

# Trantor Falls

by Harry Turtledove

THE IMPERIAL PALACE STOOD AT THE CENTER OF A HUNDRED square miles of greenery. In normal times, even in abnormal times, such insulation was plenty to shield the chief occupant of the palace from the hurly-burly of the rest of the metaled world of Trantor.

Times now, though, were not normal, nor even to be described by so mild a word as “abnormal.” They were disastrous. Along with magnolias and roses, missile launchers had flowered in the gardens. Even inside the palace, Dagobert VIII could hear the muted snarl. Worse, though, was the fear that came with it.

A soldier burst into the command post where the Emperor of the Galaxy and his officers still groped for ways to beat back Gilmer’s latest onslaught. Without so much as a salute, the man gasped out, “Another successful landing, sire, this one in the Nevask sector.”

Dagobert’s worried gaze flashed to the map table. “Too close, too close,” he muttered. “How does the cursed bandit gain so fast?”

One of the Emperor’s marshals speared the messenger with his eyes. “How did they force a landing there? Nevask is heavily garrisoned.” The soldier stood mute. “Answer me!” the marshal barked.

The man gulped, hesitated, at last replied, “Some of the troops fled, Marshal Rodak, sir, when Gilmer’s men landed. Others” He paused again, nervously licking his lips, but had to finish: “Others have gone over to the rebel, sir.”

“More treason!” Dagobert groaned. “Will none fight to defend me?”

The only civilian in the room spoke then: “Men will fight, sire, when they have a cause they think worth fighting for. The University has held against Gilmer for four days now. We shall not yield it to him.”

“By the space fiend, Dr. Sarns, I’m grateful to your students, yes, and proud of them too,” Dagobert said. “They’ve put up a braver battle than most of my troopers. “

Yokim Sarns politely dipped his head. Marshal Rodak, however, grasped what his sovereign had missed. “Majesty, they’re fighting for themselves and their buildings, not for you,” he said. Even as he spoke, another sector of the map shone in front of him and Dagobert went from blue to red: red for the blood Gilmer was spilling all over Trantor, Sarns thought bitterly.

“Have we no hope, then?” asked the Emperor of the Galaxy.

“Of victory? None.” Rodak’s military assessment was quick and definite. “Of escape, perhaps fighting again, yes. Our air- and spacecraft still hold the corridor above the palace. With a landing at Nevask, though, Gilmer will soon be able to bring missiles to bear on it—and on us.”

“Better to flee than to fall into that monster’s clutches,” Dagobert said, shuddering. He looked at the map again. “I am sure you have an evacuation plan ready. Implement it, and quickly.”

“Aye, sire.” The marshal spoke into a throat mike. The Emperor turned to Yokim Sarns. “Will you come with us, professor? Trantor under Gilmer’s boots will be no place for scholars.”

“Thank you, sire, but no.” As Sarns shook his head, strands of mouse-brown hair, worn unfashionably long, swirled around his ears. “My place is at the University, with my faculty and students.”

“Well said,” Marshal Rodak murmured, too softly for Dagobert to hear.

But the Emperor, it seemed, still had one imperial gesture left in him. Turning to Rodak, he said, “If Dr. Sarns wishes to return to the University, return he shall. Detail an aircar at once, while he has some hope of getting there in safety. “

“Aye, sire,” the marshal said again. He held out a hand to Yokim Sarns. “And good luck to you. I think you’ll need it.”

By the time the aircar pilot neared the University grounds, Yokim Sarns was a delicate shade of green. The pilot had flown meters—sometimes centimeters—above Trantor’s steel roof, and jinked like a wild thing to confuse the rebels’ targeting computers.

The car slammed down on top of the library. Dr. Sarns's teeth met with an audible click. The pilot threw open the exit hatch. Sarns pulled himself together. "Er—thank you very much," he told the pilot, unbuckling his safety harness.

"Just get out, get under cover, and let me lift off," she snapped. Sarns scrambled away from the aircar toward an entrance. The wash of wind as the car sped away nearly knocked him off his feet.

The door opened. Two people in helmets dashed out and dragged Sarns inside. "How do we fare here?" he asked.

"Our next few graduating classes are getting thinned out," Maryan Drabel answered somberly. Till Gilmer's revolt, she had been head librarian. Now, Sarns supposed, chief of staff best summed up her job. "We're still holding, though—we pushed them out of Dormitory Seven again a few minutes ago."

"Good," Sarns said. He was as much an amateur commander as she was an aide, but the raw courage of their student volunteers made up for much of their inexperience. The youngsters fought as if they were defending holy ground—and so in a way they were, Sarns thought. If Gilmer's men wrecked the University, learning all over the Galaxy would take a deadly blow.

"What will Dagobert do?" asked Egril Joons. Once University dietitian, he kept an army fed these days.

Sarns had no way to soften the news. "He's going to run."

Under the transparent flash shield of her helmet, Maryan Drabel's face went grim, or rather grimmer. "Then we're left in the lurch?"

"Along with everyone else who backed the current dynasty." *Two generations, a dynasty!* Sarns thought. The way the history of the Galactic Empire ran these past few sorry centuries, though, two generations *was* a dynasty. And with a usurper like Gilmer seizing Trantor, that history looked to run only downhill from here on out.

Maryan might have picked the thought from his mind. "Gilmer's as much a barbarian as if he came straight from the Periphery," she said.

"I wish he *were* in the Periphery," Egril Joons said. "Then we wouldn't have to deal with him."

"Unfortunately, however, he's here," said Yokim Sarns.

The thick carpets of the Imperial Palace, the carpets that had cushioned the feet of Dagobert VIII, of Cleon II, of Stannell VI—by the space fiend, of Ammenetik the Great!—now softened the booted strides of Gilmer I, self-proclaimed Emperor of the Galaxy and Lord of All. Gilmer kicked at the rug with some dissatisfaction. He was used to clanging as he walked, to having his boots announce his presence half a corridor away. Not even a man made all of bell metal could have clanged on the carpets of the Imperial Palace.

He tipped his head back, brought a bottle to his lips. Liquid fire ran down his throat. After a long pull, he threw the bottle away. It smashed against a wall. Frightened servants scurried to clean up the mess.

"Don't waste it," Vergis Fenn said.

Gilmer scowled at his fleet commander. "Why not? Plenty more where that one came from." His scowl stabbed a servant. "Fetch me another of the same, and one for Vergis here too." The man dashed off to do his bidding.

"There, you see?" Gilmer said to Fenn. "By the Galaxy, we couldn't waste everything Trantor's stored up if we tried for a hundred years."

"I suppose that's so," Fenn said. He was quieter than his chieftain, a better tactician perhaps, but not a leader of men. After a moment, he went on thoughtfully, "Of course, Trantor's spent a lot more than a hundred years gathering all this. More than a thousand, I'd guess."

"Well, what if it has?" Gilmer said. "That's why we wanted it, yes? By the balls Dagobert didn't have, nobody's ever sacked Trantor before. Now everything here is mine!"

The servant returned with the bottles. He set them on a table of crystal and silver, then fled. Gilmer drank. With all he'd poured down these last couple of days, he shouldn't have been able to see, let alone

walk and talk. But triumph left him drunker than alcohol. Gilmer the Conqueror, that's who he was!

Vergis Fenn drank too, but not as deep. "Aye, all Trantor's ours, but for the University. Seven days now, and those madmen are still holding out."

"No more of these little firefights with them, then," Gilmer growled. "By the Galaxy, I'll blast them to radioactive dust and have done! See to it, Fenn, at once."

"As you would, sir—sire, but—" Fenn let the last word hang.

"But what?" Gilmer said, scowling. "If they fight for Dagobert: they're traitors to me. And smashing traitors will frighten Trantor." He blinked owlshly, pleased and surprised at his own wordplay.

To his annoyance, Fenn did not notice it. He said, "I don't think they *are* fighting for Dagobert any more, just against us, to hold on to what they have. That might make them easier to deal with. And if we—if you—nuked the University, scholars all over the Galaxy would vilify your name forever."

"Scholars all over the Galaxy can eat space, for all I care," Gilmer said. But, he discovered, that wasn't quite true. Part of being Emperor was acting the way Emperors were supposed to act. With poor grace, he backpedaled a little: "If they acknowledge me and stop fighting, I suppose I'm willing to let them live. "

"Shall I attempt a cease-fire, then?" Fenn asked.

"Go ahead, since you seem to think it's a good idea," Gilmer told him. "But not if they don't acknowledge me, understand? If they still claim that unprintable son of a whore Dagobert's Empire, blow 'em off the face of the planet."

"Yes, sire." This time, Fenn did not stumble over the title. *He's my servant too*, Gilmer thought.

The new Emperor of the Galaxy took a good swig from the bottle. He made as if to throw it at one of the palace flunkies, then, laughing, set it down gently as the fellow ducked.

Gilmer went down to the command post in the bowels of the Imperial Palace, the command post from which, until recently, poor stupid Dagobert VIII had battled to keep him off Trantor. Gilmer's boots clanged most satisfactorily there. Whoever had designed the command post, in the lost days of the Galactic Empire's greatness, had understood about commanders and boots.

The television screen in front of Vergis Fenn went blank. He swiveled his chair, nodded in surprise to see Gilmer behind him. "Sire, we have a cease-fire between our forces and those of the University," he said. "It was easy to arrange. Our troops and theirs will both hold in place until the final armistice is arranged. "

"Good," Gilmer said. "Well done."

"Thank you. The leader of the University has invited you to meet him on his ground to fix the terms of the armistice. He offers hostages to ensure your safety, and says he knows what will happen to everything he's been fighting to keep if he plays you false. Shall I call him back and tell him no anyhow?"

"No, I'll go there," Gilmer said. "What d'you think, I'm afraid of somebody without so much as a single starship to his name? Besides"—he smiled a greedy smile—"like as not I'll get a look at whatever treasures they've been fighting so hard to hang on to. If I can't beat 'em out of him, I'll tax 'em out—that's what being Emperor is all about. So go ahead and set up the meeting with this—what's his name, Vergis?"

"Yokim Sarns."

"Yokim Sarns. What do I call him when I see him? General Sarns? Admiral? Warlord?"

Fenn's expression was faintly bemused. "The only title he claims is 'Dean,' sire."

"Dean?" Gilmer threw back his head and laughed loud and long. "Aye, I'll meet with the fierce Dean Yokim Sarns, the scourge of the lecture halls. Why not? Set it up for me, Vergis. Meanwhile"—he turned away—"I'll check how we're doing with the rest of the planet."

Banks of television screens, relaying images from all over Trantor, told him what he wanted to know. Here he saw a platoon of his troopers carrying plastic tubs full of jewels back toward their ships; there more soldiers looting a residential block; somewhere else another squad, most of the men drunk,

accompanied by twice their number of Trantorian women, some scared-looking, others smiling and brassy.

Gilmer grinned. *This* was why he'd taken Trantor: to sack a world unsacked for fifty generations, even more than to rule it after the sack. Watching his dream unfold made that come after seem of scant importance by comparison.

Watching...His gaze went back to that third screen. All the women there would have been heart-stopping beauties on a lesser world, but they were just enlisted men's pickings on Trantor. With so many billions of women to choose from, the ones less than spectacular were simply ignored.

Smiling in anticipation, Gilmer took the spiral slidewalk up to the Imperial bedchambers. Not even in his wildest dreams had he imagined anything like them. Thousands of years of the best ingenuity money could buy had been lavished there on nothing but pleasure.

Billye smiled too, when he came in. Her tawny hair spilled over bare shoulders. Disdaining all the elaborations the bedchamber offered, Gilmer took her in his arms and sank to the floor with her. There he soon discovered an advantage of thick carpeting he had not suspected before.

She murmured lazily and lay in his arms through the afterglow. She'd been his woman since he was just an ambitious lieutenant. He'd always thought her splendid, both to look at and to love.

He did still, he told himself. He even felt the truth of the thought. But it was not complete truth, not any more. The television screen had shown him that, by Trantorian standards, she was ordinary. And how in reason and justice could the Emperor of the Galaxy and Lord of All possess a consort who was merely ordinary?

He grunted, softly. "A centicredit for your thoughts," Billye said.

"Ahh, nothing much," he said, and squeezed her. Her voice was not perfectly sweet either, he thought.

"Here he comes." Maryan Drabel pointed to the single figure climbing down from the aircar that had descended in the no-man's-land between Gilmer's lines and those held by the student-soldiers of the University.

"He's alone," Yokim Sarns said in faint surprise. "I told him we were willing to grant him any reasonable number of bodyguards he wanted. He has more courage than I'd thought."

"What difference does that make, when he can't—or won't—control his troops?" Maryan Drabel said bitterly. "How many raped women do we have in our clinic right now?"

"Thirty-seven," Sarns answered. "And five men."

"And that's just from this one tiny corner of Trantor, and only counts people who got through Gilmer's troops and ours," she said. "How many over the whole planet, where he has forty billion people to terrorize? How many robberies? How many fires, set just for the fun of them? How many murders, Yokim? How do they weigh in the balance against one man's courage?"

"They crush it." Sarns passed a weary hand across his forehead. "I know that as well as you, Maryan. But if he has courage, we can't handle him as we would have before. "

"There is that," she admitted. "Quiet, now—he's almost here. "

Gilmer, Sarns thought, looked more like a barbarian chief than Emperor, even if a purple cape billowed behind him as he advanced. Beneath it he wore the coverall blotched in shades of green and brown that his soldiers used. Sarns supposed it was a camouflage suit, but in Trantor's gleaming corridors it had more often exposed than protected the troopers. The nondescript gray of Sarns's own coat and trousers was harder to spot here.

The usurper's boots beat out a metallic tattoo. "Majesty," Sarns said, knowing he should speak first and also knowing that, since Gilmer had seized Trantor, the title was true *de facto* if not *de jure*. Sarns did not approve of dealing in untruths.

"You're Dean Sarns, eh?" Gilmer's granite rumble should have come out of that hard, bearded countenance. The Emperor of the Galaxy scratched his nose, went on. "You've got some tough fighters behind you, Sarns. I tell you right now, I wouldn't mind taking the lot of them into my fleet. "

“You are welcome to put out a call, sire, but I doubt you’d find many volunteers,” Sarns answered. “These young men and women are not soldiers by trade, but rather students. They—and I—care more for abstract knowledge than for the best deployment of a blast-rifle company. “

Gilmer nodded. “I’d heard that said. I found it hard to believe. Truth to tell, Sarns, I still do. You spend your whole lives chasing this—what did you call it?—abstract knowledge?”

“We do,” Sarns said proudly. “This is the University, after all, the distillation of all the wisdom that has accumulated over the millennia of Imperial history. We codify it, systematize it, and, where we can, add to it. “

“It seems a milk-livered way to spend one’s time,” Gilmer remarked, careless of Sarns’s feelings or—more likely—reckoning the Dean would agree with him when he pointed out an obvious truth. “What good is knowledge that you can’t eat, drink, sleep with, or shoot at your enemies?”

He *is* a barbarian, Sarns thought, even if he’s lived all his life inside what still calls itself, with less and less reason, the Galactic Empire. Fortunately Sarns, like any administrator worth his desk, had practice not showing what he felt. He said, “Well, let me give you an example, sire: how did you and your victorious army come to Trantor?”

“By starship, of course.” Gilmer stared. “How else, man? Did you expect us to walk?” He laughed at his own wit.

Sarns smiled a polite smile. “Of course not. But what happens if one of your busbars shorts out or a hydrochron needs repair?”

“We fix ‘em, as best we can. Seems like nobody in the whole blasted Galaxy understands a hyperatomic motor any more,” Gilmer said, scowling. Then he stopped dead. “That’s knowledge too, isn’t it? By the space fiend, Sarns, are you telling me you’ve got a university full of technicians who really know what they’re doing? If you do, I’ll impress ‘em into the fleet and make you—and them—so rich they won’t ever miss their book-films, I promise you that.”

“We do have some people—not many, I fear—studying such things. As I said before, you are welcome to speak with them. Some may even choose to accompany you, for the challenge of working on real equipment.” Sarns paused a moment in thought. “We also have skilled doctors, computer specialists, and students of many other disciplines of value to the Empire.”

He watched Gilmer nibble the bait. “And they’d do these same kinds of things for me?” the usurper asked.

“Some might,” Sarns said. “Others—probably more—would be willing to instruct your technicians and personnel here. Of course,” he added smoothly, “they would be less enthusiastic if you shot your way in. You would also likely waste a good many of them that way.”

“Hrmmp,” Gilmer said. After a moment, he went on. “But any ships with their techs, their medics, their computer people gone—they’d be no more use to us than if they rusted away.”

“Not immediately, perhaps, but later they would be of even greater value to you than they could ever be with the inadequately trained crews I gather they have now.”

Gilmer lowered his voice. “Sarns, I can’t afford to think about later. I’d bet a million credits against a burnt-out blaster cartridge that there’s at least three fleets moving on me the same way I moved on Dagobert. Now that Trantor’s fallen, all the dogs of space will want to pick her bones—and mine.”

Privately, Sarns thought the usurper was right about that. It would only be what Gilmer deserved, too. But the dean-turned-general felt sadness wash over him all the same. No time to bother to learn anything new, no time to think about anything but the moment—that had been the disease of the Galactic Empire for far too long. Gilmer had a worse case of it than the emperors before him, but the root sickness was the same.

Sarns did not sigh. He said, “Well, in any case this has taken our discussion rather far from the purpose at hand, which is, after all, merely to arrange an armistice between your forces and the students and staff of the University, so both we and you may return to what we consider our proper pursuits. “

“Aye, that’s so,” Gilmer said.

As he had not sighed, Sarns did not smile. Show a barbarian a short-term objective and he won't look past it, he thought. "Would you care to examine our facilities here, so you can see how harmless we are under normal circumstances?" he said.

"Why not? Lead on, Dean Sarns, and let's see what you've turned into soldiers. Who knows? Maybe I'll try to recruit *you*..." Gilmer laughed. So, without reservation, did Yokim Sarns. He hadn't suspected Gilmer could say anything that funny.

What first struck Gilmer inside the University was the quiet. Almost everyone went around in soft-soled shoes, soundless on the metal flooring. Gilmer's boots clanged resoundingly as ever, even raised echoes that ran down the corridors ahead of him. But both clang and echoes were tiny pebbles dropped into an ocean of stillness.

The people were as strange as the place, Gilmer thought. Those who had fought his men were still in gray like Sarns. The rest wore soft pastels that made them seem to flit like spirits along the hallways. Their low voices added to the impression that they really weren't quite there.

Half-remembered childhood tales of ghosts rose in Gilmer's mind. He shivered and made sure he stayed close to his guides. "What are they doing in there?" he asked, pointing. His voice caused echoes too, echoes that swiftly died.

Sarns glanced into the laboratory. "Something pertaining to neurobiology," he said. "One moment." He ducked inside. "That's right—they're working to improve the efficiency of sleep-inducers."

Somehow the Dean pitched his voice so that it was clear but raised no reverberations. Gilmer resolved to imitate him. "And what's going on there?" the Emperor of the Galaxy asked. Then he frowned, for he'd managed only a hoarse whisper that sounded filled with dread.

To his relief, Sarns appeared to take no notice. "That's a psychostatistics research group," the Dean answered casually. He walked on, assuming Gilmer knew what psychostatistics was.

Gilmer didn't, but was not about to let on. He pointed to another doorway. Some people in that room were working with computers, others with what looked like chunks of rock. "What are they up to?" he asked. He still could not match Yokim Sarns's easy tone.

"Ahh, that's one of our most fascinating projects. I'm sure you'll appreciate it." Gilmer, who wasn't at all sure, waited for Sarns to go on: "Using ancient inscriptions and voice synthesizers, that team of linguists is attempting to reconstruct the mythical language called English, from which our modern Galactic tongue arose thousands of years ago."

"Oh," was all Gilmer said. He'd never heard of English, either. Well, too bad, he thought. He knew about a lot of things these soft academics had never heard of, things like field-stripping a blast-pistol, like small-unit actions.

Yokim Sarns might have plucked the thought from his head, and then twisted it in a way he did not like: "Mainly, though, we fought you so we could protect what you're coming to now: the Library."

"Everything humanity has ever learned is preserved here," said Sarns's aide Maryan Drabel.

Gilmer caught the note of pride in her voice. "Are you in charge of it?" he asked.

She nodded and smiled. Gilmer cut ten years off the guess he'd made of her age from her grim face and drab clothing. She said, "This chamber here is the accessing room. Students and researchers come here first, to get a printout of the book-films and journal articles available in our files on the topics that interest them."

"Where are all your book-films?" Gilmer craned his neck. He'd visited libraries on other planets once or twice, and found himself wading in film cases. He didn't see any here. Suspicion grew in him. Was all this some kind of colossal bluff, designed to conceal who knew what? If it was, the whole University would pay.

But Maryan Drabel only laughed. "You're not ready to see book-films yet. Before a student can even begin to view films, he or she needs to have some idea of what's in them: more than a title can provide. What we're coming to now is the Abstracts Section, where people weed through their possible reading lists with summaries of the documents that seem promising to them."

More people fiddling with more computers. Gilmer almost succeeded in suppressing his yawn. Maryan Drabel went on. "We also have an acquisition and cataloguing division, which integrates new book-films into our collection. "

"New book-films?" Gilmer said. "You mean people still write them?"

"Not as many as when the University was founded," the librarian said sadly. " And, of course, now that the Periphery and even some of the inner regions have broken away from the Empire, we no longer see a lot of what is written, or only get a copy after many years. But we do still try, and surely no other collection in the Galaxy comes close to ours in scope or completeness."

They came to an elevator. Yokim Sarns pressed the button. After a moment, the door opened. "This way, please," Sarns said as he stepped in.

Maryan Drabel and Gilmer followed, the latter with some misgivings. If these University folk wanted to assassinate him, what better place than the cramped and secret confines of an elevator? But if they wanted to assassinate him, he'd been in their power since this tour started. He had to assume they didn't.

The elevator purred downward, stopped. The door opened again. "These are the reading rooms," Maryan Drabel said.

Gilmer saw row on row of cubicles. Most of them were empty. "Usually, they would be much busier," Yokim Sarns remarked. "The people who would be busy using them have been on the fighting lines instead. "

As if to confirm his words, one of the closed cubicle doors opened. The young woman who emerged wore the gray of the University's soldiers and had a blast rifle slung on her back. She looked grubby and tired, as a front-line soldier should. Gilmer noted that she also looked as though she'd forgotten all about the fighting and her weapon: her attention focused solely on the calculator pad she was keying as she walked toward the bank of elevators.

"Do you care to look inside a reading room?" Maryan Drabel asked.

Gilmer thought for a moment, shook his head. He'd been in a few reading rooms; they were alike throughout the Galaxy. The number of them here was impressive, but one by itself would not be.

"Is this everything you have to show me?" he asked.

"One thing more," Maryan Drabel told him. shrugging, he ducked back into the elevator with her and Sarns.

Down they went again, down and down. "You are specially privileged, to see what we are about to show you," Yokim Sarns said. "Few people ever will, few even from the University. We thought it would help you to understand us better."

The elevator stopped. Gilmer stepped out, stared around. "By the space fiend," he whispered in soft wonder.

The chamber extended for what had to be kilometers. From floor to ceiling, every shelf was packed full of book-films. "The computer can access them and project them to the appropriate reading room on request," Maryan Drabel said.

Gilmer walked toward the nearest case. His boots thumped instead of clanging. He glanced down. "This is a rock floor," he said. "Why isn't it metal like everything else?"

"The book-film depositories are below the built-up part of Trantor," Yokim Sarns explained. "There wouldn't be room for them up there—that space is needed for people. Having them down here also gives them a certain amount of extra protection from catastrophe. Even the blast of a radiation weapon set off overhead probably wouldn't reach down here."

"You also have to understand that this is just one book-film chamber among many," Maryan Drabel added. "We've used both dispersed storage and a lot of redundancy to do our best to ensure the collection's safety. "

Gilmer had a sudden vision of the University folk tunneling like moles for years, for centuries, for millennia, honeycombing the very bedrock of Trantor as they dug storehouses for the knowledge they hoarded. Even worse, in his mind's eye he imagined all the weight of rock and metal over his head. He'd

grown up on a farming world full of wide open spaces, and had spent most of his life in space itself. To imagine everything above collapsing, crushing him so he would leave not even a red smear, made cold sweat start on his brow.

“Shall we go back up?” he said hoarsely.

“Certainly, sire.” Yokim Sarns’s voice was bland. “I hope you do see—now—that we are solely dedicated to the pursuit of learning, and will not interfere in the political life of the Empire so long as it does not invade our campus. On those terms, I think, we can arrange an armistice satisfactory to both sides.”

All Gilmer wanted to do—now—was get away from this catacomb, return to his own men. He noticed that Sarns hadn’t thumbed the elevator button. Maybe Sarns wouldn’t, until Gilmer agreed. “Yes, yes, of course.” He could hear how quickly he spoke, but could not help it. “You have your men put down their arms, and mine will stay away from the University.”

“Good enough,” Sarns said. As if he had been absentminded before—and perhaps that was all he had been—he pushed the button that summoned the elevator. Gilmer rode up in relieved silence; every second the elevator climbed seemed to lift a myria-ton from his shoulders.

When he and his guides returned to the level from which they had begun, a man came briskly toward them with two sheets of parchmentoid. “This is Egril Joons,” Sarns said. “What do you have for us, Egril?”

“Copies of the armistice agreement, for your signature and the Emperor Gilmer’s,” Joons replied. He held out a stylus.

Gilmer took it. He skimmed through one copy of the document, signed it, and was reaching for the other from Yokim Sarns when he suddenly thought to wonder how the armistice terms could be ready now when he’d only agreed to them moments before. “You were snooping,” he growled to Egril Joons.

“My apologies, but yes,” Joons said. “Voice monitoring is part of the security system for the book-films. This time I just made use of it to prepare copies as quickly as possible. I expected that your majesty would have other concerns that would soon need his attention.”

Gilmer recalled how badly he’d wanted to get back to his own troops. “Oh, very well, put that way,” he said. He signed the second copy of the armistice accord. This Joons fellow was righter than he knew, righter than he could know. Trantor had to be made ready to defend itself from space attack, and quickly, or Gilmer the Emperor of the Galaxy would soon be Gilmer the vaporized usurper.

Gilmer the Emperor of the Galaxy rolled up his copy of the agreement, absentmindedly stuck Egril Joons’s stylus in a tunic pocket, and said, sounding quite imperial indeed, “Now if you will be so good as to escort me back to my lines”

“Certainly.” Yokim Sarns handed the other copy of the armistice to Maryan Drabel. “Come this way, if you please.”

From behind, Maryan Drabel thought, Gilmer looked much more like an emperor than from the front. The shining purple cape lent him an air of splendor that did not match the camouflage suit he wore under it. Seen from the front, the cape only seemed a sad bit of stolen booty.

“An emperor shouldn’t look like a thief,” she said.

“Why not?” Egril Joons was still feeling pangs over his purloined stylus. “That’s what he is.”

“Wizards!” Billye shouted. “You went into the wizards’ lair, and they enspelled you!”

“There’s no such things as wizards!” Gilmer shouted back.

“No? Then why didn’t you get anything worth having out of the University, when they were at our mercy?” she said.

“I did. We aren’t shooting at them any more, and they aren’t shooting at us. They recognize me as Emperor of the Galaxy. What more could I want?”

“To put the fear of cold space and hot death in them, that’s what. If you *are* the Emperor of the Galaxy, they should act like subjects, not like equals. Can the Emperor have an equal? And you *let* them.” Billye’s hair flew around her in a copper cloud as she shook her head in bewilderment. “I can’t



believe you let them. You have all your men, the whole fleet—why not just crush them for their insolence?”

“Oh, leave me be,” Gilmer said sullenly. He didn’t need to hear this from Billye; he’d already heard it, more politely but the same tune, from Vergis Fenn. Fenn had asked him why, if the University folk were willing to instruct his personnel, that willingness didn’t show up in the armistice document. He’d been sullen with his fleet commander, too, not wanting to admit he hadn’t had the nerve to ask for the change in writing. Why hadn’t he? All the real power was on his side. But still—he hadn’t.

“No, I won’t leave you be,” Billye said now. “Somebody has to put backbone in you, especially since yours looks like it’s fallen out through your—”

“Shut up!” Gilmer roared in a voice that not one of his half-pirate spacemen or troopers dared disobey.

Billye dared. “I won’t either shut up. And there are so wizards. Every other tale that floats in from the Periphery talks about them.”

“Lies about them, you mean. “ Gilmer was just as glad to change the subject, even a little. His head ached. If Billye was going to be this abrasive, maybe he *would* find himself some pretty little Trantorian chit who’d only open her mouth to say yes.

“They aren’t lies,” Billye said stubbornly.

“Well, what else could they be?” Gilmer said. “There’s no such thing as a man-sized force screen. There can’t be—the Empire doesn’t have ‘em, and the Empire has everything there is. There’s no way to open a Personal Capsule without having a man’s characteristic on file. So stories that talk about things like that have to be lies. “

“Or else the magicians do those things, and do ‘em by their magic,” Billye said. “ And what else but magic could have made you show the University not just mercy but—but—I don’t know what. Treat them like the place was theirs by right, when the Emperor has charge of everything there is.”

“If he can keep it,” Gilmer muttered. He stalked out of the bedchamber—he’d get no solace here, that was plain. A scoutship message had been waiting for him when he returned from the University grounds: a fleet was gathering not ten parsecs away, a fleet that did not belong to him. If he was going to keep Trantor, he’d have to fight for it allover again. Even a pinprick from the University might hurt him at such a time.

Why couldn’t Billye see that? Rage suddenly filled Gilmer. If she couldn’t, to the space fiend with her! He pointed at the first servant he spotted. “You!”

The man flinched. Unlike Billye, he—all the palace servants—knew Gilmer was no one to trifle with. “Sire?” he asked fearfully.

“Take as many flunkies as you need to, then go toss that big-mouthed wench out of my bedchamber. Find me someone new—I expect you have ways to take care of that. Someone worthy of an Emperor, mind you. But most of all, someone quiet.”

“Yes, sire.” The servant risked a smile. “That, majesty, I think we can handle.”

A room in the *Library*—not a room Gilmer had seen!

Yokim Sarns, Maryan Drabel, Egril Joons...dean, librarian, dietitian...general, chief of staff, quartermaster...and rather more. They stood before a wall of equations, red symbols on a gray background. Yokim Sarns, whose privilege it was to speak first, said, “I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

“Neither did I,” Maryan Drabel agreed. “I expected—the probabilities predicted—we would have to touch Gilmer’s mind to make sure he would leave us alone here.”

“That courage we saw helped a great deal,” Sarns said. “It let him gain respect for our student-soldiers where a more purely pragmatic man would simply have brushed aside their sacrifice because it conflicted with his own interests. “

“Mix that with superstitious awe at the accumulation of ancient knowledge we represent, let him see our goals and objectives—our ostensible goals and objectives—are irrelevant to his or slightly to his

advantage, and he proved quite capable of deciding on his own to let us be,” Maryan Drabel said. “We came out of what could have been a nasty predicament very nicely indeed.”

Egril Joons had been studying the numbers and symbols, the possible decision-paths that led from Hari Seldon’s day through almost three centuries to the present—and beyond. Now he said, “I do believe this will be the only round.”

“The only round of sacks for Trantor?” Yokim Sarns studied the correlation at which Joons pointed; the equations obligingly grew on the Prime Radiant’s wall so he could see them better. “Yes, it does seem so, if our data from around the planet are accurate. Gilmer has done such an efficient job of destruction that Trantor won’t be worth looting again once this round of civil wars is done.”

“That was the lower probability, too,” Joons said. “Look—there was a better than seventy percent chance of two sacks at least forty years apart, and at least a fifteen percent chance of three or more, perhaps even spaced over a century.”

“Our lives and our work will certainly be easier this way,” Maryan Drabel said. “I know we’re well protected, but a stray missile—” She shivered.

“We still risk those for a little while longer,” Sarns said. “Gilmer is so blatantly a usurper that others will try to steal from him what he stole from Dagobert. But the danger of further major damage to Trantor as a whole has declined a great deal, and will grow still smaller as word of the Great Sack spreads.” He pointed to the figures that supported his conclusion; Maryan Drabel pondered, at length nodded.

“And with Trantor henceforward effectively removed from psychohistoric consideration, so is the Galactic Empire,” Egril Joons said.

“The *First* Galactic Empire,” Yokim Sarns corrected gently.

“Well, of course.” Joons accepted the tiny rebuke with good nature. “Now, though, we’ll be able to work toward the Second Empire without having to worry about concealing everything we do from prying imperial clerks and agents.”

“The Empire was always our greatest danger,” Maryan Drabel said. “We needed to be here at its heart to help protect the First Foundation, but at its heart also meant under its eyes, if it ever came to notice us. In the days before we fully developed the mind-touch, one seriously hostile commissioner of public safety could have wrecked us.”

“The probability was that we wouldn’t get any such, and we didn’t,” Egril Joons said.

“Probability, yes, but psychohistory can’t deal with individuals any more than physics can tell you exactly when anyone radium atom will decay,” she said stubbornly. The truth there was so self-evident that Joons had to concede it, but not so graciously as he had to Yokim Sarns.

Sarns said, “Never mind, both of you. If you’ll look here”—the Prime Radiant, taking its direction from his will, revealed the portion of the Seldon Plan that lay just ahead—“you’ll see that we’re entering a period of consolidation. As you and Maryan have both pointed out, Egril, the First Empire is dead, while it will be several centuries yet before the new Empire that will grow from the First Foundation extends its influence to this part of the Galaxy.”

“Clear sailing for a while,” Joons said. “About time, too.”

“Don’t get complacent,” Maryan Drabel said.

“A warning the Second Foundation should always bear in mind,” Yokim Sarns said. “But, looking at the mathematics, I have to agree with Egril. Barring anything unforeseen—say, someone outside our ranks discovering the mind-touch—we should have no great difficulty in steering the proper course. And”—he smiled broadly, even a little smugly—“what are the odds of that?”