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THE BARBARIAN

In his initial address to the Patronate, following his return from Venus, Tews said among other things, "It is difficult for us to realize, but Linn is now without formidable enemies anywhere. Our opponents on Mars and Venus having been decisively defeated by our forces in the past two decades, we are now in a unique historical position: the sole great power in the world of man. A period of unlimited peace and creative reconstruction seems inevitable."

He returned to the palace with the cheers of the Patronate ringing in his ears, his mood one of thoughtful jubilation. His spies had already reported that the patrons gave him a great deal of the credit for the victory on Venus. After all, the war had dragged on for a long time before his arrival. And then, abruptly, almost overnight, it had ended. The conclusion was that his brilliant leadership had made a decisive contribution. It required no astuteness for Tews to realize that, under such circumstances, he could generously bestow a triumph on Jerrin, and lose nothing by the other's honors.

Despite his own words to the Patronate, he found himself, as the peaceful weeks went by, progressively amazed at the reality of what he had said: no enemies. Nothing to fear. Even yet, it seemed hard to believe that the universe belonged to Linn; and that, as the Lord Adviser, he was now in his own sphere in a position of power over more subjects than any man had ever been. So it seemed to the dazzled Tews.

He would be a devoted leader, of course - he reassured himself hastily, disowning the momentary pride. He visualized great works that would reflect the glory of Linn and the golden age of Tews. The vision was so noble and inspiring that for long he merely toyed with hazy, magnificent plans and took no concrete action of any kind.

He was informed presently that Clane had returned from Venus. Shortly thereafter he received a message from the mutation.

His Excellency,
Lord Adviser Tews

My most honored uncle: I should like to visit you and describe to you the result of several conversations between my brother Jerrin and myself concerning potential dangers for the empire. They do not seem severe, but we are both concerned about the preponderance of slaves as against citizens on Earth, and we are unhappy about our lack of knowledge of the present situation among the peoples of the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Since these are the only dangers in sight, the sooner we examine every aspect of the problem the more certain we can be that the destiny of Linn will be under the control of intelligent action and not governed in future by the necessary opportunism that has been for so many generations the main element of government.

Your obedient nephew,
Clane

The letter irritated Tews. It seemed meddlesome, it reminded him that his control of Linn and of the glorious future he envisaged for the empire was not complete, that in fact these nephews might urge compromises that would dim the beauty that only he, apparently, could see. Nevertheless, his reply was diplomatic:

My dear Clane: It was a pleasure to hear from you, and as soon as I return from the mountains, I shall be happy to receive you and discuss all these matters in the most thoroughgoing fashion. I have instructed various departments to gather data so that when we do get together, we can talk on the basis of facts. Tews, Lord Adviser

He actually issued the instructions and actually listened to a brief account from an official who was an "expert" concerning conditions on the

moons of Jupiter and Saturn. They were all inhabited by tribes in various stages of barbaric culture. Recent reports gleaned from questioning of primitives who came from there and from the Linnan traders who visited certain ports of entry indicated that the old game of intrigue and murder among tribal chieftains seeking ascendancy was still going on.

Relieved in spite of his previous conviction that the situation was exactly as it was now described, Tews departed on his mountain vacation with a retinue of three hundred courtiers and five hundred slaves. He was still there a month later when a second message arrived from Clane.

Most gracious Lord Adviser Tews: Your response to my message was a great relief to me. I wonder if I could further impose upon your good offices and have your department heads determine how many are still here and where they are presently concentrated. The reason for this inquiry is that I have discovered that several of my agents on Europa, the great moon of Jupiter, were suddenly executed about a year ago and that actually my own information from that territory is based upon reports, all of which are not less than two years old, and those are extremely vague. It seems that about five years ago a new leader began to unify Europa; and my agents' reports - when I now examine the data they furnished - grew less clear with each month after that. I suspect that I have been victimized by carefully prepared propaganda. If this be so, the fact that somebody was astute enough to seize my channels of information worries me.

These are only suspicions, of course but it would seem advisable to have your people make inquiries with the possibility in mind that our present information sources are unreliable.

Your faithful servant, and nephew,
Clane

The reference to the mutation's "agents" reminded Tews unpleasantly that he lived in a world of spies. I suppose, he thought wearily, propaganda is even now being circulated against me because I am on a vacation. People cannot possibly realize what great plans my engineers and I are making for the State on this so-called pleasure trip.

He wondered if, by releasing a series of public statements about the grandiose future, he might successfully head off criticism.

That irritation lasted for a day, and then he read Clane's letter again and decided that an unruffled and diplomatic approach was desirable. He must ever be in a position to say that he invariably took the most thorough precaution against any eventuality.

He gave the necessary instructions, advised Clane that he had done so - and then began to consider seriously the situation that would exist when Jerrin returned from Venus six or eight months hence to receive his triumph. It no longer seemed quite the satisfactory prospect that it had been when he himself had first returned from Venus. These nephews of his tended to interfere in State affairs, and indeed both had the legal right to be advisers of the government. Each, according to law, had a Council vote in Linnan affairs, although neither could directly interfere with administration.

I suppose, Tews grudgingly acknowledged to himself, Clane is within his rights; but what was it mother once said: "It is an unwise man who always exercises his rights." He laughed, grimacing.

That night, just before he went to sleep, Tews had a flash of insight: I'm slipping back into suspicion - the same fears that disturbed me when I was on Venus. I'm being influenced by this damnable palace atmosphere.

He felt personally incapable of base thoughts, and accepted their presence in others - he told himself - with the greatest reluctance, and then only because of the possible effect on the State.

His sense of duty - that was the real pressure on him, he felt convinced. It compelled him to be aware of, and actually to look for, scheming and plotting, even though he was revolted by any indications of

intrigue.

The realization of his own fundamental integrity reassured Tews. After all, he thought, I may occasionally be misled, but I cannot be wrong if I remain constantly on the alert for danger from all sources. And even a mutation with scientific knowledge and weapons is a matter about which I, as guardian of the State, must take cognizance.

He had already given considerable thought to the weapons he had seen Clane use on Venus. And during the days that followed he came to the conclusion that he must take action. He kept saying to himself how reluctant he was to do so, but finally he advised Clane:

My dear nephew:

Although you have evidently not felt free to ask for the protection to which your rank and the value of your work entitles you, I am sure you will be happy to hear that the State is prepared to undertake protection of the material that you have rescued from the pits of the gods and from other ancient sources.

The safest place for all this material is at your residence in Linn. Accordingly, I am authorizing funds to transport to the city any such equipment that you have at your country estate. A guards unit will arrive at the estate within the week with adequate transport, and another guards unit is this day taking up guard duty at your town residence.

The captain of the guard, while of course responsible to me, will naturally grant you every facility for carrying on your work.

It is with pleasure, my dear Clane, that I extend to you this costly but earned protection.

At some time not too far in the future I should like to have the privilege of a personally conducted tour so that I may see for myself what treasures you have in your collection, with a view to finding further uses for them for the general welfare.

With cordial best wishes
Tews, Lord Adviser

At least, thought Tews, after he had dispatched the message and given the necessary orders to the military forces, that will for the present get the material all in one place. Later, a further more stringent control is always possible - not that it will ever be necessary, of course.

The wise leader simply planned for any contingency. Even the actions of his most dearly beloved relatives must be examined objectively.

He learned presently that Clane had offered no resistance and that the material had been transported to Linn without incident.

He was still at the mountain palace of the Linns when a third letter arrived from Clane. Though briefly stated, it was a major social document. The preamble read:

To our uncle, the Lord Adviser:

It being the considered opinion of Lords Jertin and Clane Linn that a dangerous preponderance of slaves exists in Linn and that indeed the condition of slavery is wholly undesirable in a healthy State, it is herewith proposed that Lord Adviser Tews during his government lay down as a guiding rule for future generations the following principles:

1. All law-abiding human beings are entitled to the free control of their own persons.
2. Where free control does not now obtain, it shall be delivered to the individual on a rising scale, the first two steps of which shall become effective immediately.
3. The first step shall be that no slave shall in future be physically punished except by the order of a court.
4. The second step shall be that the slave's work day shall not in future exceed ten hours.

The other steps outlined a method of gradually freeing the slaves

until after twenty years only incorrigibles would be 'not free,' and all of these would be controlled by the State itself under laws whereby each was dealt with "as an individual."

Tews read the document with amazement and amusement. He recalled another saying of his mother's: "Don't ever worry about the idealists. "The mob will cut their throats at the proper moment."

His amusement faded rapidly. These boys are really interfering in the affairs of state in Linn itself, which is only remotely in their province. As, the summer over, he made preparations to return to the city, Tews scowlingly considered the threat "to the State," which - it seemed to him - was building up with alarming speed.

On the second day after his return to Linn he received another letter from Clane. This one requested an audience to discuss "those matters relating to the defense of the empire, about which your departments have been gathering information."

What infuriated Tews about the letter was that the mutation was not even giving him time to settle down after his return. True, the work of reestablishment did not involve him - but it was a matter of courtesy to the office he held. On that level, Tews decided in an icy rage, Clane's persistence bore all the earmarks of a deliberate insult.

He sent a curt note in reply, which stated simply:

My dear Clane:

I will advise you as soon as I am free of the more pressing problems of administration. Please await word from me.

Tews

He slept that night, confident that he was at last taking a firm stand and that it was about time.

He awoke to news of disaster.

The only warning was a steely glinting of metal in the early-morning sky. The invaders swooped down on the city of Linn in three hundred spaceships. There must have been advance spying, for they landed in force at the gates that were heavily guarded and at the main troop barracks inside the city. From each ship debouched two hundred-odd men.

"Sixty thousand soldiers!" said Lord Adviser Tews after he had studied the reports. He issued instructions for the defense of the palace and sent a carrier pigeon to the three legions encamped outside the city, ordering two of them to attack when ready. And then he sat pale but composed, watching the spectacle from a window that overlooked the hazy vastness of Linn proper.

Everything was vague and unreal. Most of the invading ships had disappeared behind large buildings. A few lay in the open, but they looked dead. It was hard to grasp that vicious fighting was going on in their vicinity. At nine o'clock, a messenger arrived from the Lady Lydia:

DearSon:

Have you any news? Who is attacking us? Is it a limited assault or an invasion of the empire. Have you contacted Clane?

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The first prisoner was brought in while Tews was scowling over the unpalatable suggestion that he seek the advice of his relative. The mutation was the last person he wanted to see. The prisoner, a bearded giant, proudly confessed that he was from Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter, and that he feared neither man nor god. The man's size and obvious physical prowess startled Tews. But his naive outlook on life was cheering. Subsequent prisoners had similar physical and mental characteristics. And so, long before noon, Tews had a fairly clear picture of the situation.

This was a barbarian invasion from Europa. It was obviously for loot

only. But unless he acted swiftly, Linn would be divested in a few days of treasures garnered over the centuries. Bloodthirsty commands flowed from Tews' lips. Put all prisoners to the sword. Destroy their ships, their weapons, their clothing. Leave not one vestige of their presence to pollute the eternal city.

The morning ran its slow course. Tews considered making an inspection of the city escorted by the palace cavalry. He abandoned the plan when he realized it would be impossible for commanders to send him reports if he were on the move. For the same reason he could not transfer his headquarters to a less clearly marked building. Just before noon, the relieving report arrived that two of three camp legions were attacking in force at the main gates.

The news steadied him. He began to think in terms of broader, more basic information about what had happened. He remembered unhappily that his departments probably had the information that - spurred by Clane - he had asked for months ago. Hastily, he called in several experts and sat somberly while each of the men in turn told what he had learned.

There was actually a great deal of data. Europa, the great moon of Jupiter, had been inhabited from legendary times by fiercely quarreling tribes. Its vast atmosphere was said to have been created artificially with the help of the atom gods by the scientists of the golden age. Like all the artificial atmosphere, it contained a high proportion of the gas, teneol, which admitted sunlight but did not allow much heat to escape into space.

Starting about five years before, travelers had begun to bring out reports of a leader named Czinczar who was ruthlessly welding all the hating factions of the planet into one nation. For a while it was such a dangerous territory that traders landed only at specified ports of entry. The information they received was that Czinczar's attempt at unification had failed. Contact grew even more vague after that; and it was clear to the listening Tews that the new leader had actually succeeded in his conquests and that any word to the contrary was propaganda. The cunning Czinczar had seized outgoing communication sources and confused them while he consolidated his position among the barbarous forces of the planet.

Czinczar. The name had a sinister rhythm to it, a ring of leashed violence, a harsh, metallic tintinnabulation. If such a man and his followers escaped with even a fraction of the portable wealth of Linn, the inhabited solar system would echo with the exploit. The government of Lord Adviser Tews might tumble like a house of cards.

Tews had been hesitating. There was a plan in his mind that would work better if carried out in the dead of night. But that meant giving the attackers precious extra hours for loot. He decided not to wait, but dispatched a command to the third - still unengaged - camp legion to enter the tunnel that led into the central palace.

As a precaution, and with the hope of distracting the enemy leader, he sent a message to Czinczar in the care of a captured barbarian officer. In it he pointed out the foolishness of an attack that could only result in bloody reprisals on Europa itself and suggested that there was still time for an honorable withdrawal. There was only one thing wrong with all these schemings. Czinczar had concentrated a large force of his own for the purpose of capturing the Imperial party. And had held back in the hope that he would learn definitely whether or not the Lord Adviser was inside the palace. The released prisoner, who delivered Tews' message, established his presence inside.

The attack in force that followed captured the Central Palace and everyone in it, and surprised the legionnaires who were beginning to emerge from the secret passageway. Czinczar's men poured all the oil in the large palace tanks into the downward sloping passageway and set it afire.

Thus died an entire legion of men.

That night a hundred reserve barbarian spaceships landed behind the

Linnan soldiers besieging the gates. And in the morning, when the barbarians inside the city launched an attack, the two remaining legions were cut to pieces.

Of these events the Lord Adviser Tews knew nothing. His skull had been turned over the previous day to Czinczar's favorite goldsmith, to be plated with Linnan gold and shaped into a goblet to celebrate the greatest victory of the century.

To Lord Clane Linn, going over his accounts on his country estate, the news of the fall of Linn came as a special shock. With unimportant exceptions, all his atomic material was in Liun. He dismissed the messenger, who had unwisely shouted the news as he entered the door of the accounting department. And then sat at his desk - and realized that he had better accept for the time being the figures of his slave bookkeepers on the condition of the estate.

As he glanced around the room after announcing the postponement, it seemed to him that at least one of the slaves showed visible relief. He did not delay, but called the man before him instantly. He had an inexorable system in dealing with slaves, a system inherited from his long - dead mentor, Joquin, along with the estate itself.

Integrity, hard work, loyalty, and a positive attitude produced better conditions, shorter working hours, more freedom of action, after thirty the right to marry, after forty legal freedom. Laziness and other negative attitudes such as cheating were punished by a set pattern of demotions. Short of changing the law of the land, Clane could not at the moment imagine a better system in view of the existence of slavery. And now, in spite of his personal anxieties, he carried out the precept of Joqnin as it applied to a situation where no immediate evidence was available. He told the man, Oorag, what had aroused his suspicions and asked him if they were justified. "If you are guilty and confess," he said, "you will receive only one demotion. If you do not confess and you are later proven guilty, there will be three demotions, which means physical labor, as you know."

The slave, a big man, shrugged and said with a sneer, "By the time Czinczar is finished with you Linnans, you will be working for me." "Field labor," said Clane curty, "for three months, ten hours a day."

It was no time for mercy. An empire under artack did not flinch from the harshest acts. Anything that could be construed as weakness would be disastrous.

As the slave was led out by guards, he shouted a final insult over his shoulder. "You wretched mutation," he said, "you'll be where you belong when Czinczar gets here."

Clane did not answer. He considered it doubtful that the new conqueror had been selected by fate to punish all the evildoers of Liun according to their desserts. It would take too long. He put the thought out of his mind and walked to the doorway. There he paused and faced the dozen trusted slaves who sat at their various desks.

"Do nothing rash," he said slowly in a clear voice, "any of you. If you harbor emotions similar to those expressed by Oorag, restrain yourselves. The fall of one city in a surprise attack is not important." He hesitated. He was, he realized, appealing to their cautious instincts, but his reason told him that in a great crisis men did not always consider all the potentialities.

"I am aware," he said finally, "there is no great pleasure in being a slave, though it has advantages - economic security, free craft training. But Oorag's wild words are a proof that if young slaves were free to do as they pleased, they would constitute a jarring, if not revolutionary factor in the community. It is unfortunately true that people of different races can only gradually learn to live together."

He went out, satisfied that he had done the best possible under the circumstances. He had no doubt whatsoever that here, in this defiance of

Oorag, the whole problem of a slave empire had again shown itself in miniature. If Czinczar were to conquer any important portion of Earth, a slave uprising would follow automatically. There were too many slaves, far too many for safety, in the Linnan empire.

Outside, he saw his first refugees. They were coming down near the main granaries in a variety of colorful skyscooters. Clane watched them for a moment, trying to picture their departure from Linn. The amazing thing was that they had waited till the forenoon of the second day. People must simply have refused to believe that the city was in danger, though, of course, early fugitives could have fled in other directions. And so not come near the estate.

Clane emerged decisively out of his reverie. He called a slave and dispatched him to the scene of the arrivals with a command to his personal guards. "Tell these people who have rapid transportation to keep moving. Here, eighty miles from Linn, we shall take care only of the foot-weary."

Briskly now, he went into his official residence and called the commanding officer of his troops. "I want volunteers," he explained, "particularly men with strong religious beliefs who on this second night after the invasion are prepared to fly into Linn and remove all the transportable equipment from my laboratory."

His plan, as he outlined it finally to some forty volunteers, was simplicity itself. In the confusion of taking over a vast city it would probably be several days before the barbarian army would actually occupy all the important residences. Particularly, on these early days, they might miss a house situated, as his was, behind a barrier of trees.

If by some unfortunate chance it was already occupied, it would probably be so loosely held that bold men could easily kill every alien on the premises and so accomplish their purpose.

"I want to impress upon you," Clane went on "the importance of this task. As all of you know, I am a member of the temple hierarchy. I have been entrusted with sacred god metals and sacred equipment, including material taken from the very homes of the gods. It would be a disaster if these precious relics were to fall into unclean hands, I, therefore, charge you that if you should by some mischance be captured, do not reveal the real purpose of your presence. Say that you came to rescue your owner's private property. Even admit you were foolish to sacrifice yourself for such a reason."

Mindful of Tews' guard unit, he finished his instructions. "It may be that Linnan soldiers are guarding the equipment, in which case give the officer in command this letter."

He handed the document to the captain of the volunteers. It was an authorization signed by Clane with the seal of his rank. Since the death of Tews, such an authorization would not be lightly ignored.

When they had gone out to prepare for the mission, Clane dispatched one of his private spaceships to the nearby city of Goram and asked the commander there, a friend of his, what kind of counteraction was being prepared against the invader. "Are the authorities in the cities and towns," he asked, "showing that they understand the patterns of action required of them in a major emergency? Or must the old law be explained to them from the beginning?"

The answer arrived in the shortest possible time, something under forty minutes. The general placed his forces at Clane's command and advised that he had dispatched messengers to every major city on Earth in the name of "his excellency, Lord Clane Linn, ranking survivor on Earth of the noble Tews, the late Lord Adviser, who perished at the head of his troops, defending the city of Linn from the foul and murderous surprise attack launched by a barbarian horde of beastlike men who seek to destroy the fairest civilization that ever existed."

There was more in the same vein, but it was not the excess of verbiage that startled Clane. It was the offer itself and the

implications. In his name an army was being organized.

After rereading the message, he walked slowly to the full-length mirror in the adjoining bathroom and stared at his image. He was dressed in the fairly presentable reading gown of a temple scientist. Like all his temple clothing, the shoulder cloth folds of this concealed his "differences" from casual view. An observer would have to be very acute to see how carefully the cloak was drawn around his neck, and how it was built up to hide the slant of his body from the neck down, and how tightly the arm ends were tied together at his wrists.

It would take three months to advise Lord Jerrin on Venus and four to reach Lord Draid on Mars, both planets being on the far side of the sun from Earth. It would require almost, but not quite, twice as long to receive a message from them. Only a member of the ruling family could possibly win the support of the diversified elements of the empire. Of the fate of the Lord Adviser's immediate family, there was as yet no word. Besides, they were women. Which left Lord Glane, youngest brother of Jerrin, grandson of the late Lord Leader. For not less than six months accordingly he would be the acting Lord Leader of Linn.

The afternoon of that second day of the invasion waned slowly. Great ships began to arrive, bringing soldiers. By dusk, more than a thousand men were encamped along the road to the city of Linn and by the riverside. Darting small craft and the wary full-sized spaceships floated overhead, and foot patrols were out, guarding all approaches to the estate.

The roads themselves were virtually deserted. It was too soon for the mobs from Linn, which air-seoater scouts reported were fleeing the captured city by the gates that, at midafternoon, were still open.

During the last hour before dark, the air patrols reported that the gates were being shut one by one. And that the stream of refugees was dwindling to a trickle near the darkening city. All through that last hour, the sky was free of scooters transporting refugees. It seemed clear that the people who could afford the costly machines were either already safe or had waited too long, possibly in the hope of succoring some absent member of the family.

At midnight the volunteers departed on their dangerous mission in ten scooters and one spaceship. As a first gesture of his new authority Glane augmented their forces by adding a hundred soldiers from the regular army. He watched of those general officers who had had time to arrive. A dozen men climbed to their feet as he entered. They saluted, then stood at attention.

Clane stopped short. He had intended to be calm, matter-of-fact, pretending even to himself that what was happening was natural. The feeling wasn't like that. An emotion came, familiar, terrifying. He could feel it tingling up the remoter reflexes of his nervous system as of old, the beginning of the dangerous childish panic, product of his early, horrible days as a tormented mutation. The muscles of his face worked. Three times he swallowed with difficulty. Then, with a stiff gesture, he returned the salute, and walking hastily to the head of the table, he sat down.

Clane waited till they had seated themselves, then asked for brief reports as to available troops. He noted down the figures given by each man for his province and at the end added up the columns.

"With four provinces still to be heard from," he announced, "we have a total of eighteen thousand trained soldiers, six thousand party trained reserves and some five hundred thousand able-bodied civilians."

"Your excellency," said his friend Morkid, "the Linnan empire maintains normally a standing army of one million men. On Earth by far the greatest forces were stationed in or near the city of Linn, and they have been annihilated. Some four hundred thousand men are still on Venus and slightly more than two hundred thousand on Mars."

Clane, who had been mentally adding up the figures given, said quickly, "That doesn't add up to a million men."

Morkid nodded gravely. "For the first time in years, the army is under strength. The conquest of Venus seemed to eliminate all potential enemies of Linn, and Lord Adviser Tews considered it a good time to economize."

"I see," said Clane. He felt pale and bloodless, like a man who has suddenly discovered that he cannot walk by himself.

Lydia climbed heavily out of her sedan chair, conscious of how old and unattractive she must seem to the grinning barbarians in the courtyard. She didn't let it worry her too much. She had been old a long time now, and her image in a mirror no longer shocked her. The important thing was that her request for an interview had been granted by Czinczar after she had, at his insistence, withdrawn the proviso that she be given a safe conduct.

The old woman smiled mirthlessly. She no longer valued highly the combination of skin and bones that was her body. But there was exhilaration in the realization that she was probably going to her death. Despite her age and some self-disgust, she felt reluctant to accept oblivion. But Clane had asked her to take the risk. It vaguely amazed Lydia that the idea of the mutation's holding the Lord Leadership did not dismay her any more. She had her own private reasons for believing Clane capable. She walked slowly along the familiar hallways through the gleaming arches, and across rooms that glittered with the treasures of the Linn family. Everywhere were the big, bearded young men who had come from far Europa to conquer an empire about which they could only have heard by hearsay. Looking at them, she felt justified in all the pitiless actions she had taken in her day. They were, it seemed to the grim old woman living personifications of the chaos that she had fought against all her life.

As she entered the throne room, the darker thoughts faded from her mind. She glanced around with sharp eyes for the mysterious leader. There was no one on or near the throne. Groups of men stood around talking. In one of the groups was a tall, graceful young man, different from all the others in the room. They were bearded. He was clean-shaven.

He saw her and stopped listening to what one of his companions was saying, stopped so noticeably that a silence fell on the group. The silence communicated itself to other groups. After not more than a minute, the roomful of men had faced about and was staring at her, waiting for their commander to speak. Lydia waited, also, examining him swiftly. Czinczar was not a handsome man but he had an appearance of strength, always a form of good looks. And yet it was not enough. This barbarian world was full of strong-looking men. Lydia, who had expected outstanding qualities, was puzzled.

His face was sensitive rather than brutal, which was unusual. But still not enough to account for the fact that he was absolute lord of an enormous undisciplined horde.

The great man came forward. "Lady," he said, "you have asked to see me."

And then she knew his power. In all her long life she had never heard a baritone voice so resonant, so wonderfully beautiful, so assured of command. It changed him. She realized suddenly that she had been mistaken about his looks. She had sought normal clean-cut handsomeness. This man was beautiful.

The first fear came to her. A voice like that, a personality like that -

She had a vision of this man persuading the Linnan empire to do his will. Mobs hypnotized. The greatest men bewitched. She broke the spell with an effort of will. She said, "You are Czinczar?"

"I am Czinczar."

The definite identification gave Lydia another, though briefer, pause. But this time she recovered more swiftly. And this time, also, her

recovery was complete. Her eyes narrowed. She stared at the great man with a developing hostility. "I can see," she said acridly, "that my purpose in coming to see you is going to fail."

"Naturally." Czinczar inclined his head, shrugged. He did not ask her what was her purpose. He seemed incurious. He stood politely, waiting for her to finish what she had to say.

"Until I saw you," said Lydia grimly, "I took it for granted that you were an astute general. Now I see that you consider yourself a man of destiny. I can already see you being lowered into your grave."

There was an angry murmur from the other men in the room. Czinczar waved them into silence. "Madam," he said, "such remarks are offensive to my officers. State your case, and then I will decide what to do with you."

Lydia nodded, but she noted that he did not say that he was offended. She sighed inwardly. She had her mental picture now of this man, and it depressed her. All through known history these natural leaders had been spewed up by the inarticulate masses. They had a will in them to rule or die. But the fact that they frequently died young made no great difference. Their impact on their times was colossal. Such a man could, even in his death throes, drag down long-established dynasties with him. Already he had killed the legal ruler of Linn and struck a staggering blow at the heart of the empire. By a military freak, it was true - but history accepted such accidents without a qualm.

Lydia said quietly, "I shall be brief since you are no doubt planning high policy and further military campaigns. I have come here at the request of my grandson, Lord Clane Linn."

"The mutation!" Czinczar nodded. His remark was noncommittal, an identification, not a comment.

Lydia felt an inward shock that Czinczar's knowledge of the ruling faction should extend to Clane, who had tried to keep himself in the background of Linnan life. She dared not pause to consider the potentialities. She continued quietly. "Lord Clane is a temple scientist, and, as such, he has for many years been engaged in humanitarian scientific experiments. Most of his equipment unfortunately is here in Linn." Lydia shrugged. "It is quite valueless to you and your men, but it would be a great loss to civilization if it were destroyed or casually removed. Lord Clane therefore requests that you permit him to send slaves to his town house to remove these scientific instruments to his country estate. In return -"

"Yes," echoed Czinczar, "in return -" His tone was ever so faintly derisive; and Lydia had a sudden realization that he was playing with her. It was not a possibility that she could pay any attention to.

"In retrn," she said, "he will pay you in precious metals and jewels any reasonable price which you care to name." Having finished, she took a deep breath and waited.

There was a thoughtful expression on the barbarian leader's face. "I have heard," he said, "of Lord Clane's experiments with the so-called" - he hesitated - "god metals of Linn. Very curious stories, some of them; and as soon as I am free from my military duties, I intend to examine this laboratory with my own eyes. You may tell your grandson," he continued with a tone of finality, "that his little scheme to retrieve the greatest treasures in the entire Linnan empire was hopeless from the beginning. Five spaceships descended in the first few minutes of the attack on the estate of Lord Clane to insure that the mysterious weapons there were not used against my invading fleet, and I consider it a great misfortune that he himself was absent in the country at the time. You may tell him that we were not caught by surprise by his midnight attempt two days ago to remove the equipment and that his worst fears as to its fate are justified." He finished, "It is a great relief to know that most of his equipment is safe in our hands."

Lydia said nothing. The phrase, "You may tell him," had had a

profound chemical effect on her body.

She hadn't realized she was so tense. It seemed to her that if she spoke she would reveal her own tremendous personal relief. "You may tell him -" There could be only one interpretation. She was going to be allowed to depart. Once more she waited.

Czinczar walked forward until he was standing directly in front of her. Something of his barbarous origin, so carefully suppressed until now, came into his manner. A hint of a sneer, the contempt of a physically strong man for decadence, a feeling of genuine basic superiority to the refinement that was in Lydia. When he spoke, he showed that he was consciously aware that he was granting mercy.

"Old woman," he said, "I am letting you go because you did me a great favor when you maneuvered your son, Lord Tews, into the - what did he call it - Lord Advisership. That move, and that alone, gave me the chance I needed to make my attack on the vast Linnan empire." He smiled. "You may depart, bearing that thought in mind."

For some time, Lydia had condemned the sentimental action that had brought Tews into supreme power. But it was a different matter to realize that, far away in interplanetary space, a man had analyzed the move as a major Linnan disaster. She went out without another word.

Czinczar slowly climbed the hill leading up to the low, ugly fence that fronted Lord Clane's town house. He paused at the fence, recognized the temple building material of which it was composed - and then walked on thoughtfully. With the same narrow-eyed interest a few minutes later, he stared at the gushing fountains of boiling water. He beckoned finally to the engineer who had directed the construction of the spaceships that had brought his army to Earth. "How does it work?" he asked.

The designer examined the base of the fountain. He was in no hurry, a big fattish man with a reputation for telling jokes so coarse that strong men winced with shame. He had already set up house in one of the great palaces with three Linnan girls as mistresses and a hundred Linnan men and women as slaves. He was a happy man, with little personal conceit and very little pride as yet to restrain his movements. He located the opening into the fountain and knelt in the dirt like any worker. In that, however, he was not unique. Czinczar knelt beside him, little realizing how his actions shocked the high-born Linnans who belonged to his personal slave retinue. The two men peered into the gloom. "Temple building material," said Meewan, the designer.

Czinczar nodded. They climbed to their feet without further comment, for these were matters that they had discussed at length over a period of years. At the house, a few minutes later, the leader and his henchman both lifted the heavy draperies that covered the walls of a corridor leading into the main laboratory. Like the fence outside, the walls were warm as from some inner heat.

Temple building material! Once again no comment passed between them. They walked on into the laboratory proper; and now they looked at each other in amazement. The room had been noticeably enlarged from its original size, although this they did not know. A great section had been torn out of one wall, and the gap, although it was completely filled in, was still rough and unfinished. But that was only the environment. On almost every square yard of the vast new floor were machines opaque and machines transparent, machines big and small, some apparently complete, others unmistakably mere fragments.

For a moment there was a distinct sense of too much to see. Czinczar walked forward speculatively, glanced at several of the transparent articles with an eye that tried to skim the essentials of shape and inner design. At no time during those first moments did he have any intention of pausing for a detailed examination. And then, out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement.

A glow. He bent down and peered into a long, partly transparent metal

case, roughly shaped like a coffin, even as to the colorful and costly-looking lining. The inside, however, curved down to form a narrow channel. Along this channel rolled a ball of light. It turned over sedately, taking approximately one minute to cover the distance to the far side. With the same lack of haste, it paused, seemed to meditate on its next action, and then, with immense deliberation began its return journey.

The very meaningless of the movement fascinated Czinczar. He extended his hand gingerly to within an inch of the ball. Nothing happened. He drew back and pursed his lips. In spite of his attack on Linn, he was not a man who took risks. He beckoned toward a guard. "Bring a slave," he said. Under his direction a former Linnan nobleman, perspiring from every pore, extended his finger and touched the moving ball. His finger went in as if there were nothing there.

He drew back, startled. But the inexorable Czinczar was not through with him. Once more the reluctant, though no longer quite so fearful, finger penetrated the moving ball. The ball rolled into it, through it, beyond it. Czinczar motioned the slave aside and stood looking at him thoughtfully. There must have been something of his purpose in his face, for the man gave a low cry of horror: "Master, I understand nothing of what I have seen. Nothing. Nothing."

"Kill him," said Czinczar.

He turned, scowling, back to the machine. "There must be," he said, and there was a stubborn note in his glorious voice, "some reason for its movements, for - its existence."

Half an hour later he was still examining it.

"If I could only -" thought Clane many times. And knew that he dared not. Not yet.

He had with a certain cynicism permitted the soldiers sent by Lord Tews to remove his equipment to Linn. This included the prize of all his findings, a ball that rolled to and fro in a coffinlike container; a discovery of the golden age that had shaken his certainties to the core of his being.

Because of the ball of energy he had not hesitated to let Tews take control of the artifacts of that ancient and wonderful culture.

He need merely go into the presence of the ball and because of his knowledge of its function could attune himself to it.

It could then be mentally controlled from a distance; all its strange power available - for about three days. At some not precisely determinable time on the third day, it would cease to "come" when he "called" it.

Then he would have to visit it while it was in its container and by direct contact reestablish rapport.

It had seemed evident from Tews' action that the Lord Adviser had not intended to bar him from the equipment. And so the location of the ball in his own Linnan residence under guard had not mattered.

He had not despite his anxieties anticipated a major attack that would capture Linn in one swift assault.

And so the weapon that could end the war was out of his reach, unless he could somehow get to it by cunning means.

He did not yet feel that desperate.

Nor actually were the Linnan forces strong enough to take advantage of a miracle.

Even as in a kind of mental agony he wondered how he would get into Linn, and into his house, he devoted himself to the grim business of training an army as it fought.

There was an old saying in the Linnan army to the effect that, during his first month, a trainee, if put into battle, caused the death of his trained companions. During the second month he hindered retreats made necessary by his presence. And during the third month he was just good enough to get himself killed in the first engagement.

Clane, watching a group of trainees after several weeks of drilling,

experienced all the agony of realizing how true the adage was. Learning to fire a bow effectively required complex integration of mind and body. In-fighting with swords had to include the capacity for cooperating with companions. And effective spear fighting was an art in itself.

The plan he outlined that night to the full general staff was an attempt to cover up against the weakness. It was a frank determination to use unfit men as first-line defense troops. He put in a word for the unfit. "Do not overexercise them. Get them out into the open air and simply teach them the first elements of how to use weapons. First bows and arrows, then spears, and finally swords."

After the meeting, long into the night, he examined reports on the cities of Nouris and Gulf, which had fallen virtually without a fight. As the barbarians attacked, the slaves simply rose up and murdered their masters. A supplementary general-staff report recommended mass execution for all able-bodied male slaves.

The uneasy Clane dispatched messengers to gather commercial and industrial leaders for a morning conference and then unhappily took the slave problem to bed with him.

At ten o'clock he called the meeting to order and told the hundred-odd assembled representative merchants that the army had recommended universal death for male slaves.

His statement caused an immediate uproar.

One man said, "Your excellency, it is impossible. We cannot destroy so much valuable property."

With two exceptions, that seemed to be the attitude. Both exceptions were young men, one of whom said, "Gentleman, this is a necessary action."

The other said, "My own feeling is that this crisis makes possible a great progressive act - the end of slavery in Linn."

Both men were shouted down by enraged merchants.

Clane stepped forward and raised his hand. When he had silence, he began. "There is no time for half-measures. We must adopt one or the other of these alternatives."

There followed a series of conferences among groups of merchants. Finally a bland spokesman said, "Your excellency, the merchants here present favor promising the slaves freedom."

For a long moment Clane gazed at his grinning audience, then abruptly turned his back on them and left the room. That afternoon he prepared a special bulletin:

FREEDOM FOR LOYAL SERVANTS

By order of his excellency, Lord Clane Linn, Leader of Linn, temple scientist, beloved of the Atom Gods themselves, it is hereby commanded, and so it shall be forevermore:

GREETINGS to all those good men and women who have quietly and efficiently served the empire in atonement for sins of leaders who rashly led them into hopeless wars against the god-protected Linnan empire - here is the chance of complete freedom that you have earned by your actions and attitudes during the past years.

The empire has been attacked by a cruel and barbarous invader. His reign of terror cannot but be temporary, for invincible forces are gathering against him, An army of a million men is on the way from Mars and Venus, and here on Earth irresistible forces totaling more than two million men are already organizing for battle.

The enemy numbers less than sixty thousand soldiers. To this small army, which gained its initial victory by a surprise and base attack, a few foolish men and women have rashly attached themselves. All the women, unless they are convicted of major crimes, will be spared. For the men who have already gone over to the enemy, there is but one hope: Escape immediately from the barbarian enemy and REPORT TO THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS listed at the bottom of this proclamation. There will be no guards at the camps, but weekly roll calls will be made. And every man whose name

appears regularly on these rolls will be granted full freedom when the enemy is defeated.

For hardened recalcitrants the penalty is death.

To those men and women still loyally serving at their appointed tasks, I, Lord Clane, acting Lord Leader of Linn, give the following commands:

All women and children will remain at their present residences, continuing to serve as in the past. All men report to their masters and say, "It is my intention to take advantage of the offer of Lord Clane. Give me a week's food so that I, too, may report to a concentration camp."

Having done this, and having received the food, leave at once. DO NOT DELAY A SINGLE HOUR.

If for some reason your master is not at home, take the food and go without permission. No one will hinder you in your departure from the city.

Any man to whom this order applies who is found lurking within any city or town twenty-four hours after this proclamation is posted will be suspected of treasonable intent.

The penalty is death.

Any man who after one week is found within a fiftymile radius of a city will be suspected of treasonable intent.

The penalty is death.

To save yourself, go to a concentration camp and appear regularly for roll call. If the barbarians attack your camp, scatter into the forests and hills and hide, or go to another camp. Adequate food rations will be supplied all camps.

All those of proven loyalty will receive freedom when the war is over. They will immediately have the right to marry. Settlement land will be opened up. After five years citizenship rights, granted alien immigrants, will be available on application.

This is the end of slavery in the Linnan empire.

BE WISE - BE SAFE - BE FREE

It was a document that had its weak points. Before issuing it, Clane spent time arguing its merits to a group of doubtful officers - he ignored the merchants; they were too venal to be considered. He pointed out that it would be impossible to keep secret a general order for mass execution. A majority of the slaves would escape, and then they would really be dangerous. He admitted that the proclamation, though he meant every word of the promise in it, was full of lies. A million slaves in Linn alone had gone over to Czinczar, many of them trained soldiers. Czinczar could use them to garrison any city he might capture and thus have his own army free for battle. It was Morkid, sardonic and scathing, who ended the argument late in the afternoon.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you do not seem to be aware that our commander-in-chief has at one stroke cut through all our illusions and false hopes, and penetrated straight to the roots of the situation in which we find ourselves. What is clear by the very nature of our discussion is that we have no choice." His voice went up. "In this period when disaster is so imminent, we are fortunate in having as our leader a genius of the first rank who has already set us on the only military path that can lead to victory.

"Gentlemen" - his voice rang with the tribute - "I give you Lord Clane Linn, acting Lord Leader of Linn."

The clapping lasted for five minutes.

Clane watched the battle for Goram from a patrol craft that darted from strong point to strong point. Enemy squadrons tried again and again to close in on him, but his own machine was faster and more maneuverable.

The familiar trick of getting above him was tried, an old device in patrol craft and spaceship fighting. But the expected energy flow upward did not take place. His small vessel did not even sag, which was normally

the minimum reaction when two sources of atomic energy operated on a gravity line.

The efforts worried Clane. Czinczar was, of course, aware by this time that his enemy knew more about the metals of the gods than he or his technicians. But it would be unfortunate if they should conclude from the actions of this one ship that Clane himself was inside. He wanted to see this battle. In spite of evening, minute by minute, he saw it.

The defense was tough, tougher than he had anticipated from the fact that four more cities had fallen in the past four weeks. The untrained were fighting grimly for their lives. Arrows took a toll of the attackers. Spears, awkwardly but desperately manipulated, inflicted wounds and sometimes death. The sword-fighting stage was the worst. The muscular and powerful barbarians, once they penetrated the weapons that could attack them from a distance, made shortwork of their weaker adversaries.

The first line was down, devastated, defeated. The secondline battle began. Barbarian reserves came forward and were met by waves of arrows that darkened the sky - and took their toll when they struck the advancing groups of men. Hoarse cries of pain, curses, the shrieks of the desperately wounded, the agonized horror of Linnans suddenly cut off and doomed, rose up to the ears of those in the darting small craft. The defenders strove to stay together. That was part of their instructions. Retreat slowly to the central squares - which were strongly held against a surprise rear attack.

Retreat, and at the last minute spaceships would land and rescue the hard-pressed, but theoretically still intact army of what had once been able-bodied civilians. After a month and a half of training they were too valuable to sacrifice in a last-ditch fight.

As it was, their dogged resistance was shaping the pattern of the war. Surely, Czinczar, counting his men after each battle, must already be having his own private doubts, His armyas a whole, augmented by the unrepentant among the slaves, was increasing daily. But the larger the army grew, the smaller was his chance of controlling it.

Yet there was no doubt about this battle, or this city, As the dark tide of night slipped in from the east, victory fires began to burn in all the important streets. The smoke wreathed into the sky, and blood-red flames licked up into the blackness. The Linnans below, at this very moment enduring the beginning of a barbarian occupation, would not be in a humor to appreciate that their grudgingly accepted defeat represented a possible turning point in the war.

The time had come to decide when and where and under what conditions the main Linnan force would be thrown into a decisive battle for the control of the planet. And there was another decision, also, involving an immensely risk attempt to get near the ball of light. Clane shifted uneasily and drew his cloak tightly around his thin shoulders.

He was still considering ways and means when a message was brought him by a released Linnan nobleman who had been captured by the barbarians.

The message was a one-sentence question from Czinczar. "Have you ever wondered, my dear Lord Clane, how the civilization of the golden age was so completely destroyed?"

It was a problem about which Clane had pondered many times. But it had never ocured to him that the answer might be known to a barbarian from a remote moon of Jupiter.

He questioned the released nobleman, a middle-aged knight of the empire, as to conditions in Linn. The answers were not pleasant. Many slaves had taken revenge on their former masters. Numerous Linnan women of rank had been reduced to the status of prostitute.

In questioning the man for any news of his Linnan residence, he learned that Czinczar had publicly invited temple scientists to take care of "certain relics" formerly in the possession of Lord Clane.

Clane said at that point, "He actually mentioned my name."

"It was posted," was the reply, and the man shrugged. "I read it on

one of my errands out of the palace grounds."

Long after the interview was over, Clane considered that. He suspected a trap - and yet Czinczar could not know how immensely valuable that sphere was.

If the barbarian leader had looked into it through a hollow tube, he might be startled at what was "inside." But still it would do him no good. Nevertheless, suppose it was a trap.

It still made no difference. For his purpose, momentary proximity to the ball was all that would be required. Dared he take the chance?

He was still considering the gamble when another released nobleman brought a second message from Czinczar:

I shall like to have a conversation with you and should like to show you an object the like of which - I'll wager - you have never seen. Can you think of a way in which such a meeting could be arranged?

Lord Clane showed the message to the general staff at its meeting the following morning. They unanimously forbade such a rendezvous but agreed that it was an opportunity to send a formal message to the barbarian leader.

The mutation, who had his own reasons for appearing firm, had already written the communication. He read it to the assembled officers:

To the barbarian chieftain, Czinczar:

Your cowardly attempt to win mercy for your crimes against humanity by a personal appeal to myself is of no avail. Get off this planet with your barbarous forces. Only immediate compliance can save you and Europa from destruction. Take heed!

Clane,
Acting Lord Leader

The message was approved and dispatched in the care of a captured barbarian officer. Clane began immediately to complete preparations for launching an attack against the city of Linn. Such an attack had been discussed several times by the staff and had been agreed on reluctantly, as a feint. The generals felt that a landing might confuse the defenders of the city and thus enable the Linnan army to recapture key outlying cities, which would indeed be the real goal. It was understood that the assault force would withdraw from Linn during the night of the day of attack.

Clane was content with this. He set out for the city of Linn the day before the attack, making the initial part of the journey in an air scooter. From this, in a secluded spot, he unloaded a donkey and a cart of vegetables, and trudged beside it the final twelve miles.

In his drab work garb of a temple initiate, he was one of many carts; and at no time was there any problem. So vast was the slave army that held Linn that Czinczar's forces had quickly sought to establish a normal flow of food from the surrounding countryside into the city to ward off starvation.

Linnan scouts had long since reported that the gates were open.

Clane entered without interference from the former slaves who guarded that particular gate. Once inside, he was even less conspicuous, and no one questioned his right to go along the street toward his city residence. He climbed the hill at the trades entrance and was permitted to take his cart through an opening in the low fence by the single barbarian soldier who guarded that section of it.

Dutifully, as if he were sent on lawful business, he headed for the trades entrance of the house, and he turned the vegetables over to two women and said, "Who is in charge today?"

He was given a barbarian name, "Cleedon!"

"Where is he?" Clane asked.

"In the office of course-through there." The older woman pointed along the main hallway, which led through the large central room where most of the precious machinery and equipment had been stored.

As he entered the great room, he saw that there were a dozen barbarian soldiers at the various entiances. He saw also that the container with the ball of light was at the center of the chamber.

... Misty sphere, vaguely glowing as if from an inner flame, rolling to and fro ...

He could walk by and touch it in passing.

Without appearing too hurried, he walked forward, put his finger through the flimsy surface of the sphere, and, without pausing, continued on toward the office.

He was sorely tempted, at this point, to take no further chances. If he acted at once and seized the house, then he would have control of the box.

But if he carried through with his original plan and then the box were removed so that he could not find it during the three days that the sphere would not be activated - He shuddered and refused to think of such an eventuality.

He had been impressed by Czinczar's communications. The barbarian leader had important information to give. Somehow, somewhere, he had gotten hold of an object so valuable that he had risked his self-esteem in attempting to establish contact.

If too hasty action were taken, that knowledge might be lost.

Even as he walked on through the room, the mutation silently reaffirmed his purpose. A moment later he entered the office and informed the barbarian officer there that he had come for the job of taking care of the relics of the atom gods.

The big man stood up and squinted down at him, gave an almost naive start of recognition, and then called two soldiers from the hallway.

And then he said, "Lord Clane Linn, you are under arrest."

To one of the soldiers he commanded, "Get ropes. Tie him up."

Meekly, the mutation submitted to being bound.

The moment the news arrived, Czinczar headed for Linn. He was met on the roof of the central palace by Meewan. The big man had a smile on his plump, good-fellow face. "Your theory was right," he said admiringly. "You thought he would take a chance at the critical period of the invasion. He arrived this morning."

"Tell me exactly how you accepted his services." The golden voice spoke softly. The strange face was thoughtful as the other man gave his detailed account. There seemed no end to his interest. When the story was finished, he asked question after question. Each answer seemed merely to stimulate new questions. Meewan said finally, querulously:

"Your excellency, I have no doubt that our men have put the best face on the capture to make themselves look good. They claim to have captured him as he entered the building, before he could do anything or touch anything. Since they're a lax bunch of rascals, I question this. But what does it matter? What are you doubtful about?"

That gave Czinczar pause; he had not realized how tense he was. After all, he told himself, the situation was simple enough. He had issued an open invitation for temple scientists to come and take care of "some god-metal relics" that had fallen into possession of the conquerors. It was a cleverly worded request, designed to win general approval from the defeated even as it drew the temple scientist to his own undoing, Its only stipulation, very guardedly worded, was that in return for the privilege of sharing the "safe-guarding of the relics," experiments should be continued as if no war were being waged.

"The gods," Czinczar had said sanctimoniously in the invitation, "are above the petty quarrels of mankind."

Apparently, at least one of its purposes was accomplished. The

mutation himself had applied for the job. Czinczar meditated cautiously on tactics. "Bring him here," he said finally. "We can't take any risks of his having established control over anything at his house. We know too little and he too much."

While he waited, he examined the rod of force - which was one of the few workable instruments that had been found in the house. He was not a man who accepted past truths as final. That it had worked a week ago did not mean that it would work now. He tested it from a great window, pointing it at the upper foliage of a nearby tree. No sound, no visible light spewed forth - but the upper section of the tree crashed down onto a pathway below. Czinczar experienced the satisfaction of a logical man whose logic had proved correct. It was not an uncommon satisfaction. From the early days when he had been a backcountry transcriber of messages to the days of his rise to power, he had taken risks that seemed necessary, no more, no less. Even now he could not be sure that the atomic wizard, Lord Clane, would not defeat him by some decisive wile. For several minutes, he pondered that and then ordered a box brought in from the ice room of the palace. The contents of the box had come all the way from Europa packed in ice. He was indicating to the slaves where to place the box when an officer burst breathlessly into the throne room.

"Excellency," he cried. "Hundreds of spaceships. It's an attack."

Standing at the windows a moment later, watching the ships settling down, Czinczar realized that his hazy suspicions had been correct. The appearance of Clane in the city was part of a planned maneuver that would now run its deadly course. It was a pleasure to know that Lord Clane himself was caught in a trap.

He wasted no time watching a battle that he could not hope to see from the palace in any important detail. Nor did he have the feeling Tews had had months earlier that it was necessary for commanders to know where he was in the early stages of the engagement. He issued quick instructions, ordering the ice-packed box sent after him, and wrote a note for Meewan. Then he rode with a strong escort to the headquarters of the reserve army in the middle of the city.

The reserve contained a barbarian core, but like the main defense of the city it was overwhelmingly made up of slaves. Czinczar's arrival was greeted by a roar of excitement. The cheers did not die down until long after he had entered the building.

He talked over the situation with some of the slave officers and found them calm and confident. According to their estimates sixty thousand Linnan soldiers had landed in the first wave. That that was exactly the number of barbarians who had originally invaded the city did not seem to occur to the slaves. But the comparison struck Czinczar sharply. He wondered if it was designed to have some symbolic meaning. The possibility made him sardonic. Not symbols but swords spoke the language of victory.

As the afternoon dragged on, the Linnan attack was being held everywhere. The box, still dripping, was delivered from the palace about three. Since there was no longer any immediate danger, Czinczar sent a messenger to Meewan. At three-thirty Meewan came in grinning broadly. He was followed by slave Linnans carrying a sedan chair. In the chair, bound hand and foot, was the acting Lord Leader of Linn. There was complete silence as the chair was set down, and the slaves withdrew.

Clane studied the barbarian leader with genuine interest. Lady Lydia's opinion of the man had impressed him more than he cared to admit. The question was, could this strong, fine-looking military genius be panicked into thinking that the atom gods existed? Panicked now, during the next half hour? Fortunately, for the first time in his career as an atomic scientist, he had behind him the greatest power ever developed by the wizards of the fabulous days of the legends. He saw that the impersonal expression on the other's face was transforming into the beginning of contempt.

"By the god pits," said Czinczar in disgust, "you Linnans are all the

same - weaklings every one.

Clane said nothing. He had looked often with regret into mirrors that showed him exactly what Czinczar was seeing. A slim, young man with a face that was white and womanish and ... well, it couldn't be helped.

Czinczar's face changed again. There was suddenly irony in it. "I am speaking," he asked politely, "to Lord Clane Linn? We have not made a mistake?"

Clane couldn't let the opening pass. "No mistake," he said quietly. "I came into Linn for the sole purpose of talking to you while the battle was on. And here I am."

It must have sounded ridiculous, coming from a man bound as he was. The near guards guffawed, and Meewan giggled. Only Czinczar showed no sign. And his marvelous voice was as steady as steel as he said, "I have not the time to flirt with words, nor the inclination. I can see that you are counting on something to save you, and I presume it has something to do with your knowledge of atomic energy."

He fingered the rod of force suggestively. "So far as I can see, we can kill you in less than a second whenever we desire."

Clane shook his head. "You are in error. It is quite impossible for you to kill me."

There was a sound from Meewan. The engineer came forward. "Czinczar," he said darkly, "this man is intolerable. Give me permission to slap his face, and we shall see if his atom gods protect him from indignity."

Czinczar waved him aside. But he stared down at the prisoner with eyes that were abnormally bright. The swiftness with which tension had come into the room amazed him. And, incredibly, it was the prisoner who had seized the advantage - "Impossible to kill me!" In one sentence he dared them to make the attempt.

There was a crinkle of frown in Czinczar's forehead. He had been careful in his handling of Clane as a matter of common sense, not because he actually anticipated disaster. But now, quite frankly, he admitted to himself that the man was not reacting normally. The words Clane had spoken had a ring in them, a conviction that could no longer be ignored. The purpose of his own invasion of the Linnan empire could be in danger.

He said urgently, "I have something to show you. No attempt will be made to kill you until you have seen it. For your part, do nothing hasty, take no action, whatever power you have, until you have gazed with understanding."

He was aware of Meewan's giving him an astounded glance.

"Power!" exclaimed the designer and it was like a curse. "The power he has!"

Czinczar paid no attention. This was his own special secret, and there could be no delay.

"Guards" he said "bring the box over here." It was soaking wet when they brought it. It left a dirty trail of water on the priceless rug, and a pool began to accumulate immediately in the place where it was set down. There was a delay while sweating men pried off the top. Even the guards at far doors strained to see the contents. A gasp of horror broke the tension of waiting.

What was inside was about eight feet long. Its width was indeterminable, for it seemed to have folds in its body that gave an impression of great size. It had obviously died only a short time before it was packed in ice. It looked fresh, almost alive, there in its case of ice, unhuman, staring with sightless eyes at the ornate ceiling.

"Where did you get it?" Clane asked at last.

"It was found on one of the moons - within hours after a strange ship was sighted."

"How long ago?" The mutation spoke in a steady tone.

"Two years, Earth time."

"It would seem that whoever was in the ship will have departed by

now."

Czinczar shook his head. "Miners found a second body exactly like this on a meteorite in a spacesuit - seven months ago."

For a long time the mutation gazed down at the creature. Finally he looked, and his eyes met Czinczar's waiting gaze. He said slowly, "What is your theory?"

"A nonhuman race of great scientific attainments. Ruthless, unfriendly - for there are reports of sudden destruction in outlying areas of Europa which puzzled me until this body was found ... I tend to wonder if this might not be a second visitation to the solar system. I cannot give you briefly all the logical relationships I have visualized, but my feeling is that the civilization of the golden age was destroyed by the first visitation."

Clane said, "I am glad that you have shown me this, but what is your purpose in doing so?"

Czinczar drew a deep breath. And made his second move to avert the catastrophe suggested by every action and manner of this unorthodox prisoner. He said, "It would be a grave error for either of us to destroy each other's armies."

"You are asking for mercy?"

That was too strong to take. The barbarian showed his teeth in a snarl. "I am asking for common sense," he said.

"It's impossible" said Clane "The people must have their revenge. In victory they will accept nothing less than your death."

The words brought an obscene curse from Meewan. "Czinczar," he shouted "what is all this nonsense? I have never seen you like this. I follow no man who accepts defeat in advance. I'll show you what we'll do with this ... this - " He broke off, "Guards, put a spear into him."

Nobody moved. The soldiers looked uneasily at Czinczar, who nodded coolly. "Go right ahead," he said. "If he can be killed, I'd like to know."

Still nobody moved. It was apparently too mild an order, or something of the leader's tension had communicated to the men. They looked at each other, and they were standing there doubtfully when Meewan snatched a sword from one of them and turned toward the bound man.

That was as far as he got. Where he had been was a ball of light.

"Try," came the voice of Clane "to use the rod of force against me." A fateful pause. "Try. It won't kill you."

Czinczar raised the rod of force and pressed the activator. Nothing happened - Wait! The ball of light was growing brighter.

Clane's voice split the silence tantalizingly. "Do you still not believe in the gods?"

"I am astonished," said Czinczar "that you do not fear the spread of superstition more than the spread of knowledge. We so-called barbarians, "he said proudly," despise you for your attempt to fence in the human spirit. We are freethinkers, and all your atomic energy will fail in the end to imprison us."

He shrugged. "As for your control over that ball, I do not pretend to understand it."

At last, he had shocked the mutation out of his ice-cold manner. "You actually," said Clane incredulously, "do not believe in the atom gods?"

"Guards," shouted Czinczar piercingly, "attack him from every side."

The ball of light flickered but did not seem to move. There were no guards.

"Now do you believe?" Clane asked.

The barbarian looked haggard and old. But he shook his head. "I have lost the war," he mumbled. "Only that I recognize. It is up to you to take up the mantle which has fallen from my shoulders." He broke off. "What in the name of your gods is that ball?"

"It contains the entire sidereal universe." Czinczar knit his brow and leaned forward as if he were trying to understand.

"The what universe?" he asked at last.

"When you look inside through a hollow tube," Clane explained patiently, "you see stars. It's like a window into space - only it's not a window. It's the universe itself."

The barbarian leader looked genuinely bewildered, "This universe?" he said blankly.

Clane nodded but made no comment. It hadn't been easy to grasp so vast an idea, even with the written explanations that he had found.

Czinczar shook his head. "You mean the Earth is in there?" He pointed at the glowing sphere.

"It's a fourth-dimensional idea," said Clane; and still he remained patient. He could recognize a bemused man when he saw one. It was not the moment to press any other point.

The barbarian narrowed his eyes and said at last, "How can you get a large object into a smaller one?" His tone appealed for a logical explanation.

Clane shrugged. "When largeness or smallness are illusions of viewpoints, the problem does not exist."

Czinczar scowled at that and straightened. "I have been assuming," he said, "that at this point in our relations you would be speaking nothing but truth. Evidently, you are not prepared to tell me anything valid about your weapon. Naturally, I reject this fanciful story."

Clane shook his head but said nothing. He had given the only explanation he had, and it had run up against the other man's magnificent realism. Not that he blamed the barbarian. Only gradually had he himself been able to accept the idea that matter and energy were different than they appeared to the sense perceptions of the body.

But now it was time to act, to force, to convince. The bonds fell from him as if they did not exist. He stood up, and now that crown among all the jewels of the ages rode above his head in a matchless perfect rhythm with his movements.

Czinczar said stubbornly, "It would be a mistake to kill any able-bodied man, slave or otherwise."

Clane said, "The gods demand absolute surrender."

Czinczar said in fury, "You fool, I am offering you the solar system! Has this monster in the box not changed your mind in the slightest degree?"

"It has."

"But then -"

"I do not," said Clane, believe in joint-leadership arrangements."

A pause. Then Czinczar said, "You have come far - who once used atomic power merely to stay alive."

"Yes," said Clane, "I have come far."

Czinczar frowned down at the thing in the box. "The real threat to Linn is there. Will you promise to try for the Lord Leadership?"

"I," Clane said, "can promise nothing."

They looked at each other, two men who almost understood each other. It was Czinczar who broke the silence. "I make an absolute surrender," he said and it was a sigh, "to you and you alone, of all my forces - in the belief that you have the courage and common sense to shirk none of your new duties as Protector of the Solar System. It was a role," he finished somewhat unnecessarily, suddenly gloomy, "that I originally intended for myself."

In a well-guarded room in a remote suburb of Linn a core of energy rolled sedately back and forth along a narrow path. In all the solar system there was nothing else like that core. It looked small, but that was an illusion of man's senses. The books that described it and the men who had written the books knew but a part of its secrets.

They knew that the micro-universe inside it pulsed with a multiform of minus forces. It reacted to cosmic rays and atomic energy like some

insatiable sponge. No submolecular energy released in its presence could escape it. And the moment it reached its own strange variation of critical mass it could start a meson chain reaction in anything it touched.

One weakness it had, and men had seized upon that in their own greedy fashion. It imitated thought. Or so it seemed. So it seemed.

The great question that Clane, and before him the ancients, asked after observing this remarkable characteristic was: Did this mean that ... man controlled the universe or that the universe controlled man?