the glass-hard floor made his bones ache, and assessed his chances as slim.

It was an either-or choice that had little joy in it. Either they did want his special talents, in which case they would try to break him down by leaving him here until he called for mercy. And he couldn't be too quick on that or they would suspect his sincerity.

Or they would decide they didn't need him at all, and just leave him to die. And he had no way of knowing which it was. No way at all.

In all, they left him there three whole days and nights.

## VI

BY THE MORNING of the fourth day he was losing his grip on reality, and insidious persuasion from somewhere deep down told him it didn't matter. To keep still was the only way to keep clear of agony. Breathe in little sips. Don't think. That touch of warm light on his face was just another kind of pain, different from the gnawing cold, but pain just the same. Every joint and bump on him had ached and gone beyond aching into a boneless mush of dull distress that seemed remote. Tiny breaths rustled through the dusty caverns of his nose and throat, but he—the real person—kept slipping away into a forbidden land, a lovely garden where all was cool, where bountiful trees bent down under their load of luscious fruits, and chuckling fountains sprayed sparkling cascades of clear wine. Something held him just short of that heaven, some thin thread that he ought to snap, and leave the dreadful reality back there.

Then agony took shape and was viciously real, was a hurtful grip on his arm, shaking him, shattering the blissful vision into fragments, pulling him back into horror. He screwed at rusty eyelids, to squint and peer and struggle for focus against the harsh sun. He saw Ryth bending over him. He tried to say "Go away!" but it came out no more than a scrape that hurt his throat, just a rattle. She stooped closer.

"I've come to take you away with me. Do you hear?"

"Uh?" He racked his deadened wits for meaning.

"You are to come away with me. The Council has agreed."

"Uh? Wha'? Go 'way—"

"That's right. With me."

She blurred away out of focus, then a drench of cold water struck and washed over his head and face. He felt it soaking into his pores, loosening the scabs on his lips. He sucked greedily at the few drops that ran down into his mouth, struggled to sit up. She sluiced him with another dose and now he could see that she held a wooden bucket, swinging it in one hand.

"There's more," she said. "As much as you want," and she put the bucket down by his arm. "Be careful now. Not too much!"

He fought his way up to his knees on bones and sinews that screeched protest, plunged his head and face into the bucket and almost drowned in his need to drink. She grabbed his hair and hauled him back and out by main force, to let him choke and cough a while, then she repeated her warning, "Not too much at once. Take your time!"

He nodded blearily, struggled to the bucket again and ducked in. But this time his wits were better. He drank, and breathed, and drank again, and the water was liquid life, soaking through him, clarifying his brain. It gave him renewed capacity to feel his aching agony and the gnawing emptiness in his belly, but it brought caution too. He steeled himself to be on guard.

"All right," he mumbled at last, swiping the back of his hand across four days of bristle and dirt. "What do you want from me? What's this for?"

"Did you think we would leave you to die?"

"Why not? I have nothing for you, now or ever."

She came to crouch down by him, one knee on the ground by his hand, to stare at him and shake her head. "You're a strange man, not like the rest. They, at least, are willing to help themselves."

"So they've gone over to your side? Sold themselves for a futile hope. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"On the world you come from, do events happen by themselves? Does your food thrust itself into your mouth? Do garments grow on you, or on trees? Do your homes just happen?"

"Do you take me for a child?"



"You are acting like a child! On Scarta we have a way. We say this. No man lives idle. I have heard you talk and I think this may be strange to you, because you speak of machines which do a man's work. But think now as I tell you. There is food and drink, shelter and clothing. For you. As much as you could ever need. If you want it. But you must earn it. You must work for it!"

He turned his face away, feeling the muscles of his neck creak as he did it. "You know my answer to that, Ryth. You were there. You heard. I will have nothing whatever to do with any harebrained scheme to try and stop Zorgan. It's futile. The rest of the men can think and do as they like. You've told them to think for themselves, and this is the way they are doing it. The fools! They don't know the score the way I do. I know just how useless it is to try to do anything to stop that technique, that capability. They had their chance to listen to me, and I can't do anything to stop them now from making fools of themselves, and of you. But I won't help."

She reached for his stubbly chin and pulled his head around. "We have learned much since you came here. On Scarta we say, from everything that may happen, learn a lesson. We have learned a new word. Loyalty. It means, I think, to have trust and faith in an idea, to make it more important than life, even. Yes?"

He met her gray gaze with cold suspicion, then made a twisted grin that hurt his face. "You don't know, do you? Loyalty has nothing to do with it. Oh yes, it's a word, and you have the meaning right enough. But that's all it is, a word. I go by facts. Like, for instance, do you believe that in so many hours from now it will be dark? Would you try to evade or defeat that? Or think of a crawling beetle. Does he get together with his fellows and say, come let us join together into a great force and throw off this giant heel that is about to come down and crush us?"

"The Scartans are not beetles!"

"All right. If you don't like that picture, try this." The water, on his vacant stomach and body-racked aches, made Bragan feel slightly lightheaded, but he managed to keep his voice even and measured. "Count the number of grains in a farmer's field. For all their huge numbers, do they resist

when the farmer comes with his blade and cuts them all down? Would it matter to him if they did? Does he care, as he beats and grinds them into flour and then into bread?"

Now she looked troubled and uncertain. "Is Zorgan so great as that?"

"And more! You have no chance at all!"

"So you choose to die? On Scarta we say, while I live, I choose!"

"We have a similar saying: While there's life, there's hope. That is just more words. I have no hope, and little choice. I can die now, or later."

"You can live!"

"There's a quality to living. It has to have some point."

She slid down to squat on the stone floor beside him, and sighed. "I think I understand you, a little. You are convinced that to resist Zorgan is hopeless. I had hoped your mind would change, but I can see now that it won't. But there is another choice. Will you listen?"

"I can't stop you from talking."

She pinked a little at his rudeness, but rode on past it. "Do you know anything at all about the land? How to plant and grow and gather food?"

"Some. Not much. Enough to be able to live off the country if I have to. That's part of my military training. Why?"

"I will tell you. Hallex Mordin, my father, is a city man, a landholder of Stopa. This is his life. It is not mine. I have a small holding, a farm some distance from here. About forty miles. Near a small village called Tarat. It is small. I work it with my brother Hork. The work is hard, but satisfying, to me at least. But Hork is impatient to get away and work in the city like his father. And I could not work my holding alone. I would welcome a helper. Will you accept?"

"Accept what? The offer to become a farmhand, under you?"

"Under at first, yes, until you learn. But then, with knowledge, it would be equality, a full sharing."

Bragan pushed his distresses into the background and took a minute to look at her proposition. "It's a trick," he growled. "Why should you go out of your way to do this?"

"On Scarta we do not like waste. We say, life is too precious to be wasted. You are able, intelligent, healthy. Will

you support yourself if you have the chance? It is no more than that."

"What do you get out of it?"

"A helper. When Hork goes I shall need more hands. There are trees and bushes to be cleared from one plot I can use. There is a stream to be diverted. Many things. There is always work, on a holding."

"Would I still be a prisoner?"

"Only of your needs. To eat and sleep you must work. There will be no bonds on you. If you choose to run off into the wilds—" She let the sentence hang, expressively; then, "What say you?"

He gave it another minute then shrugged, then wished he hadn't. "You have yourself a helper. Is there any more to it?"

"Very little, except that I must get you out of here, get you some food and clothing. And a bath."

An hour later, any shreds of dignity Bragan might have fancied he had left had been totally destroyed. He had been hoisted out of his prison by two husky men with a rope. He had been half-led, half-carried to the nearest building that could offer hot water and cleaning oil. He had chewed ravenously on plain bread and a handful of things like carrots, and Ryth had got for him a coarse gray wool tunic and sandals. Although shaking and aching, thoroughly humiliated and kitten-weak from hunger, Bragan used his eyes, and his wits. The people who encountered him wore grins, but nothing savage. The water was hot. The depilatory paste was efficient. The bread was good, full-flavored. Texture was the word he settled on. These people had a rich texture to their lives, as if they lived every minute fully.

When he was ready to move, and Ryth led him to the little airfield, there was more to note and wonder at. To his way of thinking a little airfield meant little and clumsy aircraft, and the impressive thundering waves of bombers the other night needed some explaining. Now he could see their flying machines close up, and gape.

One was taking off as they walked out into the open. It was stumpy of body and wing, no bigger than would seat six at the most, and with two engines turning airscrews. But even as the screws began to spin gently the whole of the body-top lifted, stood clear on a thick spindle and began to

rotate, and he saw that it was a cunningly flattened oval tube with air-slots. And hardly had the tube-wing begun to windmill at speed than the machine was rising, straight up and away. *Vertical takeoff*, he thought, watching it climb and then swoop away at speed.

Ryth nudged him toward another similar craft and he clambered aboard, noting the stark simplicity of the interior. He began to add and subtract, and make patterns, because that was how his mind was trained to work and he needed the answers. He got some. These people, the Scartanni, were highly advanced in potential. No matter how contradictory it might seem, the fact that they demonstrated few luxuries, that they lived on an agrarian level, did not mean they were primitive. It merely meant that they had deliberately so chosen. He recalled his own words to Swann on that same conclusion.

They had highly efficient radio technology, with a standby telephone substitute. They had some kind of computer technology, according to what Mordin had said. They had aircraft, good ones. They had advanced chemical knowledge—he knew from the history he had read just how difficult it was to produce a satisfactory depilatory—and they had fantastic inventive and technological capacity. Yet they chose, deliberately, to remain simple.

Some of it, he reasoned, came from their philosophy of life, to judge by the samples he had had from Ryth, and her father. But that moved the whole key question just one stage back. Where did that philosophy come from? He cleared away a few odds and ends from his mind, tried to ignore the remaining aches, and his still-clamant hunger, and realized that this was the one thing he had to know. This was the touchstone that would crack the enigma. Then he slid a careful glance aside at Ryth, as the aircraft shuddered and took off, and knew what he had to do. Strategy. Gain her confidence. Find out just what it was that made the Scartanni tick. And he knew, even as he planned his future course, that he was moving into the most dangerous phase of the game so far.

He looked away, out of the window and down over Stopa as it shrank into a gathering of dolls' houses arranged along the twisting river. Having made up his mind he was able to

slip out of that preoccupation and relax. And pay attention to the scene as it unrolled beneath him. He felt a pang, an inner twinge that would have astonished those who knew him well. Because he could appreciate this beautiful country. Rolling parkland for the most part, with here and there a stretch of untouched wilderness, trees clinging to upstanding peaks, ravines full of green and dark shadows, wild life, the real original life—and he contrasted it with the overdeveloped, overlived and gutted surface of his own home world. Miles upon square miles of concrete and glass jungle; miles upon ribbon-miles of houses, houses and more houses. And roadways, railways, factories and developments. Depressingly dulling duplication. He began to feel that he was the fool in seeking to find why the Scartanni had chosen this instead of that. By comparison, this was paradise unspoiled.

Then through his sentiment struck the chill reminder of fact. This green and pleasant land ranged against the juggernaut might of Zorgan! There—his eye caught on a string of little circular lakes like bomb craters—they looked beautiful now. But imagine the whole of this countryside pocked and cratered like that! Gashed and ripped and reduced to smoking radioactive ruin. That's what Zorgan would do at the first hint of resistance. He imagined the little jewel-drop lakes, not as placid pools of water but as beds of simmering fire and smoking debris. The shock and roar of earth-shaking explosions—and started as Ryth nudged him out of his reverie.

"We are here," she said briskly, and he snorted and straightened, to see that they had settled down on a green patch close to a clutch of low brown buildings. He clamped his teeth on a groan as he made to move his limbs, and almost fell from the hatch of the aircraft onto the ground below. Ryth took a firm hold of his arm. "You need a good meal," she decided. "Come along!"

As the aircraft whoop-whooped away, she led him across a grassy patch, over a narrow stone bridge and up to the largest building. Bragan could hardly get along, and was glad to sag into a chair by a rough table while she vanished into a further room and began clattering pots and pans. He didn't let the weakness at his knees distract his attention or

his eyes. There were points to note, here. That bridge out there. The gutter. This stone floor. That added up to another underground system. In the name of sanity, why? And the building itself had its peculiarities too.

He twisted around, seeing as much as he could. This wasn't the friable stone-block stuff of Stopa. This was a stuff more like paper, a composition stuff with a glaze to it, but without much body. He could see one wall give and spring back to the push of the breeze outside. Frowning, he worked it out. Girders at the corners, solidly bedded in the stone floor. The walls hung on those. The windows were not glass at all but something flexible, a plastic. There were no doors between rooms. The outside door had no lock. A picture grew in his mind and he examined it carefully while Ryth made busy sounds just like any housewife.

*What do you do*, he wondered, *with an answer that doesn't make sense?* This house, the cellar complex, the type of building—the whole of Stopa—it all made sense only if you postulated a population that went in constant fear of and readiness for—aerial bombardment! Bomb-shelters!

"Here you are." She planked a bowl down on the table before him. "You can start with that. There will be something else in a—why do you look at me that way?"

"Because I have just discovered something very strange about you."

"About me?" She stepped back and looked disconcerted.

"Not you personally. About Scarta." He scowled down at the bowl of soup, spooned some of it, tasted and swallowed appreciatively. "I need to think about it." He took another spoonful and then glanced around at the sound of a heavy footfall. Ryth's brother Hork filled the doorway for a moment then came on in, to stand and look down at Bragan curiously.

"A Zorgan?" he demanded curiously. "I had expected he would be up to here perhaps!" and he elevated a muscular arm to aim at a point about a foot higher than his own six foot three. Bragan studied the youth. Hork was no more than twenty by the look of him, but he was all muscle and plenty of it. There was more than a hint of his father's cragginess about his sunburned face and in the way he stood, with just

white wool about his lean hips and a gray cloak over one arm. "Good soup, Zorgan?"

"It's very good," Bragan admitted. "But a bowl twice as big would be no better, only more of the same," and Hork grinned hugely.

"I am not judging *you* by size, Zorgan, only the stories that come by the radio. I heard you say Zorgan is mighty. You, by the voice. Yet you are just a man, like myself."

"He has been without food or drink, or shelter, for four days," Ryth rebuked her brother gently. "Let him eat so that he can become strong enough to work. There will be much to do, seeing that I have been away four days."

"I haven't been asleep!" Hork grumbled, sitting down to the bowl she laid for him. "Nothing has been neglected, except the mereens, and that is no job for a single pair of hands. Eat up, Zorgan. The sooner you can do my job the sooner I can be away to Stopa."

"Anxious to get into the war-effort?" Bragan asked, and the phrase seemed to puzzle the younger man.

"There is much to be done," he nodded. "I do not know just what. But I will learn. All men who are healthy are asked to move into the cities to learn new skills. If that is war-effort, yes."

Bragan frowned to himself as he tried to analyze this. The Scartan language didn't have a word for war, not exactly. The nearest they could come was "struggle hard against extreme difficulty" with overtones of being hindered by other people. Nor did they even have a word for bomb. It was a puzzle, but he decided to let it go and hope that something would turn up to trigger off a solution.

"We have half a day," Ryth declared. "We can deal with the mereens in that time, three of us. This way, Zorgan." She conducted him into another room, indicated a massive cylinder and alongside it a thing that looked like a hand-power-tool. "Bring those. Hork will show you." She caught up a low stool and a handful of cords and marched out. Hork grinned, hefted the cylinder onto a shoulder while Bragan took the tool, and they followed her out and across a sun-bright meadow at a pace that made Bragan stretch hard to keep up. In a while the meadow took on a slope, and they climbed, to halt by a rough fence of dark green

bushes. Ryth dropped the stool, made two quick double-tweaks of her fingers to undo buttons, and stepped right out of her blue tabard, to drop it aside on the grass. Then she strode ahead, slid in between the shoulder-high bushes and was gone from sight. Hork tossed his tunic to one side, too, and pointed to the stool.

"You'd better take that. Here, I'll show you how the cutter works." He took a length of pressure tubing and connected it at one end to the heavy cylinder, the other end to the butt of the tool, turned valves, pressed a stud, and the tool whined. Bragan held it, studied it curiously. It had a semicircle muzzle like a comb, and when the motor ran, a circular toothed blade skimmed over the teeth of the comb. Shears!

"Doesn't it pull away to the right?" he wondered, and Hork nodded.

"That's the trick of it, Zorgan. You bear the effort against that. You have seen this kind of thing before?"

"Similar idea, but we do it with a straight comb and straight blades that oscillate to and fro. There's a spinning drive just the same, but it operates a rocker-arm; do you know what I mean? I don't see that it's any better than this, though. Just different." What he didn't remark on, although it impressed him, was the fact that in this stubby handle he held was a hydrogen-burning fuel-cell producing electricity enough to drive that motor, which was a way of producing and using electricity that he had never seen so cunningly done before.

He looked up as the bushes tossed and Ryth came through lugging a protesting animal something bigger than a sheep, but looking more like a cross between a goat and a mule, with useful and angry teeth and a thick mat of gray fleece. Hork went forward, grabbed competently, and made quick and expert passes with a cord, then delivered the victim to Bragan's feet.

"Start here," he advised, slapping the root of the tail, "and run right up the spine to the neck, then down one side first, then the other."

Bragan took a moment to steady his hand, and his breathing, and made a start. Those two glimpses of Ryth in nothing but a skimpy white cashmere patch about her loins had



shaken him badly. It was obvious that the woman didn't know the power she had. Hork didn't seem to see anything amiss either as he watched Bragan's inexperienced efforts.

"Don't be afraid of hurting the merreen," he urged. "The blades cannot cut unless you force them into the flesh on purpose. A moment, when I have stringed the next one, and I will show you." Ryth was back with another snarling beast. He grabbed and threw and fastened swiftly, then took the shears.

"Like this; see?" He plied the whirring blades and the thick mat of wool peeled away down to the belly line. "Now for the other side. Never mind the shoulders, neck and legs. Leave those, or the merreen will be able to push through the shrub-fence."

"Is that why Ryth took off her tunic?"

"Try getting through those shrubs with one on, and see," Hork chuckled. "There are hook-thorns that would tear the cloth to pieces in no time. In any case, we do not wear clothing in the fields when working. It is easier this way; healthier, too. And clothes last longer."

It was all very rational, Bragan thought, but he imagined the prospect ahead and the sweat began to run down his face, not all from the strain of holding the shears and guiding them through the fleece. Hork kept moving. The shorn beasts had to be freed and turned back into the fenced enclosure, and Ryth kept coming with more, glossy with sweat but seemingly without any thought of fatigue. And Bragan couldn't complain, because he knew he had the easy part, sitting down. So he set his teeth, ignored his aches and concentrated on shearing. He got better at it by degrees.

As Ryth said, sparing a moment to come and inspect the fleeces critically, "Not good, but you will improve with time. I think perhaps there are six or seven more yet to be caught. Then I will go ahead and prepare for the evening meal."

Her timing was pretty accurate. By the time Bragan had steered the shears through the last thicknesses of the last fleece the red glow of sunset was staining the hillside. Hork had already knotted the short cords into a long line. He freed the last snarling beast, herded it through the fence, then added the cords to his string and made two rough bales of the fleeces. He adjusted them across his shoulders to

take the bite out of the thin cord between the two great bundles. Then, with a grin and grunt, he hoisted the two bales and took them like a milkmaid carries a bucket-yoke.

"If you'll hand me the stool," he said, "can you manage the gas-bottle and shears?"

Bragan stood and stretched and said, "I can try. Where to?"

"Just follow me." Hork went plodding away down the hill. Bragan followed wearily until they reached the first building, a long low shed. Copying Hork, he dumped his burden gladly. Then the youth grinned and waved him on.

"This is the best part of the day," he declared, and Bragan followed him past the buildings and down into a little gully. At the far end a small stream chuckled in a bend and made a tempting pool. Hork dropped his tunic, took a moment to skin out of his woolen drawers and ran to hurl himself into the water. Bragan went after him promptly. It was good to feel the cool water soak away the grime and ache. He ducked right under blissfully.

"Ryth will be along in a moment," Hork promised, "with oils and towels, and fresh clothes. And then supper!"

Ryth came with a jar, and an armful of clean white stuff, which she put down carefully on a flat rock and then, just as they had done, skinned out of her clothes and threw herself into the water with them.

"I would not live in the city for anything," she declared, surfacing happily. "They have no pleasure as simple and as rewarding as this."

And Bragan, to his own surprise, felt that he agreed with her. Hard work and fresh air and the utter sincerity of these two, had peeled away some constricting layer of his being so that he felt new. It was a pleasure, in a while, to scramble out on the bank and share with them the business of making a foaming lather of the oil from the jar, even to let Ryth take hold of his neck-muscles at the back and knead them strongly.

"This is where it gets you," she said. "I know. Usually I am the one who sits and shears while Hork handles the mereens. There, that feels good, doesn't it? And now, one more plunge to wash away the oil, and then dry and clean clothing. And supper! It will be ready."

Bragan discovered a huge appetite, and a sense of satisfaction on top of being well-fed. To round it all off, Ryth produced a jar of stuff that had a sour-sweet flavor not unlike apple wine.

"We usually sit for a while on the grass outside," she said, "and look at the sky-glow, and the stars. Perhaps you will not care for that, since it might remind you of home."

"I'd like it fine, only I can't guarantee how long I can keep awake, not after today, and this apple-jack."

"A pity," Hork commented. "It is the time when we talk about things. I was minded to ask you, Zorgan; do you really think it is impossible to beat your big fleet?"

"My name is Bragan. Denzil Bragan. And it is not impossible to beat Zorgan—in the sense that nothing is impossible. Impossible is a big word, like forever. A force bigger and stronger than Zorgan—could defeat Zorgan. That's all there is to it. And that's the only way. Now—if you will show me where I am to sleep?"

## VII

THE WEEK that followed was the longest seven days Bragan had ever known. Not even in the timeless vastness of space, where pure boredom dragged out the hours, had time seemed so long. All that kept him going was the knowledge that he *had* to, and that the torture was no more than a whole array of muscles and sinews that he had never abused so much before. He made himself into two people. One was a groaning, aching, protesting mass of straining effort that fought its way out of a crude cot and rough blanket in one corner of Hork's room every morning with daylight's first sign; a bleary-eyed thing that ate, and worked, hoisting, shoving, reaching and cutting and carrying; that fell into cool water each evening to get clean, and fell asleep almost before it could dull its hunger at night. That was one creature.

The other was his withdrawn, never-resting mind, watching points, storing up fragments of knowledge, listening critically to Hork and Ryth, to the way they talked, to the clumsy way in which they kept hauling around their occasional conversations to the same topic: how to beat Zor-

gan. They were not very good at dissimulation. It was painfully plain that they wanted to milk him of any valuable knowledge he might have, and the thought made him want to laugh at them.

Hork put it bluntly one noon, as the three of them sprawled on a patch of grass and munched their midday snack before making a further attack on a mass of standing canes which carried a berry they called bilbys.

"When Father Mordin called the roll," he said, "all the other men claimed some special skill of some kind. What's yours?"

"I'm a strategist." Bragan waited for the inevitable next question and thought it through carefully. "You are bigger than me," he said. "Heavier and stronger. If it ever came to a struggle between us, you would defeat me."

Hork thought about it. "Why should we struggle?"

"Suppose I had a long knife and tried to kill you with it. And you saw, and grabbed a knife too, and tried to stop me." Hork scowled and nodded at the alien picture. Bragan went on, "Again we would be unmatched, yes? But if I had skill with a knife, and you hadn't, then I would defeat you—for all that you are bigger and stronger than me. See?" Hork took a while to grasp that. Bragan waited until he showed signs of understanding then went on again. "Put away the knife. Suppose it is just the two of us as we are, with nothing. Suppose I am exactly the same size as you, and we are standing face to face. A game. I must try to put you down on the ground, and you must try to do the same with me. Can you imagine that? Now, both are evenly matched, equal to each other. What happens next?"

"There is no way of telling," Ryth suggested. "If two men are equal and they play this game, who can tell what will happen? And why should they waste time and strength like that?"

"Trust a woman to ask an unnecessary question," Bragan growled. "There isn't any 'why would they?' That is contained in the supposition. But you are right. If they were equal the contest would be stalemate. But if one is more skilled at the game than the other, he will win. That skill is one kind of strategy. I am not so big, nor so strong as you, Hork, but if you and I stood and played this game I have

just described, I would beat you. Because I know which things to do to hit your weak places."

"I'd like to see that." Hork scrambled to his feet, and Bragan got up too, though not so vigorously. "I am to try and put you down on the grass?"

"Right. And I am going to stop you—by putting you down first!"

It was, Bragan thought, a shame to do it. Hork was strong, and fast, but it was glaringly obvious he had never fought anyone before. By the time he had hit the grass solidly three times in quick succession he grew wary, and Bragan held up a hand for peace.

"That's simple stuff, ignorance coming to grief against skill. It's only the start of strategy. As you can see, it won't work much longer because you're getting careful now. If I had been meaning to kill you I would have done it the first time, or the second, before you had a chance to learn. And that, also, is strategy. Hit the other man when he doesn't expect it, when he is off-guard. Find his weak spots and hit them. Like this—" and he took Hork's right hand swiftly, got a hard grip in a certain manner, and the big youth came up on his toes as the first anguish racked him. "So long as I hold you this way I can make you behave; see?" and he let go the hold.

Hork stood back, flexing his fingers and staring. "That is a new kind of knowledge to me," he muttered. "Will you teach me that trick?"

"If you like. But what good will it be to you? You are not a fighting man. Your people are not fighters. I am. All Zorgan is trained to be like this. That's why, with only six small ships, we felt certain we could grip your planet the way I gripped you just now, and make you bend. We failed only because I misjudged certain things about you. I was responsible for that mistake. Strategy is 'the best way to beat the other side' and is my special skill. I failed because I didn't know enough about you."

Hork dropped to the grass again; his brow furrowed as he pondered over the novelty, but Ryth had seen beyond the simple fact into the larger implication. "If we had that kind of skill," she said, "we could beat Zorgan!"

"Where would you learn?" he retorted, and she shrugged

and passed the question by. But it came up again in the cool of the evening, and other evenings. Clumsily naive questions that took the form "If you were set to it, how would you organize things to defeat a force like Zorgan?" Most times he was too bone-weary to bother answering. But once or twice he let himself be drawn into fantasizing such a situation, always reminding them that it was nothing more than high-powered imagination on his part. His constant refusal to entertain the notion seriously that Scarta could offer anything but futile resistance provoked Hork, one evening, to offer a scheme of his own.

"We get news," he said, "regularly, from Stopa and other places. A lot is being done. There is talk of trying to repair your ships and build more like them. We can build. We have skills, and your technical people to help. Why can't we build a fleet as big as Zorgan, and stop them that way?"

Bragan snorted at it. "That would be just about the silliest and most futile thing you could do, believe me!" As Hork demonstrated that he didn't believe, Bragan elaborated. "Let's do it from simple beginnings. Look; you are faced with an armed force on the ground, right? So you put up a similar force to stop them. You meet headlong. You wheel, try flanking movements, exert strength face to face, and you either win or lose. Call it a battle. It's practical and bloody, and men have been fighting that way for years and years. Two dimensions, on the flat. But now introduce a third dimension, the air. You know about aircraft. Can you hang a curtain of aircraft up there to stop an enemy? He can go over or around you, and you can stop some—your aircraft can shoot each other down—but some will get through. Think, and learn as all warrior nations have had to learn, that you can't fight a battle in three dimensions. It can't be done. And so, even less can it be done in space, where you really *have* three dimensions, fantastic speeds and unlimited room to move around in. Building spaceships calls for highly sophisticated skills and knowledge. Just getting them off the ground is an achievement. Flying them is something else again, calls for training and experience. Manning them with trained space-troopers is yet another big step onward. And even if you could do *all* that, fast enough and massive

enough—which you can't—it would still be a waste of time. Can you do calculations?"

Hork said that he could, within reason and certain limits.

"All right. See your glow-lights up there? They are roughly a quarter of a million miles up. Now, you try working out the surface area of a globe that sizes in square miles, and then imagine one ship per hundred of those square miles—which you'd need for adequate guard and watch—and let me know what the figure comes to." Bragan didn't have to wait long. By the time you cube a quarter of a million and look at the result, you begin to breathe hard.

Hork grunted. "Then it is not possible to fight the enemy in space?"

"Absolutely not. It just is not worth thinking about. The only way in which you can deliver a blow at another space-fleet and hope to make it effective is to catch that fleet in the vicinity of a planet, say if it was actually carrying out a ground attack, and was therefore pinned down a little. If you had a big fleet, and you had just put down invasion forces, and were standing by with support—*then* you would be vulnerable from the rear. There you have it. All you need is to radio some nearby friendly planet to come up on Zorgan from the rear while you are engaging them down here—"

And Hork climbed to his feet with a growl. "You have a strange sense of humor, Denzil Bragan."

"Not me, Hork. You are the comedians, if you only knew it, you and your hopeless attempts to defeat the inevitable. Build ships? You don't know how funny that is."

"I don't think it's funny, either," Ryth told him, and he stared at her in the gloom, calculating his response.

"I have no reason to help you," he said. "Nor have I any reason to do you a bad turn. In a sense I owe you something, a little, this extra life. If I wanted to betray you entirely I would tell you to talk to your valiant friends on your radio, and advise them to concentrate on building a great fleet of ships. That way I could utterly ruin all your efforts, because it would be a waste of time. But it doesn't matter either way. It's just that I do not like futility, in any sense. I think I've made that plain. I have to admire your Scartans for your drive, your courage. It would be a shame to waste it by trying to build ships. And that's it. Take it or leave it."

It was a gamble, but he felt he knew these two at least well enough by this time to estimate what they would do. He would not have been surprised to know, that night after he and Hork were safely asleep, that Ryth sat by her radio and talked to Stopa, relaying the whole of that conversation, word for word, to attentive ears in the city. Two people in particular were most interested. One was Hallex Mordin himself, the other was Otto Karsh.

When she had finished her account, Karsh looked across at Mordin and nodded grimly. "There you are, old man. Isn't that exactly what I've been trying to tell you for two days now? We cannot possibly match Zorgan ship for ship, not in a hundred years, and even if we could, it would be useless."

"That, or you both are from the same brood of liars!"

"It's my life," Karsh retorted. "I'm as fond of living as you are. And when it comes to tactical matters I'll trust Bragan all the way. That's a smart girl you have there. She seems to have gained his confidence, and we need that. We need his brains."

"One man?" Mordin growled. "Is he so precious?"

"Every man to his own skill," Karsh said patiently. "I've told you this before. If this radio breaks down, can you fix it? No. But I can, and so can any man who is trained for that. Look, in a battle fleet every man has his job. Troopers, squad-leaders and such, they operate on the ground, or with weapons. A ship's captain knows his ship and how to handle it. My own special training is in technology, of weapons, forces, energies, metals and so on. But a battle fleet is a whole thing, a striking force, and one man has to be in charge. It takes a special kind of mind and brain, and special training. We call men like that cadwalladers. It means battle-arrangers. And that's Bragan. He's trained for it. If there is any man who can figure out a way of crippling a big fleet with a smaller force, he's that man!"

"I think this is true," Ryth came in thoughtfully. "I saw this man throw Hork to the ground three times. He was still weak, and weary from hard work, and Hork is much bigger than he is, yet he threw him down with only a twist of his hand. He called it strategy."



"There you are!" Karsh declared. "I told you, we need him. He won't break by force, but he might with kindness."

"Very well." Mordin shrugged. "But it is for Ryth to decide."

"I think I can get him to talk," she said. "He is sour in some ways, and suspicious, but he is a good worker and doesn't complain. Hork is the trouble. He is too forthright with questions."

"How soon before you can manage without him?"

"I think about seven or eight days. The Zorgan will be strong enough by then, and most of the heavy work will be done for a while." She signed off to leave Karsh and Mordin to their planning.

Bragan knew nothing about it. All his thoughts were given over to one nagging problem, even while he slept. It was a simple problem to put into words, but tremendously difficult to find an answer for. In all the history he had studied, and it was considerable, there was one unbroken axiom. Ability, talent, genius, call it what you will, emerges only under pressure of some kind. Survival pressure. On the surface the Scartanni should have been simple, almost retarded farmers. Instead they were near-genius intelligent, fantastically resourceful and ingenious. Why? What was driving them? Why did they all so positively and instantly reject any idea of defeat?

In the week that followed the problem never moved away very far from his mind, even though, by the end of that second week, he had succeeded in putting himself back together again. It was a process that happened almost insensibly. He couldn't have pinpointed the moment when hopping out of bed in the morning became a pleasure, when expanding his chest was no longer an effort but a joy, when he could lay hold of a machete and swing it to clear undergrowth with zest. Hork noticed it the day they slaughtered a mereen for fresh meat, and Bragan hoisted the carcass over his shoulder and carried it back to the cold-store shed without so much as a grunt.

"You couldn't have done that the day you came here, Denzil. I think this life is good for you."

"Fresh air, good food and hard work. It's an old recipe,

Hork. You would rather live and work in the city than stay here?"

"It is necessary if we are to beat Zorgan. All men are needed. A woman can run a farm." Hork laughed, not unkindly, and added, "Why don't you come with me, and help?"

Bragan shook his head as they strode along to where Ryth had their noon meal ready outside on the grass. "I'm no good at that. Even if I thought you had a chance—and I don't—I can't *help* with it. My part in military affairs is to take charge, and your people wouldn't allow that."

Ryth, squatting down by the steaming plates, wanted to know what they were talking about, and Bragan told her. "He's trying to persuade me to run off with him back to Stopa and help with the war-effort."

"You fool!" she snapped at her brother, then pinked and tried to ease the moment by adding, "Why do you think I wanted Denzil here in the first place, if not to help me so that you could leave?"

"That's what you say. But all the holdings around here are managing without men now; you know that. I'm the only male working land in the whole Tarat region. If the others can manage, so can you!" Hork took his plate and began to eat. Ryth grew pinker still and managed an uneasy smile for her prisoner. Bragan came to her rescue easily.

"I'm not going to leave. Not unless you want me to. Apart from anything else, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't get cooking like this in the city."

Now her pink became a rosy glow that spread down over her lovely curves in a warm tide, and Bragan felt a twinge of contrition. She really was a marvelous cook, a marvelous woman, and if things had been different—he felt ashamed of what he was doing. Then he recalled Swann, and other good men who had died, and thought of the millions more who would share the same fate if he made a mistake, and managed to harden his heart.

"We will gather gleebs this afternoon," she declared, "and I will make a pie from some of them. Then you will see what good cooking really is. And no more talk of leaving me here alone to do all the hard work."

Hork grunted. "Gleebs! Boy's work!"

"Not for you. You can cut and clean those carcasses ready to hang. We will have baskets for you to carry by then."

The gleebs filled a field over by the slope of a hill opposite the mereen pasture. The bushes stood about eight feel tall, a yard apart in orderly rows. They had taken with them a pile of flat straw baskets. Ryth, tossing her tunic aside as always, set a basket close by her feet, grasped a machete, and commanded him to observe.

"Cut the top here," she indicated a point level with her chin—"and let it fall. Then chop one side-shoot at a time; like this," and the blade spun to slice off a stout branch laden with large green fruit something like a tomato in shape. She dropped the machete so that it stuck upright in the ground and proceeded to strip the fruit with quick hands, tossing them into the basket. In five minutes the bush stood stark and slim with just stumps of branches left. "It will grow again, more fruit, in about eight or nine weeks. Now let's see you." And she watched while he tackled the first in the next row. Then they began to work, bush by bush, in harmony.

Small things like this added up to a lot in his mind. Crops every seven or eight weeks, if they were needed. In the cold-store shed he had seen several canisters and cans of powders which Hork had told him were weed-killer, growth accelerators, pesticides and additives. The machete was glass, with a razor edge that had shown no sign of needing to be honed. Things like this stirred up his problem harder than ever. Ingenuity and resourcefulness under pressure. But what was the pressure? Ryth's sleek shoulder brushed against his as she lowered her blade for a moment's breather.

"You do not talk much, Denzil, but you think a great deal. I would like to know what it is you think about, all the time?"

Before he could offer some kind of answer the air about his head leaped violently and a monstrous *kaBAM-BLAM* made him duck and cringe by reflex. Then, almost as swiftly, he straightened up as he identified the sound and looked up for the source. Hearing the shrill dopplering wail, he spotted vapor trails against the blue, and whistled softly to himself.

"Supersonic jets—already? They can certainly move when they have a mind!" Still staggered by the magnitude of the technical achievement in such a short time, he looked down

to Ryth again. And she was flat on the ground, curled into a fetal panic. For a moment he stood quite still, not knowing quite what to do. Then he crouched down by her side, touched her shoulder and shook it gently, feeling the shiver through her satiny skin.

"Scares you a little if you've never heard one before," he said gently, "but there's nothing to be afraid of, really. It's just a fast aircraft on the way over. There was a flight of seven, actually." She stirred, lifted her head and brushed the hair from her face, stared at him and he saw stark terror in her gray eyes. It was so unlike her that he could hardly take it in for a while. Then he heard a distant bellow and stood up to see Hork come galloping up the slope from the house.

*Well, well!* he thought. *So they can be scared. But why a supersonic bang? Where did they hear that before?*

By the time Hork arrived Ryth had regained her feet and the terror was gone from her eyes, but she was still shaking with aftereffect.

Hork, white-faced and out of breath managed to gasp, "There was no alarm! What was it?"

"Just a flight of aircraft going over, traveling a little faster than usual." Bragan stared at him, at both of them. "Supersonics. Something new to you?" It obviously was, and he tried to explain as simply as he could why an aircraft that was flying faster than the noise it was making would deliver the whole accumulated noise in a packet with two ends. They heard him. They listened, and he thought they understood, but they made no comment. For the very first time he had run into a subject they didn't want to talk about, that was somehow taboo. It was not mentioned again.

The following day a more conventional aircraft wheeled gently down into the clearing by the farmhouses to carry Hork away to the city. The leavetaking was brief and non-demonstrative. Bragan watched the aircraft lift off again with mixed feelings. The job was going to be tough now, and he wasn't just thinking about the manual work. As a strategist he had trained himself to regard any situation as a game, to remain uninvolved personally, but ever since Ryth had rescued him from death by starvation he had found it more and more difficult to be impersonal. Now that he was to be left alone with her it was going to be impossible.

As the flying thing vanished over the hill he said, "Two of us, to do one woman's work . . . ?"

"Don't take Hork too seriously," she told him. "He was being resentful simply because all the other men have moved into the city. There will be work enough for both of us. There is always work on a holding."

They turned to walk back to the house. "I wonder if you can answer a question for me, Ryth."

"I can try. What bothers you?"

"People, again. You and others. You said, long ago, that Scarta is not owned by you, that you don't think of it that way. Yet you—young men like Hork, that is—are willing to give up almost anything to fight, which is strange to you, to keep Scarta from an enemy. It would be simpler to say let the Zorgan come and take over, as they must, and we will work for them. The difference would be slight, perhaps a fifth part of all you produce."

"A change in our way of life."

"It's changing now, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it is the way we choose, not the way someone else tells us."

"Even that's not true. This change comes as a result of the threat of Zorgan, not by your choice at all."

She was silent for a while, then, "We work for what we get. What we have worked for we keep. We owe nothing to anyone or thing—from the sky." It was the first time she had used such an expression, and he was careful to scout around it, to save it for later.

"Think of it from another angle, then. Yield to Zorgan and you change your way of life somewhat. Stand up and resist—and this fair planet of yours will bear the scars of the result for all time. Perhaps you don't mind being killed, but think of all this, as far as you can see, blasted bare of green, transformed into a smoking hell of radioactive sterility. That could happen with just one medium-size nuclear bomb. There are other weapons more terrible than you would believe!"

"Denzil!" She halted to face him in the shadow of the building she called home. "It is difficult for me to feel that you are an enemy. If I could keep that thought"—her gray eyes fell away from his—"I would try to persuade you to tell

me exactly how a small force would use craft to beat a larger one. You have shown something of how it can be done. A man with your skill and knowledge of Zorgan—" Her voice faltered. He knew exactly what her trouble was, because he shared it. He forced his mind away from a purely emotional impulse and made a laugh that shook a little.

"If I was a friend, Ryth, I couldn't do better than I have done, to tell you to give up the hopeless task. But as an enemy—all right, I'll do whatever you ask. Let's pretend I'm in charge of Scarta, and we are hell-bent on beating Zorgan. You'll have to tell me about the planet and its resources, and I'll tell you best how to employ them."

"Truly?"

"Truly. It's futile, but if that's what you want, all right!"

## VIII

AND SO THE DAYS and weeks slid by and fell into a pattern. Hard but healthy and satisfying work during all the hours of daylight and long and detailed arguments and discussions in the evening under the ribbon of light in the starlit sky. She did her part well, listening critically and often making him explain a second and third time just why it would be wrong to do this and right to do something else. First and basic, he told her, was to preserve the air of innocence the planet had worn in the first place, to make it a trap. Then to concentrate on ways of knocking out those ships they could safely hope to hit. He explained the system that provided unlimited power for the men in the field, unlimited power for the ships as they came down, from the sun itself, and the nature of those shielding screens that had held off the valiant bombardment.

Night after night he rolled into his narrow cot bone-weary, knowing that everything he said was being carefully relayed to other ears. And it was what he wanted, but he was not happy about the means. He was living a lie, and so was Ryth; a thin and delicate bubble of pretense shimmered between them and was in evergrowing danger of being broken. Because you cannot work and eat and share healthy exhaustion and satisfaction with someone else, day after day, without

coming to be very close to that other person; and there was a quality of spontaneous affection about Ryth that made it ever more difficult for him to remain impersonal.

He began to dream about her. There were times when he found himself about to reach out and touch, to take her hand, or pat a sleek suntanned shoulder. Every once in a while she would get out a special flask of stuff and wash her hair in it, and then sit brushing it dry on the grass by him while she went on with her never-ending questions. Those times were a particular torment, and yet a delight to him.

But they went on being Zorgan and Scartanni on the brittle surface, and all around them Scarta was exploding into action. Bragan saw very little of it, but he knew it by what Ryth told him, and more from what she didn't mean to tell him, but conveyed by the way she kept harking back to ideas and adding questions that could come only from those who were trying them and running into snags. There were things he saw with his own eyes, too. More of the supersonic aircraft flew over, and this time Ryth was not scared at all. The little ball-wheeled truck that came in from Tarat once every other week to collect their spare produce, turned up one time as a sizzling ground-effect floater that was bigger, faster and in all ways more efficient than the truck had been. The slim eighteen-year-old redhead who drove it was fiercely proud of its speed and its total indifference to deficiencies in the road surface.

But she brought a message, too. Ryth relayed it after she had gone.

"We must grow more, Denzil. So many men in the cities, all working at other things and all needing to be fed."

"Wartime economy," he nodded. "I'm surprised it's taken so long to hit us. This always happens. War is a wasteful business."

"You didn't think so when you first came here."

"Oh yes, I did," he corrected. "But I was in it then. There was nothing I could do to alter that. I knew that precious material, resources, and skill and brains, were being wasted. Lives too. But in my job I had to disregard that. I had to see the big picture. Now I'm close to it—never mind, you say we must expand. How? You're the boss; what can we do?"

She pointed to the hillside opposite the mereen paddock

and said, "We will clear those trees. That will give us more ground."

"We will clear them. That would take a squad of men a week!"

"Not the way we do it. Tomorrow I will show you."

It turned out to be simple but strenuous, a matter of gas-cylinders and a power-cell, a long heavy cable and a cutter that was no more than a fine wire loop fitting into a handle, which grew white-hot when he touched the switch. As soon as he had climbed, and topped, and stripped the branches from one tree and begun on the next, she took another cutter to burn through the bole and send it crashing down. By the end of the day they were both sooty, sweaty, impregnated with the tang of scorched green-wood, and weary. But the trees were down, and he had a question.

"What now? Do we cut 'em up, leave 'em, haul 'em away, or what?"

"A drag will come, tomorrow, to carry the trunks away for timber. I have a chemical that will rot the stumps into compost, and the day after, we will plant. Now, tell me again about this what you call camouflage—"

The drag came, and with it two husky men known to Ryth by sight and name. They drove a thing with a huge motor that whined powerfully and that drew after it an array of paired wheels. Bragan eyed them from afar but went on with his own job, which, for that morning, was stripping down a pump that had choked itself on weeds. He managed to get it clear and turning over in time for the midday meal-break, just as Ryth came to check.

"That is good," she approved. "Yarrow and Belven asked for a spray to quench the few embers still glowing in the logs, but I think they really want it to get cool. I can let them have it now."

Bragan followed her around the buildings to the green patch that was the farmyard, to see the logs all mounted in piles of eight or ten in a long chain of wheeled mounts. Ryth had guessed shrewdly. One man, Yarrow, was in fact spraying the smoking logs, but taking care to get himself wet, and to direct a squirt or two over his companion.

*All in good fun*, Bragan thought and had to grin in sympathy. But Yarrow saw the grin differently. All at once he



spun around and directed the cold jet full into Bragan's face.

"Wipe away that grin, Zorgan!" he ordered.

Bragan put up his hand to divert the jet, shook water from his face, and stared at the hulking Scartanni grimly. "It would take more than water to do it, Scartanni. More than anything you can do."

So fast that it took him a long time to work it out afterward, a whole series of petty irritations boiled up in his mind and took concrete form. He saw Yarrow stiffen and toss away the hose-pipe, and then come forward on eager feet.

"We have heard talk," he said, "from Hork, who is but a youth, about what a mighty fighter you are, Zorgan. I think it is all wind, that you are only a man, and a skinny one at that." It was a deliberate insult.

Bragan was less in bulk than Yarrow, but not in any sense undersized, and the weeks of hard labor had toughened him. This man was asking for a lesson, and it fell in nicely with the way Bragan felt. The barrier between himself and Ryth had grown perilously frail. Perhaps this would help to remind her that he was, still, the enemy. To Yarrow he said, "You've finished your work here?"

"It's all done. Man's work, Zorgan. Not for you."

"It would be for me if I crippled you *before* it was finished."

"Cripple me? What with, Zorgan—big words?" Yarrow came closer, a bit too close. Bragan reached out, saw Yarrow hoist an arm to fend off the blow, and smacked him flush on the nose with his other fist. It wasn't a damaging blow, just intended to hurt. It succeeded in shocking Yarrow into an instant and murderous rage. He went back a step then came in swinging clumsily, and Bragan danced around him, through the flail of arms, chopping and hitting as he liked, making the big man look a fool. He made Yarrow grunt to a kidney-jab, then sank a hard right into his stomach to curl him up, straightened him with a knee in the face, then chopped once, twice across pectoral muscles and Yarrow stood with his arms hanging and his face a mass of blood, gasping for breath. Bragan felt Ryth grab his arm, turned to see her gray eyes blazing at him in fury.

"What are you doing this for?"

"He provoked me. He asked for it, and he got it. Excuse me—"

He pushed her gently away because Belven, from the far end of the log-train, had seen and was coming on the run. He was bigger than Yarrow, if not so tall, and immense across the shoulders. Bragan eyed him with respect, but it wasn't needed. Belvan's idea was a mad bull-rush. Bragan let him go by, fended off a grasping hand, danced a light tap to an ankle and watched the big man plunge on and down into a skidding heap on the grass. Getting up was an effort, but he made it and came lumbering back, pawing the air with huge hands. Bragan waited for him, took hold of one of those hands, and heaved, whirled, grunted with effort, and Belvan sailed through the air a short and disastrous flight, and then lay still.

"You've killed him!" Ryth gasped, and he shook his head.

"I think not. Put the hose on him." He watched her move to the hose, and jerked aside just in time to avoid a savage blow from Yarrow, who had caught up a length of lumber intended to chock the logs on the drag. Six feet of three-inch timber whistled through the air as Yarrow made another swipe. Bragan sneered as he evaded the blows.

"Only a man, Scartanni? You need a club to beat me? Two of you?" He snatched a moment to shout to Ryth. "See this? Tell the fool to put down his weapon and yield, before I take it from him and hurt him with it!"

Yarrow snarled and grew crafty, grabbed the timber and jabbed with it instead of swinging. He couldn't have done worse. Bragan chose his moment, fended off a jab, walked around it fast, laid hold and heaved to jerk the big man off balance, then leaned on the timber so that Yarrow went pitching over it into a heap on the grass.

Then he marched forward smartly, rapped Yarrow over the skull and snapped, "Get up. Get on your contraption. Take your friend with you. And if you come back this way again and see me, call me 'Lord!'" Yarrow snarled his defiance and Bragan cracked him again, harder this time. "Yield, you fool, or I'll break your head!"

Yarrow cursed again, then grudgingly said, "I yield, Zor-gan. *This time!*"

"And every time, if you come against me. Now, get your stupid friend up there with you, and go!"

As the drag grumbled away through a gap in the bushes he tossed the improvised club onto the last log-pile, watched it vanish out of sight. Then he turned to see Ryth looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes.

"For the first time," she whispered, "I am afraid of you."

"You've nothing to fear from me, Ryth, so long as you remember that I am the enemy, and don't provoke me."

"You were terrible. So calm and smiling, not angry."

"That's the way it has to be in a fight. Stay calm; use your head. If you get angry, lose your temper, you've lost everything. There's another bit of strategy for you, if you like."

For once she was not eager to grasp information. She was silent over lunch, and reserved during the rest of the afternoon as he helped her douse the tree-stumps with a foul-smelling liquid that seethed its way into the wood and dissolved it into jelly-like pulp. By the time evening came the silence between them had grown almost to an issue, so that he had to break it down somehow. He did it roughly because there was no other way.

"Do you still think you have any hope of beating Zorgan?" he asked.

"For the first time," she admitted, "I doubt."

"And—?"

"Just doubt. It makes no difference otherwise. Denzil"—her voice took on a tone he had never heard before, a strange raptness—"everyone on Scarta knows, from babyhood, that death may strike from the sky at any time, without sense or reason. That there is nothing to be done but prepare, and otherwise use every moment to the full." She paused and he waited, unwilling to disrupt her thread. "Then you came. From the sky. You didn't strike like death and destruction. You struck with words, and threats. And, for the very first time, we of Scarta had the chance to strike back. We struck. We broke you and found you were just men, with machines."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Why should you? But when you tell us that death will strike again, that's not new. That changes nothing. Until you go on to tell us that the death and destruction to come

will be by men and machines, like you. Then it is different. Then we know we can strike back. Again. And we will!"

"There's something behind what you're saying, Ryth. Something I don't get. Strike back? At what?"

He knew he was on the verge of something important, but she suddenly gathered herself up from the grass and said, "You would not understand if I told you. And it doesn't matter, anyway." And with that she went away to her room, leaving him to scratch his head and wonder.

Later, in the dark of night, the answer came to him in a form he had never dreamed of. He was well asleep, possibly dreaming, but any visions he might have had were destroyed and forgotten as a steel-throated klaxon burst into horrible sound and brought him bolt upright on his cot as it shredded the night-silence into hideous clamor. He had barely a second to realize that someone had cunningly pitched that note so as to be murderously abrasive to every nerve in his body, when Ryth appeared at his door like a pink-naked wraith, eyes staring and her face strained. She charged straight in, grabbed for his foot, shook him, snapped, "You hear the alarm? Come on! After me!"

The urgency in her voice sliced through his sleepy inertia, stopped all questions, brought him up out of his cot on the run and after her as she fled frantically across the living room, butted the outer door open with her shoulder and scurried through. Pounding after, he saw her race across the narrow grass patch, heading for the stone bridge, but veering at the last moment. *Tunnel*, he thought. *Gutter*. *Air raid?*

He saw her run full-tilt up to the edge of the gutter and then launch herself in an odd sideways fall, dropping down out of sight. It was all done so fast that he was himself launched into a similar helpless drop before the panic struck him and he cringed, expecting to crash down onto solid stone. Instead he fell some eight feet into the thick hairy strands of a woolen net, which bounced him gently then rolled him down a slope. Back toward the house, he realized, as he went over and over, and then cannoned softly into her warm nakedness, felt her hand grab his tightly to help him to his feet.

The klaxon snarled here, too, almost drowning the click as she found a light-switch. He squinted, finding himself in a

gray stone tunnel exactly like those under Stopa. "Come!" She dragged his hand and they went a dozen steps to reach a small chamber where there was a wooden bench and a big bundle of bedding stuffed against the wall at one end. "Sit here, with me!" she said, settling herself and tugging at his hand. He sat, noticing now that she was shaking like a leaf in the wind, and death-white. Instinct drove him to put a strong arm around her and hug her tight, even as he winced against the hideous bray of the alarm.

"What is it, Ryth? What's happening?"

She turned and pressed herself against him like a scared child, burrowing her face into his chest. "The gods awake from their uneasy sleep!" she whimpered, and he opened his eyes wide.

"The gods?" He could scarcely believe his ears.

"Denzil!" She thrust back enough to lift her face to him. "This may be goodbye for us. So, just in case—" and she shifted her clinging arms to circle his neck and draw his face down to hers, her mouth settling on his in eager abandon. His heart leaped in his chest enough to hurt and all his sense went glimmering into confusion at her ardent embrace.

Goodbye? Was it the end of the world? To an air raid alarm? He had barely formed the thought when the heavy bench under him bucked up and sideways violently, so that she was flung off balance against him. And then down with a bone-shaking thump. A split second later came a gargantuan roar and boom, and the crack, of some enormous impact close by. Stunned, he heard the shrill wail of noise that followed the trail of whatever that had been. The harsh lights blinked, the klaxon hiccuped but went on screaming, and he struggled to get his balance again, clinging to Ryth.

"What the—" he started to growl, and another giant-sized hammer-blow battered the solid ground into leaping shock-waves, toppling him, making him cringe. Fine dust swirled around the lights. Roaring echoes reverberated in the tunnel. Again came that insane shock of immense energy slamming into the ground, jolting him, making his head ring with the aftermath of sonic booms and echoes.

And now the faint stink of sulphur, too. He wrapped his arms tight around her and felt dull rage at his helplessness. There came another enormous impact, and then two more,

shaking the solid ground, ravaging the air with senseless bangs and bellowing thunder. And then, mercifully, the klaxon changed its note and dwindled down into a sobbing, a wailing, and then into silence. The echoes were still there, but only in his head. He stirred, put a finger in his ear in a vain attempt to discharge the ringing tone, and drew a deep breath, his first in several minutes.

Then Ryth stirred, eased herself free, pushed him gently away, took a breath as deep as his and brushed the hair from her face. Her gray eyes were like pools of smoke.

"Not this time," she whispered. "The gods strike, and miss, and I still live."

"It's all over?"

"For this time, yes. The alarm has stopped. That's the end of it, for this time."

He began to shake, clenched his fists against his thighs to stop it, and saw that she was shaking too. He felt angry again.

"Now, look!" he growled. "What *was* that, and why? And let's not have any of that stuff about the gods, if you don't mind."

"Facts," she said, "don't care whether you believe them, whether you believe *in* them, or what you believe *about* them. That's something we are all taught when we are very young." She sounded like a child now, her voice unsteady and her breath labored. "Facts *are*. So then, in fact, that was some five or six large things, perhaps stone, sometimes metal. Things which fell from the sky at great speed and with much noise, fire and smoke. They struck the earth. And where they struck they destroyed, making great holes and setting fires around. Those are the facts, whether you believe them or not. By your face I think you do not."

"Eh?" Bragan stared at her stupidly for a moment, engrossed by the sudden arc-light flare of total comprehension in his mind. "Believe you? Of course I do. This silly expression is for me, for being so stupidly blind as not to see this a long time ago. I'm a fool! Ryth, tell me, how long has this been going on, and how often does it happen?"

"You don't understand, or you wouldn't ask. Who can predict the whim of the gods? How often? I have seen perhaps a hundred such strikes, not so many as close as this.

Four in one day I saw once. Sometimes weeks, even years, the gods will doze, or strike other places. I am told there is always somewhere on Scarta where the gods are awake and angry. But I also know of people who have lived a whole life and never seen a strike."

"That figures. And it's been going on for a long time?"

"In the beginning, when the gods made Scarta and gave it to us as a place to live, they chose for themselves the great sky-lights. But then they could look down and see how beautiful Scarta was, and they knew they had given away the best part, and ever since they have been angry and they throw stones down on us from time to time—"

He heard her with only the fringe of his mind. The theology didn't interest him. All intelligent peoples go through a stage of devising myths to account for origins, and this was no better, nor worse, than others. But it confirmed something for him. "In the beginning—" is a phrase that means, in fact, a time so far back that no one can remember when it was not so. And Scarta had no moon. It was so obvious that he could kick himself now for not having expected it.

"If you don't believe me," she said, "you have only to climb up the ladder and look for yourself. The strike couldn't have been far away!"

"I believe you. Now that it is all over we have to get up and out in any case, and study the damage. Come on; let me help you." He stood, gave her a hand, and she got to her feet, reeled a little and leaned on him.

"You need something hot," he advised. "You've had a pretty bad shock. Your nerves are shot!" He put his arm around her, led her along the tunnel until he found the ladder and then helped her up to the surface again. The stink of sulphur was plainer now and there was a fitful breeze full of rain. It took only a moment to see that the impacts had indeed been close. There was one smoldering crater not thirty yards beyond the buildings, and five in a cluster gouged out of the hillside where they had labored so hard to clear the trees. The look was like angry red eyes rimmed with fire and smoke.

*Meteors*, he mused. *Meteorites*. *Bolides*. *Thunderbolts*. *The original air raids*. He recalled the scatter of little circular lakes he had seen from the air. He knew why Stopa was a

spaced-out city built of fragile stone-dust, why the farm-houses were fragile, and why there were shelters everywhere. And he knew, because Ryth had just told him why, the Scartanni were people of immense ingenuity, lightning-fast reflexes, and indomitable will. Scarta had lost its moon millions of years ago, possibly even before the dawn of anthropoid evolution. In all that time those shifting unstable glow-balls of rock and rubble up there had been hurling down assorted chunks of debris at random and with great frequency.

It must have taken sheer guts and unbeatable persistence just to survive in such conditions. Weakness, despair, panic and all debilitating neuroses must have been bred out of the stock countless generations ago. With this kind of evolutionary pressure, from outside, it was no wonder the Scartanni were a people of one language, one culture and no tendency toward fancy frills. Nor could they ever have afforded the wasteful insanity of war. With the constant knowledge that whimsical nemesis can smash you dead at any moment, you tend to think things through to basics and work for the things that really matter.

Ryth shivered and stirred within his arm. "Now that you have seen," she said, "I must report to Tarat, or they will be sending someone to find out if I need help, and that will be a waste of time."

"Right," he nodded, turning for just one more look at those burning circles, like the eyes of hell. *Imagine living with that hanging over you!* he thought. *No wonder they're not scared of Zorgan, and no wonder they're itching for just one more chance to hit back!* "All right, come on."

"I can walk," she protested, and he hugged her tighter.

"You can take it easy, Ryth. You don't have to prove anything to me. Come on." He half-carried her back indoors to her room. Then, "You go ahead and make your report while I make some coffee for us. You need something. And get some clothes on!"

It wasn't real coffee, but a berry he had discovered and experimented with until he had produced a fair substitute. It was bubbling by the time she came back with a blanket draped around her. Pink was fighting its way back to her cheeks but she was thankful to sit by the table and sip at



the cup he put out for her. Outside, the drizzle from the atmospheric disturbance had sharpened into a downpour and the rattle on the roof was quite plain.

"You look excited," she murmured. "As if you had discovered something."

"I have. Something so big that I can't quite grasp it yet. So much that I hardly know where to start asking questions. That alarm, for one. How is that worked?"

"I don't know the technical details. But I do know that every city and every village of any size keeps a constant sky-watch in some manner, day and night. It's some kind of radio that can see the god-stones as they begin to fall, and clever devices that can work out where they will strike, and then all the dwellings in that region are called with the alarm, to take cover. Is that enough? Hork could have told you more, perhaps."

"It's enough. Early-warning radar! It figures. No wonder Tarat knew where and when we had landed, and no impact." He chuckled at the thought, and then eyed her curiously. "Ryth, why haven't I heard about this before?"

"Because we never talk about it. Because there is neither sense nor reason in it. Every child is taught from the first what the alarm means, and what to do. What more is there to say? I know that I may be struck dead at any moment, so why talk about it? You realize that the shelters would not save anyone from a direct hit? That they are there only to help?"

"I realize that, all right. But there is rhyme and reason, Ryth. If it won't distress you, may I explain your 'gods' to you? Not that it will change anything, but at least it will explain just what does, in fact, happen."

She shrugged indifferently and he set away to explain, as simply as he could make it, the basic laws about gravity, and orbit, and satellite. And then the law that decrees the breakup of a satellite that comes too near a planetary body.

"In all probability Scarta captured it in a highly eccentric orbit, and every time it zoomed in close it ruptured a bit more, until it broke up altogether under stress. And now you have the debris spinning around up there in three equilaterally spaced nodes, with a ribbon of dust connecting them. And the silly thing is that I knew all that a long time ago. I

even knew those tumbling rock-piles are unstable. We had a hell of a job securing our collector-dishes to them so that they would keep an eye on the sun—" He broke off as the association of ideas to go with collector-dishes sparked off an idea so vast that it caught his breath. Ryth stared at him and shivered.

"What are you thinking now?"

"Something—don't ask me. I have to let it settle!" He got up, all at once, and went to the door. The rain had stopped and the night air was as clear as crystal. He stepped out and looked up. There, just sinking over one hilltop, was a ball of silver fire, and newly risen over another was a second cool flame, with the great glowing scarf of dust banded between them. He stared, and thought, and wondered as the immensity of his idea took hold. He started out of a reverie as she came to brush his shoulder. She had left her blanket draped over the chair and was as naked as Eve.

"Denzil!" She caught his arm and turned him to face her. "There is something I must say. I must!"

"Yes. What?" He hardly saw her because his mind was still seeing visions of a different kind. Silver light painted the side of her hair and cheek, shoulder and breast, and the red glow of Betelguese tinged the shadowy side so that she was two kinds of fire, cool and warm.

"Just now. In the shelter. When I believed I might not live very much longer—I did something I would not have done, otherwise."

Something in her voice sliced through his preoccupation and he tensed, seeing her as if for the first time. She raised a hand uncertainly. He knew. The knowledge made his vision blur with a sudden rush of blood to his head. And then, with an effort, he clutched at sanity and stepped back just a pace.

"No need to explain," he muttered. "We all do silly things in the heat of a moment like that. If you're worried that I might have misunderstood, forget it. I wouldn't make a mistake like that. You're Scarta, and I'm the enemy, Zorgan. It's forgotten. Think no more about it."

She sagged visibly, let her arm fall, and looked like a struck child. Then she sighed, and lifted her chin again.

"Very well. It is forgotten. It was, as you say, a silly thing to do. I think I will go to bed now."

He watched her go away, and was numb. But there was no choice, for him. What, he asked himself savagely, does one man matter when a whole planet is at stake?

## IX

FOR THE FIRST TIME in all the weeks he had spent on the holding he was awake before her the next morning. She turned out looking as if someone had switched out a flame inside her somewhere. He feigned concern.

"A bad night? No wonder, after the shock you had. Better take things easy for a while. I can manage on my own. You just tell me—"

"I am perfectly all right!" she snapped. "I shall not take it easy. There is much to be done!"

"All right." He shrugged. "You're the boss. Don't you want to hear about my idea of last night?"

"Not unless it will help to destroy your kind, when they come!"

"Well, now!" he grinned. "That's just what it could well be, if you had the technology to do it. What d'you think of that?"

"I think you are a big liar, Zorgan. But I will listen, while we eat breakfast." She did more than listen. She hung on his words with a kind of fascinated horror as he expounded.

"The first thing," he told her, "is that sky-warning radio of yours. You've never taken it any further than the source of the trouble, and I can't blame you for that. But the fact is that with a little know-how you could easily lay a blanket of early warning well out past the meteorite zone. It would call for some filtering and fancy electronics, but it could be done."

"To what purpose?"

"Get it through your head! We are not your sky-gods. We come from a long way further off, as I told you. Planets of another star, out there! And by stretching your sky-watch you'll have advance warning of the big fleet, when it comes."

"And what good will that achieve?"

"You're not trying. That shock last night—never mind. Believe me, any kind of advance warning is a benefit. And I know how the Zorgan mind will work. Exactly the way we did. They will steal in, and hide behind the glow-clouds just as we did. And take some time to study the layout, assess the likely opposition, and work out plans. Just like we did. They will think you don't know they are there. But you *will* know. Get it? You'll know. And there's a whole string of things you can do. Clamp down a radio-silence, for one thing, so as not to give away any clues. Hide your aircraft. Put on a show of being even more bucolic than you are, and all the time you're getting ready, in force, to hit them when they do decide to come down. See?"

"Now you frighten me again," she said, "just like when you fought Yarrow and Belven. So cold and calculating, and eager to destroy. You are not a man, after all. I was wrong. You are a killing machine!"

"Think so? Well, that was only a pipe dream anyway, because you don't have the technology to push out your radar that far. And you are going to see killing machines for real when the big boys *do* come, believe me!"

She ate in silence for a while, her inner struggle plain on her face. Bragan watched her, hiding his sympathy. He knew the conflict, the agony of choosing between two devils, either bad enough to chill the blood, and to be mixed up with personal emotions at the same time. Hate is akin to love—who had said that?

Before he could dredge up the reference, she said, "And that was all your big idea, an early warning?"

"No. That was just a little tickle. The big one—will really get you scared. You see, your biggest handicap, and the major power that Zorgan uses, is just this. All the time there are ships up there—or, as in our case, collector-dishes—serving out energy to the men below, you can't do a thing. No matter how hard you hit back, or how many units you knock out, there's always more. We have the entire power of your sun to pull on. You could never have stopped my invasion if you hadn't wrecked those ships, *all* of them. That was either pure genius or uncanny luck. If you had left just one ship functioning, it would have been enough to smash anything

and everything you could put up against us. Do you see that?"

"But we *did* break your ships!"

"Right! Because we had them all on the ground. My fault, and I admit it freely. But you won't do that to the big one. Ryth, they have ships that are ten—a hundred—times as big as anything I had. And they won't come down. They aren't designed to do it, even if they wanted to. They will hold orbit up there and monitor the show. And they will beam down power a thousand times more than we had. Even if you could wipe out every ship they drop, and that's highly incredible, they would still have the heavy weapons up there. And those ships, if need be, can spit heat-beams, laser-beams, energy-beams, to carve this planet into slices. Or hell-bombs that could split it in half." He watched her cringe back across the table as he hammered home his point.

"You have no chance at all, except to die valiantly, unless you can hit that back-up force, up there. And, if only you had the know-how, you'd be able to do just that. What a thought! The Zorgan Major Fleet, wiped out by a natural fluke!"

"Explain!" she whispered. "What is there to do?"

"It's really very simple, when you know how. I don't, but I know it can be done, and a technologist would understand at once. Like this. Your sun is a large self-sustaining nuclear reactor, a ball of fire. In nature such things happen according to certain laws, like any fire. A lump of wood will burn, but not of itself. You have to ignite it first. And there are ways of doing that. Ways of initiating the reaction in anything, if you know how."

She stared at him in wide-eyed wonder. "You are mad! You mean we should reach up and change the sky-lights into small suns!"

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But it can be done. And the gear is all there for it. Remember the sun-power collector-dishes? Still up there where we left them, still collecting power, storing it, leaking it off because we aren't pulling on it. Power! With a suitable microwave array, and some know-how to trap and bounce that power right back—you have it! Three new bright little suns. Those rock-balls are all of five hundred miles through. Plenty of material there. And

the resulting fire-balls should really be a sight to see! Only the ships that were using them as cover won't see that. They will be—annihilated instantly!"

She had nothing to say. The gray horror on her face said it plainly enough without words. He waited a moment then took the gleam off his face and became grim.

"Just a dream, Ryth. It can be done, but you'll never do it. You don't know how, and even if you did, you haven't the time. Time is the one thing you have least to spare."

"How much time?" she whispered. "You know, don't you? How much?"

"Yes. I know. I'll tell you. It works like this. Zorgan believes in organization. When a squadron is in action, every ship is linked to all the others. If one is knocked out, the others know, at once. If a whole squadron is knocked out, that knowledge goes immediately to the next and nearest squadron—and so on. When you wrecked our ships, that automatically sent a signal to the nearest Zorgan squadron. An alarm. They will follow it up. I calculate, knowing where and how long it will take for them to get organized, that you had just one year, your time, from the moment you burst us until the moment the punitive fleet shows up on your radar. One year, and there isn't much of that left, is there?"

This was his greatest gamble of all, and he watched her with held breath to see how she would react. The story he had just told was entirely a fiction, but the end-fact was true, and he had practiced the yarn long enough to make it sound glib. Time *was* running out, and he knew it. His worry now was, had he pushed too hard? So far as he could see, the Scartanni had almost limitless resistance to despair. No matter what the odds, they would go on struggling. But perhaps there was a limit. Perhaps he had just hit it. Perhaps they would now throw up the effort as hopeless. He watched her, saw her sag, and shake her head. And then she stared at him in loathing.

"It was a bad day for Scarta when you came," she muttered. "You have made me think thoughts and desire things I would not have thought possible. You have changed my life—the whole life of Scarta. I think it would be better if we did yield, and let Zorgan destroy us. We are destroyed, anyway."

"So you quit, eh? And now you know how I've felt all along. From the moment you destroyed my ship I was a dead man, living on borrowed time. And you're the same, only you can live, as a slave."

"Never!" She got up from the table violently. "You may think like that, but I don't. Only six weeks—but a lot can be done in that time. While I live, I choose!" and she strode off out of the living room and into her own quarters, swishing the curtain across pointedly.

Bragan got up and went out into the sun. And there, where she couldn't see, he could relax and let the cold shakes get him. The whole fantastic gamble, from start to finish, had been balanced on a knife-edge. Now it looked—hopefully—as if it might come off, after all. Six weeks. Could he hold the pose that long?

Ryth got through to her contacts in Stopa with some difficulty, as it was the wrong time of day for her message. But Mordin and Karsh excused her that much when they heard the tension in her voice, and the message itself. She dealt with the radar-watch first, uncomfortably, and Karsh, hearing it, swore violently and glared across the desk at Mordin.

"Why the hell," he demanded, "didn't you mention this earlier? All that stuff about sky-gods!"

"We do not discuss such things," the old man growled. "In any case, why should we have to tell you? You come from the sky!"

"Oh no!" Karsh sagged into his seat as the truth got to him. "All this time you've been believing that we are the personification of your gods? You didn't believe that—all we told you about Zorgan? Well, start believing it now! Because it's true. And I can show you, and get men to help with your alarm-watch, so that you'll be able to see the big ships coming a long time before they get into your meteorite-zone. Bragan is right; we should have seen this right from the start. No wonder you people are quick on the draw."

But when Ryth went on to relate Bragan's hypothesis about the stellar reaction, the technologist-chief shook his head. Mordin eyed him keenly.

"It won't work?"

"It's not that, old man. It would be no trick at all to trig-

ger those rock-piles into nuclear fractions and fusion. And it would wipe out any ships that were using them as cover. That part's all right. But what happens after that? Which way do they move? Does the fire blow off into space—or does it spiral in and down, on us?"

Mordin's craggy face set into hard resolve. "Can it be calculated?"

"We can try, but there are so many random factors we could only hope for a guesstimate. It's one of those things."

"Calculate!" the old man ordered. "If there is a chance in our favor, we will take it."

"Right! We'll set up the program right away. Incidentally, I told you, didn't I, what a useful head Bragan has? He's as good as a fleet by himself. I'd like it fine if we could figure some way of getting him along here to the control-center when the big show starts."

"He also told me when." Ryth's voice came wearily from the speaker, and her father demanded, "What did he say on that? How long?"

"From the time the ships were destroyed, one year. Or, as I make it, six weeks from now."

Karsh snorted and glowered at Mordin. "There you are! What did I tell you? Now do you believe? I told you it was a trigger-effect of some kind, and I estimated the time for the round trip. I told you!" He turned to the radio and said, "It's all right, Miss Ryth. We already had guessed it would be pretty soon, and we have planned for it. You've done very well."

"What more do you want of Bragan?"

"You take good care of him. He's valuable." Karsh shot a query-look to Mordin, and then added, "We want him here when the fun starts. We'll send and have him picked up."

"For all I care," she said, "you can have him now!" and she cut off the connection, leaving Karsh and Mordin locked in argument.

"I will not have that man here to give orders," Mordin stated. "It is enough that we of Scarta have laid aside our traditional free ways and made an organization such that one man orders and others obey. That is bad enough." He spoke with feeling because the major part of the ordering had



fallen on his shoulders and he was beginning to feel the strain of being an executive.

"You don't like giving orders," Karsh pointed out. "I would think you'd be glad to hand that chore over to somebody else, to a man who's trained for it, and good at it!"

"A man who believes we cannot possibly win?"

"That's from a long-range viewpoint. And he may be right. But once you're in a battle and the show is on, you don't think about things like that. You concentrate on doing your damndest to smash the other guy. I tell you, we *need* him!"

"I will think about it," Mordin admitted grudgingly. "Now, about how to make a stone burst into fire—"

Ryth came out of the front door of the farmhouse with her feet dragging. Bragan thought he had never seen her so thoroughly quelled. And, by the way he had to fight his impulse to go over and put an arm around her and comfort her, he knew his time here was almost ended. He couldn't stand much more of it.

"What's the plan for today?" he asked, and she lifted her eyes to look at the ruined hillside, and shrugged.

"There is nothing we can do with that. We will gather bilbys."

So they gathered bilbys, and scythed grain, and collected panniers of gleebs, and then it was time to fleece the mereens again, and the days slid by, but not as before. There was no more talk of an evening, very little at any time except what was absolutely necessary. And she didn't laugh anymore as she worked. Bragan tried to regain something of the old friendship, but she withdrew from all his efforts. He sensed a break had to come, and it did.

A day came when she made a decision, out of the blue, that there would be no work that afternoon at all. Instead, they would wander down to the pool and just laze in the sun, "... and do nothing, nothing at all!" she declared.

He saved his comment until after they had plunged and bathed and were relaxed on the grass in the sun. He was uneasy. She hadn't bothered to put her clothes back on, and that was a change. After drying, she had spread the towel and was stretched on it, seemingly far away in some reverie.

"What about the war-effort and the grow-more food campaign?" he demanded. "How can we afford to loaf like this?"

"What does it matter. In a few days now we will all be dead. Isn't that what you have been trying to tell me all this time?"

"Those were *my* words. What about yours? What about your 'Never! We will never surrender!' What about that?"

"Things have changed since then. I have changed. You once told me, when you were talking about your world, of a saying. 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!' Remember?"

"I remember. It's a fool's philosophy, a philosophy of despair."

"You reject it?"

"I do. There are some things a man doesn't do."

She came up on an elbow and smiled at him crookedly. "Then if I say to you let us eat, drink and be merry—you wouldn't? Why not? We are all to die soon. What does it matter?"

"It matters to me. Like this." He looked away from her and set himself to be deliberate. "If a man said to me—'Here is something of mine, very precious, but I give it freely to you because I'm going to die and it will be no use to me after I'm dead'—I wouldn't count him much of a man, nor would the gift be worth much. I don't want it; you can have it—that's not a gift; it's an insult!"

"I did not mean to insult you!" He saw that she had flushed a hot red all over, and glanced away again hurriedly.

"It doesn't matter. Perhaps you didn't mean anything at all. Perhaps you were just making talk."

"That's it," she agreed, wearily, and lay back on the towel in the sun. "I was just talking."

That most uncomfortable day dragged to a close without any more speech between them, but that night his tentative plans came to a head. It was no more than a coincidence that Ryth's radio should bleat and chime an urgent call to her next morning when the dawn was still gray, and her father's voice told her the long-awaited news.

"They are here. A host of strange objects gathering on the other side of the sky-lights."

And then Karsh. "You decide for yourself whether to tell him or not, but somebody will be along to get him as soon as we can arrange it."

And then, when she padded along to his room in her bare feet, he was not there. Unknown to her, he had packed up his few needs and departed long before sunup. She stared, then whirled and ran back to the radio with the news. Karsh reacted fast.

"We'll get him. There'll be scouts out. You stand fast and let us know if he comes back."

But Bragan had no intention of coming back. In his mind the two urgencies had reached a head together. He preferred to think of Ryth only as something past and over with, and Zorgan as more important. He knew the general directions of Stopa, and he had with him a machete and a small sack of minimum provisions. By full dawn of that day he had put three hills between himself and the farmhouse, and then, in caution, he climbed a tree and settled himself to roost out the rest of the day. By morning of the third day he reckoned he was within five miles or so of Stopa. Not exactly fast time for the journey, but there had been rough terrain to cross, streams to dodge around, farms to avoid, and he had no intention whatever of underestimating Scartanni woodcraft. He had learned a little of his own in the past months, and used it to the point where he could say with confidence that Stopa had to be on the other side of that hill.

But there was something on the top of that same hill that intrigued his eyes. From a high crotch in the branches of a tree a hundred yards from the summit, he studied the thing. A dark bulk masked by bushes, and then objects that looked superficially like trees and might have fooled him a year ago, but not now. He scrambled down and went closer cautiously, beating up the hill from bush to bush until he came to the edge of a hollow depression and could peer down into it from a fringe of undergrowth.

A "hard" base. No doubt about it. That long-muzzled thing, twined with creepers and green stuff, was a beamer. As he stared the outlines became apparent. A beamer—and a *big* one, at that. And that pair of fragile trees that didn't stir in the wind, they carried a peering camera. He circled

the site gingerly, and saw that he was right. That was Stopa, away down there with the river and the sea to catch the morning light.

Then some sixth sense made his head come around fast, to see a face and eyes staring at him from bushes about three yards away. A face that grinned a wolfish grin and stood up to reveal a lean youth in a snug, close-fitting woolen suit of green. Bragan stirred—and realized that he was ringed by Scartanni. At least six of them were all around, now showing themselves. He relaxed his caution, moved out into an open space.

"All right," he called, "so you've caught me. Now come and get me, if you can!" The youth with the grin also moved, but only a little, enough to let Bragan see that he was carrying a hand-weapon that looked like a stun-gun.

"You can't catch us with those tricks twice, Zorgan," he called. "We have learned from Hork. And Yarrow. And Belven!" and he raised the weapon. Bragan fell flat and rolled frantically, then scrambled to his feet and ran in a crouch. Feet crackled through the undergrowth all around. A wrenching agony struck his shoulder, paralyzing his left arm. He flung himself aside, twisting and turning, but it was useless. Now a tall intent girl rose from the green in front of him, aimed and fired. He saw her finger go down on the stud. And then his whole world dissolved into twisting, knotting pain. He felt the ground come up and hit him. And then nothing.

## X

THERE WAS a taste of acid in his mouth, and old-age arthritis in his limbs. Some heavy-footed goblin in big boots was dancing a slow jig inside his skull. Then he recalled the stun-gun and winced as he opened his eyes to look around. *Back to square one*, he thought, because he was in a cell once more, the image of the one he'd been confined to, so long ago. As he sat up and swung his feet to the floor the lights flared and the door opened. In the gap stood a hard-faced youth. Bragan noted the stun-gun first, then the dress. Close-fitting wool from head to foot, but this had been polished in some

way to give it a glitter, and it was a gray that looked like metal. And a red paint slash-mark across the chest. Scarta *had* changed, he realized.

"Up and out!" the youth ordered, and stood aside to reveal a companion. Bragan shrugged and stood, reeled a little as the effect of the paralysis hit him, then steadied. The stunner waved him out. He went, into the familiar long tunnel, urged into a fast march by the youth at his heels.

"What's the hurry?" he demanded.

"Enough for you. Your friends are up there, preparing to come down."

"The big fleet—it's here?"

"Not for long. Hurry it up, and you'll see how we deal with invaders!" Bragan stretched his legs, smiling wryly at the brusque tone. But there was something new in the atmosphere. Noise. It grew as he went along, and then out of the narrow walls and into an upturned bowl of a room that was huge, bright with lights, and humming like a hive. Everywhere he looked he saw the glitter and sheen of machinery controls, consoles, lively gauges and the purr and click of gadgetry. Cabinets, buttons, winking lights, and a swarm of men and women intent and alert, muttering across to each other, checking things. He was astonished by the sheer quantity of organization represented here.

The stunner-muzzle jabbed at his back and a grim voice said, "Straight ahead, Zorgan, to the central control."

As he started to move again a tense voice rose above the chatter to declare. "Sky-watch Three. High fifty, green one eight three. Six objects separating out. Tracking."

"Lock-on!" came another voice. "I have then. Tracking!"

Bragan marched on, came to the center of the room and a clear space. And there at the focus of everything was a large circular plot-screen showing the dark sky and stars. And Mordin sitting in one swivel chair that was a mass of controls, Karsh in another. The third chair was vacant.

"Here's the Zorgan, sir!"

"Thank you." Mordin looked up, as bleak and craggy as ever, and Bragan saw across his chest a gold stripe through a circle. "Back to your post." The youth went away; the gray eyes settled on Bragan.

"Supreme Executive of Zorgan on Scarta," he said, very

steadily. "And I am Supreme Executive of Scarta. We have learned from you, Bragan, perhaps more than you realize. You talk too much, and my daughter is a good listener."

"She is also a good cook, which is equally relevant right now, so far as you are concerned. I gather the big fleet is here?"

"It is, and the first wave of attack ships is descending. Sit, and see how much we have learned. Watch your big fleet eat up death at our hands."

Bragan sat, looked across at Karsh. "Have our friends arrived yet?"

"Not yet. They are a trifle late, cutting it fine!" Karsh unclipped a small hand-set from the arm of his chair and stood it on the edge of the plot. Mordin glared at it.

"You insist on using your own radio to keep in touch with the others, when I tell you our land-wires are better, safer."

"You can't have too many lines of communication," Karsh declared. "You tend to your business; tell him the setup. Let's not waste time. They've already begun dropping."

"Six ships," Bragan nodded. "I heard. One unit for each major city, just as we did. That's for openers. What about sleep-gas? Are you prepared for that?"

"We have taken care of it. All the underground systems are filter-trapped and with neutralizing systems."

"Right. And all your cities are in touch?"

"Every city, even the small ones, all over Scarta, is in touch with us and we with them. We have learned, Zorgan."

"Textbook stuff," Bragan told him coldly. "Don't get too cocky about it. Where are those ships now?" Mordin made a sign and a babble of information came back at him to do with location, rate of fall and probable destination. Bragan watched distant screens pick up green spots and lines and then put his attention on the old man, saw him nod.

"Exactly as before. One for each of the six cities." Mordin took up a trailing microphone. "Attention all ring-beamers. Charge up and stand by."

"And what," Bragan demanded icily, "do you think you're going to do now? Ring-beamers?"

"Where you were caught," Karsh put in. "You must have recognized it. A hundred megawatt beamer. Q-switched!"

"Switched? You mean, they can pulse-beam those things? I thought it couldn't be done with that kind of power?"

"These boys can. Pretty good, huh? And every city on the planet is sitting inside a solid ring of those."

"Those ships will be destroyed before they ever touch the ground," the old man stated firmly. Bragan glared at him.

"You're a fool! You've learned? Learned what? Get on your mike and tell your beamers to hold their fire!"

Mordin stared at him in amazement. "You think me mad, Zorgan? We will destroy them, like that!" and he snapped his fingers. Bragan came up out of his seat, reached out and grabbed the microphone, held it away and pushed his face belligerently near to Mordin's.

"You stupid oaf! *You've learned!* How many engagements have you ever fought? Now listen to me, and listen carefully; there's no time to repeat a lot of elementary stuff. This is the *BIG* fleet, remember? Those six ships are openers only. Markers. By the ~~time~~ they are settling in for ground-fall there will be at least six more for each marker. Thirty-six in all. They will come down in formation. They will hover above the marker-ship, for reinforcement, surveillance, look-out. Right at this moment they think you're all asleep, just waiting to be taken. You so much as hit one of those markers and you'll blow the whole thing! Get me? The other ships will go back up, fast. And stay there awhile until they've weighed up the picture all over again."

"And then," Mordin snapped, "they will come down, and we will burn them!"

"You're still a fool. They won't come down, no more than a ten-mile ceiling. Can you burn them at that range? Don't be stupid."

Mordin hesitated, looked to Karsh, who shrugged. "I told you, didn't I? He knows his stuff. If they park at ten miles and work us over from there we might as well give up!"

"Do it!" Bragan ordered. "Tell your beamers to hold. Tell them!" As Mordin hesitated still, there came a shout from the sky-watch group.

"More objects are separating from the clouds, large numbers, too many to count as yet."

"Now do you believe me? You so much as lay a finger on

one of those marker-ships and that swarm will lay off and pound the *hell* out of you!"

Mordin paled, reached for the microphone. "Attention all beamer-crews. Do not fire on the first ships. Hold your fire until I order."

Bragan settled back into his seat, getting the feel of the operation by degrees. This, his natural talent, came to him as easily as breathing.

"Where's this picture from?" he asked, and Karsh told him.

"This camera is in the middle of Stopa, looking straight up. We've a ring of them all around the perimeter."

"Any chance the enemy might detect it?"

"Not a hope. This is Scartanni stuff. Low-intensity T.V. Everything else is by wire. I doubt if they know we have radio."

"Any chance of us listening to theirs?"

"That's a thought!" Karsh spun in his chair and began manipulating dials on a nearby console. Bragan watched the big plot-screen intently. And there it was, the first ship, destined for Stopa. The blurred dot slid in from the edge of the picture and scurried past. Making the first gas-pass, he noted. Standard Operating Procedure. Now the dot came back, larger, to make another pass and swing into a slow curve and settle roughly in the center of the plate. Then, abruptly, it grew larger, ballooning into hugeness. Mordin made a sign and the picture jumped abruptly to another standpoint, from the top of some building on the outskirts. Now they could see the Zorgan ship from the side, saw it settling down. It was a great flattened oval of dead black, sitting on top of a violet bed of ion-fire from the steering jets. The control-room was suddenly very tense. Mordin said it for all of them.

"That's a *big* ship!"

"No it isn't," Bragan corrected grimly. "That is just a light-heavy. A vanguard. You wait until you see the support-ships! Ours was tiny. That one will carry a thousand shock-troopers ready to move out as soon as she's down on the ground."

"A thousand?" Mordin roared, and Bragan gave him a chill stare.

"Remember what I told you, now. Hit that ship and you



might as well cut your throat. The support-ships are ten times the size of that one, and loaded. Can we have a reading on them, please?" He swiveled around to see the stiff-faced crew hastily adjusting their instruments to get readings. And the picture was grimer than he had painted it. The cloud of support-ships had subdivided neatly into separate swarms, one cluster heading for Stopa. Forty-eight of them in lattice-formation, a three-dimensional array with each ship one mile from any other. The vanguard ship settled now, in exactly the same spot Bragan had chosen. Mordin's face showed that he itched to strike.

"A thousand armed troopers," he growled, and Bragan spat at him.

"Helpless, once we cut their power supply. Forget them. We have to get that upstairs force first." There came an excited hail from away to their left. "Jalban has struck! Their ship is destroyed!"

"Fools!" Bragan snarled, and heard a sudden harsh-voiced clamor from Karsh's setup. Zorgan.

The commander out there in that ship was ordering, "All troops ready to ground. Stand by for screens."

"Take it!" Bragan ordered. "Beamers to fire, on the high force only! Get those upstairs ships!"

He had hardly spoken before the order was passed, and six of the dark discs in that lattice exploded into white fire, blinding the screen for a moment. Then four more, and the rest shifted rapidly, changed formation, grew huge as they dived for the ground. Smart thinking, Bragan admitted, to drop down and diminish the target area. The screen was full of dancing, darting, spinning discs, the control-chamber thick with shouted orders and anxious reports.

Bragan yelled to Mordin over the din, "Now you can take care of the marker-ship!" and the old man made a wolfish grin as he nodded and moved two switches, then thumbed a button. The whole chamber leaped and shuddered to the shock of an immense explosion. The lights dimmed then flared again, and Karsh grinned.

"How about that? Every square foot of the city is mined!"

"Then where the hell are we?"

"Just outside. Same as every other city on the planet. All deserted and booby-trapped. Mined. Smart, eh?"

Bragan clung to his chair as the chamber leaped again to another heavy shock. Again the lights flickered. Dust began to haze the air. The screen-picture shifted to another camera and they saw the angry red glare where the marker-ship had been. They saw angry black shapes plunging and swooping, and spouting fiery-red heat-blasts to sear the city. One blinked out and then flared into a blaze of white destruction. Another plunged down as it died, and the chamber danced again with the impact.

*Zorgan thinking*, Bragan mused, watching the carnage from the furious heat-beams. *Hit back ruthlessly*. But they were hitting the wrong target, a deserted city. The beamers were all outside in a circle, and they took their toll. Three more of the vengeful black ships blew apart in coruscating flares of death before the message got through and the remainder collected themselves into formation and fell away into the chill gray dawn sky. Up and away they went, but not so fast that the eagle-eyed beamers could track, and get, four more before they became dots in the blue. Bragan counted the blips, squinting against the dust. One marker-ship and forty-eight supports had come down. Only twenty went away.

If that was a fair measure of how the other cities had fared then the Zorgan force had lost the first engagement. But not the battle, not yet. The tension dwindled into aftermath as the reports began to come in from the rest of Scarta. Jalban was worst hit, the entire city reduced to a smoldering crater, more than half the beamer-posts blasted out of the ground and only three ships taken in return. Other cities reported as good as Stopa, some better. Geelzon had managed to wipe out all but three of her attackers and was jubilant. Otham reported, angrily, no strikes at all. Their ships had taken warning from the rest before even getting within range. Karsh totaled up the score. Mordin had figures too, for check and comparison. Bragan watched them.

"So much," he said, "for that. You've mauled them, and they won't like it. Now they will really get rough."

Mordin growled, made a sign for a sky-watch check, and an anxious-faced girl told him, "It is not possible to count how many, at this range. But very large numbers are still there in the sky-lights."

"See?" Bragan rubbed it in. "You haven't begun yet."

They'll regroup, recast their strategy—" Mordin turned away from him to Karsh.

"They have gone back to the god-clouds to lick their wounds. Now is the time for the ultimate weapon you spoke of."

Bragan hardly heard, because here came Ryth through the dusty control room. Her face was white and set, streaked with dust and full of despair. She went to her father.

"The city is destroyed," she mumbled. "Everywhere is fire and wreckage and smoke. It's all gone!"

"Not all," he said. "We know how bad it is. Jalban is even worse, and there is more to come." She sighed and turned her stare on Bragan. He had expected anger, even hatred, but she looked stunned and hurt.

"I don't understand," she whispered, "how someone like you could do this to us?"

"You can't say I didn't warn you. I told you. I kept on telling you." He made his tone hard, avoiding her eyes. Mordin growled in his throat.

"Enough of that. What about the fire-weapon?"

"What about it?" Bragan added his words and looked at the technologist anxiously. "You can trigger a stellar, can't you?"

"Nothing to it," Karsh said slowly. "It's all set up. But we have no way of telling which way it will go, afterward. It's a nice balance. The whole system is knife-edge unstable."

"You knew?" Bragan turned to feel Ryth's clutch on his arm, and saw her blazing eyes.

"That you were set to spy on me? Yes, I knew. You didn't do it very well. You're too honest to make a good spy." He shifted his gaze quickly to Mordin. "Now you know," he said gently, "what responsibility is like, and what it's for. You can say the word—and destroy Zorgan. But you may be destroying your own planet at the same time. You may be condemning every Scartanni man, woman and child to slow death. And you haven't time to ask for their agreement, have you? How does it feel, old man?"

Mordin's craggy face went gray as death. The whole chamber seemed to hold its breath, so that the hum and clack of instruments struck loudly. And there came a foreign splutter and crackle, from the radio by Karsh's arm.

"Earth task-force Alpha to Operation Antibody. Alpha to Antibody. Do you read? Does anybody read?" The language was strange to the Scartanni but heartwarmingly familiar to Bragan and Karsh.

"Gimme that thing!" Bragan snapped, stretching his hand out for it and holding it to his face. "Antibody to Alpha. We read. Mastermind here."

"Hello, Professor Bragan. Glad to know you're still functioning."

"Glad to hear from you. What kept you?"

"We have been in position some time. We have observed the first-wave attack and resistance. Can we help?"

Bragan put the speaker against his chest and stared at Mordin. "Make up your mind, old man. What's it to be? Suicide—or surrender?"

"We use it. You would destroy us anyway. You and your friends out there." Despair struck the old face. "I think we are betrayed—"

Bragan hushed him with a gesture, brought the radio back to his mouth again. "Hello, Alpha. We don't need you yet. Lay well off and stand by. We are arranging a spectacular. You can be ready to pick up the pieces. Out!" He nodded to Karsh. "Go ahead and blow it!"

Karsh began to pull and push switches on another console. Bragan grinned up at Ryth. "Remember what I told you, once? That you needed a friendly planet nearby, to clobber your enemy from the rear while they were busy? You just heard them. That was not Zorgan."

"That's it!" Karsh closed a switch, pushed a plunger full home and got up from his chair. "It will take maybe three minutes to build up, and I'd like to see it with my own eyes. It might be the last I'll ever see."

"Why not?" Bragan agreed soberly. "Which way is out, here?"

Ryth led them swiftly along a chain of tunnels and out into the pink dawn, onto a narrow ledge. They were on a hillside overlooking Stopa. The air was chill and tainted with smoke and fumes from down there. One glowing skylight hung close to the far horizon, barely visible in the growing sunlight. The connecting ribbon of dust was completely

lost against the sky. Bragan felt Ryth move to stand close by him and put her hand on his arm.

"I don't understand," she breathed. "I don't understand anything. You knew that I was—spying on you, trying to steal your knowledge?"

"Don't worry about it," he chuckled. "Who cares, now? The cooking was worth it all. I've put on weight!" He felt slightly light-headed and it seemed the right thing to put his arm around her and hug her tight.

He heard Karsh muttering under his breath, "Seconds only—any time—there she goes!"

There, right at the dim heart of the moon-ball a star was born, a pinpoint of brilliant light that grew swiftly and spread, opening out as if someone had pulled back a curtain from a window. It grew until Bragan had to shut his eyes against it, and the brilliance struck through his eyelids, the heat of it warm on his face. And still it grew. He put up a palm to shade his face and saw the fire-ball changed from blue-white to yellow, to golden, and grow a broad arm into the sky. Then from over his shoulder came the other end of the arm to meet it, and merge and make a great band of glaring light across the sky. He glanced down at the stark-lit scene, felt the heat, and shafted an anxious glance across to Karsh.

"Radiation hazard?"

"This phase? Negligible. Nothing hard will get this far. It will be mostly short-range gamma stuff; won't bother us at all."

"How long before it burns itself out?"

"Hard to tell exactly, but something like thirty, thirty-five days, not more. By that time it will be all dust." Karsh turned away. "Just dust—but if it falls back this way, settles down into the atmosphere, we're as good as dead."

"How soon will you know, which way?"

"Within half an hour. I have the computation-program already set up. It's up to the instruments, now."

Bragan turned to look down at Ryth. "We've provoked your gods, my dear. It's up to them, now."

"What are you?" she whispered, and her father came close to repeat the question in slightly different form.

"What is it all about, Bragan? There are things here that I don't understand."

"I imagine that applies to many of your people, too, Mordin. It's about time I explained the whole thing. Can we go below, and I'll talk so that you can all hear—"

"A moment!" the old man growled and laid a hand on his arm. "See there; we have company," and he pointed down the hillside to where a procession was winding its way up. A dozen or so Scartanni armed with stun-guns were herding five lumbering figures in body-armor, black armor and weapons that were all dead and useless now. Ryth caught her breath and her hand gripped his arm tightly as she eyed the shapes.

"What are those?"

"They are Zorgan," Bragan said softly. "The real ones, this time." He looked to Mordin curiously. "What do you want done with them?"

The old man stared and put a shaking hand to his face, as well he might, because these creatures were all of seven and a half feet tall and as the armor-joints moved it could be seen that they were humanoid only by a stretch of the imagination. As they came close Bragan stared up into the flat-planed scaly faces and lizard-slit eyes with stony calm and prepared his mouth and tongue for the rasping syllables of their language.

"You are helpless, defeated, and your master fleet is burned into dust in that star-fire up there. Do you understand this? Which one speaks for the rest?" He used the speech-form to indicate rank, and one of the captives bared his yellow fangs in the appropriate manner.

"I speak, being 'dan' of this party, what remains of it. Our armor and weapons are dead; our ship destroyed. We accept death."

"Wait! Bragan turned to the old man. "It's up to you. They expect to be executed. Well?"

"We do not kill," Mordin mumbled. "What kind of creatures are these?"

"Zorgan. I suggest you keep them prisoner until you can work something out. You *might* get them to understand cooperation with you, but I doubt it."

Mordin gave the orders and watched the ungainly two-legged things tramp away. Ryth shivered.

"I have seen snakes that look like men!"

"That's not too far-out. I reckon there's a lot of reptile in their evolutionary tree. You'll have problems there. They don't think the way we do, at all. Shall we go back down now?"

Back at the central control point once more, with Ryth on one side and Karsh on the other, Bragan faced Mordin, and a microphone that linked him with the whole of Scarta.

"We're not proud of what we did," he began. "Our only excuse is that we had no choice. . . . Beyond the red star and the white is the territory of the Zorgan horde. We—come from the planetary system of a small star in the opposite direction. We are of the Solar Union. We learned long ago that war is waste, that conquest is a crime. When we began moving into space, to go traveling among the stars, we went in peace, not wishing to interfere with anyone else. We learned to stand well back and observe and then pass by. But then we encountered Zorgan. We studied them enough to know them well, and to fear what we knew. Because Zorgan knows only one thing, to expand and to conquer, by any and all means. We knew, by studying, that within a certain measurable period of time Zorgan would reach as far as our sun, and would descend on us. That was the situation we faced."

He paused to stare at Mordin while he collected his thoughts. "The Solar Union comprises three planets and several smaller bases, and, unlike Scarta, we long ago developed a highly complex technical culture—so that all our resources go into maintaining our living, with little to spare. We just did not have the resources to turn over into a defensive and warlike economy. So what were we to do?"

He paused again, looked at Ryth now, spoke to her. "You are farmers. You also have great skill in medicine and chemicals. You must know, therefore, of the practice of immunization against a deadly disease. It is done by infecting the person or animal with a mild form of the disease first. The person sickens but recovers, and is then proof against the virulent form, if and when it should strike." Ryth opened her eyes wide.

Mordin came forward in his seat to gasp, "You mean—you were immunizing us?"

"Yes. It was the only plan we could think of. It fell into two parts. Like this. Zorgan works to technique always. That technique is predictable. We were able to predict almost to the day when Zorgan would contact Scarta. We had that much time. We were to come, with a fleet the exact image of the Zorgan one, only smaller, and take you. To impress you with the power and might of Zorgan. And then—somehow—to allow ourselves to be defeated, but at the same time warning you of the major fleet that would follow. As you know"—he grinned—"it didn't work quite like that!"

"So that's why," Ryth whispered, "you wouldn't surrender."

"I couldn't. It was all right for the others to turn traitor and help out. That was fine. But somebody had to stand out and keep reminding you of the pressure, to keep you driving. There wasn't much time. And the other leg of the plan was that we of the Solar Union would crash-build the biggest and most powerful fleet we could, to get here and stand by for support-attack, at exactly the right time. The time when Zorgan was being engaged and held by ground resistance. As you know, they got here. We should be hearing from them soon as to the fate of the rest of the Zorgan fleet up there. And there it is." Bragan shrugged wearily. "As I said, we're not proud of it, but what could we do?"

"You deliberately attacked us, pretending to be Zorgan?" old Mordin muttered, his craggy face furrowed in unbelief. "For a year we have been upset, outraged! You have made us change our whole way of living—!"

A chattering of reports interrupted him. The sky-watch crew reported swarms of dots descending from the skies in random fashion, and there was a rapid return of tension, but Karsh spoke up, turning to scan the displays.

"Nothing to worry about. Those ships carry just enough battery-power to make a landing of sorts, but they are helpless otherwise without their supply from upstairs. You won't have any trouble with them." He got up and stalked across to a set of chattering consoles, to study the readings that were coming up. Mordin reached for Bragan's arm in anger.

"You deliberately involved us, set us up as a target—!"

"Nol" Ryth struck at her father's arm in sudden heat.



"Can't you see? Remember the snake-people we saw, the real Zorgans? They would have come in any case, wouldn't they? And we would have been utterly defeated, without warning, hope or mercy!"

"That's true," Bragan assured him. "You wouldn't have stood a chance, and you know it, if you stop and think a little. And then it would have been our turn. What else could we do?" As he watched the old man's face, there came another crackle and buzz from the ship's radio-link and he reached for it.

"Alpha to Antibody. Do you read?"

"Antibody to Alpha. We read. Bragan here. Who's that?"

"This is Fleet Admiral Zarnov speaking. Nice to hear from you again, Professor. I admire your spectacular. Quite a fire-ball!"

"Yes. What of Zorgan?"

"All taken care of. The three major monitors managed to burst out of the fire-blast, but they were staggering, and we took care of them. About a dozen smaller craft, but they didn't give us any trouble at all. What was that fire-ball stunt, anyway? For a while we thought the planet had gone noval"

"It might be that bad, yet. Tell you later." Bragan shut off the radio and looked at Mordin again. Ryth leaned forward, her face aglow.

"People of Scarta, what else can you say but everlasting gratitude to these people of the Solar Union? They risked their lives to prepare us and to save us from dreadful defeat!" She glared at her father, and the old man sighed and nodded.

"It is true. We are scarred, but it would have been much worse if it hadn't been for you."

Bragan caught a sudden thumbs-up signal from Karsh, and a big grin. He leaned forward to speak into the microphone. "There's more. Much more. People of Scarta, look up at the great light in your sky. Look up and rejoice, for that is the end of your angry gods. No more will stones fall from the sky to strike you. They have all been burned away into dust!"

"Is that true?" Ryth caught his arm.

"Guaranteed! The stellar-effect has blasted the debris out

into the void. For good. You're going to have some spectacular sunsets for a while, but no more god-stones. That's all over." He took up the ship's radio again. "Antibody to Alpha. Bragan here. That was no nova, Admiral Zarnov; that was the twilight of the gods of Scarta. You want to come down now?"

"Not just yet, not while the radiation count is so high. Later."

"All right. When you do, I invite you to come and be my guest on a little farm-holding I know of. I guarantee you the best cooking you've tasted in a long while." He put the radio away again, turned to Ryth. "I should explain. I am not a military man, not a fighter. I am a teacher. My field is military history and psychology of warfare. And I'm thinking of giving it up, retiring, settling down to a quiet country life. You wouldn't happen to know of someone who needs a good hard-working farmhand, would you?"

She met his eyes squarely and steadily. "I do not need a hand, but I would welcome a partner, someone to share in the work—and everything."

"You have a deal." He took her hand. "Eat, drink—"

"—And be merry—for tomorrow and tomorrow—we live!"

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