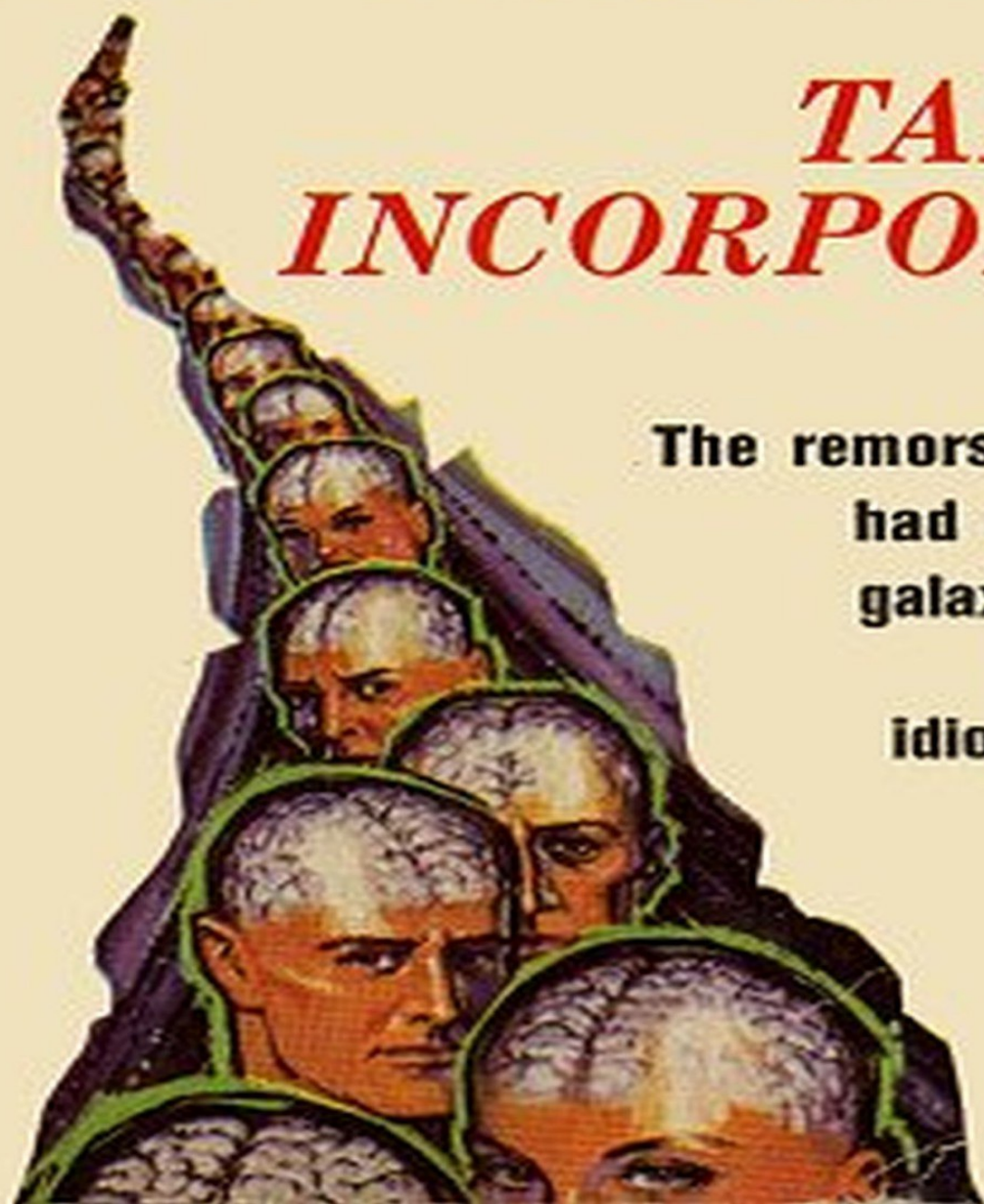


A new science-fiction novel by

MURRAY LEINSTER

TALENTS, INCORPORATED

**The remorseless aggressors
had everything in the
galaxy on their side—
except the little
idiosyncrasies of the
human mind!**



TALENTS, INCORPORATED

by Murray Leinster

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

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

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

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TALENTS, INCORPORATED

Part One

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

Bors said grimly;

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

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

There was a clicking, and then there came a voice which had the curious

quality of a loudspeaker sound picked up and relayed through another loudspeaker.

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

A pause. The voice from the spaceport:

"Sir?"

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

He went on with the work. His jaunty uniform became more smeared and smudged. He gave himself no rest. There were papers from other planets now under the hegemony of Mekin. Some were memoranda from citizens of this planet, who had traveled upon the worlds which Mekin dominated as it was about to dominate Kandar. They, especially had to be pulverized. Every

confidential document in the Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs was in the process of destruction, but Captain Bors in person destroyed those which would cause most suffering if read by the wrong persons.

In other ministries and other places similar holocausts were under way. There was practically nothing going on on Kandar which was not related to the disaster for which the people of that world waited. The feel of bitterness and despair was everywhere. Broadcasting stations stayed on the air only to report monotonously that the tragic event had not yet happened. The small space-navy of Kandar waited, aground, to take the king and some other persons on board at the last moment. When the Mekinese navy arrived—or as much of it as was needed to make resistance hopeless—the end for Kandar would have come. That was the impending disaster. If it came too soon, Bors's task of destruction couldn't be completed as was wished. In such a case this Ministry and all the others would hastily be doused with incendiary material and fired, and it would desperately be hoped that all the planet's records went up in the flames.

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

The communicator buzzed, again. He answered once more.

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

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

"Yes, sir."

Bors made a quick circuit of the Ministry building to make sure the rest of the destruction was thoroughly carried out. He glanced out of a window and saw the other ministries. From their chimneys thick smoke poured out—the criminal records were being incinerated in the Ministry of Police. Tax records were burning in the Ministry of Finance. Educational information about Kandarian citizens flamed and smoked in the Ministry of Education. Even

voting and vehicle-registry lists were being wiped out of existence by flames and the crushing of ashes at appropriate agencies. The planet's banks were completing the distribution of coin and currency, with promissory notes to those depositors they could not pay in full, and the real-estate registers were open so individuals could remove and hide or destroy their titles to property. The stockholders' books of corporations were being burned. Small ships parted with their wares and took promises of payment in return. The planet Kandar, in fact, made ready to receive its conquerors.

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

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

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

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

The stout man cheerfully handed over a very official envelope.

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

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

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

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

"It's too late to do anything for us," said Bors. "Much too late. We expect the

Mekinese fleet at any instant. You'd better go back to the spaceport and take off in your yacht. They're going to take over this planet after a slight tumult we expect to arrange. You won't want to be here when they come."

Morgan waved a hand negligently.

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

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

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

The stout man looked at his watch.

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

Bors went a trifle pale.

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

He looked at them icily. The stout man grinned.

"Listen, your h— Captain, listen to me! The first liner will report inside of five minutes. That'll be a test. Here's another. There's a Mekinese heavy cruiser aground on Kandar right now! It's on the sea bottom fifty fathoms

down, five miles magnetic north-north-east from Cape Farnell! You can check that! The cruiser's down there to lob a fusion bomb into your space-fleet when it starts to take off for the flight you're planning—to get all the important men on Kandar in one smash! That's Talents, Incorporated information! It's a free sample. You can verify it without it costing you anything, and when you want more and better information—why—we'll be at the spaceport ready to give it to you. And you will want to call on us! That's Talents, Incorporated information, too!"

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

"He left out something, Captain. That cruiser— It could hardly act without information on when to act. So there's a pair of spies in a little shack on the cape. They've got an underwater cable going under the sand beach and out and down to the space-cruiser. They're watching the fleet on the ground with telescopes. When they see activity around it, they'll tell the cruiser what to do." Then she smiled more broadly. "Honestly, it's true! And don't forget about the liner!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He'd said something else that was impossible, too. He'd said there was a Mekinese cruiser on the sea-floor of Kandar, where it could blast all the local fleet—which was ready to fight but vulnerable to a single fusion-bomb. If such a thing happened, the impending disaster would be worse than intolerable. To Bors it would mean dying without a chance to strike even the most futile of blows at the enemy.

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

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

Bors gave curt orders to his subordinates in the work of record-destruction. He went out of the building to the greensward mall that lay between the ministries of the government, and headed for the palace at its end. The government of Kandar was not one of great pomp and display. There was a king, to be sure, but nobody could imagine the perspiringly earnest King Humphrey the Eighth as a tyrant. There were titles, it was true, but they were

life appointments to the planet's legislative Upper House. Kandar was a tranquil, quaint, and very happy world. There were few industries, and those were small. Nobody was unduly rich, and most of its people were contented. It was a world with no history of bloodshed—until now.

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

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

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

Captain Bors said curtly, "Majesty, the first of the four liners is in. Two more will arrive tomorrow and the last at sunrise the day after. The Mekinese will be here two days later."

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

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

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

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

Bors handed it to the Pretender of Tralee.

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

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

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

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

He left the palace. There was already disorganization everywhere. The planetary government was in process of destroying all the machinery by which Kandar had been governed, as if to make the Mekinese improvise a government anew. They would make many blunders, of course, which would be resented by their new subjects. There would be much fumbling, which would keep the victims of their conquest from regarding them with respect. And there would be the small tumult Bors had said was in preparation. The king and the Kandarian fleet would fight, quite hopelessly and to their own annihilation, when the Mekinese fleet appeared. It would be something Kandar would always remember. It was likely that she would not be the most docile of the worlds conquered by Mekin. The Mekinese would always and everywhere be resented. But on Kandar they would also be despised.

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

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

"Say it," said Bors.

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

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

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

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

Bors went inside. He found men with burning eyes conferring feverishly. An air force colonel said urgently, "Sir, please advise us! We have our orders, but there's nearly a mutiny. We don't want to turn anything over to the Mekinese—after all, no matter what the king has commanded, once the fleet had lifted off, there can be no punishment if we destroy our planes and blast our equipment! Will you give us an unofficial—"

Bors broke in quickly.

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

The men stared at him.

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

as if some Mekinese spy or traitor had confessed it.

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

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

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

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

Captain Bors flew the ship. The official pilot used an electron camera, giving

a complete and overlapping series of pictures of the shore five miles away with incredible magnification and detail.

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

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

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

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

Bors made no report to the palace. King Humphrey was a conscientious and doggedly resolute monarch, but he was not an imaginative one. He would want to hold a cabinet meeting before he issued orders for the destruction of a space-ship that was only technically and not actually an enemy. Kandar had received an ultimatum from Mekin. An answer was required when a Mekinese fleet arrived off Kandar. Until that moment there was, in theory, no war. But, in fact, Kandar was already conquered in every respect except the landing of Mekinese on its surface. King Humphrey, however, would want to observe all the rules. And there might not be time.

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

brilliant piece of staff-work. Men had worked with impassioned dedication to bring it about.

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

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

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

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

Then there was a detonation. The plane staggered. Its pilot fought and fought, but his craft had no power at all. It came down fluttering, with the pilot gaining every imaginable inch toward the sandy shore. It seemed certain that he would come down on the white beach unharmed, a good half-mile from the fisherman's shack on the cape. But—perhaps it was a gust of wind. It may have been something more premeditated. One wing flew wildly up. The flier seemed to plunge crazily groundward. At the last fraction of a second, the plane reeled again and crashed into the fisherman's shack before which, from a distance of five miles, a man had been photographed, laughing.

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

he was also blasted as he tried to reach the same device.

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

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

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

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

A square mile of ocean erupted as the planes climbed up and away from it. There were bombs in the ocean—some had sunk down deep. Others followed in close succession. Many, many burdens of bombs had been dropped into the sea as plane-fleet after plane-fleet went by.

The sea exploded in monstrous columns. Ton, half-ton and two-ton bombs began to detonate, fifty fathoms down. The Mekinese duty-officer below had just learned that the spies' signalling device was cut off, when a detonation lifted the hull of the Mekinese cruiser and shook it violently. Another twisted

its tail and crushed it. A bomb hit sea bottom a quarter-mile away. More bombs exploded still nearer, in close contact with the giant hull. A two-ton bomb clanked into contact with its metal plating and burst.

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

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

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

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

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

There was no space-cruiser at the bottom of the sea. There was evidence of one, yes. There were patches of plating, and there were naked, twisted girders. The dangling underwater camera faithfully reported what it saw by the light that was lowered with it. But there was no space-cruiser. There were only the rather small fragments of what had been one a little while before.

Captain Bors went back to the palace. He was savagely pleased. He and the air-fleet men had done something. They'd had some satisfaction. They'd killed some Mekinese and ruined a plan to assassinate the Kandar fleet. But

they'd only gotten an immediate satisfaction. Kandar was still to be conquered. Nothing important had changed.

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

There was Mussolini, said the learned men. He had organized a group of rowdies and gangsters, and began by levying protection-money on gambling-houses and even less reputable resorts, and with the money increased his following. He had murdered those who opposed him and presently he collected protection money from even the great business corporations of his country, financing more political gangsterism until he ruled his nation for himself and his confederates.

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

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

The ruling clique on Mekin had begun in this manner.

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

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

was an ultimatum, and there was surrender, and then the installation of a puppet government and the ruthless bleeding of another captured planet for the benefit of the rulers of Mekin.

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

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

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

Bors spoke, excitement coloring his words.

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

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

that we should negotiate until the very last instant."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here's some Talents, Incorporated information," he said zestfully. "The

cabinet is scared. A few are willing to fight, but most are already trying to think how they can make terms with the Mekinese."

Bors opened his mouth to swear, then checked himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morgan struck an attitude, beaming.

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

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

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

"A trifle," said Morgan, waving his hand, "mere soupçon of accomplishment.