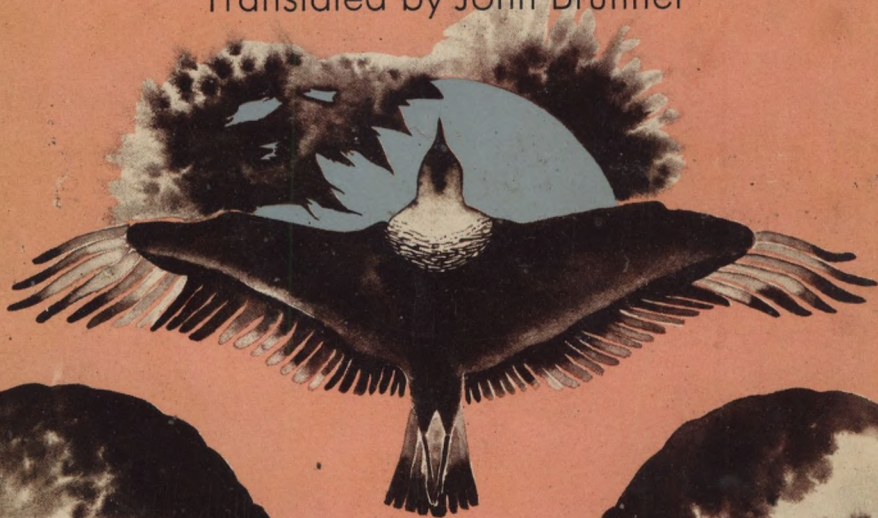


# The Overlords of War

**Gérard Klein**

Translated by John Brunner



Doubleday Science Fiction

Gerard Klein



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GERARD KLEIN

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## *The Overlords*

*Le del charrie un mauvais grain.  
Est-ce aujourd'hui, est-ce demain  
Que tous les peuples harasses  
Vivront enfin pour s'embrasser?*

*Et rataplan et rataplan  
Les morts se vengent des vivants.*

The welkin bears a seed of sorrow—  
Is it today, is it tomorrow  
That all the weary peoples will  
Learn how to kiss instead of kill?

Rat-tat-tat goes the drummer's stick—  
The dead take vengeance on the quick.

*Song by Frehel*

## CHAPTER 1

The Monster was weeping like a little child—not with remorse at having killed three dozen men, but at finding itself so far from its mother world. Corson could understand its distress; it was all he could do not to give way to the same feeling.

In the darkness his hands groped along the ground, warily because according to the Briefings there were plants here which cut like razors. They encountered a clear space. Only then, and with extreme slowness, did he advance a little. Beyond, the “grass” was as soft as a fur pelt. Surprised, Corson drew back his hands. The plants ought to be hard and knife-keen. Uria was a hostile and dangerous world. According to the Briefings, soft plants *ought* to indicate a trap. Uria was at war with Earth.

What he needed to know most urgently was whether the natives were already aware of the arrival of two strangers—the Monster and George Corson. The Monster was equipped to cope with them. Corson wasn't. For the twentieth time he worked it out: the natives would have seen the ship founder in flames and would probably assume its crew to be dead. They wouldn't carry out a search during the night if the Urian jungle were even half as dangerous as the Briefings claimed.

His calculations always brought Corson to the same conclusion.

He had to face three mortal threats: from the Monster, from the natives, and from the wild beasts of Uria. Weighing the risks, he decided to stand up. He wouldn't get far on all fours. If he found himself too close to the Monster, that would cost him his life. He could estimate what direction it lay in, but not how far away it was. The night seemed to muffle sound, or perhaps fear had taken the edge off his hearing.

Gently, gently, he rose to his feet, trying not to rustle the grass or any foliage there might be. Stars shone peacefully overhead, in patterns that were strange but not menacing, stars like those he had seen scores of times from the surface of worlds scattered around the galaxy. The starry vault was a reassuring sight, if a meaningless one. Long ago, on Earth, men had coined names for constellations which they believed unchangeable, but which were only the result of observing the heavens from a briefly privileged vantage point. That was past; so too was the divine ranking of the stars.

The situation, Corson told himself, was by no means hopeless. He had a good gun, although it was almost empty. He had eaten and drunk just before the accident, which would enable him to keep going for some hours. The air was fresh, which would prevent him from becoming drowsy. On top of that he was the sole survivor of a crew of thirty-seven men and hence must enjoy incredible good luck. Last, he could move freely; he was neither handicapped nor even hurt.

The wails of the Monster redoubled, which brought Corson's attention back to the most pressing of his problems. If he hadn't been very close to the Monster's cage when it launched its attack, he would probably now be drifting in a thin cloud through the Urian stratosphere. He had been trying to communicate with the Monster, as his job required. From the other side of an invisible wall the Monster fixed him with six of the eighteen eyes ringing what it was convenient to call its waist. Those lidless orbs changed color in a variable rhythm which constituted one of its modes of communication. The six long claw-tipped fingers on each of its six paws tap-tapped on the floor of its cage, in a second communication mode, and a dull monotonous cry escaped from its upper orifice, which Corson could not see. The Monster was at least three times his height, and its mouth was surrounded by a forest of tendrils which from a distance might be mistaken for hairs, but close up looked pretty much like what they were: slender strands as tough



as steel, capable both of lashing out at fearful speed and of acting as tactile antennae.

Corson had never doubted that the Monster was intelligent. Besides, the Briefings said so. It might even be more intelligent than a man. The great weakness of the species it belonged to had been to Overlook—perhaps to scorn—that great invention which had made humans and sundry other races so powerful: society. The Briefings declared that this case was not unique. On Earth itself, before the age of space and the systematic exploitation of the oceans, there had existed in the sea an intelligent species, remarkably individualistic, which had never taken the trouble to build a civilization. Extinction had been the price the dolphins paid for their neglect. But creating a society was not in itself a warranty that a species would survive. The pitiless war between Earth and Uria was in a fair way to proving that.

The eyes, the fingers, and the voice of the Monster, from the far side of the invisible wall, conveyed a message which Corson understood perfectly well even though he was unable to decipher the creature's language: "As soon as I can, I shall destroy you!"

For a reason unknown to him, the chance had arisen. He couldn't believe that the ship's generators had broken down. More likely, Urian forces had spotted them and opened fire. During the picosecond it took for the computers to activate the defensive screens, while the force fields of its cage were momentarily short of power, the Monster had attacked with unheard-of ferocity. Using the limited control of time and space it was capable of, it had hurled part of its environment a great distance off, and that had caused the disaster. Proof, if any were needed, that the Monster was by far the most formidable of the weapons employed by Earth in its war against Uria.

Neither Corson nor the Monster had been killed in the initial explosion because the latter was protected by its force-field cage and the former by a shield of the same type, though smaller, which he wore against a possible attack by the Monster. The *Archimedes* had plunged toward the stormy depths of Uria's atmosphere. At that moment, in all likelihood, only Corson and the Monster survived on board. Corson, by reflex, had locked his shield to the cage. When the vessel was only a few hundred meters above the ground the Monster had uttered a shrill cry and reacted in the face of danger. It had displaced itself a few fractions of a second in time, carrying part of nearby space along with it. Corson was within that space. Abruptly

he found himself, in the Monster's company, outside the ship and spinning through the air. The resilience of his force shield enabled him to withstand the shock. The Monster, concerned for its own safety, took care of the rest. Corson had landed at its side, and taking advantage of its confusion had managed to run blindly off into the dark.

The whole episode had been an object lesson in the potential of the Monster. Corson knew some of its talents, suspected others, but had never dared hint in his reports that the beast might be *this* hard to kill.

Imagine, though, an animal hunted by a pack of hounds. Cornered, it rounds on them. The attackers hesitate for an instant. An invisible barrier seems to divide them from the quarry. Then they rush at it. And suddenly find themselves a second earlier. Or two seconds. In the exact spot where they were before crossing that imperceptible line. They can never reach their prey because, time and time again, it hurls them into its past. And when they are dazed enough, the hunted becomes the hunter.

Now imagine that this animal is endowed with intelligence at least equal to the human, reflexes more rapid than a missile's, a cold cruelty, and implacable hatred for any creature unlike itself.

And you have a faint conception of a Monster.

It could control about seven seconds' worth of local time, either forward or back. It could snatch from the future a scrap of the cosmos and hurl it a few seconds into the past, or vice versa. And foresee what was going to happen a few moments before it actually did, at least for an unsighted observer such as a human being.

Hence its sudden attack aboard the spaceship. The Monster had known before men or their machines did when the Urian fleet, or the ground batteries, or the accident, would intervene. It had pinpointed with adequate accuracy the picosecond when the bars of its energy cage would be weakened. It had hit out at the right moment, and won.

Or lost. It was a matter of your point of view.

Uria was the Monster's destination, in any case. After thirty years of fruitless struggle against the Urian Empire, the Solar Powers had devised a tactic which ought to humble those haughty princes. More precisely, ten years earlier they had chanced on an "ally" which had cost them a space fleet, plus a number of individual ships, plus a naval base, plus a planet that had had to be evacuated, plus a system

that had had to be embargoed, plus a lot of casualties. Just how many was a state secret. Without actually intending to, they had experimented on a grand scale with the effects of what was for the time being the Ultimate Weapon.

Assignment: to unleash on a planet of the Empire, preferably the capital world, the worst disaster in the whole of history. Condition: to escape infringing the terms of the Armistice which had ended the hot phase of the war and had been tacitly observed by both sides for twenty years. Method: set the Monster down at a prescribed point on Uria, without being spotted, and let the beast get on with it.

Six months from now, it would give birth to about eighteen thousand of its kind. A year later at most, the capital of the Urian Empire would be panic-stricken. The Princes of Uria would have to overcome their reluctance and appeal to the Solar Powers for help in getting rid of the Monsters, and then in reconstruction. For five or six thousand years that had been the inescapable conclusion of all wars; the victor would rebuild for the vanquished . . . after his own fashion.

Mistake to avoid: giving away the origin of the *Archimedes*. If the Princes of Uria were able to prove that the Monster had been turned loose by a Solar ship, the Powers would have some difficulty in arguing their case before the Galactic Congress. They might even risk being put under interdiction.

Interdiction: an immediate end to all interstellar traffic, confiscation of merchant ships found outside national space, destruction on sight of vessels of war, outlawry.

Duration: permanent.

For all these reasons the *Archimedes* had been on a suicide mission. From that standpoint it had been a complete success, barring the survival of George Corson. Not a scrap of the ship remained which would allow it to be identified. The Princes of Uria would be compelled to admit that the Monster might have arrived at their capital world aboard a ship of its own. Only the Terrestrials knew the exact coordinates of its planet of origin and just how puny were the present technological abilities of its species. The sole clue which might allow the Princes of Uria to work out the Monster's provenance was now Corson himself. If the natives managed to capture him they would have solid proof of Earth's guilt. The logical solution was suicide. He was satisfied of that. But he lacked the means

to destroy himself completely. Granted, the Monster would tear him to shreds, but the traces remaining on the ground would be plenty to convince the Galactic Congress. No abyss on the planet would be so deep that a spoor could not be followed to his body. The only chance Corson had of remaining unidentified lay in staying alive.

At all events, the Monster had been delivered safely.

## CHAPTER 2

The night protected Corson from the Monster, whose eyes could not detect infrared or even red, though they saw well enough in the ultraviolet. It was capable of finding its way about in the dark by using sonar frequencies, but it was far too preoccupied with self-pity to bother about tracking him down.

He was trying desperately to work out the nature of the beast's distress. He was virtually certain that Monsters experienced no counterpart of fear. On their mother world no enemy was known that could seriously endanger their lives. Unacquainted with defeat, they doubtless had never imagined an opponent more powerful than themselves before meeting humans. The only limit on their expansion was imposed by hunger. They could not reproduce except when there was an adequate surplus of food. Without it, they remained

sterile. One of the chief problems the biologists from Earth had encountered in accomplishing their project had been how to get the Monster gorged.

Corson could not believe, either, that the creature was hungry or cold. Its metabolism was capable of drawing sustenance from most organic substances and many minerals. The rich pastures of Uria would furnish it with a splendid diet. The climate distantly resembled the most hospitable regions of its mother world. The composition of the air was different, but not so much so as to worry a being which, as experiment had shown, could without apparent harm endure vacuum for hours on end or wallow in sulphuric acid.

And mere loneliness was unlikely to affect the Monster. Experiments which consisted in turning loose Monsters on barren asteroids to study their behavior had indicated how little store they set by the company of their own kind. Given that they were capable of congregating for tasks that exceeded the abilities of an individual, or to play, or to exchange the spores containing their gene equivalents, it nonetheless seemed that they were in no sense sociable.

No, none of his ideas fitted. The voice of the Monster made him think of the cries of a child shut up by mistake or for punishment in a dark closet, feeling himself lost in a vast, unfathomable, terrifying universe full of nightmares and hallucinations, caught in a trap from which he cannot escape by himself. Corson wished he could explain the nature of the trap. But that was impossible. Throughout the voyage he had tried to establish contact with the Monster. He knew it was susceptible to various types of argument, but he had fared no better than his predecessors when trying to carry on a conversation with it. There was one obvious cause: the implacable hostility the Monster displayed toward humans. Why this should be so, no one knew. It might be a matter of smell, color, sound . . . The biologists had tried many ways of deceiving the Monster, all in vain. Its tragedy was that it was too intelligent to be misled by tricks played on its instinctual reactions, and not intelligent enough to identify and tame the mindless powers snarling within which made it good for nothing but to kill.

Having tried a few steps forward, and stumbled, then continued on his knees for some hundreds of meters, Corson, worn out, decided to drowse without entirely relaxing his vigilance. He started awake again after what felt like only a few minutes. His watch told

him he had slept for four hours. It was still night. The Monster had fallen silent.

A thick cloud must be crossing the sky, for the stars had vanished from a whole area to his left. It was moving rapidly. It had a sharply defined edge. A huge object, doubtless a flying machine of a type he had never heard of despite having studied all the engines of war employed by the Princes of Uria, was passing soundlessly overhead. It was hard to guess at its height or speed because it was so difficult to see clearly. But when it was directly above him, its black outline on the heavens swiftly grew larger and he just had time to realize that it was going to crush him.

It must be this intruder which had quieted the Monster; it must have been the sudden silence which had awakened him. Knowing what was about to happen a few seconds ahead of time, the Monster had inadvertently warned its unwilling human ally.

Corson felt his belly muscles tense, his blood run chill. He grasped his gun, under no illusions. He did not doubt that the vessel had come to capture him. Determination alone would be useless against a machine so vast. The only course for him to adopt was, once he had been made prisoner, to persuade the occupants of the ship to lure the Monster on board too. Whatever cage or cell the craft was fitted with, that would be all he'd need to do. With a bit of luck the strange ship would be as completely destroyed as the *Archimedes*, and the Princes of Uria would never find a trace of George Corson's visit to their world.

## CHAPTER 3

Details of the ship emerged from a blur of nothing. A lance of light stabbed down from its black, shiny hull and raked the thicket where Corson was hiding. The Princes of Uria must then have such confidence in themselves that they did not even bother to use a black-light projector. Reflexively Corson trained his gun on the lamp. The underside of the ship was sleek and polished like the surface of a jewel. Its builder had taken esthetic advantage of the geodesics, along which leaves of metal had been attached. This craft did not look in the least like a war machine.

Corson braced himself against a gun bolt, a blast of gas, or the shock of a steel cable around his shoulders. He anticipated the chirping cry of a Urian soldier. But the beam merely focused on him and remained there. The craft descended further, then halted so close that he could have touched its side without getting up. Big ports shone around its circumference. Corson could have tried to break one with his gun. But he didn't do it. He was trembling, yet at the same time he was more puzzled than frightened by the odd and unmilitary behavior of the craft's commander.

Doubled over, he walked around the circular hull. He tried to catch a glimpse of the interior through the ports, but they dazzled him, and the only impression he gained of the equipment within was

distorted and vague. He did fancy he discerned a humanoid silhouette, but that was not surprising. From a distance the natives could pass for humanoid enough.

Startled by bright light, he shut his eyes for a moment. A brilliantly illuminated doorway was opening in the ship's side above a flight of steps suspended on nothing. Corson hesitated, then rushed up them. The door closed again silently as soon as he had passed through, but he had been prepared for that.

"Come in, Corson," said a voice—a young girl's voice. "There's no reason to stand about in the corridor."

That was a human voice! Not an imitation! The Urians would not have been able to fake one so convincingly. A machine might have managed it, but Corson doubted whether his enemies would have added such a finishing touch to a trap he had already fallen into. People at war seldom gave invaders the tourist treatment.

Corson obeyed. He pushed at a half-open door nearby, and it slid back into the wall. He saw a wide room, at the far end of which was a gigantic viewport. He could clearly make out the dark mass of the forest they were flying over and, sparkling at the horizon, a brighter line which he reasoned must be an ocean with the sunrise glinting on it.

He swung around. A girl was looking at him. A sort of veil, or mist, was all she wore. Fair hair framed her smiling face. He could detect no enmity in her gray eyes. She seemed remarkably at ease. It had been five years since Corson had seen anything remotely like a woman apart from the issue plastoids with which you had to make do aboard a ship of war. The ability to reproduce was too critical a resource for women of breeding age to be risked in space. And this one, moreover, was beautiful.

He regained his breath, swiftly reviewed the situation, and allowed his combat reflexes to gain control. It was as though a secondary personality took him over. He snapped, "How did you know I'm called Corson?"

At once the girl's expression betrayed astonishment mingled with fear. He had put his finger on the crux of the matter. The fact that she used his name might imply that the Princes of Uria knew about the mission of the *Archimedes*, right down to the identities of the crew. On the other hand the girl was definitely human, body and voice, and her presence on Uria was in itself a total mystery. No surgeon could make a Urian look like that; no operation could re-



place a homy beak with soft lips like those. If the girl had been fully clad he might have felt reservations. As it was, every detail of her figure proclaimed her origin. He could clearly see her navel, something which Urians—hatched from eggs—did not possess. And plas-toids were never built to a standard that could deceive a man.

“But you’ve just told me!” she exclaimed.

“No, you called me by name first of all,” he said, feeling as though he were spinning round and round. His brain was working frantically, but in vain. He felt a strong impulse to kill the girl and make off with the ship, but surely she could not be alone on board, and he must know more before he acted. Perhaps he might not in fact have to kill her.

He had never heard any report of humans going over to the Urian side. In a war whose main and perhaps sole basis lay in a fundamental biological difference combined with the ability to inhabit similar planets, there was no future for the traitor’s trade. And—he realized suddenly—he had not noticed the characteristic Urian smell when he came aboard. He was certain he could have detected the tang of chlorine instantly. Even so . . .

“Are you a prisoner?”

He wasn’t hoping that she would admit it, but she might let fall a clue.

“What funny questions you ask!” She opened her eyes wide and her lips started to tremble. “You’re a stranger! I thought— Why should I be a prisoner? Are women kept prisoner on your planet?”

Her expression changed suddenly. He read intense terror in her gaze.

“No!”

She cried out and flinched away, casting around for something to use as a weapon. Then he knew what he had to do. He strode across the room, brushed aside the feeble blow she aimed at him, planted a palm on her mouth and caught her in a wrestling hold. His thumb and forefinger sought the pressure points in her throat. She slumped. A trifle harder and she would have died. He was content to knock her out. He wanted to give himself time to think.

He searched the ship and convinced himself they were alone on board. Fantastic! That a young girl in a pleasure boat—he couldn’t find a single weapon—should be cruising cheerfully over the forests of an enemy planet: it defied belief. He located the instrument panel, but the controls meant nothing to him. A red spot which must

represent the ship was moving across a wall map. He recognized neither the continents nor the oceans of Uria. Had the commander of the *Archimedes* brought them to the wrong planet? Out of the question. The vegetation, the solar spectrum, the composition of the air, were enough to identify Uria, and the attack they had suffered wiped away the final doubt.

He glanced out of a viewport. They were flying at about three thousand meters, and as nearly as he could judge at about four hundred k.p.h. In ten minutes at most they would be over the ocean.

He returned to the first cabin and sat down on an ornate chair, staring at the girl. He had laid her on the floor and put a cushion under her head. One seldom finds cushions aboard a warship—embroidered ones, at any rate. He struggled to recall precisely what had happened since he set foot in the ship.

She had called him by name.

Before he had opened his mouth.

She had seemed terrified.

Before he had thought of attacking her.

Partly, it had been the fear he could read in her eyes which drove him to action.

Telepathic?

If so, she knew his name and his mission and knew about the Monster, too. So she would have to disappear, especially if she was in the pay of the Princes of Uria.

But she had retreated even before he thought of overpowering her . . .

She was stirring. He set about tying her up, tearing long strips of cloth from a tapestry. One doesn't find tapestries aboard a warship. He bound her wrists and ankles, but did not gag her. Also he tried to determine the nature of the garment she had on. It was neither woven fabric nor a gas, but something more like a gleaming mist, so light that it was hard to see. Only at the corner of his eye could he clearly discern its contours. A sort of energy field? Certainly not a force field, anyhow.

The language she had addressed him in was pure Pangal, but that meant nothing. Urians spoke it as well as Terrestrials. Corson had even tried to teach the rudiments of Pangal—that language which proudly claimed to embody the common factors of all intelligence—to the Monster, but without success. As usual.

But it was thinking about the Monster which gave him the key to the puzzle.

This girl must have at least one talent in common with the Monster. She must be capable of foreseeing the future, within limits. She had been aware, the moment he entered the ship, that he would ask her, "How do you know I'm called Corson?" The fact that her terror had decided him to attack her made no odds, merely posed the problem of proximate cause. As did most temporal paradoxes. Those who came in contact with Monsters learned something about temporal paradoxes, generally the hard way. So he could assess the girl's precognitive range at about two minutes. She was doing better than the Monster, then.

Not that that shed any light on her presence on Uria.

## CHAPTER 4

The sun had been up for more than an hour, and they were flying over the ocean out of sight of land. Corson was beginning to wonder what was keeping the Urian fleet when the girl suddenly roused.

"Corson, you're a brute!" she said. "Attacking a woman who had made you welcome—that was contemptible! We might be back in the barbarian days of the Solar Powers!"

He studied her closely. Although she was writhing in her bonds,

he could read no alarm in her face, only anger. It followed that she knew he did not mean her any immediate harm. Her delicate features relaxed and the rage gave way to cool determination. She seemed too civilized to spit in his face, but effectively that must be what she wanted to do.

"I had no option," he said. "Like they say, all's fair in love and war."

Nonplused, she stared at him. "What war are you talking about? Corson, you're out of your mind!"

"George," he said. "George Corson."

At least she had not foreseen that, the other half of his full name, or at any rate she had not bothered to use it. With deliberation he set about untying her. He realized that that was why her face had relaxed. She let him do it without saying a word. Then she rose in a single movement, rubbed her wrists, confronted him and—before he had time to move—slapped his face, twice. He did not react.

"Just as I thought," she said scornfully. "You can't even cog. How could an atavism like you crop up? What use are you? Oh, something like this could only happen to *me!*"

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away, her gray eyes fixed on the sea over which the craft was soundlessly floating.

Exactly like the heroine of an old teleplay, Corson thought. A prewar teleplay of the kind in which girls would pick up guys by the road, and a lot of more or less dreadful things would happen to them, and generally they wound up falling in love. Myths. Like coffee, or tobacco—or a ship such as this one.

"That'll teach me to invite people in whom I don't know," she went on, as though playing a part in just such a teleplay. "We'll find out who you are when we get to Dyoto. Until then, you behave yourself. I have influential friends."

"The Princes of Uria?" Corson suggested sarcastically.

"I've never heard of any princes. Maybe in legendary times . . ."

Corson swallowed hard.

"Is this planet at peace?"

"Oh, only since twelve centuries ago to my knowledge! And I hope it'll stay that way to the end of time."

"Do you know any of the natives?"

"Yes, of course. They're avians. Intelligent, harmless, spend most of their time discussing philosophy. Slightly decadent types. Ngäl

R'nda is one of my best friends. Say, who do you think you're dealing with?"

"I don't know," he confessed. That was a strict and literal truth.

Her manner softened. "I'm hungry," she said. "You must be too, I imagine. I'll go and see if I'm still capable of fixing something for us after what you've put me through." He could not detect the slightest apprehension in her tone, only friendliness.

"Your name?" he said. "After all, you do know mine."

"Floria," she answered. "Floria Van Nelle."

*That's the first woman who's told me her name in five years . . .*

"No," he corrected himself silently. "If I'm not dreaming, if this is not a trap, or a hallucination, the three-dimensional full-color delirium of a dying man, then in twelve hundred years, or two thousand, or three thousand."

She was putting a glass in his hand. He almost dropped it.

When he was full, his brain started to work normally again. He took stock of the situation. He still had no idea what could have happened on Uria except that apparently a state of peaceful coexistence obtained between the millions of humans who lived here and the scarcely more numerous native population. He knew he was bound for Dyoto, an important city, in company with the loveliest girl he had ever set eyes on.

And that the Monster was wandering in the Urian forest, ready to breed, to give birth to eighteen thousand little Monsters who would quickly become as dangerous as their parent. That would be in at most six months, perhaps less if the Monster found plenty to eat.

Now he could work out what had most likely happened. When the Monster hurled itself clear of the ship just before the explosion, it had not made a jump of a few seconds through time, but a journey across millennia. And had dragged George Corson along. The Princes of Uria no longer existed; nor did the Solar Powers. The war had been lost or won, but in any case forgotten. He could consider himself discharged from the service and abandon his soldier's uniform. Or else he could regard himself as a kind of involuntary deserter, marooned in the future. He was no longer any more than one man lost among the billions of citizens of a galactic federation covering the whole of the Lens and extending towards the Andromeda Nebula. It united planets he would doubtless never go to, linked by a network of transmatters allowing virtually instantaneous transit from world to world.

Now, he had no identity, no past to live down, no mission to accomplish. From Dyoto, he could head for any of the stars he had seen shining in the night sky and there pursue the only profession he knew, war. Or choose another. He could run away, forget Earth, forget Uria, forget the Monster, forget this girl Floria Van Nelle, lose himself for ever in the mazes of space.

And let the new inhabitants of Uria figure out on their own how to cope with the Monster and—soon—its eighteen thousand offspring.

But he couldn't fool himself. He was aware it would be a long time before he stopped asking himself one all-important question: why had Floria come to pick him up just in time?

Why did she give the impression that she was acting, rather poorly, a role she had learned by heart? Why had she switched from anger, which wasn't faked, to cordiality as soon as she had her wits about her again?

## CHAPTER 5

From a distance Dyoto resembled an enormous pyramid whose base rested on air more than a kilometer above the ground, a jagged cloud along whose sides dark planes flecked with sparkling dots of light

were ranged like geological strata on the flank of an eroded mountain. It took Corson's breath away.

Then the pyramid seemed to disintegrate. The cloud became a labyrinth. The buildings, or machines, which composed the city were widely spaced one from another. A twin river jettted vertically from the earth and ran through the city like a pillar trapped inside an invisible tube. Vehicles flitted along the city's three-dimensional arteries. Just as the ship carrying Corson reached its outskirts, two major buildings, both cubical in shape, rose skyward and flew off toward the ocean.

Dyoto, Corson told himself, was a fine example of city planning based on antigravity and bearing the stamp of an anarchically conceived society. In his experience the use of antigrav was confined to warships. As for anarchy, that was no more to him than a historical label; it had no place in time of war. Every man, every object, had a role assigned by the system. But in twelve centuries, or however many millennia, there had been time for things to change. At first sight it was clear that antigrav must now be as common as fusion power. Could it itself have become a source of energy? He had heard vaguely about projects of that kind. Antigrav generators aboard warships consumed a hell of a lot of power, but that meant nothing. The forces exerted by one mass on another must also represent a vast energy potential.

Such a city, by contrast with those he was used to, was not a more or less fixed collection of structures. It was a fluid group of them; one could cast or hoist anchor at will. Only the primary function of the city endured, that of bringing people together so they could exchange goods and ideas.

Slowly Floria's ship climbed along one of the faces of the pyramid. The buildings were so arranged, Corson noted, that even the lowest stories of the city enjoyed a great deal of sunlight. That argued the existence of some central authority, regulating traffic and allotting places to new arrivals.

"Here we are," Floria said abruptly. "What are you going to do?"

"I thought you were going to turn me over to the police."

Seeming interested, she said, "That's what would have happened in your time? Well, the lawmen will find you by themselves if that's what they want. I'm not sure they still know how to carry out an arrest, though. The last one must have happened a decade ago."

"I—I assaulted you."

She burst out laughing. "Let's say I needled you, shall we? And it's been a terrific experience, keeping company with a man who can't tell from one moment to the next what you're going to say or do."

She walked straight up to him and kissed him on the mouth, then drew back before he had time to clutch at her. He stood there gaping. Then he told himself that what she'd said had the ring of truth. Meeting him had excited her. Well, she might not be used to men like him, but he knew women like her. He had found favor in her eyes because he had used violence against her. So the fundamental characteristics of humanity couldn't have changed in these twelve centuries even if certain superficial talents had evolved.

He could capitalize on a situation like this.

But something in him rebelled. He wanted to get the hell out. A kind of instinct was urging him to put the maximum possible distance between this planet and himself. The impulse was solidly founded on what he knew was going to happen here. Possibly in twelve centuries—or more—the human race had made enough progress to get rid of eighteen thousand Monsters easily. He doubted it. And he was well aware that if he stayed in Floria's vicinity much longer he was going to become attached to her in a way that would seriously hamper his freedom of action.

"Thanks for everything," he said. "If I can do anything in return one day . . . ?"

"You're very sure of yourself," she said. "And where are you thinking of going?"

"Some other planet, I hope. I . . . Well, I get around a lot, and I've spent plenty of time on this world."

Her eyes widened a little. "I won't ask why you're lying, Corson. But I am wondering why you lie so badly."

"I enjoy it."

"Not very much, apparently."

"I do my best."

He was aching to put a multitude of questions to her, but he bit them back. He would have to explore this new universe on his own. For the time being he wanted to keep his secret, so he would have to make do with the meager data he had acquired during this morning's conversation.

"I'd hoped for something else," she said. "Still, it's up to you."

"I can do you a favor anyhow. I'm going to get off this planet."



You do the same. In a few months life here is apt to be intolerable.”

“Go with you?” she countered ironically. “You’re not even capable of seeing one minute into the future, and here you are playing the prophet! Well, I’ll give you some advice in return. Get some new clothes. If you don’t you’ll look very silly.”

Embarrassed, he emptied the pockets of his combat uniform and accepted a sort of tunic which she offered him.

*When on Mars, breathe like a Martian . . .*

The ship was pulling alongside an aerial jetty now. Corson felt really silly in his new outfit. The craft came to a dead stop.

“Have you an incinerator?”

“A what?”

He bit his lip. “Ah . . . Something which gets rid of refuse.”

“An eraser? Well, of course.”

She showed him how the device worked. He rolled his uniform into a ball and tossed it in. The loose-fitting clothes he had put on would adequately hide his gun, under his left armpit. He was almost certain she had spotted the weapon, but that she had no idea of its purpose. The uniform vanished before his eyes.

He went straight to the door, which opened for him. On the point of leaving, he wanted to say something, but words would not come. He made a vague gesture with one hand. For the moment, his mind was dominated by a single obsession.

He needed somewhere quiet to think out how he could get the hell away from Uria—*fast*

## CHAPTER 6

The landing stage was soft under his boots—correction: under his sandals, now. A pang of alarm struck him as he looked around. He could have stayed longer with Floria, picked up a lot more information ... As far as he could tell, his haste to get away stemmed from an ancient soldier's reflex: never stay longer than you have to in a temporary hideout. Keep moving, always keep on the move!

So his present behavior was still conditioned by a war over a millennium old, which he had resigned from the night before. But he was aware of something else, too. Floria was young, lovely, and very likely available. He himself came from an epoch of total war, where practically every ounce of human energy was devoted to combat or to the industrial effort which made fighting possible. He was suddenly exposed here to the possibilities of a world where individual happiness appeared to be the only law. The contrast was too much for him. He had left the ship because in Floria's company he suspected he would not be able to think straight.

He reached the end of the landing stage and studied with mistrust narrow gangways fitted with handrails, steeply slanting ramps. He was worried that he might draw attention to himself by his nervousness, but he soon realized that nobody was likely to notice. In his universe, a stranger was instantly assumed to be a spy even though it

was absurd to imagine that a Urian would risk entering a city held by humans. A spy scare had an additional purpose apart from maintaining security. It kept people's minds busy. He was cynical enough to recognize the fact.

These inhabitants of Dyoto displayed a lot of courage. They leaped from one ramp to another even if they were twenty or thirty meters away. Corson thought for a moment that they must have miniaturized antigrav units hidden in their clothes, but soon realized he was wrong. At his own first attempt he jumped from a height of three meters, landed with his knees bent, and nearly fell over. He had expected a much more violent impact. Emboldened, he tried a dive of twelve meters or so, and saw coming straight toward him a tiny aircar. The machine had to swerve to avoid him and its pilot turned a face pale with rage or fright. He told himself he must have broken a traffic regulation. He moved on quickly, afraid of finding some sort of patrolman at his heels.

Most of the time the people around him seemed not to be heading anywhere special. They spun and wheeled like insects, darted down three stories, let themselves be swept up by invisible air currents which set them down six levels higher, chatted for a moment with an acquaintance, and continued on their senseless way. From time to time somebody entered one of the buildings that formed the skeleton of the city.

Loneliness overcame Corson some three hours later. He was hungry and he felt tired. His initial excitement had subsided. He had assumed he would locate, without difficulty, a public restaurant or a dormitory, or the two combined, such as existed on all planets occupied by the Solar Powers for the benefit of soldiers and travelers, but he had failed to spot one. He dared not question any of the passers-by. Eventually he decided to enter one of the larger buildings. Beyond its door there was a vast hall. Things were laid out on immense counters. Thousands of people were milling around and helping themselves.

Was it theft to take something from here? Theft was severely punished by the Solar Powers and Corson had been strongly conditioned against it. A society at war could not tolerate such antisocial tendencies. When he found an array of foodstuffs, he stopped worrying. He selected items that resembled what Floria had prepared for him, stuffed them in his pockets, rather expecting to hear an alarm go off, and beat a retreat toward the entrance by a devious route, taking

care not to follow for a second time the aisles he had used on his way in.

At the moment when he was about to cross the threshold, a voice made him jump. It was deep, pleasantly inflected, rather friendly.

“Haven’t you forgotten something, sir?”

Corson looked about him. Nothing!

“Sir?” the bodiless voice persisted. “Mister—?”

“My name’s Corson,” he muttered. “George Corson.” There was no point in concealing his name on a world where it would mean nothing to anybody.

“Perhaps I have overlooked some formality,” he admitted. “You see, I’m a stranger here. Who are you?”

The most amazing thing was that the people passing by seemed not to hear the voice.

“The accountant for this establishment. Perhaps you wish to speak to the manager?”

By now he had worked out where the voice was coming from: a point in midair, about shoulder height and a meter away.

“I’ve broken a regulation?” Corson said. “I suppose you’ll have me arrested, then.”

“Sir, no credit account has been opened in the name of Corson. If I’m not mistaken, this is the first time you have visited our premises. That is why I took the liberty of addressing you. I trust you will not hold that against me.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any credit, no. Naturally, I can return what I’ve taken—”

“But why, Mr. Corson? You can pay in cash if you like. We accept currency from any recognized world.”

Corson started. “Would you say that again?”

“We accept money from any recognized world. Any type of currency certificate will settle the matter.”

Dumbfounded, Corson said, “Money? I don’t have any *money!*”

The word burned his mouth. Money for him was an archaic concept, and rather a disgusting one. He knew, as everyone did, that it had been used—long before the war—as a medium of exchange on Earth, but he had never seen the stuff. The army had always provided everything he needed. He had practically never felt the urge to acquire anything other than what he was allotted. He had been led like all his contemporaries to regard money as an obsolete custom, barbaric in fact, inconceivable in an advanced society. It had

never for a moment crossed his mind that he would need money when he left Floria's ship.

"I—uh . . ." He cleared his throat. "I could maybe work in exchange for what I've taken?"

"Nobody works for money, Mr. Corson. Not on this planet, at least."

"But what about you?" Corson said incredulously.

"I am a machine, Mr. Corson. Let me suggest a way out of this. While waiting for your credit to be established, could you perhaps name a person who would serve as your guarantor?"

"I only know one person here," Corson said. "Floria Van Nelle."

"That will suit admirably, Mr. Corson. Forgive me for troubling you. We hope to see you again."

The voice fell silent. Corson shrugged, annoyed at feeling so upset. What would Floria think when she found that he had embezzled credit from her? Well, that had been a stroke of bad luck. But that voice was what had really shaken him. Was the "accountant" omnipresent here, able to speak simultaneously with a thousand customers, advise them, inform them, tell them off? Were invisible eyes spying on him all the time, hidden as it were by crannies in the air?

He shrugged again. At any rate it seemed that he was free to go.

## CHAPTER 7

He located a fairly quiet spot and opened one of the cans. Once again his soldier's reflexes were at work. While eating he attempted to decide on a course of action. But try as he would he could not picture a future for himself.

The problem of money, to start with. Without money, it would be hard for him to leave Uria. Interstellar trips must certainly be expensive. To the time trap he was in had now been added a space trap. Unless, within six months, he found a way to earn some money.

Not by working, since nobody worked for money here. The more he pondered, the tougher the problem seemed. There was nothing he knew how to do which was likely to interest the people of Uria. Worse, in their eyes he was a kind of cripple. The men and women strolling along the avenues of Dyoto could foresee events about to happen in their lives. He did not share that talent, and had every reason to think he never would. The appearance of this power raised several questions which he reviewed for a moment. Was it due to a mutation, suddenly cropping out and spreading rapidly among the human species? Or was it a latent power which could be developed with special training?

The power implied, anyhow, that in his dealings with the human population here he could never take anyone by surprise. With one exception.

He knew the distant future of the planet.

In six months, a swarm of Monsters would cheerfully and ferociously launch an attack on Dyoto, hunting their victims through a maze of space and time. Perhaps their new talent would enable the humans to enjoy a short reprieve. But nothing more.

It was a good bargaining point. He could warn the central authorities of this planet, advise a total evacuation, or try to perfect the techniques for dealing with Monsters which the Solar Powers had been studying. That was a two-edged sword, though. The Urians might simply decide to hang him.

He threw the empty food packs overside and watched them fall. Nothing slowed their descent. The antigrav field must affect only human beings. Possibly the necessary orders were drawn directly and subconsciously from the nervous system. He was unable to imagine how that might be done.

He rose and started to wander about again. Mission: find the Spaceport, the starship launch station, or the transmatter terminal, and get away, using force if need be. If he were arrested, he could always talk about what he knew.

The layout of the city was becoming clear to him, although it struck him as extraordinarily haphazard. The military bases of his own day had always been built to the same design. Certain routes were reserved for vehicles, others for pedestrians. Not here. The ability to foresee events—to *cog*, as Floria had called it—must have influenced the highway code. He recalled the accident he had barely escaped a few hours earlier. That driver had not foreseen Corson getting in his way. Then, in order to cog something, the Urians must have to make an act of will, perhaps focus a kind of inward sight. Or could it be that the power was less well developed in some people?

He tried to concentrate and imagine something that was about to happen. A passer-by: he might carry straight on, turn, go up or down. Corson decided he was going to turn. The man kept on his way. He tried the test again, failed again.

Again. Again.

Perhaps he was failing *too* often? Perhaps some block in his nervous system was causing him always to make a wrong choice? Perhaps!

Vague recollections of long-ago experiences rose to his mind, premonitions, cruelly clear, which had come true. Like lightning flashes which, at a key moment during battle, had lit up the field of his awareness. Or in the silence of utter exhaustion. Nothing cal-

culated or reasoned out. Just incidents such as one forgot again at once, dismissed as coincidental.

He had always had the reputation of being a lucky bastard. The fact that he was still alive seemed to confirm what his comrades—dead, all dead—laughingly used to say. Had luck become a factor you could measure, here on Uria?

A light floater halted level with him and by reflex he tensed. Muscles taut, knees flexed, he reached toward his armpit. But he did not draw his gun. The machine contained only one passenger, a girl. Empty-handed. Dark. Young and pretty. She was smiling. She must have stopped to talk to him. He had no idea who she might be.

He straightened and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The girl beckoned to him.

“George Corson, isn’t it? Then come along.”

The rim of the floater deformed like cloth, or plastic under a heat beam, to let him board.

“Who are you? How did you know where to find me?”

“My name is Antonella,” she said. “And Floria Van Nelle told me about you. I wanted to meet you.”

He hesitated.

“I know you’re going to get in, George. So let’s not waste time.”

He almost turned on his heel. Could one cheat the precog power? But she was right: he did want to get aboard. He had had enough of being alone, and needed to talk to someone. He would have time later to continue his experiments. He climbed into the machine.

“Welcome to Uria, Mr. Corson,” Antonella said with a touch of formality. “I am instructed to greet and guide you.”

“An official assignment?”

“If you like. But I take great personal pleasure in it.”

The floater had gathered speed and was flying off without the girl seeming to pay attention. She smiled; her teeth were magnificent.

“Where are we going?”

“How about a trip along the seashore?”

“You’re not taking me anywhere in particular, then?”

“I won’t take you anywhere you don’t want to go.”

“Fair enough,” Corson said, sitting down on a cushioned bench. And, as they were leaving Dyoto behind:

“You’re not scared. Floria must have told you everything about



“She told us you were a bit rough with her. She doesn’t yet know whether to hold it against you or not. I think what annoyed her most was your walking off and just dumping her. It’s very insulting.”

She smiled again and he relaxed. Without being able to say why, he felt he could trust this girl. If it was really her duty to make strangers welcome, she had plainly been selected with great care.

He turned his head and saw for the second time the enormous pyramidal mushroom of Dyoto, seeming to balance on the two glittering columns of the twin vertical river. The sea, in great slow heaves that indicated a vast ocean beyond, came to gnaw at an endless beach. The sky was almost empty. A faint iridescence, like the ill-defined cloud above a waterfall, surrounded the summit of the city.

“What do you want to know about me?” he asked suddenly.

“About your past, nothing, Mr. Corson,” she answered. “It’s your future which concerns us.”

“Why?”

“You honestly don’t know?”

He shut his eyes for a moment. “No. I don’t know anything about my future.”

“I see.” A pause. “Would you like some smoke?”

She was offering him an oval case. Curious, he took from it a cigarette-like tube, set it to his lips, and sucked, expecting it to light of its own accord. But nothing happened. Antonella held an igniter toward him, and at the moment when it uttered its flame a brief and very bright light dazzled him.

“What are you planning to do?” the girl asked in a soft voice.

He passed his hand across his eyes and filled his lungs with smoke. Amazing! This was genuine tobacco—if he hadn’t forgotten what that tasted like after smoking the sad dried seaweed which had taken its place in a world at war.

“Get off this planet,” he said impulsively, and at once bit his lip, too late. A luminous spot was floating before his eyes as though the brilliant reflection the metal shell of the igniter had flashed onto his retinas had stamped them with a tiny and indecipherable design. He suddenly caught on and crushed the cigarette out against the side of the vessel. He pressed his fingers on his eyelids so hard that he saw rockets, whole salvos of them, and nova stars. His right hand slid toward his gun. That flash from the igniter had not just been a reflection. Its hypnotic effect, probably combined with a drug in

the cigarette, had been intended to make him talk. So much for his combat reflexes! They must have been dulled by the placidity of Dyoto. Still, his training had made him able to resist attacks on this level.

“You’re very tough, Mr. Corson,” Antonella said in a calm tone. “But I doubt whether you’re tough enough to get off this world.”

“Why didn’t you cog that your little trick would fail?” He heard his voice harsh with anger.

“Who said it had failed?” She was smiling as pleasantly as when she invited him on board.

“All I said was that I plan to quit this planet. Is that all you wanted to know?”

“Maybe. Now we’re sure it really is your intention.”

“And are you going to try and stop me?”

“I don’t see how we can. You’re armed and dangerous. We merely wish to advise against it.”

“In my own interests, of course.”

“Of course.”

The floater was losing height and speed. Above a small stream it halted, sank down, landed gently on sand. Its rim subsided like melting wax. Antonella jumped to the ground and stretched herself, sketching a dance step.

“Romantic here, isn’t it?” she said, picking up a polyhedral shell that might have belonged to a sea urchin. An alien sea urchin, Corson reminded himself. After weighing it in her hand for a moment, she tossed it into the waves which were washing around her bare feet.

“So you don’t like this world?”

Corson shrugged. “It’s a little decadent for my taste. Too mysterious beneath its placid surface.”

“I imagine you prefer war, violence, plenty of action. Maybe you’ll find some of that if you stay, though.”

“Love and war?” he said sarcastically, recalling what he had said to Floria.

“Love? Why not?”

She had lowered her lashes a trifle and appeared to be waiting for something, her lips apart. Corson clenched his fists. He could not remember ever having seen such a sexy woman, not even at an army rest center. He forgot his past completely and took her in his arms.

## CHAPTER 8

“I’d never have thought you could be so gentle, George,” she said in a faint voice.

“Is this the way you always welcome strangers to your world?” His tone reflected dull annoyance.

“No,” she said. He saw tears gathering in her eyes. “No. I suppose our customs must be a lot freer than yours, but. . .

“The lightning struck, is that it?”

“You’ve got to understand, George. Got to! I couldn’t stop myself. It’s been such a long time!”

He started to laugh. “Since our last meeting, you mean?”

With an effort she composed her face into something more like its former calm expression.

“In a way, yes, Corson,” she said. “You’ll understand by and by.”

“When I’m a big boy?”

He rose and held out his hand to her. “Now I have an extra reason for getting off Uria,” he added.

She shook her head. “You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“At any transmat terminal, on any world, they’ll arrest you and make you undergo treatment. Oh, they won’t kill you, but you’ll never be the same man again. You won’t have any memories left, and precious few desires. It would be like dying.”

"Worse," he said slowly. "And is that what they do to all interstellar travelers?"

"Only to war criminals!"

He was aghast. The universe about him seemed full of baffling mist. To a certain extent he could understand the behavior of this girl, no matter how obscure were her motives. After all, it was no more extraordinary than these airborne cities balanced on vertical rivers and populated by madmen flitting about in flying yachts. But what Antonella had just said was at the same time incomprehensible and pregnant with menace.

*War criminal? Because I took part in a war that's been over for more than a thousand years?*

"I don't get it," he said at last.

"Try, try! Anyway it's plain enough. The Security Office has no jurisdiction on a planetary surface. They only step in when a criminal goes from one world to another. If you take a transmatter, even to one of the local moons, they'll grab you. You won't have one chance in a million of escaping."

"But why should they want *my* hide?"

Antonella's face grew hard.

"I've told you once, and I'd rather not say it again. Do you think I enjoy calling the man I love a war criminal?"

He caught her wrists and pressed them as hard as he could.

"Antonella, I beg you! Tell me what war—*what war?*"

She struggled to break loose.

"Beast! Let me go! How do you expect me to tell you that? You must know better than I do! Thousands of wars happened in the past—it doesn't matter which one you came from!"

He released her. A bright fog danced before his eyes. He rubbed his forehead.

"Antonella, you've got to help me. Did you ever hear about the war between the Solar Powers and the Princes of Uria?"

She frowned. "It must have been a very long time ago. The last war which involved Uria happened more than a millennium ago."

"Between the humans and the natives?"

She shook her head. "Certainly not. Humans and Urians have shared this planet for over six thousand years."

"Then," he said with relief, "I'm the last survivor of a war which took place more than six thousand years ago. I suppose there's an amnesty."

She raised her head and stared at him, her big brown eyes full of astonishment.

“No amnesty is possible,” she said in a level tone. “It would be too easy to abuse it. All you’d have to do, at the end of a war you’d lost, would be to jump far enough into the future to escape retribution. Maybe to start fighting all over again. I’m afraid you underestimate the Office.”

The truth was being borne in on him now. For centuries, perhaps millennia, men had been able to travel in time. And defeated generals, dethroned tyrants, had systematically sought refuge in the past or future rather than endure their enemies’ revenge. So peaceful epochs were compelled to protect themselves against these invaders. Otherwise wars might last for all eternity, interlocking in a cosmic network of alliances slashed across here and there by the indeterminate outcome of battles which were ceaselessly being fought over and over again. This Office Antonella had spoken of supervised the stability of time. It ignored conflicts that broke out on the surface of a single planet, but by its control of communications it prevented any war from spreading to a galactic or historic scale. It was a dizzying task. One had to picture the inexhaustible resources of an endless future before it was even conceivable.

And George Corson, emerging suddenly from the past, a warrior lost among the centuries, had been automatically labeled a war criminal. Images of the fight between the Solar Powers and the Princes of Uria passed fleetingly before his eyes. On both sides the war had been conducted without mercy and without quarter. Back then he would not have wasted a moment on the ridiculous idea that a human might feel sympathy for a Urian. But six millennia or more had passed away. He was ashamed for himself, for his old comrades, for both species, at the kind of evil joy he had experienced when he realized the Monster had been delivered safely.

“But I’m not a war criminal,” he said eventually. “Not exactly. I did take part in a long-ago war, but nobody asked my opinion about it. I was born on a world at war and when I came of age I was put through training and I was told to go into combat. I didn’t try and dodge my responsibilities by jumping through time. I was flung into the future by—well, by an accident, by an experiment that went wrong. I’ll cheerfully undergo any kind of interrogation provided it doesn’t harm my personality. I think I could convince any impartial judge.”

Twin tears shone in Antonella's eyes.

"I so much want to believe you! You can't imagine how I suffered when they told me what you were! I've loved you since the first time we met. And I thought I'd never have the guts to carry out this assignment."

He took her by the shoulders and kissed her.

So now he was certain of one thing. He would see her again in the future. He would find her at a time when she had not yet met him. In some fashion he could not fully understand, their destinies were intertwined. Today was the first time he had seen her, yet she had known him already. And the exact opposite was going to happen one day. It was a trifle complicated, but it did make a crazy kind of sense.

"Is there such a thing as a government on this planet?" he asked. "I have some news to pass on."

## CHAPTER 9

She hesitated a moment before answering. He told himself she must have been so upset that she was unable to cog his question.

"A central authority? No, there's been nothing like that on Uria for nearly a thousand years. Nor on any other advanced world. Governments belong to the primitive period of mankind. We have ma-

chines that take care of things like the distribution of goods. And we have a police force. But that hardly ever does anything.”

“What about the Security Office?”

“It supervises nothing but communications. Oh—and, I believe, the opening up of new planets.”

“So who looks after Uria’s relations with the Office?”

“There’s a Council. Three humans and a Urian.”

“Is that who you work for?”

She seemed shocked. “I don’t work for anybody! They asked me to see you, that’s all, and warn you about what will happen if you try to leave the planet.”

“Why did you agree?” Corson said sharply.

“Because if you do try and leave here, you’ll lose your personality, your future will be changed, and you’ll never meet me again.” Her lips trembled.

“That’s a private reason,” Corson said. “But why is the Council interested in me?”

“They didn’t say. I think they believe Uria will have need of you. They’re afraid some danger threatens the planet and they’re convinced that only you can avert it. Why, I just don’t know.”

“I have some idea,” Corson said. “Can you take me to them?”

Antonella seemed dismayed by the question.

“That might be rather difficult,” she said. “They live three hundred years ahead, and I myself have no means of traveling in time.”

## CHAPTER 10

Corson broke the subsequent silence with an effort.

“You’re trying to tell me you come from three centuries in the future?”

She agreed.

“And what assignment does this Council of yours plan to give me?”

She shook her head, her hair swooping around her shoulders.

“None that I know of. They simply want you to stay on this world.”

“I can prevent the disaster just by sticking around?”

“Something like that.”

“Very comforting. And at this moment, while we’re talking, nobody is exercising any direct responsibility on this planet?”

“No. The present Council supervises a period of a little over seven centuries. It’s not very much. I’ve heard of Councils on other worlds which have to look after a millennium or more.”

“Well, at least that has the advantage of guaranteeing a stable power structure,” Corson sighed. “And how do you intend to get back to your own age?”

“I don’t know. The idea is that you’re supposed to find a way.”

Corson whistled. “They’re landing me with more and more problems, aren’t they? Well, we have this much in common, anyhow: we’re both lost in time!”



She took his hand.

"I'm not lost," she said. "Let's go back. The light's failing."

They returned to the floater, deep in thought and with bowed heads.

"One thing at least is definite," Corson said. "If you're telling the truth, I'm going to find some means I don't yet know about to reach that period of the future that you hail from, and up there I'm going to meet you even before you come to give me this warning. You'll see me for the first time, I'll see you for the second. I shall make advances that you'll find incomprehensible. And at the end of that trip perhaps I'll make sense of this unfathomable muddle."

He dropped on the cushions, and sleep overcame him while they flew toward the airborne city, its pyramidal splendor licked by the violet tongues of the sunset.

## CHAPTER 11

He was awakened by cries, grinding noises, the clumping of boots on a rough surface, orders shouted in a snarling voice, the spiteful clatter of weapons. It was absolutely dark. The floater was swaying from side to side. He turned toward Antonella, whose face he could not even discern in the inky blackness.

"Has there been an accident?"

"No, we're being attacked. I didn't cog anything but this black cloud, and I couldn't work out what it was."

"And what's going to happen next?"

"I can't see anything. Just darkness, utter darkness." There was despair in her tone.

He reached out and squeezed her shoulder for reassurance. But in this total obscurity, no contact, however intimate, could dispel the sense of separation.

He whispered, "I've got a gun, you know!"

And in a single continuous movement he drew the weapon from its holster and swept the space around, trigger hard down. Instead of the fierce silver ray he was used to, a weak beam of violet shone from the muzzle. Two hands' breadths away, it faded into nothing. This must be a force field, tuned to absorb not only light but even the most penetrating types of radiant energy. Within his very body Corson felt a nasty prickling sensation, as though his cells were threatening to lose their grip on each other.

A voice so deep and powerful it was like a blow in the belly boomed from an incredibly distant cave.

"Corson, don't shoot—we're friends!"

"Who are you?" he cried, but the words were as shrill as though he were hearing through a tiny, tiny spy mike.

"Colonel Veran," the voice answered. "You don't know me, but that doesn't matter. Hide your eyes—we're going to lift the screen."

Corson put away his gun and in the darkness felt for Antonella's hand.

"Do as he says. Does the name mean anything to you?"

She whispered, "I don't know anybody called 'Colonel'!"

"That's a rank, a military rank. His name is Veran. I don't know him any more than you do, but—"

Like a lightning flash. Between his fingers Corson saw at first only a blank whiteness, which shortly dissolved into a horde of needles as red as blood that drove through his closed lids. When he was able to open his eyes properly he saw that the floater was hovering in a forest glade. It was broad day. They were surrounded by men in gray uniforms, carrying unknown weapons. Beyond the ring of soldiers he could make out two machines, or two mounds of something, whose details were blurred to his suffering eyes. There were two more like them on each side, and when he turned his head he found two more still at his back. More soldiers were standing guard on them.

Tanks?

Then one of the things moved, and Corson almost cried out.

Those "mounds" were Monsters!

Monsters exactly like the one which the *Archimedes* had been sent to turn loose on Uria. Creatures so terrifying that human beings of Corson's day, in that age when war had impoverished language, had been able to invent no other name for them but *Monster*.

Corson glanced at Antonella. Tight-lipped, she was keeping up a pretty good front.

Now a man in a green uniform left the group of gray-clad soldiers and approached the floater. Three meters away he drew himself up stiffly and said in a sharp voice, "Colonel Veran! Miraculously escaped with the rump of the 623rd Cavalry Regiment from the Aergistal disaster. Thanks to you, Corson. Your idea of setting up a beacon saved our lives. What's more I see you've managed to get hold of a hostage. Fine. We shall interrogate her later."

"I was never—" Corson began. Then he fell silent. If this alarming person felt he owed Corson a debt, let him go on thinking so.

He jumped down from the floater. It was only then that he noticed the soldiers' uniforms were torn and stained, and there were deep dents in the blackened masks which covered their faces. Oddly, none of the men in sight appeared to be wounded, even slightly. The reason sprang to Corson's mind from his past experience.

*Casualties get finished off . . .*

That name "Aergistal" meant nothing to him. These uniforms were none he recognized. The rank which translated into Pangal as "colonel" must have been used for fifteen thousand years at least. This Colonel Veran might have emerged from any battle fought between Corson's time and the present, although the fact that his men used trained Monsters did indicate that he must come from a period fairly long after Corson's own. How long would it have taken to communicate with the Monsters, train them, following the first tentative experiments by the Solar Powers—ten years, a hundred, a thousand?

"What was your rank?" demanded Colonel Veran.

Instinctively Corson straightened to attention. But he was grotesquely aware of the unmilitary nature of his dress. And of the situation. He and Veran were no more than ghosts at this point in time. As for Antonella, she had not yet been bom.

"Lieutenant," he said in a dull voice.

"I promote you captain," Veran said solemnly, "by virtue of the

authority bestowed on me by His Serene Highness the Ptar of Murphy!"

His voice became relatively cordial as he added, "Of course you'll be made a field marshal when we've won the war. For the moment I can't grant you a rank higher than captain because you've served in a foreign army. Speaking of which, you must be very pleased to have found a proper army again, a bunch of tough and reliable men. The short time you've spent by yourself on this world can't have been much fun for you."

Leaning close to Corson, he spoke in a lower tone.

"Do you think I could pick up any recruits on this planet? I could do with about a million men. And I'll also need two hundred thousand pegasones. We can still save Aergistal!"

"I don't doubt it," Corson said. "But what's a pegasone?"

"Our mounts, Captain Corson!" With an expansive gesture Veran indicated the eight Monsters.

"Oh, I have some great projects in mind, Captain," he went on. "Great projects! I'm sure you'll want to join me. In fact, after I've retaken Aergistal, what I plan to do is land on Naphur, take possession of the arsenals there, and dethrone that lousy crot the Ptar of Murphy!"

"To be quite candid," Corson said, "I can't see you finding many recruits on this planet. As for pegasones, though . . . Well, there's one roaming around in the forest, but it's completely wild."

"Wonderful!" Veran said. He took off his helmet. His scalp had been shaved; now the hair was starting to grow again, it looked like a pincushion. His gray eyes, very deep-set, made Corson think of hard stones. His face was brown with a lifelong tan, crossed here and there by the marks of old scars. His hands were hidden by gauntlets of shiny flexible metal.

"Let me have your gun, if you please, Captain Corson," he said.

Corson hesitated a moment. Then he offered the weapon butt-first to Veran, who took it with a brusque gesture. He looked it over, weighed it in his hand, and smiled.

"No more than a toy!"

He seemed to ponder awhile. Then he tossed it back to Corson who, taken by surprise, almost dropped it.

"In view of your rank and the signal service you performed for us, I think I can let you keep it. It goes without saying that it will be use-

less except against our enemies. But as I'm afraid it may not be enough to protect you, I'll assign you two of my men."

He beckoned, and two soldiers wearing light metal collars tramped forward and stood to attention.

"From now on you're under the orders of Captain Corson here. Make certain he doesn't fall into an ambush if he leaves the camp perimeter. And as to this hostage of his—"

"She will remain my responsibility, Colonel," Corson cut in.

Veran's hard eyes rested on him for a second.

"For the time being that is doubtless preferable. Just make sure she's not allowed to wander around the camp. I don't like breaches of discipline. Good, you may go."

The two soldiers flanking Corson spun on their heels. Helpless, he copied them, giving Antonella a shove for the sake of appearances. They started to march away.

"Captain!"

The harsh voice of Veran stopped them short. It was tinged with sarcasm.

"I must say I wouldn't have expected to find a soldier of your caliber so . . . sentimental! I'll see you tomorrow."

They moved on. The soldiers walked like robots, their rhythmical paces showing how their discipline was surviving their fatigue. Unconsciously Corson fell into step. He had no illusions about his status, despite his weapon and his escort—or rather because of them. He was a prisoner.

The soldiers led them toward a group of gray tents which men were setting up with brisk well-drilled movements. Beforehand, they had carefully sterilized the surface of the clearing. The dry ground was covered with a thin carpet of ash. Where the Ptar of Murphy's troops had passed, grass must have a lot of trouble growing again.

One of the soldiers lifted the flap of a tent which had already been guyed and indicated that they were to enter. Inside, the furniture was basic. Inflatable chairs surrounded a metal plate floating on air which served as a table. Two narrow bunks completed the list. But the sparseness of this setting made Corson feel more at ease than the luxury of ornate Dyoto.

He let his mind wander for a moment. How would the inhabitants of Uria react to this invasion? Although Veran's troops were few in number, it was certain they would meet with no serious resistance. Naturally, by one means or another the news would reach the

Council in the future, but they had no army. Perhaps they had already been wiped out. Question: how could a government survive in the future when the past it sprang from had been effectively annihilated? The Urians might never have considered that problem, but it looked as though they were going to find out the answer even before they realized it was a problem. In some ways this immediate threat overshadowed the menace of the Monsters which Veran's civilization appeared to have tamed under the name of—"pegasones."

And here was something else far too extraordinary to be a coincidence. Veran had popped out of nowhere, claimed to know him, and said he needed two hundred thousand pegasones. In less than six months, if he managed to catch the offspring of the Monster which Corson himself had helped to dump on Uria, he would have eighteen thousand of them. In less than a year he could have even more than he was asking for. Under favorable conditions Monsters reproduced rapidly, and took only months to reach full growth.

No, there wasn't a chance in a billion that Veran had arrived here by accident. But why should he need a wild pegasone?

Ah! Maybe because . . .

Maybe tame pegasones couldn't reproduce? Back on Earth, long ago, oxen had been used for pulling carts and plows. Thanks to a minor operation, they were far more docile than a normal bull, which was a ferocious beast. It would account for everything very neatly if Veran's pegasones had undergone some similar treatment. Certainly it would explain why he needed a wild—undoctored—Monster.

At last Corson turned his attention back to Antonella. She had sat down on one of the inflatable chairs. She was staring at her hands. Flat on the metal plate, they were trembling slightly. Now she glanced up and waited for him to say something.

He sat down opposite her. Her face was drawn, but she was showing no sign of panic. Altogether she was behaving much better than he had expected.

"There's a good chance that someone's eavesdropping on us," he began abruptly. "I'll say this to you anyway. Colonel Veran strikes me as a reasonable type. This planet needs to be put to rights. I'm sure nothing will happen to you so long as you respect his authority, and mine. Moreover your presence may be useful to his plans."

He hoped she understood that he was not betraying her and that he would do all he could to get them out of this with whole skins, but that he could not say anything else for the time being. Veran would

have other matters on his mind apart from spying on them, but he was not the sort of person to take risks. If Corson had found himself in Veran's shoes, he would certainly have bugged this tent.

A soldier lifted the entrance flap and cast a suspicious eye around the interior. A second wordlessly brought in two platters and set them on the table. Corson recognized their contents at once; military rations had scarcely changed. After a couple of false starts he showed Antonella how to heat the cans by breaking a seal and then how to open them without burning her fingers. Cutlery was built into the cans, and he ate with a good appetite. To his great surprise Antonella copied him without hesitation. He was beginning to develop a certain respect for these Urian civilians.

Naturally their precog talent must help them to keep their heads. It warned them of imminent danger, so perhaps they could cause Veran's soldiers more trouble than they were expecting.

Having finished his meal, Corson rose. He made for the exit, but glanced back at Antonella before leaving.

"I'm going to take a turn around the camp and see if Colonel Veran's principles of site defense agree with what I was taught. Maybe my experience will be useful to him. Don't leave this tent on any account. Don't show yourself, even. Don't turn in before I get back. The—ah—necessary conveniences are under the bunks. I won't be gone for more than an hour."

She looked at him without speaking. He tried to read from her expression whether she had mistaken his intentions. He failed. If she was pretending, then she deserved an acting prize.

As though they had been waiting for him, the two soldiers were standing by the exit. He stepped forward and let the flap fall without provoking the least reaction.

"I'm going to tour the campsite," he said in an arrogant tone.

Instantly one of the soldiers clicked his heels and fell in at his side. Discipline was plainly well in force among Veran's men. That reassured him about Antonella's immediate fate. This camp was on a war footing and the commander would not let his control slacken by a single notch. He had acted sensibly in forbidding Antonella to move around the camp and leaving her in Corson's charge. He had other concerns than erecting a prison for a single captive. Besides, the sight of a woman might cause trouble with the rank and file. If he hadn't hoped to make use of her, Veran would have liquidated Antonella

right away. Later, when the camp was properly secure and the men were off duty, it would be a different matter.

Corson drove away that unpleasant thought and looked about him. The blackened soil of the clearing formed a circle several hundred meters across. Around the perimeter soldiers were hammering in stakes and linking them together with a glittering wire. An alarm system? Corson decided not. The men who were unreeling the wire wore heavy insulated clothing. So it must be a defensive barrier, then—and, despite its apparent fragility, no doubt a formidable one.

About a hundred tents occupied most of the space this enclosed. Corson searched with his eyes for a tent larger than the rest, or flying a command pennant, but in vain. Veran's headquarters post was indistinguishable from the tents of his men.

A little farther on, a dull vibration made the soles of his feet tingle. Veran must be digging out an underground refuge. No doubt of it: this man knew his job.

On the far side of the clearing Corson counted twenty-seven pegasones. Judging by the number of tents, Veran had about six hundred men with him. If the rank of colonel was to be taken in the same sense as it had been in Corson's time, at the start of his campaign Veran would have had a force of between ten and a hundred thousand. Aergistal must really have been a disaster. The 623rd Cavalry Regiment of the Ptar of Murphy must have been virtually wiped out. Veran must have displayed inhuman determination to reestablish control over the survivors and make them set up this camp as though nothing had happened. And he must be possessed of phenomenal ambition—to say nothing of limitless arrogance—if he thought of continuing the fight.

The fact that he was letting Corson inspect his defenses unhindered indicated pretty clearly the type of man he was. So did his expressed intention to muster a million men and enlist them in his phantom army. Was he bluffing? Perhaps. Unless he had unsuspected resources. Which brought Corson to a question he was astonished at having neglected for so long.

Whom had Veran been fighting against at Aergistal?



## CHAPTER 12

The pegasones were not hobbled, but they remained so absolutely still that from a short distance they could have been mistaken for the stumps of enormous multicolored trees. Their six great paws, each ending in six fingers, looked like roots. The eyes which encircled their bodies halfway up, a little above Corson's head, shone only with a wan and fleeting light. Now and then one of them uttered a little plaintive cry, followed by a grunt like a pig's. One might have thought that they were chewing the cud. They had nothing in common with the wild beast which Corson had been trying to study before the destruction of the *Archimedes*. On their flanks, a complicated harness had left deep scars, as though a hot iron had been seared into tree bark.

How could they be mounted? At first sight no part of their bodies seemed adapted for a saddle. And how many men could each of them carry? Veran's demands suggested a rough guide: a million men, two hundred thousand pegasones ... So one of these beasts could carry at least four men and their equipment. And what part would they play in combat? Up to now it hadn't occurred to Corson to think of any other function except that of assault vehicles. Their mobility and their primitive ferocity would make them ideal for a ground battle. Their ability to foresee the immediate future and to move a second

away in time would make them targets almost impossible to hit. But these pegasones which Corson was looking at scarcely seemed to be fierce. He would have sworn, too, that they were completely without intelligence, the reverse of the wild specimen wandering the forests of this planet in search of an ideal spot to reproduce.

The use of a living steed in warfare was not an idea unknown to Corson. During the Earth-Uria war, on worlds that were being fought over, he had run across barbarian allies of the Terrestrials who rode reptiles, hippogriffs, or even giant spiders. But he was himself more accustomed to a mechanized army. What surprised him here was the coexistence of an advanced technology and animal steeds. What sort of terrain had they fought over at Aergistal?

He couldn't imagine. If only planets had names which described them! Perhaps this mysterious world was rocky, a place of peaks and precipices bathed in a steely light. But it could just as well be a planet of green and smiling valleys. For a brief moment he had wondered whether the name might simply designate another part of Uria itself, but both Antonella and Floria had insisted that no war had even involved Uria for a thousand-odd years, let alone been fought on its surface.

No, the battle where Veran had lost the majority of his forces must have taken place on some other world. For better or worse he must have embarked the remnant of his command on a cruiser and gone in search of a world where he could rebuild his army. He had picked on Uria, landed his men and their beasts, and sent his cruiser back to space for fear it might be trapped on the ground.

***But— No, wait a moment!***

Veran must be fresh from his battle. His men had still been in full combat rig when they intercepted Corson. They were dirty and exhausted. No matter how close Aergistal might be, no matter how fast Veran's cruiser, it would have taken hours or days to cover an interstellar distance. He tried to recall the map of the Urian system. There were only two other planets in it, and both were gas giants which would not provide a battlefield ... at least not for humans. How about their moons? No: Antonella had spoken of taking a transmitter to one of the local moons; therefore they must be at peace. And this sector of space was thinly populated with stars. Aergistal must be located at least six light-years from Uria. Probably a lot more. The idea of a starship which could cross light-years in a few minutes seemed ridiculous. On the other hand . . .

Corson was the sole survivor of a universe six thousand years in the past. In sixty centuries a lot of new discoveries must have been made. Even what he had seen at Dyoto exceeded his powers of comprehension. A starship capable of almost Ultimate Velocity was scarcely harder to believe in than a society without a government or a city built entirely on antigrav.

While Corson was contemplating the warlike activity of the camp, a faint nostalgia overcame him. Although he had never been particularly bellicose himself, he felt at home again in this environment of taut efficiency. He followed with his eyes the man who was marching sentry go in front of the pegasones, his gun slung at an easy angle. He glanced at his bodyguard. The man did not seem to be concerned about the vast problems disturbing the universe. He must have lost friends in the battle of Aergystal, but one could not have deduced it from his attitude. Two days earlier, Corson had been like him. Strange, what two days could do to a man. Two days—and six thousand years. *No*, Corson corrected himself bitterly. Two *days, six thousand years . . . and two women.*

He turned to face the guard.

"Was it tough at Aergystal?"

The soldier did not stir. He was looking straight in front of him at a horizon which a timeless regulation fixed at a distance of six paces. Corson hardened his tone.

"Answer me, will you? I'm *Captain* Corson, remember!"

Finally the soldier did speak, in a clear voice, but barely parting his teeth.

"Colonel Veran will tell you about it himself. Those are his orders."

Corson did not press him. The soldier wouldn't anyway have been able to answer the next question he wanted to put. Even if he had been willing to. Where was Aergystal? As for the third—well, it made even less sense.

*When* was Aergystal?

For by now Corson was coming to the conclusion that the battle must have occurred far in the past. Veran's ship must have crossed not only space but—like Corson—time as well. He must hail from an era when interstellar wars still took place, where the Security Office did not yet lay down the law.

He wondered how the Office would react when it learned about the presence of Veran on Uria.

He circled the pegasone park. Night fell, though the vanished sun still decorated the treetops with mauve plumes. A cool wind was rising. He shivered. For the first time he was really aware of how ridiculous his flimsy ornate garments were. No wonder the guard had trouble treating him as an officer! He regretted having destroyed his uniform. Even though it was unlike what Veran and his men wore, it would have given him a more military air. He smiled inwardly. He hadn't been demobilized very long! Barely more than forty-eight hours. Perhaps Veran's arrival had been providential. In his company, especially since the man seemed to have need of him, he might again take up the only profession he knew, that of arms. Never mind the risks. Danger was everywhere, in the forest where the Monster was at large, in space where he, Corson, was an outlaw, a war criminal . . . He might as well end his days among his compeers.

He scowled, thinking of Antonella. It was sensible to teach soldiers to keep away from real women, never to grant them more than a few minutes of female company. They complicated everything. As if the situation weren't tangled enough already . . .

But he couldn't simply dump her. He wasn't going to. Even so . . .

His fists clenched in futile frustration. On the dark fringe of the forest the barrier wire shed a purple glow. It was absurd to wish he could escape.

"I'm going back," he said, not addressing anyone in particular. The soldier fell into step at his heels.

## CHAPTER 13

He had scarcely dropped off when he found himself back on Earth. He was running along an underground passage walled with rough concrete, a thousand meters below the surface, his eyes stinging from the glare of a snakelike neon tube. He was fleeing from something. His whole body vibrated to the beat of nuclear explosions which were taking place regularly, one a minute, a kilometer overhead. The bombs had been launched from too far away to be aimed at any special target. Urian ships had released them from the orbit of Pluto, or from even deeper into space, and nine tenths of them had been intercepted before reaching Earth's atmosphere. Some failed to brake properly on entry and burned up in a flash, without time to explode. Four fifths of those that did reach the surface fell in the sea and caused no damage worth mentioning. Only one or two per cent struck a land mass. But the holds of the Urian fleet seemed to be bottomless. For the first time Earth itself was being bombarded, and overhead this hemisphere had been turned into a literal hell.

Naturally nobody was left up there. Those few who had not found room in the shelters in time had died in the first seconds of the attack. As he ran he mechanically repeated a calculation. At least two hundred million must be dead. All in ten seconds.

He didn't know why he was running. It was impossible to stop him-

self, impossible even to slow down the legs that were bearing him along with the automatic frenzy of the pistons in an engine. He ran with his hands outstretched before him as though in a headlong fall, as though at any moment he was due to crash against some blank wall mindlessly upheaved from the ground. But the underground corridor was at least twenty kilometers long. The tempo of the explosions quickened and seemed to be echoing the sound of his feet. Someone was chasing him!

A light touch wakened him. He rolled over so suddenly that he made his narrow bunk wobble, and discerned in the gloom the form of Antonella leaning over him. He must have cried out in his sleep. His limbs were as limp as if he had just run a long race. It wasn't the first time he had endured this dream. In sleep his memory often replayed the terrible punishment inflicted on Earth by the Princes of Uria. But it had never seemed so real before.

Antonella was whispering to him.

"Something's going to happen. I can tell. But it won't come clear yet."

And, as he stretched out his hand to turn on a light: "No, better not alert them!"

She was showing more presence of mind than he was. He threw back his coverlet, set his feet on the ground, and in the course of the movement brushed against her. She caught at him. He clutched her to him and felt her lips move against his ear.

Before he had time to catch one word of what she was saying, there was uproar in the camp. Men ran and shouted oaths to the accompaniment of a rattle of gunfire. A motor began to wheeze. A shrill vibration ripped the air. Artillery snarled and burped. Officers shouting orders sought to call their men to stations. Searchlights stabbed the sides of the tent, but they were in quest of another target and did not pause. Above the cries and the clanging of metal on metal Corson clearly made out the sobs of frightened pegasones.

***Frightened? But in the wild no Monster—***

The lamps went out. The shadows which had been moving on the walls of the tent gave way to total shadow, menacing. The racket changed its nature. Sounds became muffled. The guns grew quiet. Someone stumbled and fell groaning against the tent, whose guys held good, and then made off on dragging feet.

In the silence which followed, he recognized the voice of Veran, much amplified.

“Corson, are you there? If this is one of your tricks... I”

The rest was lost. Corson hesitated. Not knowing what was going on, he had no reason to make things worse between himself and Veran. He almost called back, but Antonella put her hand over his mouth.

“Someone’s coming!”

When he lost sight of her in the sudden dark, he had not been particularly alarmed. Now that his eyes had had time to adjust, though, he realized that this was no ordinary night. They were adrift in the same opaque fog as when they had been taken prisoner. Something was blotting up light.

So the camp was under attack. The onslaught had lasted less than three minutes and already it was over. No one could fight in murk like this. And even if Veran knew how to generate it, he apparently didn’t know how to counteract it.

“You mean Veran?” he whispered, harking back to Antonella’s precognition.

“No, not him. Nobody from the camp. Someone”—she tensed, pressing close against him—“someone like you. Someone very much like you!”

*One of the attackers, then—a liberator, or a new threat?*

There was a draft. Someone had lifted the flap of the tent. A spot of light appeared close to Corson’s face. It grew larger, swirled, sucked in wreaths of the dense fog. Soon Corson could see his own hands on Antonella’s shoulders. The luminous area resembled a galaxy spinning on its axis in free space, and deforming and tearing the space as it expanded. When the zone was two meters across it stabilized and ceased to revolve. Antonella and Corson found themselves almost completely within a cocoon of brilliance, roughly spherical and walled with night.

Antonella stifled a cry.

A gloved hand emerged from the mist. It floated in midair as though it had been severed from its arm. It was empty. Palm forward, it made a universal gesture of peaceful intention: *I hold no weapon!*

And there was, after all, a man behind that open hand. Or at any rate a humanoid form in a space suit. The visor was full of darkness.

Without a word the visitor offered Corson two suits identical to his own and indicated by signs that he and Antonella should put them on.

Corson broke the silence. “Who the hell are you?”

The unknown pointed with greater insistence at the suits Corson was so slow to take hold of. Antonella seized one and started to draw it on.

"Not so fast," Corson said. "We have no reason to trust this man!"

"He's going to get us out of here," she answered. "Get us out of the camp."

"How?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. He's going to use a method I can't grasp."

Corson made up his mind, peeled off his festive garments, and slipped into the suit. He set the helmet in place and was surprised at being able to hear as well as before. He exchanged a few words with Antonella. So there was no technical reason for the stranger to remain dumb. But why space suits? Did this obscuring mist have a toxic effect after long exposure?

The stranger checked the seal on Antonella's suit, then turned to Corson. He jerked his head, indicating the engulfing mist, and took Antonella by the hand. She caught on at once and offered her other hand to Corson. They plunged together into total blackness.

The stranger led them along with confidence. Carefully he avoided obstacles and made sure his companions did the same. Several times Corson felt soldiers brush against him, wandering around the camp in utter confusion. Once someone clutched desperately at him. He struck out reflexively with his free hand and the attacker doubled over with a gasp.

The darkness had imposed quiet. Here and there a few calls could still be heard, but it seemed that the soldiers, dazed, had given up hope of locating each other except by groping their way. Perhaps, too, they were afraid of attracting the blows of unseen enemies. Even the officers had stopped issuing orders. Only the pegasones continued to wail. Their sobbing reminded Corson unpleasantly of his first night on Uria.

And the sobs grew louder. The stranger was leading them toward the pegasone park. Corson hesitated, but Antonella's hand drew him onward. He was angry with himself for his own misgivings, because she seemed unaffected by them. On the other hand, she had never seen Monsters at work . . .

Finally they came to a halt. Close to them, the stranger busied himself with some unknown task. Corson guessed that he must be sad-



dling up a pegasone. So that was the way of escape he had picked for them. It was terribly risky, in Corson's view.

Now the mystery man produced a little glowing ball and Corson could see his guess had been correct. Complex harness hung from the beast's flank. What corresponded to a saddle for its riders was no more than a kind of swing fitted with stirrups. There were straps to fasten yourself on by.

Corson had scarcely mounted before he felt the fearful tendrils of the pegasone curl around his wrists. He expected the worst. But the pressure remained gentle. Those strands which could cut like steel wires did not even hamper his movements. He guessed that they must serve as reins for the rider. But he had not the slightest idea how one controlled a pegasone.

The Monster—as he still thought of it despite his best efforts to the contrary—trembled with excitement. It had stopped whining and now was giving forth an irregular series of whistles. Raising his head, Corson could just make out three of its eyes.

He heard the stranger utter a peculiar cry, braced for a shock, and—against all expectation—found himself falling. He was weightless. If he had not felt the straps floating around him and the massive body of the pegasone against his side, he would have believed that a pit had opened under his feet. Antonella gasped in surprise. He wanted to comfort her, but before he had time to frame the words, they emerged from darkness.

Above them stars shone peacefully. Corson craned his neck, but the vast bulk of the beast hid Antonella from him.

Then he saw something which took his breath away: another pegasone, like a giant mushroom turning in the air, occulting a vast area of the sky, its eyes flashing as wildly as the lamps on an insane computer. The stranger hung on its flank like a wart. He waved encouragement to them.

Then Corson dared to look downward, expecting to see a pool of opaque fog. But in the weak starlight all he could make out was the ground in the clearing. A breeze was bowing many tall plants where, a few hours earlier, he had seen nothing but ashes. The camp seemed never to have existed.

So they had made a jump through time. The pegasone was capable of motion not merely in space but far further across time than the wild Monster Corson was acquainted with. How far, he couldn't

guess; they might have gone back a night, a week, a century before Veran or even Corson reached Uria.

It occurred to him to invoke Antonella's talent. He called out, "What's going to happen next?"

She answered uncertainly. "I don't know. I can't cog anything at all."

Suddenly they went up like a rocket. The clearing disappeared in the black fleece of the forest. Now Corson realized the purpose of the space suits. At this rate they would be out of atmosphere in a few minutes.

A smear crossed the sky, hiding the stars for a fraction of a second. Then another. Then the two fleeing pegasones were high enough for the sun to be seen over the eastern rim of the planet. They raced beneath a sky that grew blacker and blacker while, below, Uria was a huge bowl of shadow, crested on one side with a diadem of fire.

Inexpressible jubilation overcame Corson's mind.

Once more, a dark smear on the sky. Although the vision lasted only an instant, this time he recognized it. A pegasone, no doubt one of Veran's. The colonel hadn't lost any time. No, that phrase didn't mean anything. Since the pegasones were capable of time-jumping, Veran could have taken as long as he liked to prepare for the chase. He might have organized an ambush. These pegasones rushing by were no more than scouts beating the past and future in search of the quarry.

Suddenly: a scrimmage. They were in the middle of a sphere of pegasones. The sun stared Corson in the face and he shut his eyes. It had crossed the sky in one gigantic bound. He understood why. To escape the snare, the stranger had dodged through time. For a moment they played this weird game with Veran's cavalry on a chess-board of meters and seconds. But the outcome seemed scarcely to be in doubt. Each time they found themselves in the middle of a smaller sphere. Despite vacuum and great distance Corson fancied he could hear the soldiers' shouts of triumph. The sun danced in the sky as though it had been turned into a bouncing ball. Was it below, to the side, or where? The planet Uria flickered between the brilliance of day and the obliteration of night.

Corson saw the other pegasone, the stranger's, coming dangerously close. He uttered a cry of warning. Antonella echoed him. The stranger leaned over and seized a handful of the tendrils on their steed. And the universe changed shape and color. Everything they knew disappeared.

## CHAPTER 14

The space around them was streaked with colored flames. The stars had vanished, and the planet too. The pegasone's body loomed blood-red. As for the flames, they clashed and intertwined in great sheaves of luminance, but the space they wove back and forth in had no depth. Corson could not have said whether those flames were a few millimeters from his eyes, or light-years distant.

Maybe this was the real appearance of the universe. It was another aspect of it, anyway. The pegasones were moving through time at high velocity, he was sure of that. Which turned perspective topsyturvy. The regular image human beings had of the cosmos was essentially static. For them, stars moved only slowly in the heavens. The release of energy which gave them birth, then consumed them until nothing was left but a few cinders of inert and unbelievably dense matter, was far too slow for a man to perceive under normal circumstances. The greater part of the important events in the history of the universe did not affect him, for he was unaware of them. He could discern only a narrow band of the radiations permeating all of space. He could, live under the illusion that the cosmos is mainly composed of vacuum, of nothingness, that the stars—few and far between—are like a tenuous gas, a trifle more concentrated in the vicinity of a galaxy.

But in reality the universe was *full*. No point existed in space

which did not at some given moment of time correspond to a particle, to a photon, to some manifestation of the primal energies. In a sense, the universe was solid. A supposititious observer looking at it from outside would not have found a way to stick a pin into it. And because the pegasones were moving so rapidly through time, their riders saw the universe as *dense*. If they reached Ultimate Velocity, Corson said to himself, if they found themselves present at the beginning and the end of the universe and at every instant between, they would purely and simply be squashed.

At the rate they were traveling, light vibrations were invisible. But those blue flames might be electromagnetic waves several light-years long, and those purple rays might correspond to variations in the gravitational field of the stars or of the galaxies themselves. They were literally crossing time at a gallop. And just as a rider on a horse going full tilt does not notice the stones on the roadway, but only the major items alongside it such as hills or trees, only the chief events of the universe were perceptible to them.

Now Corson's thoughts took a different turn. He had been mistaken in assuming that Veran must have a starship. He and his men must have fled the scene of battle on steeds like this. They had just arrived when he and Antonella fell among them. Aergistal, then, might easily be at the other end of the universe.

The whirling of the flames diminished. They were slowing down. The luminous space around them split up into a horde of separate patches, which shrank as empty blackness gobbled them up, like the progression of a fatal disease. Soon they were surrounded only by bright points. Stars. Among them one alone remained two-dimensional, a disc of gold. A sun. They were spinning around and around. When the heavens ceased to revolve they found themselves once again above the cloud-enshrouded ball of a planet.

Not till then did Corson realize that the second pegasone had vanished. They had escaped their pursuers but they had lost their guide. They were alone above an unknown world, bound to a steed they had no idea how to control,

## CHAPTER 15

Antonella recovered enough breath to ask: "Uria?"

"No," Corson replied. "This planet is farther from its sun. The constellations aren't the same here, either. We've traveled in space as well."

The pegasone was going down, unhesitatingly, as though it knew its way, and shortly they were enveloped in cloud. A little lower, they passed through a belt of fine rain.

The rain stopped. They pierced through the clouds as though through a ceiling and discovered a plain of mown grass that seemed to go on for ever. A roadway glistening with rain striped across it. It began beyond the horizon and led to a colossal building: a paralleliped of stone or concrete whose top was lost in mist. No trace of windows. Corson guessed that its narrowest face must be more than a kilometer along the base. It was bare, smooth, and gray.

The pegasone landed. Corson unhitched his straps. He went around the beast and helped Antonella to clamber down. Apparently satisfied, the pegasone started to graze with its tendrils, swallowing the grass in noisy gulps.

That grass was as neat as a lawn. The plain was so flat, indeed, that it seemed to Corson out of the question for it to be other than artificial. The roadway was of some brilliant blue substance. A kilometer away at most, the building reared up like a dizzying cliff.

“Ever seen this place before?” he asked.

Antonella shook her head.

“Does the layout suggest anything to you?” he pressed. “This plain, this grass, that building?”

Since she did not answer, he asked on the spur of the moment, “Well, then, what’s going to happen right now?”

“We’re going to the building. We’ll enter it. Up to then we won’t see anybody. Afterward, I don’t know.”

“There’s no danger?”

“None that I can cog.”

He stared at her. “Antonella, what do you make of all this?”

“I’m with you. That will do for the time being.”

He nearly snapped at her with annoyance, but controlled himself, and merely said, “Okay, let’s go!”

He started off with long strides, and she almost had to run to keep level with him. After a moment he regretted his anger and slowed down. Antonella was probably his only ally in the universe. Maybe that was why her company upset him.

The roadway ended at the foot of a huge door, hermetically sealed and matching the scale of the building, which practically merged with the wall. But when they arrived in front of it, it slid soundlessly upward. Corson strained his ears for any noise from within, but heard nothing. The whole setup made him think of a mousetrap.

For giant mice.

“If we go in, will the door shut behind us?”

Antonella closed her eyes.

“Yes. But nothing will threaten us inside, at least not for the first few minutes.”

They crossed the threshold. The door started to come down again. Corson stepped back. The door stopped, then rose again, indicating a simple automatic detector. He was much relieved. He had no special wish to explore the building without knowing more about it, but they could hardly stand around forever on that lawn. Sooner or later they would get hungry, and they couldn’t eat grass. And eventually night would fall. It might be cold; it might be inhabited by enemies. They had to find shelter. Above all they had to abide by that oldest of all the military principles embodied in the Briefings: keep on the move, never stay put, try to take the enemy by surprise . . .

Not that it was so easy to surprise an opponent when you knew nothing about him.

Their eyes adjusted to the gloom in here. On both sides of an aisle which extended out of sight down a vast hall, geometrically exact structures reared up like the webs of a mathematically inclined spider, forming cells like those of a honeycomb. Those too continued to infinity, lost at last in a bluish mist.

The nearest cell contained ten girls' bodies, completely nude, and shrouded by a faintly violet gas that stayed put although nothing seemed to be confining it. Motionless, as rigid as corpses, they were all very beautiful and might be aged eighteen to twenty-five. They bore a vague family resemblance to one another. Drawing a deep breath, Corson made a rough estimate: if every cell was filled the same way, then even in the small section of this monstrous hall that he could make guesses about there must be a good million bodies.

Close to his cheek, Antonella whispered, "Are they dead?"

He reached out. His hand penetrated the mist without meeting any resistance, but he felt his skin tingle. Maybe the gas had preservative properties. He touched a warm soft shoulder. It felt no colder than twenty degrees C. In one sense, then, it might be said she was still alive. Gently he took hold of her wrist. The pulse was nearly imperceptible. The heart seemed to be beating, but only at a very slow tempo.

*Very* slow.

"No," he said. "Not *quite* dead."

At the feet of each of the sleeping women a faint luminance could be seen, a seven-banded rainbow. Noticing that the colors underwent slow periodic changes, he puzzled for a while and concluded that he knew what they implied. They reminded him of EEG pulsations, though he had never seen anything quite like them. What would you call a device that performed the function of detecting life—a metaboloscope?

The two uppermost of the colored bands showed no changes at all. He shivered.

"If I've worked this out right," he muttered, "they're not just in coma, either. It looks as though the bodies are alive, but there's no activity in the brain."

He had seen cities destroyed, whole planets laid waste, fleets smashed to fragments; he had seen men die by the thousands and sometimes by the millions, but he had never run across anything as

quietly saddening as this mausoleum. Had an entire population chosen this end for themselves? Was the prairie outside the lawn of a cemetery? Could it make any sense to keep bodies idling if they would never again have any more personality than a plant? How long could they be preserved? Looking again, more closely, he spotted wires, finer than hairs and nearly invisible, which penetrated the girls' skin: no doubt the terminals of automatic maintenance devices.

Suddenly he began to dash about like a madman, peering into one bay after another. He must have covered more than a kilometer before he stopped, soaking with perspiration. He had not seen a single male body. Clearly he could not climb up and inspect the cells on the upper levels, which were stacked clear to the roof of the great hall, but it was a safe bet that they too contained only women.

None over twenty-five. All very beautiful. Including representatives of every race he had run across. The family likeness he had noticed at once turned out to be due to a classification system. The hair of the first one he had felt the pulse of was black; the last he had examined before stopping was fair. On the other side of the aisle the cells contained dark-skinned women, shading from tan to so deep a black it was almost blue.

What the setup called to mind was a collection. Someone—or something—had laid these girls out like the prizes of an entomologist. Once, during a battle, he had been fighting his way through a museum of butterflies, not only those from Earth but their counterparts from hundreds of other planets. Shots and explosions raised a mist of dead butterfly wings. The air was full of dry bright dust that seared his lungs despite his respirator. In the end the museum had caught fire, and in the swirling updraft he had seen swarms of butterflies take the sky for the last time.

Naturally skin color and hair color would not be the only criteria. Maybe the color of their eyes was classified along the vertical axis . . . . But without means to climb up and see, there was no point in wondering about that.

Were men kept in a separate building? Or was the collector interested exclusively in women? That might imply that the person responsible was human: unbelievably perverted, but human nonetheless. An alien—he thought of the beak-faced Urians—would have no reason to specialize in female bodies.

Slowly he returned to the entrance. And suddenly an idea struck



him. At once he decided it was the sole logical explanation for this place. They must have discovered a prison camp.

Suppose that somewhere in time or space remote overlords engaged in frightful combat were to assemble hordes of slaves. They would wipe out the peoples they conquered, retaining only, in accordance with immemorial custom, the most physically perfect of their captives. "A fate worse than death"—it looked as though here the cliché had acquired a literal meaning. For the overlords involved in such a war would regard it as a waste of their resources to take any trouble over the care of their livestock. The cost of sheltering, feeding, and guarding them must be kept to a minimum. Besides, history was littered with warlords killed by one of their own prisoners.

So these overlords would have drawn a lesson from the past. They would have obliterated the consciousness of their victims, and when the whim overtook them they would graft on an artificial, robot-like personality. Something of the kind had already been possible by Corson's time. If these girls had been treated like that they would no longer be capable of initiative, reasoning, or creativity. Their intelligence might approximate that of an advanced ape. But that wouldn't worry their overlords. One would not seek in a slave girl wit or affection or understanding.

***How could anybody be that twisted? People like those would be necrophiles, in the strictest possible sense.***

The idea was so revolting that Corson sought grounds to convince himself the Terrestrials had been at least a little better than that in the days of the Earth-Uria war. He searched his memory. He recalled a general who had ordered the execution of thousands of Urian hostages in the first few hours of the conflict. He remembered another commander whom he had seen dancing among the ruins of a bombed city. It had been a human city, but the inhabitants had made the mistake of trying to conclude a treaty with the Urians. He thought of Veran, and the way he had asked for a million men. Someone of his type would scarcely have hesitated to organize something as loathsome as this if he thought he could profit by it.

Murderous rage possessed Corson for a moment. His jaw lumped, his fists doubled, his vision went dark. He drew in on himself as adrenalin poured through his veins. Then the fit passed, and he simply stood there trembling. Was this the way of the universe, that violence should evermore breed violence? Was the true visage of humanity a mask of blood? Did a grinning demon ride the back

of these upstart monkeys, the specter of desolation and death? Was there any means of getting rid of it and becoming something else, something better?

Well . . . Dyoto. He thought of that utopia founded on the wreckage of war, of that world which knew nothing of compulsion and enjoyed a government so stable over six centuries that it did not require an army. That evil aspect of mankind had to be done away with, but not at the cost of violence. How, though, to ban violence without using it? How to escape the fetters of "just wars"?

Antonella had hunkered down in the middle of the aisle, and she was weeping. All the suppressed anger he had felt since she played that trick on him aboard the floater broke away from his mind like a chunk of ice falling from a roof. She was, after all, a human being like himself. He helped her to her feet and took her in his arms, hiding from her the sight of those sinister cells. He heard her sob, and wordlessly thanked her for it

## CHAPTER 16

Corson was hungry. He headed mechanically toward the door, as though merely going outside amounted to approaching a solution. Of course, there was a solution, and he was only too well aware of the fact. If he had been alone he might even have considered it. Sol-

diers in battle were taught to feed on anything rather than die of hunger. If they didn't learn the lesson well, they didn't last very long. And training, rather than instinct, reminded him that they were surrounded by a vast stock of protein. But he could imagine the unspeakable horror he would see in Antonella's eyes if he explained the price they might have to pay for their ultimate survival.

Back in legendary times there had been a name for those who devoured corpses from a graveyard.

Ghouls.

And it was a matter of historical record that people had done such things, not only during a famine. Corson wondered if the overlords of war might not be cannibals rather than necrophiles. On occasion Mongol conquerors used to dish up the most beautiful of their concubines, with their heads displayed on a golden platter, so that all might see they were not miserly. What one man could think of doing, another might do again.

The door lifted to reveal the green plain, the grass spread out like a bitter carpet, crossed by the straight blue road, and the indistinct shape of the pegasone, contentedly grazing. Corson envied the beast.

Then he spotted something lying on the road, not far away. A bag. Laid on top of it, a metal plate glistened in the milky light which filtered through the clouds. In three steps he reached it. He looked it over closely, without touching it. While they were shut inside the building someone had left these here, intending them to be seen.

The plate bore a message.

For one moment the letters danced before his eyes, and he read:

CORSON, THIS BAG CONTAINS VICTUALS. EVEN EMPTY WRAPPINGS CAN STILL BE USEFUL. THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO MAKE WAR. REMEMBER THAT. YOU MUST GO TO AERGISTAL. IT IS THERE THAT CRIMES ARE JUDGED AND SOMETIMES PARDONED. SHOUT AERGISTAL. THE PEGASONE WILL UNDERSTAND.

Someone was playing a game with them. Escaping, being stranded here—now the bag and the message. If the unknown meddler was an ally, why did he not show himself? And if he was an enemy, why hadn't he killed them?

He weighed the bag in his hand, then opened it. Inside were a score of combat rations. Mechanically he slung it over his shoulder and reentered the mausoleum.

Antonella was standing there with her arms slack at her sides, her cheeks hollow, her eyes dark-ringed, plainly in a state of shock. But

she seemed to have recovered from her bout of misery. The tears had dried on her face.

“We won’t die of starvation,” Corson said, handing her the bag. “Someone has thrown us a bit of birdseed.”

Before helping himself, he watched her open one of the ration packs. Apparently she was in normal control of herself again. She tore a water capsule at the proper place, the way he had shown her, and offered it to him. He shook his head, and when she tried to insist pointed out that there were plenty more.

Finally she consented to drink, and he watched her swallow, seeing how greedily her Adam’s apple rose and fell under her delicate skin. Then, sitting on the floor, he too began to eat, drinking in sips and chewing carefully. He pondered as he did so.

*According to the message, I have to go to Aergistal—where “crimes are judged and sometimes pardoned.” Could I be released, at Aergistal, from the doom hanging over me?*

On the other hand, it had been or would become a battlefield. Not the sort of place he wanted to take Antonella to. But he couldn’t abandon her here. And he did not know in this new universe any safe place where he could leave her.

When they had finished, he collected up the scraps that were left over and looked for a way to dispose of them. Eventually he located a little trapdoor, raised it, and found below a black space from which rose the sound of running water. At least they would not leave a visible sign of their passage here—though his precautions would prove childish if the building were full of bugs, as it might be for all he knew.

Then he made up his mind.

“We’re going to Aergistal,” he told Antonella, showing her the message. “I don’t know what’s in store for us there. I’m not even sure if we’ll reach it.”

He expected to see alarm in her face. But she remained quite calm. It seemed that she had developed absolute trust in him, and—as he told himself sourly—that was the worst of his problems.

He kissed her lightly and led her out of the building and toward the pegasone. Having strapped her in place, he donned his own harness. He hesitated a moment, because it seemed so absurd to shout “Aergistal” as though giving an address to the computer of a city cab. He had to clear his throat. Then, in a voice that still quavered, he called it out.

*“Aergistal!”*

And the world around them once again became a place of crazy shapes and colors.

## CHAPTER 17

They emerged above a broad plain tufted with smoke. The sky was pinkish and across it ran palpitating veins, so unlike anything Corson had ever seen that he shivered. On the horizon, beyond a low but sharply defined mountain range, rose three pillars of mingled fire and ash.

They were descending rapidly. Below, what looked like sparkling insects darted and whirled. Astonished, he recognized armored knights on gaily caparisoned horses. Out of tall grass they charged with lances at the ready. A movement in undergrowth . . . and Red Indians stood up uttering wild cries, letting fly a volley of arrows at the order of their feather-bedecked chief. Some of the horses reared up, and a melee broke out—but already the pegasone’s slanting course had carried them past.

The almost invisible beam of a blazer tore the air. The pegasone shied away from it through time and space. The mountains were in a slightly different position. The plain was barren now and sown with

craters.. Dull rumblings arose from it, as solid-seeming as hills of pure sound. But the sky looked just the same.

A movement attracted Corson's attention. A few hundred meters away a monstrous mass was shifting very slowly across country. Only its geometrical form betrayed its mechanical nature. A tank? If so, it was infinitely the largest Corson had ever seen. A crater like those stamped into the ground seemed to open right in the middle of its near side, but that was illusory, due to a reflection. Corson thought it must be heading toward a low hill nearby, which might conceal a fortress or might itself be a still vaster machine. Hanging on the pegasone's flank, he felt dreadfully exposed. He would rather have landed and sought a hiding place in this blasted terrain.

Something black and lens-shaped, with a scythe-sharp edge, came spinning from the hill toward the tank, flying a complex curve. It struck the side of the tank as though it were the blade of a circular saw. Huge sparks flashed out. Then it blew up, causing no apparent harm to the target. A bright square patch of bare metal was the only trace of the attack. The tank rumbled onward, impreguably.

Then, without warning, the rough ground opened, giving way like a pitfall under the tank's weight. Tilting, it spat out forward extensions that struggled for purchase on the far side of the crevasse. But in vain. It tried to go into reverse, slithered, slid inexorably toward the pit. Irises opened on its sides and vomited men, in good order, wearing camouflage netting which changed color to match that of the ground and rendered them almost invisible. They hurled grenades into the pit. Flames and black smoke burst upward. The trap subsided a little farther yet, then was immobilized. But the slope was already too steep and the surface too slippery for the tank to climb out again. Finally it skidded, teetered on the very brink of the pit, and toppled forward, jamming there almost vertically. Its engines, hitherto silent, roared desperately, and quit. A few more men abandoned it and joined the others who were taking cover. A salvo of missiles darted from the hill and wiped out everything in its vicinity, making a solid layer of flame in which men were instantly consumed. The few who did escape vanished into the rugged landscape.

The whole thing could have lasted only half a minute. The pegasone had already left the fortified hill to its left. It flew so low that it had to swoop upward to avoid one outcropping hillock after another as the earth shifted in response to vast unseen forces. At last it landed in the shelter of a crag that seemed relatively stable.

Corson hesitated. He was unable to control the pegasone. So he had to rely on the creature's instinct of self-preservation and assume that for the moment it had brought them to a place which was safe from attack either through time or in space. Of course, the pegasone might have a very different notion of what constituted an attack than did its riders. It might not bother to dodge an acid gas cloud that could dissolve their space suits. Or it might wander off by itself.

Still, Corson decided, it was worth taking advantage of this respite. He undid his straps and helped Antonella down.

He looked the scene over. Some rocks had tumbled down the hillside and offered precarious shelter at its foot. Taking Antonella's hand, he urged her to a run. Halfway to their goal he noticed a red flower bloom on the plain. He flung himself to the ground, dragging her with him, and by rolling over and over they reached a hollow between the foot of the hill and the pile of rocks. A missile struck the hillside with a gigantic hammer blow. When the dust settled, he saw that the pegasone had vanished.

"At least that warhead wasn't nuclear," he said dryly.

He risked a glance over the surrounding country.

"So this is Aergystal! It looks like one vast battlefield—the father and mother of all battlefields."

Antonella wiped dust from her faceplate. "But who's fighting? And against whom?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Corson said. "To me the whole thing looks absolutely crazy."

You could call this *total* war and mean it—or so it appeared. An ordinary war implied two sides more or less clearly opposed to each other, a shared or maybe two comparable technologies. Here, everybody seemed to be fighting everybody else. Why should armored knights be charging a tribe of Red Indians? Where could you hide the cities, the empires, which you would need to support such forces and which must constitute the stakes that they fought for? What was the nature of this pinkish and rather repulsive sky, featureless, boasting neither sun nor moon? Even the horizon looked somehow wrong, infinitely far away as though the whole of Aergystal were nothing but an endless plain. But if this was a giant planet, why should its gravity be normal or nearly so?

"The air seems to be okay," he announced after glancing at the gauges on his sleeve. That too was a mystery, given the amount of dust and probably radiation that these ceaseless explosions must be

hurling into the sky. Still, the gauges were definitely working. He took off his helmet and filled his lungs. The air was cool and odorless. A breeze brushed his face.

Once again he risked peering out from the shelter of the rocks\* Clear to the slopes of the distant mountains the plain seemed to be uniformly deserted. There were puffs of smoke here and there.

A flash caught his eye and by reflex he dived to the bottom of the hollow. In front of them there was nowhere worth making for.

"We'll have to get over the hill," he said. "Maybe on the far side we'll find . . . something."

There was no hope of locating an ally, and probably not even a rational being. They were trapped in this war—this inconceivable war.

A black dot had just appeared overhead. It left a line of smoke and with it was tracing signs in the sky. The first group meant nothing to Corson. In the second he thought he detected a vague likeness to Cyrillic, used on a world he had never visited. The third was just a String of dashes. But he didn't have to wait for the craft to complete its mission before reading the last

***"Welcome to Aergistal!"***

Then the black dot made off at high speed over the crest of their hill, while the symbols and letters drifted lazily toward the mountains.

With a shrug, Corson said, "Well, we might as well move on as stay here."

As quickly as they could they scaled the steep slope. When they reached the top, he cautiously poked his head over, all his back muscles knotting at the idea of the fine target they would make if someone had a scope or an automissile trained on this spot.

What he saw astonished him so much he nearly lost his footing. The far side of the hill slanted gently down to a beach so straight it might have been drawn with a ruler. A blue and perfectly calm sea stretched away to infinity. A few cable lengths from shore a dozen sailing ships were swapping cannonballs, and a dismantled hulk was on fire. On the beach, only a few hundred meters away, two military encampments faced each other. The tents of one were blue and of the other red. Banners saluted a rising wind. Between the two camps soldiers dressed in bright colors, drawn up as though on parade, were firing at each other turn by turn. Although he was too far away to be sure, Corson thought he saw men falling now and then. He heard rolling musket volleys, the sharp cries of the officers, the



sound of trumpets, and from time to time the deep boom of the ships' cannon.

Glancing inland, he saw bulging from a hollow which hid it from the view of both armies something huge, gray, soft, and almost round. A stranded whale?

But much closer to them, at most a hundred meters distant, at the rear of the blue camp, a man was sitting quietly writing at a wooden table. He wore a blue cocked hat with a white cockade, a peculiar frock coat in white and sky blue with gold braid and epaulettes, and from his belt the scabbard of a large saber hung down to touch the ground.

Corson climbed over the hilltop and led the way toward this extraordinary scribe. When they were only a few paces from him, the latter turned his head and said without displaying either surprise or alarm, "Want to join up, young fellers? We just increased our prize money, you know. I can give you a bonus of five crowns even before you put on our fine uniform."

"I haven't—" Corson began.

"Ah, I can tell you're dying to serve under Good King Victor—'Old Whiskers,' as we call him, you know. Conditions are good and promotion comes quickly. The war will last a century or two and you can look forward to winding up as a field marshal. As for the lady, she'll get on fine with our jolly boys and I predict she'll make her fortune in next to no time."

"All I'd like to know," Corson said, "is where the nearest town is."

"I believe Minor is the nearest," said the man. "Directly ahead of Us, only twenty or thirty leagues away. We're going to take it as soon as we've dealt with these clowns in red. I admit I've never been there, but there's nothing odd about that, for the good and sufficient reason that it's in enemy hands. Still, the trip there will be worth it. Come on, sign here—if you know how to write—so that everything is done according to the book."

And he jingled some discs of yellow metal that awoke a vague memory in Corson. He guessed they must be cash—no, what was the word? Coik? *Coins!*

On the table in front of the man, on either side of a big ledger, lay two peculiar hand weapons which he would have liked to examine more closely. But Antonella was squeezing his arm hard, and he felt her trembling.

"What about those ships?" he demanded, pointing out to sea.

"That, my friend, has nothing to do with us. Everybody here gets on with his own war, without worrying about what his neighbors are up to. That is, until you've got rid of the current opposition. Then you sign up the survivors and go looking for someone else to take on. You're on the run yourselves, aren't you? I never saw uniforms like yours before, at any rate."

"We don't want to join up," Corson said firmly. "We only want to—well, find work somewhere."

"Then I'll have to persuade you, my friends," the man said. "That's both my vocation and my avocation."

He seized his weapons and pointed them at Corson.

"Kindly sign your name here before I get annoyed and withdraw the offer of your recruiting fee!"

Corson flung Antonella to the ground and leaped at the table, kicking it over. But his opponent, forewarned, dodged back and pulled both his triggers. A bang deafened Corson in the same moment as he felt a violent blow on his left arm. Almost at once he also heard a sort of fizzing noise. One of the pistols had not gone off properly.

He hurled himself forward into thick smoke. The man in the cocked hat had dropped his guns and was frantically drawing his sword. This time Corson was the faster. Jumping the overturned table, he kicked him in the guts and then punched him on the temple. Not too hard. He didn't want to kill him.

The man keeled over, clutching his belly with both hands.

Corson felt his left biceps, expecting to find that he was bleeding. But the suit had been tough enough to stop the bullet. He almost laughed aloud; he was going to escape with no more than a gigantic bruise. When he turned, though, his smile froze on his face. The explosion had attracted attention, and from the camp a small squad of men was hurrying toward them.

Corson dragged Antonella to her feet, and—pausing only to possess himself of the fallen saber—broke into a run, forcing her to keep pace. There was only one way open to them. The sole escape route led toward the hollow where they had seen what he imagined to be the body of a whale.

Explosions sent bullets whistling past their ears. Luckily, either their pursuers weren't taking the time to aim properly or they merely wanted to scare them off. It was obvious that their guns were not self-sighting, and when the fusillade broke off, Corson realized with

amazement that they did not even reload automatically. It took quite a while for them to be charged again.

Panting, they scrambled up the outer slope of the hollow. Breasting the top of the rise, they saw it was an old crater, far deeper and wider than they had expected. And the "whale" was a colossal ball of rubberized cloth, enclosed by a net. It floated in midair, tethered to a thick rope that moored it to a boulder. A wicker gondola, half in contact with the ground, hung beneath it. A man in red trousers and tunic, with a sort of turban on his head, was busy making adjustments to a whole collection of valves. His skin was a magnificent black.

He grinned on seeing Corson and Antonella approaching. The grin vanished when he noticed the saber. He reached for a gun, whose muzzle jutted over the edge of the gondola, but Corson checked him with the flat of the sword.

"We're being chased," he said. "Can this thing of yours carry three?"

"The regulations don't allow—" the black man began, casting an anxious glance at Corson. Then he looked further, and saw how at the rim of the hollow heads topped with cocked hats were starting to appear.

"I think it might be a good idea to get away from here," he finished.

Followed by Corson and Antonella, he jumped into the gondola and hastily began to tip sandbags overboard. The gondola left the ground and began to sway dangerously.

"Lie down on the bottom!" Corson shouted at Antonella. Then, seeing that the black man was wasting precious time on undoing the mooring rope, he slashed at it. A few strands parted. A second cut severed the core of the cable and a gust of wind did the rest. Suddenly released, the balloon took off like a rocket. Shots rang out, but the bullets passed beneath them. By the time the guns had been reloaded the runaways would have made too much height to be hit by the inaccurate fire of Good King Victor's bullyboys.

Corson, clutching the rim of the gondola, pulled himself up. The abruptness of the ascent had thrown him to the wicker floor, which creaked alarmingly. He glanced at the black man, who was hanging on to the suspension ropes with both hands, and set down his saber before helping Antonella to her feet.

"Whoever's side you're on," he said to the stranger, "I'm glad we

ran into you. My name is Corson, and I belong to the crew of the . . ."

The words tailed away. How ridiculous to speak here of the *Archimedes*, a battle cruiser involved in the interstellar war between Earth and Uria! Now he really was a soldier with neither an army nor a cause to fight for, a soldier lost. And if it had not been for the enormous battlefield of Aergistal, he might well have forgotten that he *was* a soldier.

"My name is Touray," said the black. "I'm a Zouave. Provost marshal and *pro tem* balloonist with a communications regiment. Originally this balloon of mine was supposed to be captive, but a lucky shot—or maybe an unlucky one—turned it loose." With a wry smile. "Also I'm a qualified medical orderly, and . . ."

He hesitated. "And—?" Corson prompted.

"Your uniforms made me remember something. I wasn't always a balloonist. I was an engineer. And a helicopter pilot. That's why they wished this balloon on me."

He started to laugh. "You see, I told them I knew a bit about flying. It seemed better to be above the battle than mixed up in the middle of it. . . And what about you? What war do you hail from?"

It was Corson's turn to hesitate.

"From a war between planets," he said after a moment. "But I didn't come direct from there to here."

"A war between planets," Touray said thoughtfully. "So you must come from a much later period than me. In my day we were just getting interested in space travel. I can still recall the day the first man landed on Mars. Quite an event!"

He jerked his thumb toward Antonella.

"What about her? Is she from the same war as you?"

Corson shook his head. "No, she comes from . . . from a period of peace."

The black face froze. "Then she ought not to be here!"

"Why do you say that?"

"In this world there's nobody but soldiers, warriors, people who for one reason or another have been declared war criminals. Me, I fired rockets at a village where there were only civilians, somewhere in Europe, on an island that I still remember was called Sicily. I won't say I realized what I was doing, but I can't claim that I didn't know, either. That's war for you, I'm afraid."

A question sprang to Corson's mind.

“You’re talking Pangal. I thought that wasn’t developed until after the invention of star travel.”

“Oh, it isn’t my mother tongue. I learned it here. Everyone at Aergystal speaks Pangal, with some local differences. Dialects, I suppose you’d call them.”

“So what was your mother tongue?”

“It was a language called French.”

“I see,” Corson said. But he didn’t; the word meant nothing to him.

His mind was swarming with insoluble mysteries. Those, though, would have to wait for an answer. So far the balloon had been drifting along the shoreline, but it was showing a disturbing tendency to wander out to sea, and that level ocean seemed to reach to infinity.

## CHAPTER 18

They floated over a group of galleys that were madly trying to ram each other but were hindered by the slackness of the wind and only making progress by the use of slow oars. A little farther on, they spotted some honeycomb-shaped structures that a crowd of spider-like creatures were fighting for. There were not only humans at Aergystal, then, although in the region they had so far explored hu-

mans appeared to be in the majority. Once or twice they discerned great shadows beneath the sea.

The balloon moved farther and farther from the coast, but remained in sight of it.

"Well, it's no good starving, is it?" Touray said, and turned to open a wicker basket that took up part of the space within the gondola.

Automatically Corson felt on his shoulder for the sling of his ration bag. It wasn't there. He must have dropped it during his struggle with the recruiting officer.

"There's some sausage," the Negro said. "And some bread that's still fairly fresh, and some red wine."

From his loose-fitting trousers he produced a huge pocket knife and set about carving up the bread and sausage. Then he uncorked the bottle of wine and offered it to Antonella. Corson watched him with fascination.

"Never seen anything like it, hm?" Touray said, noticing his amazement. "I bet in your time you lived off pills and chemicals! But this isn't too bad, you know. When at war you make the best of what you've got."

The wine, Corson found, was warming and comforting. He bit into a chunk of bread and decided that it was time to ask a few questions. After all, here was a man who had had far more experience of this weird world.

"What surprises me," he said cautiously, "is that the sky is practically empty. You'd expect aerial warfare to spread all over the place."

"There are regulations," Touray said. "At least, I assume there are. In this sector of Aergistal there are no planes, no rockets and no copters. But that doesn't mean there aren't dogfights going on somewhere else. In fact I'd be rather surprised if there weren't."

"Regulations," Corson repeated thoughtfully.

"You must have noticed something right away," Touray went on. "Nobody around here is using nuclear bombs, right? I imagine that puzzles you. But on the other side of those mountains atom bombs do go off now and then. Big ones at that!"

Corson recalled the pillars of fire and mushrooms of smoke which they had seen beyond the mountains. He nodded.

"And who makes sure the rules are obeyed?"

"If only I knew, I'd file a polite request for him to get me out of here! Oh, probably a god—or a devil!"

“Do you really think we might be in hell?”

Corson used the word readily enough, but it had little personal meaning for him. By his time, in an age dominated by cold and calculating pragmatism, its only referent was half-forgotten mythologies. And the nearest term available to match it in the galactic tongue meant no more than somewhere especially unpleasant.

Still, Touray took his point. “I’ve been wondering a lot about that,” he admitted. “But this strikes me as a pretty material kind of hell, if it is one. I managed to make some sightings on the sky as I went up and down with this balloon, and I’m convinced the ceiling is only about ten or twelve kilometers above us. Of course, even if it is made of ordinary matter, this place doesn’t look much like a natural planet. No horizon, an absolutely level surface ... Or if the planet were big enough to give this impression, we ought to have been squashed flat by the gravity in the first minute.”

Corson agreed, surprised that this man from a period so long before his own should know so much.

“I don’t think we’re in normal space at all,” Antonella said. “I can’t cog anything—not a thing. At first I wasn’t worried because our foresight does fade away now and then. But never so completely. Here it’s as though I were . . . well, as though I were blind.”

Corson stared at her. “When does your talent let you down?”

She flushed. “For a few days every month, that’s one thing. But that’s not what’s happening at the moment. And during a space flight, but I haven’t flown space very often. And when I’ve just made a jump across time, but that never lasts for long. And lastly when the probabilities in favor of several different outcomes are almost exactly balanced. But I always retain at least the ghost of the power. Here, there’s nothing at all.”

“What power is she talking about?” Touray demanded.

“Antonella’s people have a certain ability to see into the future. They call it ‘cogging’, from precognition. They can foretell events before they happen, usually a couple of minutes ahead.”

“I see. It must be like having a periscope capable of breaking through the surface of the present. But it sounds like a pretty short-sighted kind of periscope. Two minutes—that isn’t very long.”

Corson sought to organize what Antonella had told him into a pattern that would make sense. He knew that if prescience were possible—and it was—it must be dependent in some way on Mach’s cosmogonic principle, the uniqueness of each point in the universe

in relation to the whole. Would a total breakdown of the power imply that they were no longer in the universe to which Antonella's nervous system was attuned? Were they in fact dead, without remembering that they had been killed?

"You know, it's very funny," Touray said. "In Africa, long before I was born, there were witch doctors who claimed they could foresee the future. Nobody believed that any longer, in my day. Yet that wasn't in the past; it was in the future they claimed they could look into!"

"What about this bread?" Corson asked, brandishing the remains of his sandwich. "Where does it come from?"

"Oh, from whoever runs this place. Now you mention it, I must say I haven't seen plowed land anywhere, let alone factories or bakeries. But it's always like that in wartime, isn't it? Guns, uniforms, medicines, rations, all come from far, far away, in what might as well be a mythical country. If the war lasts long enough, you just stop wondering about that sort of thing. The only fields you see are the ones you bum over because they're in enemy hands."

"Where are the high command? Why do they carry on with these crazy battles?"

"Oh, they're a long way up the ladder from you. A long, long way. In the normal course of events you'll never see them."

"But what if they get killed?"

"They're replaced," Touray said. "By those who come next in line. You see, in a really all-out war you go on fighting because for one thing there's the enemy and for another you don't have any alternative. Maybe the brass hats have reasons of their own, but those must be—well, brass-type."

Corson drew a deep breath.

"But where the hell are we?" he shouted.

Touray gave him a steady stare. "I could say we're in a balloon above a calm ocean. But that might be a delusion. I've given this a lot of thought. I can only offer three possible explanations. See which you prefer, or come up with another."

"What are they?"

"First off, then: we're good and dead and we've arrived in some kind of hell or purgatory, and we're stuck here for goodness knows how long, maybe for all eternity, with no hope of escape even by getting killed. The Breathers take care of that."

"The Breathers?"



"You haven't been through one of those yet? No, of course you haven't—you only just got here. I'll tell you about those later, then. My second theory is that we don't actually exist. We just have the illusion of existence. We may be nothing more than data, tape perforations or punched cards or electrons whizzing around in some gigantic machine, and someone's playing a war game with us, or a *Kriegsspiel*, or whatever they call it where you come from, trying to find out what went on in such-and-such a battle. Or maybe what would happen if all the wars in the universe took place at once. In that case we'd simply be tin soldiers, if you get me."

"I get you," Corson said from a dry mouth.

"A variant of that notion would be that we do exist, but not in this world. Maybe we're all stacked up in a vault somewhere, wired into a machine, and just imagine that we're alive here. It could be a sort of therapy, to make us sick of the very idea of war, or it could be a show put on for somebody, or it could be an experiment."

"How about your third theory?"

"That this universe is in fact real. Weird, by our standards, but genuine enough. And built by someone, possibly by humans—though I doubt it—to serve some purpose I daren't even guess at. That's the theory I prefer. Because if it's correct, there might be a way of escaping and still being yourself."

"There's one thing in common between your three theories," Corson said. "They could equally well apply to the worlds we've left behind."

"The ones we remember," Touray corrected. "Not necessarily the same thing. Are you sure we both come from the same universe? Besides, something else holds good for this world as well as the others. We have the same feeling of free will, and we're just as incapable as we were back there of running our lives the way we'd like to."

There was a short silence.

"How did you get here?" Corson asked at length.

"I'd rather ask you the same question. Don't you think I've been talking too much?"

"Well, I don't know whether you'd believe me."

The black man said wryly, "Oh, I've learned to believe six impossible things before breakfast."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go on."

So Corson briefly recounted their wanderings since leaving Veran's camp, although he offered no details of the mausoleum world.

"Someone went to a lot of trouble to bring you here," Touray decided. "One of *them*, probably. It fits my third theory best, doesn't it?"

And he added, "This is the first I've heard about—did you call them pegasones? The animals that can move through time, I mean. But I'd certainly begun to suspect that there must be a means of jumping from one century to another."

"What about you?"

The black man leaned over the gondola and spat into the sea. "To be honest," he said, "I don't recall very clearly. I've been through four, five, maybe ten Breathers since." The capital letter could be heard in his voice. "I was gunning down everything I could see from my old Gadfly Five, when I felt a blast of heat and blacked out. And here I was, still in the copter, over what looked like the same sort of country. I didn't notice the differences until I landed and realized I didn't know anybody at the base. I said so. They took me to the M.O., and he said something about shock and gave me a needle and sent me back into action. After a while I gave up trying to be certain about anything. I simply decided to stay alive."

"One thing puzzles the hell out of me," Corson said. "The body count must be terrible in these wars. Why don't they stop because they've run out of manpower? Or does a fresh supply of soldiers keep pouring in non-stop from all time and all space?"

Touray shook his head. "I told you. There are Breathers. The dead come back."

"Somebody revives them?"

"No. But when a Breather is in the offing, the sky goes dark. Everything becomes sort of numb, time runs slower and slower, any kind of light burns dim—flames, electric lamps, anything. You feel as though you're turning to stone. For a second or two you find yourself in an awful silence. Then everything starts over. Sometimes you're still where you were before the Breather, but that's not common. Usually you're in another army doing another job. You don't recall very clearly what was happening before the Breather; it's as though someone started telling another story, or—or changed the record! That's what led me to my second theory. And the dead come back and take on new roles. But they never remember having been killed. As far as they're concerned the Breather began just before

they died. So maybe the Breathers are purely individual events. But I don't really believe that. You get the impression that they involve the entire universe. I'm sure that the people who run this place, or manage it, must know how to travel in time and simply go back and collect the people who are about to die. Nothing supernatural about it."

"No, of course not," Corson said.

His beard had begun to grow out. Tugging at it, he reflected on the amazing fact that this man, this primitive soldier from the very dawn of the space age, was quite prepared to accept the idea of time travel. Still, he himself had made a pretty quick adjustment to Dyoto. And what would you expect of a soldier who was accustomed to being tossed from one theater of war to another for reasons the high brass didn't condescend to explain? If you didn't adapt, you didn't last.

He was about to ask for more information about the Breathers when a vast explosion slammed at his eardrums, fiercer than any thunderclap, like two dagger points driven into his head. It was as though the universe were breaking apart.

On unseen rails the balloon swerved across the mirror-smooth sea beneath that improbable but unchanging sky. The breeze was at most fresh. But the explosion went on, grew louder, evolved through a dull rumbling into a vibration which made the suspension ropes twang, and then seemed to divide into two pure notes like a tree trunk being split by lightning: one climbed into the treble, racing up the octaves—a thousand hertz, two thousand, five, ten, and at last into the ultrasonic, still so loud it seemed to be drilling into their skulls—while another deepened, as though a giant had clutched at them, and became a hammering, then a panting noise, like the breathing of a tortured god.

The ocean . . . *wrinkled*. Touray shouted something, but the desperate movements of his lips were like the mouthings of someone struck deaf and dumb. Antonella clapped her hands over her ears, frightened and in pain. Corson felt tears start to his eyes, as though pressed from his very brain by the vise of the twin vibrations.

A squall grabbed at the balloon. It climbed several hundred meters and the ambient pressure diminished cruelly. The gondola tossed like a cork. Corson caught hold of Antonella and pressed her against the suspension ropes, which he clung to with both hands. The wicker

creaked. The wind was so fierce now, it flattened one side of the balloon as though a giant hand were pushing it along.

Touray caught the end of a rope and lashed himself as firmly as he could. Bending double, he managed to pass the other end to Corson, who secured Antonella and himself as best he could. This was worse than riding a pegasone, he thought, fumbling to tie the knots.

Above the roar of the storm he screamed, "Is this the beginning of a Breather?"

Touray shook his head. Ashen-faced, he called back, "I—never—saw—anything like it!"

The squalls gave over, but the wind blew on. Now it was steadier, but it grew stronger by the minute, pressing Corson against Antonella; he heard—or felt—her panting. He himself was breathing quicker and deeper than usual. It was owing to lack of air. The atmospheric pressure had dropped still further.

He signaled to Touray, pointing first at the balloon, then at the ocean. The black man understood and turned his valves. The balloon dropped several hundred meters, but without the air becoming perceptibly more dense. Below, long white crests embroidered the tops of waves laden with wrecked ships. A halo of oil spread on the sea created an unlikely oasis of calm.

Hours went by. The balloon sped onward. Corson and Touray agreed that they must be traveling at a good thousand k.p.h. if the latter had correctly estimated the height of the pulsating veins that served not so much as landmarks but as skymarks. Tumbled together in the bottom of the gondola, all three of them drowsed, half suffocated.

Corson was vaguely aware that if they had been on Earth they would already have been blown a quarter of the way around it. Still the wind was not dropping. Now, it was pushing before it mountains of water so high and so solid that they might have been carved out of glass. It was insane, as crazy as everything that had gone before. They might sail on forever above this boundless ocean. They might starve to death, die of thirst or exhaustion in the gondola, but their bodies would continue on their mad career unless the suspension ropes broke and ditched them in the sea, or the balloon, leaking its hydrogen—helium—whatever—lost so much height that it stuck like a wart to the side of a rolling dune of water . . .

The gondola leaped wildly: a cable giving way. It almost pitched Corson upside, but the rope he had lashed around him saved his life. He caught a glimpse of the horizon, and uttered such a tremen-

dous cry that for a brief moment it outdid the roaring of the wind.

There was a horizon on this planet after all. But not a mere skyline. A black streak, swiftly widening, into a band, into a wall! Its darkness was absolute, the darkness of empty space. And, incredibly, the parallel edges of this wall of shadow, instead of being curved to follow a planetary surface, were—for all any human eye could tell—perfect and unqualified straight lines.

## CHAPTER 19

That was where the universe came to an end.

This universe, at any rate.

And they were being hurled toward that black gulf. . .

The wind had lost a little of its violence, but the waves grew higher and ever higher as though, somewhere ahead, they were breaking against an unseen obstacle. They hollowed now into glaucous valleys hundreds of meters deep.

At the horizon the ocean stopped dead, like the edge of a table. Beyond lay the abyss, filling the space between the sky and the sea.

“There’s only one chance left,” Touray said. “And that’s a slim one! If a Breather comes along before . . .”

There was no need for him to finish. They stared, fascinated, at the edge of the world.

"Unless the wind drops," Corson said.

Touray shrugged. "It won't. That's vacuum pulling us along. This whole world is going to go the same way."

"But why?"

"Oh, something must have broken in the big machine!"

As they drew closer, the black space became populated with lights, shining motionless points which, from time to time, winked out and reappeared as though some dark object had passed in front of them. The balloon seemed to be heading toward a patch of black even more total, even more absolute, than the rest of the wall. It was haloed by bright lines that spread in all directions like forked lightning.

What it reminded Corson of was a broken window.

And that, he realized a second later, was exactly what he was looking at. A window, shattered by something dashed against it. The moveless lights were stars. That patch of blacker-than-black was a hole through which Aergistal—or at least that section of Aergistal that included the balloon—was being sucked into the void.

A colossal whirlpool bit into the surface of the sea, near the interface. The water likewise was being emptied out into nowhere.

Corson wondered whether this space was infinite, whether the whole of Aergistal with its lunatic wars, its legions and fleets and pitiable heroes, its generals and its nuclear mushrooms, would all find peace at last among those stars. Were not the creators, or the operators, of Aergistal going to step in? Was this accident beyond their powers to cope with? Or . . . were they simply emptying a test tube? Had Touray been right to talk about model soldiers? Could it be that after all Aergistal was nothing but an artificial world, huge but not boundless, floating in space and in the course of being drained owing to damage or by deliberate decision? What would happen if, along the fissures he could see, the "glass" shattered all of a sudden? Would the sky and the land join up again? Or would the structure of this senseless world—senseless in human terms, at least—survive forever, preserved in uncorrupting vacuum?

As the balloon approached the hole, the temperature dropped and the air grew ever thinner. Oddly, however, the gap seemed to grow narrower. A moment ago it had yawned kilometer-wide. Now, at its broadest, it was only a few hundred meters across. It was repairing itself, and swiftly at that. The balloon was so close that Corson could see circular ripples cross the interface, dying at the edges of the hole.

The sea was disappearing under an icepack which drew a white line along the straight underside of that wall of space. Not a window, then! Not a wall, even—but a force screen capable of mending itself, overloaded by an inconceivable shock.

“We’re going through!” Touray gasped. “If it doesn’t close up too fast!”

Antonella hid her face against Corson’s shoulder. He himself, panting for breath, found energy to point toward the hole. The wreck of a vast spaceship floated in the void, a little below the level of the ocean. It might have been spindle-shaped; at any rate that was the form suggested by the stem section, which seemed to be stuck to the transparent wall. In repairing itself, the force field had trapped it.

What amazed Corson was the biological slowness of the repair process. One might better term it “healing.” He only recalled force fields which, as far as human perceptions were concerned, propagated instantly over short distances. Then he reminded himself that here the energies involved were so immense that time itself could be deformed by them. The mass equivalent of that barrier must be fantastic. Long before his own day, relativity theory had shown that time at the surface of a giant star would pass more slowly than in free space.

Even more surprising was that this time-dilation effect did not apparently extend into the space surrounding the barrier. If this was indeed a field in which time was slowed, it must have immense gravitational potential. One would have expected the balloon to be hurled toward the screen so fast that it would have burned up from friction even before it crashed.

Corson found himself able to hope again. There were only a few hundred meters to go. The healing was becoming more rapid, the fissures were vanishing. The blank black patch was shrinking. All around space seemed to glisten as though newly varnished, no doubt from a side effect of the field.

Any second now! Corson reached out to protect Antonella. Crash. Bounce! The universe spun giddily. The rope he had tied around him sawed into his ribs. He rocked, fell forward. His head struck the rim of the gondola. A steep angle. He could still hear a soft noise. The balloon smashed against the barrier, the gondola rocked. Crash. Bounce. Not so fiercely now. Something resilient in the way.

Fainted.

## CHAPTER 20

Coolness on his forehead. He awoke. Almost at once—maybe. His head was resting on Antonella's knees and she was wiping his face with a rag dipped in wine. He brought his hand up to his right eyebrow, which was painful, and saw blood when he withdrew it. Then he met the worried gaze of Touray.

Giddy, he sat up, and with a great effort managed to stand.

"The balloon has plugged the hole," Touray explained.

Indeed, the gasbag was half sunk in the barrier, a good kilometer above the water, which had ceased to seethe. The underwater breach must have healed as well. The air pressure was returning rapidly to normal. Corson's ears hurt; he pinched his nose and blew hard.

Then he leaned over the side of the gondola and stared, fascinated, into the void. Above them the sky, below them the ocean, stopped as cleanly as though they had been cut with a knife. The barrier was almost within arm's reach. Leaning dangerously outboard, he stretched his hand toward it, but without managing to make contact. All he felt was a slight tingling which could simply have been imaginary.

Beyond was free space. But not empty space. There were stars, thousands and thousands of them in unfamiliar constellations, the sort of multicolored stars you only saw in vacuum, through a ship's



viewport or a space-suit helmet. A red splotch shone out which might be a whole galaxy very far away. And there were not only stars and galaxies to be seen.

Among and sometimes in front of them colossal battle cruisers prowled. Naturally, in spite of their size, Corson could not perceive them directly, but they made the stars twinkle, or rather distorted the path of their light. *Mass and energy*, he thought. *A photon being such a tiny thing, so easily turned aside . . .* Under his trained eyes the mad dance of the stars took on a pattern that made sense. Out there two fleets were engaged in desperate combat. In the course of a skirmish one of the cruisers had been disabled and slammed into the barrier so violently that it caused major damage. Doubtless unaware of this cosmic accident, the others kept on with the fight, all-important to them, but reduced on this side of the barrier to a mere abstract weaving back and forth, a shaking of space that made the stars waver like reflections on a rough sea.

Vast greenish lumps were drifting on the other side of the force field. It took Corson a while to identify them. Ice! Bergs of space, the remains of however many millions of tons of water had poured through the breach.

He was aware that he was seeing hardly anything of the battle; it must go on for light-years, and all he was watching was a local dog-fight. But the violence of this clash was enough to tell him something important about the nature of this space.

It was not beyond the border of Aergistal. It formed part of Aergistal. That fitted. Space wars too must have their place at Aergistal, along with air wars, sea wars, land wars. A special environment was required, so it had been provided. The model, if this universe was a model, was nearly perfect.

So who could be fighting out there in space? Humans, aliens, humans versus aliens? The wreck of the cruiser against the barrier was nothing like any vessel he was acquainted with, and for all he could tell—distances and sizes being so deceptive in space—might be a kilometer long, or many kilometers. The intact ship must have been at least three times as big. He thought he spotted a human form drifting among the debris like a fetus. But it was so far away that it might easily have been a chunk of metal.

Touray cleared his throat. The vibrations had faded. The air was calm as a stagnant pool. It was no longer necessary to shout to make

oneself heard, even though a ghostly rambling continued in their battered ears.

"We're in a bit of a mess," the black man said.

"I'm afraid we are," Corson admitted. He had already reviewed and rejected every possibility open to them. The suspension ropes were not long enough for them to reach the water. If they cut up the gasbag and tried to make parachutes, they might loosen it from the barrier and sink under the waves after a kilometer-long fall. There was almost no chance of the balloon breaking free by itself. And even if somehow they did manage to get down, he had no idea how they might return to solid land, after flying thousands of kilometers at incalculable speed. So here they were, stuck like flies on a wall smeared with glue.

***If only one of these Breathers would occur!***

At first, when Touray talked about Breathers—a name doubly apt, implying both a respite and a chance for the dead to "get their breath back"—I—he had been filled with a confused, animal fear. To go through a Breather must be like dying, or witnessing the end of the world. Now here he was praying for one. But that was pointless. They could never hope to influence the decisions of the unseen gods who had created—or were administering—this universe.

Another thing that Touray had said came back to his mind. But he was reluctant to draw all the conclusions that it implied.

Yonder in space he saw the darkness break into a kind of foam. The depths seemed to come alive, not with the random agitation of the stars, but as though—very close—a swarm of bees had appeared . . . or rather mosquitoes, flying about in no perceptible pattern. And, like mosquitoes, they were pestering the nearest of the starships, which were becoming directly visible. They dodged the ships' fire with devilish skill. One cruiser exploded, then another. The two blasts of light briefly blinded Corson, although he had taken the precaution of shading his eyes. He wondered what would happen if a ship were blown up right against the barrier. Presumably it would withstand the shock, if the repair mechanism had functioned properly, but would it screen enough of the radiation?

***Mosquitoes?***

All of a sudden Corson realized what they were. Pegasones! His last doubts vanished when one of them materialized just the other side of the barrier. He recognized that girdle of lidless eyes, those six clawed feet spreadeagled on nothing, the mane of tendrils float-

ing like the tentacles of a sea anemone, the harness, and—when the Monster turned around—the uniform which Veran's forces wore.

Beyond the barrier the rider gave an unheard cry of surprise on spotting the gondola and its occupants. His lips could be seen moving inside his helmet. A moment later a cloud of pegasones pressed against the barrier . . . and vanished . . .

And reappeared the other side. Without apparent effort they had penetrated the force field. Encircling the balloon they waited, their guns trained on the gondola. Antonella clutched at Corson's arm. Touray, wiping his sweaty forehead, demanded, "What the hell is going on?"

There was no time to answer. The idea which had just taken root in Corson's mind grew into a decision. They could not expect mercy from Veran. But he might try to take them alive. With a woman like Antonella his men could have a lot of fun.

Corson ground his teeth. There was suddenly a taste of blood in his mouth. He looked up at the gasbag. Did it contain hydrogen or helium? There was no time to inquire of Touray. Well, it was a fifty-fifty chance. Hydrogen in contact with air would explode readily, though the temperature of his gun beam was not nearly high enough to initiate a fusion reaction.

Drawing the gun from the holster hidden in his suit, he calmly fired. He had time to see the gasbag rip open and a flame lick up. Then he felt fire engulfing him, and his eyes no longer saw the darkness of space, but an ineffable brilliance. He felt his hands burn, his face, his skin. His broken eardrums spared him the sound of the others screaming—and himself with them.

All he could think was: Yes, *hydrogen* . . .

He fell, and felt Antonella's body against him even though he was no longer corporeal. Oddly, he was not dead. He did not even have the impression of dying. But the light was fading, even as a huge flame rushed toward him. The sky turned purple, then black. As though in the negative of a black-and-white photograph, he could make out pegasones and even their riders, frozen into expressions of amazement like comical statues. He too was struck motionless. The flame ceased to spread a few centimeters from his face . . . except that he had no face any longer. He felt as though this moment of stasis was universal and would last for ever.

Then the flame went out.

## CHAPTER 21

The Breather ended as quickly as it had begun. Corson, who had no recollection of opening his eyes, floated in a universe of purple light, where huge tangled tubes without visible openings throbbed, stretched, bulged, and suddenly split apart into rootlets which in their turn started to grow. There was neither up nor down. Even though he had nothing to judge size and distance by, Corson felt a sensation of vastness.

*I've gone through the roof*, he thought. *I've gone to heaven.*

His limbs would not obey him, but he felt no pain: more, vague curiosity. Memories came back to him little by little. Gaps remained, but a slow process of reassembly at the border of consciousness, perhaps not too trustworthy, was filling them in.

That was how he knew that he was marooned in a very strange place. Typically, at Aergystal, one reawoke in the middle of a battle. So he must have left there. He was sure he must be on the other side of the sky. Was this another hell, a place where creatures inconceivable to man fought one another? Or had he been removed from the game because he ought not to have been in it, or because something else was in store for him?

He was alone. He knew that, even though he could not turn his head.

And then a voice broke the silence like a string of bubbles in clear water. At first he perceived it as pure music, and took a while to realize that it was addressing him. But the words remained graven on his memory as though it had been washed, made new, and was eager to be filled with knowledge.

“So you’re a war criminal, then!”

After a moment’s consideration, he answered, “And you’re a god.”

The voice started to laugh. It sounded almost childlike, but also as though among an infinity of echoes, overlapping so that one could hardly be distinguished from the next, he was hearing only the nearest and most comprehensible to him. And among that maze of sound other voices were concealed, some of them very horrible.

Yes, the voice was much like a child’s. But it could also be that of a lizard, or a spider, the fiery siren call of a star, the squeak of a rat, the stridulation of wing cases rubbed together, the whistle of the wind endowed with speech.

“We have more powers than any gods you can imagine.”

Corson hesitated. This conversation had begun very strangely. Surely he could not have been brought here for a theological argument? Or maybe that was the custom, here in heaven. He wanted to change the subject, yet at the same time he felt drawn along by the natural course of the dialogue.

*I’ve been drugged*, he thought, as though that accounted for everything. Then he realized what a thin explanation it was.

Curiosity, and also an urge to challenge the unknown, made him continue.

“Gods are all-powerful,” he said.

“All-powerful?” the voice repeated. “That’s just a word, an empty word. You can only endow them with powers you are capable of defining, and hence of acquiring.”

Corson pondered again. The statement did seem to make a weird kind of sense. He decided, “You’re immortal.”

Once again the voice seemed to be amused.

“Yes and no. You make no distinction between what is infinite and what is boundless. We are not immortal if you mean that our lives are infinite. Nothing is infinite in that sense, not even the universe, not even what includes the universe. But our lives are boundless.”

“Boundless?” The concept escaped him.

“We can take them back, relive them differently, modify their

course. Nothing which happens during our lives is outside our control."

"I see," Corson said, and this time he did. Existence, for these beings, was not a fixed form cast like bronze in the mold of the past and blindly stretching ahead into the mists of the future. From end to end their existence was a malleable continuum, capable of being reshaped. They could know nothing of "before" and "after." Their lives would have no "length." And in fact, he asked himself, what is the "width" of a human life, or its "thickness"? These beings would view their lives as a unity, coherent and susceptible of being altered. As a result of the consequences they would change the causes. For them the present would be only a particular point of view. Therefore they must control time. Their power must stem from that ability. Just as human beings, for ages imprisoned by the limits of the distance they could cover on foot, petty even given a lifetime of a century, had conquered space and flown to the stars, so these beings had conquered time. For them men must be no more than pitiable hobbled creatures, crippled, to be regarded much as Corson himself regarded those of his ancestors who had been confined to one narrow patch of ground.

*That's a fearful power,* Corson thought, and then—as though someone had offered him the chance—*I'm not ready to exercise it.*

"You can't be human," he said.

*Who are they to gamble with our lives? Invaders from another galaxy, or another dimension? Pure mind, our creators, the deities of mythology?*

"You will be as we are," the voice declared.

*Is that a promise or a statement of fact? How can I become like you and still remain myself when I can't even imagine how to use a power like yours? Or could these be the distant descendants of mankind? The talent Antonella's people have: could that foreshadow the master power? How many billions of years lie between the primitive being Corson and this unheard-of posterity which judges him?*

"Did you appear—after us?" he asked.

The amusement in the voice this time calmed him instead of irritating him.

"We did not appear 'after' you," it said. "We are in the same time as you because we fill the whole of duration. Our two existences are coextensive, as you might say. But in a very special sense, if it will comfort you—yes, we did come after you. We were born from you."

*So they are our descendants. And at the same time far, far older than us. From that point in the future where their branch and ours separated, they have invaded the whole of the universe of which we occupy a petty little corner. They were born of us, yet they have been there since our beginning.*

“What about other species—the Urians, for example?”

“There is no difference,” said the voice.

*No difference! That was a categorical answer. And it's too soon to ask for an answer to the answer.*

“Where are we?” Corson asked diffidently.

“Outside the universe, on its surface, on its skin. One must step outside a totality before one can comprehend and alter it.”

*The crust of the universe. Is that why ordinary laws of physics don't apply at Aergystal, why these beings can do whatever they choose? And what lies beyond?*

He posed the question. The voice replied, “The universe in its own right. Something which has nothing to do with time or space. The exterior never influences the interior and therefore is not directly knowable.”

*Dead end. Is there a limit to the power of these beings, or does the only limit lie in the poverty of the concepts I have at my disposal?*

Corson decided to return to the subject of his predicament.

“Are you going to sentence me?”

“You have already been sentenced.”

“I'm no criminal!” Corson protested with sudden impatience. “I never had any choice—”

“But you *will* have the choice. You will have the chance to undo what you did, to break the chain of violence, cancel out a series of wars. You are going back to Uria. There you will be cured of war.”

“Why do you need me? Why can't you use your own powers to suppress all wars?”

“War is part of the history of this universe,” the voice said. “In one sense, we too were born of war. We want to wipe out war, and we shall succeed—we have succeeded—with the help of those who wage it, in their own interest, in order to become what they could be. But we cannot share our powers with beings who have not overcome war. Perhaps in the ultimate analysis we could suppress war by using our powers, by using force. But that would be a contradiction in terms, for we would be struggling against ourselves. We have undertaken to

remake this universe. A universe is remade with what it is made of. Aergistal is a means to an end. It has three functions. The first is to eliminate war. Aergistal breeds, sooner or later, dedicated devotees of peace. To eliminate war you must comprehend it, so Aergistal contains an immense number of battlefields. Conflicts between empires, worlds, or species do not exist at Aergistal except as background, as far-off motivations. For we know that war is not only kept going by actual conflict of interest, but spreads and perpetuates itself of its own accord, even when the proximate causes have disappeared, and well beyond what is justified by the stakes. War possesses a structure whose aspects are manifold, but only its aspects. The test tubes of Aergistal enable us to comprehend war and make those who fight comprehend it too."

*War as an organism! Something endowed with a modicum of autonomy, bom perhaps at the moment of actual combat but feeding thereafter on the substance and energy of those involved!*

Corson seized on the idea because it would explain so much, even though not without some residual confusion. For example, it accounted for the fact that—before Corson's day—there had been wars in every period of human history, under no matter what type of government. Regularly, a group of people would undertake to abolish war and never achieve it. At most they would manage to damp it down, create an oasis of peace lasting a century or so, rarely a millennium, between conflagrations. And usually their followers undertook to enforce peace by means of war.

Why was that war raging between the Solar Powers and the Empire of Uria? For economic reasons? Because of the ambitions of the high command? Or the fear of the populace? All those reasons had some weight, but there had to be another to potentiate them. The Urian war had been a surrogate for one which threatened to break out between the human planets, whose origin could be traced back to treaties badly drafted long ago that in their turn were the outcome of still more ancient wars. Doubtless from there one could go back and back clear to the war which had laid Earth waste, millennia before Corson was born, and impelled men to the conquest of the stars by condemning them to temporary exile. And further back yet, to the first battle of all, when one pithecanthropus raised a rock to strike another.

And it had been the same in the history of other species. Or al-



most all of them. All those at any rate which were represented at Aergistal.

*We've often wondered what we were fighting for, Corson thought. But never, or not often enough, why we were making war. History is diseased. We are ants struggling one against another for reasons which we imagine to be obvious but which mask a gigantic mystery, an absolute lack of knowledge. And Aergistal is a laboratory . . . or an array of culture dishes.*

"The third purpose of Aergistal," the voice said, "is to preserve war. War is one of the activities of life. It's part of our heritage. It could be that we shall need its techniques. Something might emerge on the exterior of the universe. Aergistal is a frontier, and a rampart too."

The voice had suddenly become strained, or perhaps touched with sadness. Corson tried to imagine the Outside, but that total abstraction defeated him. Utter blackness. Untime. Unspace. Nothing, yet perhaps something else. If I were a number, Corson thought, say, the number one, how could I imagine the number of numbers, the last number of all?

"To eliminate war," the voice said. "To comprehend war. To preserve war. The choice will be granted you. You will be sent back to Uria to solve a problem. If you fail, you will come here again. If you succeed, you will be free. In your own time you will no longer be a war criminal. But above all you will have made a step forward."

The air around Corson grew thick. Walls materialized on all sides of him. He found himself stretched out in a long box of metallic appearance. It resembled a coffin.

Or a tin can.

"Hey!" Corson shouted. "Give me weapons—give me something!"

"You have a brain," the voice said with finality. "And you will get what help you need."

"The Security Office—" Corson began.

"We have nothing to do with them," the voice said. "All they deal with is the Epoch of the Triple Swarm, and what's more in only a single galaxy."

*In sum, Corson said to himself before he Sank into darkness, a pinch of dust. . .*

## CHAPTER 22

*Minos, the fabled judge of the dead. A tribunal from which there was no appeal . . .* Corson was dreaming, and dimly knew that he was doing so. He pondered what he had heard, and thought now and then of Antonella.

*Damned pacifists from the end of time, unable to do their own dirty work. We're pawns between their fingers, the tyrants! Motionless, I spin and tumble between the meshes of this web of lives, dropped from the palm of a god. Do what you like, the god has decreed, but stop your row, stop these wars which spoil my dreams.*

The web was woven of human bodies. Every knot was a man and each held in his hands the ankles of two other men. And so on to infinity. And these men, naked, fought and shouted insults, tried to scratch or pull close enough to bite. From time to time one lost his grip and was at once swallowed up in the abyss. A hole appeared, soon filled in by an incomprehensible slipping of the mesh. And Corson passed between their outspread limbs like an unseen fish.

He dreamed that he woke up. He was wandering in a vast and splendid city. Its towers climbed to the sky, not like masts but more like trees, dividing and forking to comb the wind. Its streets, like lianas, were thrown out over emptiness.

He felt an anguish grip his heart which at first he could not ac-

count for. Then the reason for his presence came back to him. There was a box hanging against his chest on a sling, and that was a machine for traveling in time. On each wrist he had a sort of watch, and those were chronometers built with the uncommon precision required if he were to read and master time. On the crystal of each watch was painted, or maybe engraved, a thin red line radiating from the center and marking an exact hour, minute, second. From the position of the long hand he could tell that barely five minutes remained before it would reach the red line. And on the upper side of the time-travel device, figures were displayed one after another to tell him the same thing, counting minutes and seconds and fractions of a second. He knew the machine was set to throw him into the past—or the future—just before the hand reached the line.

Red. Something terrible was about to happen. Yet in the city all was quiet. No one there guessed what was in store. And as the cause of his anguish grew clearer, as he remembered more of the details, he wondered how he could await the moment of his deliverance without starting to scream.

All quiet in the city. The wind rocked the hanging roads, the tapering branches of the towers, slowly back and forth. A woman played with a polished pendant around her neck. In a garden an artist was carving space. Children were chanting as they tossed into the air colored balls which revolved around each other before falling lazily to the ground. To Corson the dreamer, the city resembled a sculpture, almost immobile overall yet composed of microscopic elements individually in motion.

In less than two minutes the city would be destroyed by nuclear missiles that were already on the way, bellowing in the stratosphere, leaving in their wake the complaint of the space tortured by their drive. The imminence of destruction seemed incredible to the dreamer, yet its exact instant was marked on the crystals of the two watches. He knew that he would escape the destruction and retain only the image of the city at peace. He would not witness the brightness of a thousand suns and the melting of the towers like warm candles and the eruption of lava from the bowels of the earth and the vaporization of bodies before they had time to catch fire and later—much later—the shriek of tortured air. He would know of its destruction only as a distant event, something historical and abstract.

And then he realized something which he did not remember, which his time machine was incapable of sparing him.

It happened abruptly. The city was tranquil. Then the woman started to scream. She tugged so violently at the chain around her neck that she broke it and flung the polished metal plate away from her. The children fled in panic, weeping. A cry that the very city seemed to utter assailed the stranger. It sprang from millions of throats, millions of mouths. It challenged the high pale towers. It sounded nothing like a human voice.

Corson heard the city shriek like a great beast tearing itself apart, bursting into a multitude of frightened cells that no longer shared anything except terror.

He wanted to put his hands over his ears, but could not. Now he remembered. The inhabitants of this city could foretell the future, sense just a few moments ahead, and they knew what was going to happen.

They knew bombs were going to fall. They would scream until the explosions overtook them. They already perceived the fire and the fierce light and the utter darkness.

And he, the stranger, the dreamer, knew there was nothing he could have done, that he had had no chance to warn them. He had not even had time to tell them of their end before they saw it with their inward sight. He was not to see the city die, but he was hearing it scream.

The long hand had nearly reached the fine red line, but it seemed to the stranger, the dreamer, that this final instant was lasting dreadfully long. A frightful thought jolted his mind: suppose the device on his chest was not a time machine? Suppose he was merely one of the inhabitants of the city, doomed like all of them to disappear?

He opened his mouth. The time machine operated. He was saved. Alone. Completely alone.

He was somewhere else and the cry was no longer audible. He tried to recall it. He knew he was dreaming and that he had had this dream before. On his wrists the two infallible chronometers marked an inexorable and identical time. He was the master of time. Before him lay a low and level city furrowed with canals, stretching along the shore of a violet sea.

He began to moan, alone, in silence which was barely disturbed by the song of birds. Someone very far off turned toward him, not understanding.

## CHAPTER 23

Darkness and six metal walls that scarcely left him room to move his hands. He was lying on his back. His weight felt about Earth-normal, plus or minus ten percent. He was no longer afraid.

He pushed hard against the lid of the box, but in vain. Then someone or something grazed the metal and a bright line appeared along one of its edges. A moment later the box opened out and Corson, blinded by a strong light, tried to sit up.

The air stank of chlorine. He had fallen into the clutches of the Urians. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he managed to make out three silhouettes leaning over him, vaguely humanoid, but with horny beaks, too-small heads each topped by a crest, long thin necks, scrawny arms, short stocky bodies with prominent sterna.

So he had gone clear around the universe only to wind up as a guinea pig under a Urian scalpel.

He expected it to hurt.

"Do not be afraid, man Corson," whistled one of the Urians.

Wooden-limbed, Corson managed to force his body into a sitting position and looked about him. The room was vast, hung with silken draperies, windowless and with no visible means of egress. It reminded him pretty much of how Urian interiors had been pictured at the time of the war, back on Earth.

*Do the overlords of war make a habit of delivering war criminals into the power of their enemies?*

A Urian who seemed to be older than the others was perched on a sort of throne which, to Corson, resembled a hen roost. Urians had evolved along a line very similar to that of Earthly birds. Their appearance suggested the fact, and it had been confirmed by dissection of dead bodies—at least that was the official story—which the humans had got hold of. In their brains the cortex was relatively underdeveloped, but by contrast the cerebellum was very large. Among Earthmen a lot of jokes had circulated about “bird-brained Urians.” But Corson had never fallen for that line. He knew that even on Earth certain birds, even including the common crow, displayed surprising intelligence, and he was only too well aware of the mental acuity of the Princes of Uria. Much of a human brain is devoted to decoding and interpreting sensory data, and a relatively small part to abstract reasoning. In the case of Urians, sensory powers were limited by human standards. Although their sight was generally keener than a man’s, their color perception was far inferior, while their hearing was so poor they had never invented any music apart from simple rhythm. Their sense of touch was handicapped by the structure of their prehensile organs—claws rather than hands—and by the vestigial down covering their bodies. But they displayed a remarkable gift for abstract reasoning and philosophical argument.

“So they have sent us a human,” the old Urian said with obvious distrust.

Corson cautiously tried setting a foot on the floor.

“Before you attempt anything rash,” the old Urian went on, “it would be best for me to advise you of certain facts. Not that we have anything to fear from you”—he pointed, and Corson realized the other three Urians were training weapons on him—“but we paid rather a lot for you, and I should be sorry to see you come to any harm.”

He rose and poured for himself a large mug of some cloudy liquid. Corson knew what it must be: a solution akin to domestic bleach on Earth. The Urians’ taste for ammonia had, in his day, been another popular subject for jokes.

“You’re a war criminal. You cannot leave this world without running the risk of I know not what punishment at the hands of your own kind. On this world, if you were free, you would very quickly learn that this drawback markedly reduces the range of options open

to you. Therefore you are obliged to deal with us, and even rely on us. You have no choice.”

He preened himself for a moment, long enough to let what he had said register in Corson’s mind. Then he continued, “For our part, we have need of a specialist in the art of warfare. We purchased you, at a high price as I mentioned, from a go-between you have no need to know about.”

He approached Corson with that waddling gait which made Urians so much resemble giant ducks, gorgeously clad in sumptuous fabrics, but mortally dangerous.

“I am Ngal R’nda. Remember that name, man Corson, for I have no intention of failing in what I plan to accomplish, nor of having to live with the knowledge of defeat, no matter how unlikely that may be. Moreover you are the only human to be acquainted with me in this guise. For the rest of your kind I am a peace-loving old fellow, rather cynical, toying with the arts after the human style, and a part-time historian. As far as those who stand before you are concerned”—he made a grand gesture—“I am the true Ngal R’nda, sole descendant of a long line of Urian Princes, hatched from a blue egg. You can have no idea, man Corson, what a blue shell used to mean in ancient times ... or what it still does mean today to a clawful of loyal initiates. More than six thousand years ago Princes of the Blue Shell ruled Uria. Alas, men came to us bringing lies by the shipload, and soon there was a war. A long and dreadful war, during which more than once Earth came close to perishing beneath the beak of Uria. But nobody won. Only the Princes of Uria lost. Slaughter and exhaustion spawned a bastard peace. Humans and Urians granted one another concessions on their respective planets as a gage of good will. But it turned out that Urians could not live on Earth without wasting away, so they gave up their so-called privileges. In contrast, here on Uria humans flourished, and in a little while those who had been hostages turned into masters. Their offspring outnumbered ours. Above all they showed that they were able to apply their coarse wits, with unbelievable doggedness, to problems beneath the dignity of the Princes of Uria, who were more concerned with higher meditation. Thus it came about that the Princes of Uria lost a war which the Earth people had not won and during which Uria had not tasted defeat Oh, the treachery, the foul treachery of peace!

“And worse was to follow. Shaken by war and undermined by the debasing contact of humans, Urian culture abandoned the tradition

of respect for the Blue Egg. False egalitarian myths were sown among us. The Urians lost their pride, vegetated, yielded their world inch by inch to humans without even fighting for it

“Days turned into centuries, then millennia. But the purest dawn of Uria—let me call it the finest flower, to make it clear for you—has not forgotten. Perhaps the time has come to shake off our yoke. According to what we hear, the Galactic Security Office is in trouble, and will need to give up its meddling for a century or two. That’s more time than we need to rebuild a fleet and take the road of conquest again. But before that we must seize back our own world and cleanse it of humans.”

He darted his gaze toward Corson, who stared back unmoving at those vertical irises between double lids.

“And this is where you come in. We have forgotten the practice of war. Not the theory, because it is our custom to speculate on every kind of subject, but the hard practice. We possess fearful weapons, the very ones which the most farsighted of the Urian Princes hid in the depths of the planet over six thousand years ago. But we need a cunning, stubborn animal like you to tell us when and where to strike. I do not underestimate humans; I merely find them contemptible, which is not the same thing. And during my long nights of meditation I have been saying to myself: use against humans that keenest of weapons, another human.

“Raise no objections, man Corson. Your interest lies with us. You have been judged, condemned, and discarded by your own people. There is no safety for you among them. Whereas if you enter the service of the glorious Blue Egg of Uria you will be free, as free as any Urian, and you will come to lord it over human slaves. If you were to decide to oppose us, man Corson, your will power alone would not prevail. We are expert in forbidden sciences and we have not forgotten the experiments we carried out six thousand years ago on some of your species. I am afraid, though, that afterward you might not be much like yourself.

“And you are not the only individual at our disposal, man Corson. These days there is a considerable trade in warriors. On many worlds there are beings who desire to get rid of the overweening Security Office and who are buying mercenaries at a good price. For the most part there is nothing the latter want more than revenge. Hate for their own species multiplies their skills by ten. I hope, man Corson, for your sake and ours, that we have not been misled concerning



your talents. For you are committed to a course from which there is only one way out: to win for us!"

"I understand," Corson said.

Urians had a reputation for being talkative, and this one was no exception. But he had not mentioned what Corson most wanted to know: the date. Had he returned before or after his first visit to Uria? Did this new danger coincide with the other two, the Monster at large in the forest and Veran's lust for conquest? Was that coincidence not far too great? Was there some compensatory principle which made it possible to delay a catastrophe, but not avoid it?

And that name, Ngal R'nda. Floria Van Nelle had uttered it: "Ngal R'nda is one of my best friends." Since, at the time, he had attached little importance to it, it was odd that he should now recall it so distinctly.

He realized that asking for a date would be pointless; he had no idea what the year of his first visit was called in the Urian calendar. But there was one landmark he might invoke.

"Has a wild pegasone been reported recently on Uria?"

"You ask peculiar questions, man Corson. But I see no harm in answering that. No wild pegasone has been seen on this world for centuries and perhaps millennia."

*So there are two alternatives. Either all this is happening before I landed on Uria, or else it's just afterward, while the Monster is hidden in a burrow getting ready to bear its eighteen thousand young. In the second case, the margin of error is reduced to at most six months . . .*

"Very well," Corson said. "You've convinced me. I'll march with you. That is, if you have an army."

"An army is an unsophisticated means of waging war."

"What is your means, then?"

"Blackmail—assassination—propaganda."

"Very sophisticated indeed!" Corson said ironically. "But you're going to need an army as well."

"We have weapons that do not require operators," the Urian said. "From this spot I can wipe out anything on the planet from a whole city to a single twig. Or any human being, wherever he may be . . . including you, of course."

"Then why do you need me?"

"You are to tell us what targets are most suitable for attack, and what rate of escalation should be adopted. Your suggestions will be

carefully analyzed before being put into effect. You will also be in charge of negotiations with the humans. After that they will detest you so much you will no longer be tempted to betray us.”

“What conditions are you laying down for their surrender?”

“To begin with, nine out of ten women are to be put to death. Human breeding must be kept within reasonable bounds. To kill men would be pointless, for one man may fertilize many women. But women are the weak spot in your species.”

“They won’t let that be done to them,” Corson said. “They’ll defend themselves like demons. Humans can be very tough if they’re needed too often.”

“They will have no option,” said the Urian. “It will be that, or extermination.”

Corson scowled.

“I’m tired and hungry,” he said. “Are you intending to go to war this minute, or do I have time to rest and refresh myself . . . and think things over?”

“Yes, there is time,” said the Urian.

He gave a signal to the guards, who lowered their guns and closed on Corson.

“Take him away,” the old Urian said. “And treat him gently. He is worth more than his weight in element 164.”

## CHAPTER 24

Corson was gently awakened by a Urian whose cropped crest and yellow tunic indicated he was of a low servant caste.

“Man Corson,” the native said, “you must prepare yourself for the ceremony.”

Too sleepy for the moment to ask what ceremony, Corson allowed himself to be led into an ablution room whose fittings were ill designed for humans. The water stank of chlorine and he used it sparingly; nonetheless he managed to wash and even shave. Then the Urian gave him a yellow tunic like the one he himself wore. Although it had obviously been altered specially for Corson’s benefit, the sleeves were too short and the hem dangled around his feet. The Urians’ vaunted knowledge of human anatomy did not extend to the tailor level, it appeared.

Then he was taken to a refreshment room. Human and Urian metabolisms differed so radically that what was food for one was poison for the other, and at first Corson was dubious about what was set before him. However, the giant bird reassured him.

Having sampled the food and found it better than it looked, he inquired what ceremony he was being invited to.

“A Presentation of the Egg, man Corson,” the native answered in a solemn tone.

“What egg?” Corson asked with his mouth full.

He thought the Urian had suddenly been taken ill. Chirping noises issued from his beak, which Corson assumed to be either oaths or some sort of ritual formula.

“The Most Honorable Blue Egg of the Prince!” the servant forced out at last, as though his bill were stuffed with capital letters.

“You don’t say!” Corson exclaimed in surprise.

“No human has ever witnessed a Presentation of the Egg before. You are extraordinarily lucky, and it’s a great honor that Prince R’nda is bestowing on you.”

Corson nodded. “I can believe that.”

“And now,” the Urian said, rising, “it is time to go.”

He escorted Corson to a large elliptical room, devoid of openings apart from its door. Since falling into the clutches of the Urians, Corson had not seen a single opening of any kind giving on to the exterior. This secret base must be buried far below ground.

A hundred or so Urians were crowded into the room, preserving a respectful silence. They parted to let Corson and his guide through to take their station at the front, and he noticed that those present wore tunics of different colors and were grouped by hues. Corson and the Urian servant were the only ones wearing yellow in the foremost rank. All the others were uniformly dressed in violet, shading toward blue. Corson heard a cackling noise around him and had no trouble in guessing that his neighbors must be high-class nobles if they allowed themselves to indulge in such a breach of etiquette. Turning his head, he looked toward the back of the room. Behind those in violet, others wearing red were dutifully waiting; beyond them again were more in orange, and right at the far end were a few in yellow standing with their heads bowed.

Before him, almost at the extremity of the ellipse formed by the walls, an oblong block of metal reared up. Was it a chest, a table, or an altar? A shiver ran down his spine.

*I hope I’m not scheduled to be sacrificed*, he thought half jokingly. *I’d rather not be cast in the role of one of those young virgins you find in historical novels!*

In fact he had nothing of the kind to fear. The Urians had never invented the concept of divinities to be placated. They only accorded symbolic honors to their dead. Their world view—if that was the proper term—was founded exclusively on the idea of the clan. That

was regarded as immortal, and the individual only as its transitory appendage.

The lights went down. An opening appeared in the wall at the tip of the ellipse, behind the block of steel. It widened, and complete silence fell. Ngal R'nda stepped through. He wore a sumptuous toga of brilliant blue, almost metallic, its folds trailing on the ground. He took his station behind the four-square block, facing the audience, raised his scrawny arms over his head, and declaimed a few words in archaic Urian, to which the crowd uttered a response in a shriller tone.

*They are very much like us, Corson thought, in spite of our different origins. Is that pure chance? Or must intelligence always follow more or less the same paths?*

Ngal R'nda fixed his yellow eyes on Corson. In a whistling voice he said, "Look, man of Earth, and see what no human has ever seen before!"

The metal block opened and slowly there rose from it an engraved column supporting a huge eggshell mounted on three claws of gold.

Corson almost burst out laughing. So this was the blue egg that Ngal R'nda was so proud of having hatched from! Someone must carefully have collected the pieces and stuck them together. From where he stood he could see the joins, like the sutures of a polished skull. What Ngal R'nda wanted was to put his followers in mind of his inheritance. Showing them the Blue Egg, he evoked the glorious saga of Uria, the long ancestry of their warlike princes. Without this egg Ngal R'nda, regardless of his personal talents, amounted to nothing. The egg was the indisputable sign, the ultimate proof, that he belonged to a family described in legend.

In spite of himself Corson was fascinated by the egg. The scientific part of his mind recalled scraps of history. Before the First Communal Civilization, back on Old Earth, families had played a role comparable—at least superficially—to that of the clans on Uria. In those days it was best to be born into a powerful family. The brutal destruction of the Communal Civilization, brought about by the Coexistence War, and the subsequent dispersion among the stars of mankind fleeing a planet rendered temporarily uninhabitable, had not however restored to families their former importance. Sociologists—at the time of Corson's "first life," as he was now coming to call it—claimed that that was because man had passed a threshold of technological achievement whose effects could not be undone. But

why then had the Urians reached a comparable level without evolving past the stage of a society based on heredity? In the light of historical science, that smacked of paradox.

The solution, Corson told himself, was under his very nose. The Urians—or their upper caste, at any rate—must have practiced a ruthless system of genetic selection almost since the dawn of their history. They had discovered, possibly by trial and error, that the color of an eggshell had some connection with the intrinsic qualities of the Urian who would hatch from it. And no doubt it was much less emotionally exacting to decline to incubate, or even to smash, a motionless egg than to expose or kill a helpless squalling little creature like a baby . . . though even that had been done by some human societies. Still, the fact that the practice had been institutionalized indicated that humans and Urians were indeed profoundly different.

“Look, man of Earth,” the Urian repeated. “When I die, this egg will be pulverized as were those of my ancestors, and its dust will be mingled with my ashes. Behold the egg I came from, which first was broken by my own beak! Behold the egg which sheltered the last Prince of Uria!”

Uproar broke out at the back of the room. Ngal R’nda made a sign and the egg vanished back into the chest. A yellow-clad Urian who had with difficulty forced a way through the throng pushed Corson aside and bowed before his prince, chirping in an acid-shrill voice.

Ngal R’nda listened, then rounded on Corson and spoke in Pangal.

“A horde of armed humans has taken up a position fifty kilometers from here. They are accompanied by Monsters—that is, by pegasones. They are fortifying a camp. Is this some act of treason on your part?”

*Veran!*

“Not at all, Prince,” Corson said, trying to hide a smile. “As I told you, you need an army. And it’s just arrived.”

## CHAPTER 25

They were walking through the forest.

It was strange to think that at any moment now he was about to fall, along with Antonella, into Veran's hands. . .

A circle was being closed. Somewhere out yonder he was living his life for the first time, in ignorance, and here he already knew the outcome: the suffering, the camp, the flight in the wake of the masked stranger, the voyage through time, the fruitless stopover on the mausoleum world, the mad leap to the end of the universe, Aergystal, its battles, the balloon, the earthquake, the other side of heaven, the god's speech, the return to Uria. Here and now.

Yonder he had entered, yonder he was this moment entering, a maze that ran clear around the universe and doubled back so tightly on itself that Corson was no longer separated from his own past by more than the thickness of one of its walls.

Now the maze stretched ahead of him, as completely unfathomable as it had been in the past. But because he knew what was going to happen to the *other* Corson, this scrap of the maze he was at present passing through took on a little sense. Back then, he had known nothing of the third threat looming over Uria, nor had he known how to cope with the other two. Now a faint idea had come to him. The future would reveal the rest, he was sure of that.

He had an intuition. That man from the mist, that pegasone rider with a mask full of darkness whom Antonella had said resembled him . . . would *be* him. Therefore he did have a future. The maze would fold back on itself again, and perhaps again and perhaps an infinite number of times, and he would repeatedly brush past himself until finally his selves would meet. And that Corson-to-come would know a new section of the maze because he would have explored it, and perhaps he would be able to grasp the plan and purpose of it, and thus apply the proper touches to change his life.

He recalled what the god had said. In that far distant future they controlled their own existence, and their destiny was no mere thread stretched from birth to death, but a whole fabric, or rather a multidimensional warp and woof outlining a space. The gods, he said to himself, create a universe simply by becoming themselves.

He also knew that in the future he would meet Antonella again because she recalled having met him. And he would lose her again because she had fallen in love with him and was sorry that—at the time when she had picked him up on the street in Dyoto—he had found out. He told himself that now in his turn he had fallen in love with her and regretted it and nonetheless hoped that at long last the tangled skeins of their lives would knot together. That was a possibility still hidden in the folds of time. There were these two points—fixed, he presumed, and known by his future self—where he would set himself free and where he would meet Antonella, and he hoped that they defined a curve which, somewhere in time, would be shared by both of them.

But for the moment he had to wait for the future to happen. Because the predetermination of those two points depended on what he did. He must carry out his duty well. Who had imposed that duty on him? Perhaps another self, still further away from the present, who had chosen to disperse the clouds shadowing Uria. What more trustworthy ally could he have chosen than himself? So that the man of tomorrow might live, the snares of the past must be avoided by the man of yesterday who knew nothing about them.

He recalled the hesitations of Ngai R'nda as though they were already ancient history, whereas in fact they were only a few hours old. The Prince protested that he had no need of Veran. He distrusted humans and despised them so much that he would only listen to them when he had bought them. The weapons he showed off would be sufficient, in his view: gray balls of metal which could unleash



lightning on the other hemisphere, glass cannon as slim as needles which could blast through mountains, and images to be projected on the sky which could afflict a whole army with amnesia. And the whistling voice declared that in the war of six thousand years ago the Urians had been beaten by traitors infiltrating their ranks and not by force. Corson almost believed him. Granted, Earthmen also had shields of terror and lances of nullity. The match might have been an even one. But the outcome of the present was therefore all the more certain. Those humans, and those giant birds, who took the side of peace would last no more than a day.

Corson had said again, "You need an army."

Stubbornly, and bearing in his mind the image of millions of women dead, millions of men enslaved, he had argued the need to occupy the territory you conquered, and repeated with determination, "You do need an army!"

And he had added, "Tomorrow you will have command of space. You'll need a fleet, and specialists to man it. How many people can you count on?"

The Urian had seemed to ponder, and Corson pressed his advantage. "How many loyal supporters have you?"

With surprising frankness the Urian had answered, fixing him with those flat yellow eyes, starred with an overbright speck of blue: "Five hundred, possibly a thousand. But the Urians who are now wallowing in human styes, at Dyoto and Sifar and Nulkr and Riden, will fall in behind me under the banner of the Blue Egg."

"Yes, of course they will. How many of them?"

"Perhaps thirty million."

"So few!"

He had bitten his lip at that. During the long-ago war, not millions but billions of Urians had threatened the Solar Powers. No doubt, given the opportunity by galactic peace, many had emigrated to other worlds. But Corson could guess at another factor, the story of a race doomed by peace because a taste for war and conquest was inscribed too deeply in their genes. Before him was the rage and cruelty distilled by a long period of decadence.

There were men who owed to their heredity an uncontrollable taste for aggression. They possessed one gene too many. Although physiologically viable, to a certain extent they were monsters. Society, in the old days at any rate, exterminated them or shut them away, gave them a chance to escape their fate. Was it possible that

whole species might become, from that point of view, monstrous—with no choice but to fight or wither away? The destiny of men was not all that different; they had just been lucky to have a temperament enabling them to endure peace.

Corson was surprised to find himself thinking: *the Urians have no future.*

Which implied something else. War *has no future.*

But right now he was compelled to wage one.

He had said, “You *do* need an army. There is the question of Occupying forces. Veran is a mercenary. Promise him plenty of battles and an empire afterward. And there’s another thing. I mentioned that wild pegasone. In a short while there are going to be thousands of them ravaging this planet. How are you going to cope with them? How are you going to avoid being threatened on your home world? Check your records. Consult your experts. Pegasones can stand up to your weapons. All they have to do is jump through time. Veran knows how to track them down and wipe them out. He has tame pegasones. Make an alliance with him, then. Liquidate him later. Are you afraid of one old sweat and a few hundred soldiers?”

The Urian closed his twin eyelids.

“You shall go and parley with him, man Corson. You will be escorted by two of my staff. If you try to cheat me, you will die.”

Corson knew he had gained the little leverage he was after.

## CHAPTER 26

They were walking through the forest and the dead scales of trees that were nothing like Earthly trees were crunching under Corson's feet. The Urians went without a sound. Fragile creatures, those. They had inherited hollow bones from their ancestors. He could lay them out, croaking, with two punches. But they were grasping deadly weapons in their talons, and moreover he had need of them.

His first night on the planet, the darkness had been as deep as this. And—just like now—he had eavesdropped on the noises of the forest, trying to make out where the Monster had laired. Now he had to deal with a new monster, a human one called Veran.

They had left their floater behind, far from the camp, hoping that they might approach unnoticed in the confusion caused by the attack, or rather by his and Antonella's getaway. He consulted his watch. This very instant they must be crossing the camp under the guidance of the unknown who was himself. They were approaching the pegasones. The stranger with a mask of midnight was harnessing one of the beasts. He was helping Corson and Antonella to mount. All three of them, and two pegasones, were going to vanish into the sky, into time.

Any moment now!

His first night on this planet . . . Then he hadn't dared make a

light, either, but this time he was wearing on his corneas contact lenses that enabled him to see in the infrared. The ground, except in patches, looked as black as a starless sky. The tree trunks were reddish. Their scale-like leaves, site of relatively intense energy processes, were orange. Here and there a stone on the ground was giving off stored heat from the daytime and showed as a pale speck. He saw something luminous sneaking silently away between the bushes—a frightened animal.

He could smell burned resin and melted sand. The camp was close.

*Is this to be a historic moment?* he wondered. So many things hung on it for this planet. Would Veran accept? What would happen if Veran's men fired on sight, if he was killed? Then the alliance would never ensue, the monsters and the Monsters would continue to roam at liberty.

There would be a war. Maybe two. Between the humans and the natives, and between Uria and the Galactic Council or the Security Office or—whatever you called it, there was bound to be some organization. Something would snap. A crack would propagate across the centuries and shake the future. He was sure of that. There was no other reason for his presence. They had sent him to plug a breach in history without telling him how or why.

A historic moment! A place and a date where several time lines crossed, where he had met himself without knowing it and where now he was avoiding himself by choice. A historic moment! As though anybody would ever remember it! As though history were composed of battles and alliances and treaties signed and torn up. No, the opposite was the case. In the deceptive silence of the forest he understood that what deserved the appellation of "history" was the reverse of war. History was like a fabric. Warfare was so many tears in it, and wars so many thorns bloodstained from ripping that fabric which always healed itself with the persistence of a living creature.

Or, he corrected himself with a worse pang of alarm than any the sight of Veran's sentries could have evoked in him, *has always healed itself... so far!*

He, this person Corson, felt himself to be the heir of millions and billions of men born and dead in the past, who with their bodies and their lives had woven the grand tapestry of history. He felt answerable to billions upon billions of men yet to come. He was going to give them a chance and offer a solution to those who were dead.

This potential fight wasn't even an important war, yet no war any-

where—anywhen—had ever been more important. A battle in which spaceships by the millions clashed against each other, like those of six thousand years before, was no more *important* than the first squabble between cavemen throwing undressed stones. It was a matter of your point of view.

The curtain of the trees grew thinner. Crazy lights appeared. A fine purple trace, which Corson knew to be deadly, cut across the night in a dotted line broken where tree trunks obscured it. At a sign from him the Urians stopped dead, in perfect silence. He could barely make out their quick shallow breathing.

They had agreed that Corson would go forward by himself and talk alone to Veran until a preliminary agreement was reached, but they had attached a sound pickup to his neck. He did not doubt that Ngal R'nda would be listening.

The dotted line vanished. Corson hesitated.

A calm voice hailed them from the camp: "Corson, I know you're there!"

It was Veran. Corson strode forward toward the harsh disc of a searchlight, pretending not to notice the weapons trained on his back and now on his chest as well.

"So you've come back. And found time to change your clothes, I see!" The voice was tinged with sarcasm rather than anger; Veran knew how to control himself. "And you've tucked the woman away in a safe place!"

"But I'm here," Corson said simply.

"I knew you'd come back. A short reconnaissance into the future told me that. Just as I knew where to find you the first time. After all, it was you who picked this spot for me. I presume you had a good reason for offering me a base to refit after our setback at Aergistal, and it follows that you must have something to tell me."

"I have a proposition to put to you," Corson said.

"Come a little closer. I can't leave a gap in my perimeter indefinitely, you know."

Corson walked forward. The purple line reappeared behind him. He felt in his bones its characteristic vibration.

"So, Corson, what have you to offer?"

"An alliance. And don't you need one!"

Veran did not even blink. His gray eyes shone in the glare of the searchlights. He looked like a crude statue, barely outlined. His men were a match for him. Two stood at his back, one on either side,

motionless, frozen, but fingers no doubt ready on the triggers of the little guns they held, like tiny cannon with points instead of muzzles; one might have taken them for toys. Six more men formed a rough semicircle at whose center stood Corson. They were just far enough away for him to be unable to reach any of them with a desperate bound, even though it cost him his life, before they had time to fire. These were professionals all right, and in a way that was a comfort. They would not risk shooting on impulse before receiving the order or before being genuinely threatened.

Only Veran held no gun. His hands were out of sight behind his back, right fingers no doubt clutching left wrist; it was a customary stance for colonels. In another life, another age, Corson had often had to deal with colonels.

Veran would not be an easy man to persuade.

"I could kill you," he said. "I haven't done so because of that message you sent me. It bailed me out of a nasty jam. I'm waiting for an explanation, though."

"Naturally," Corson said.

"It was you who sent the message, was it? Or could it have been someone else?"

"Such as who?" Corson answered in a level voice.

A message signed by him that he didn't remember sending! Which he would not even have known how to address to Veran. And which, beyond doubt, arranged a meeting place, identified this world, this spot, and this moment, and suggested a means of getting away from Aergystal at a point when the situation grew too hot for comfort. A message which he would send later on. That message might form part of the plan he was beginning to construct. Which suggested that in the future there would be another version of the scheme, more solid, more detailed. A version which he would perhaps evolve himself when he knew—and was able to tackle—a lot more. Already, though, he was uncovering snippets of it.

But if something went wrong, if Veran did not consent to the alliance, would he still be able to send that message? Since he knew of its existence, and without it Veran would not have come to Uria, he would be obliged to send it. But when would that happen? When would he think of it—now, later, when? Would he send it if he was unaware that Veran had received it?

It was no good. Trying to work out a strategy, or even a theory of war, in time was too difficult. First he must make a practical experiment.

## *The Overlords of War*

“You’re taking a long time to think before you talk,” Veran said. “I don’t like that.”

“I have a great deal to discuss. Out here is not the ideal place.”

Veran made a sign. One of his men said, “He’s not carrying a gun. Nor a bomb. He does have a transmitter on his neck, but it’s sound only, no pictures.”

“Fair enough,” Veran said. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 27

“Every man has an objective in life,” Veran mused. “Even if he doesn’t realize it. What I don’t understand, Corson, is what you’re after. Some people are driven by ambition, like me, some by fear, others still—in certain epochs—by a lust for money. And whether they make out well or badly, their actions are like arrows all pointing toward their target. But I can’t see your target, Corson, and I don’t like that. I don’t enjoy dealing with someone whose objective I can’t comprehend.”

“Say that I’m motivated by both ambition and fear, then,” Corson answered. “I want to become important, with the help of the Urians. And I’m scared because I’m a war criminal, a hunted man. Like you, Veran.”

“Colonel Veran, if you please!”

“Like *yon*—*Colonel*. I have no special wish to go back to Aergistal, to live out an endless stupid war. Does that make sense?”

“You do know, then,” Veran said slowly, “that at Aergistal wars never have any point? That there’s nothing to conquer up there?”

“I did get that impression.”

“Your attitude is overlogical. When an enemy wants to make you believe he’s going to execute a certain maneuver, he provides good solid reasons for doing it. He hides behind them, and does something else. And there you are walking into a trap.”

“You want me to break down and cry? Because I’m a poor devil lost in space and time, dragged off Aergistal by a slave dealer and sold to a bunch of fanatical birds? Sorry!”

“That message!” Veran snapped.

Corson laid his hands flat on the table and with an effort compelled his muscles to relax.

“You said you sent it to me with the help of the Urians. I’ve mislaid it. Can you remind me of what it said?”

“I made a date with you here, Colonel. I told you how to get away from Aergistal. I—”

“The actual words, Corson!”

Corson stared down at his hands. It looked as though the blood was drawing back from under the nails, leaving the flesh chalk-white.

“I’ve forgotten the exact words, Colonel.”

“I think you don’t know them, Corson,” Veran said. “I don’t believe you’ve sent that message yet. If you were working for someone who had sent it using your name, you’d know what was in it. That message must belong to your future, and I don’t know if I can believe in your having any.”

“Assuming your theory is correct, doesn’t it follow that in the future I shall perform a great service for you?”

“You know very well what it implies.”

There was a silence. At length, staring at Corson, Veran said, “I can’t kill you. Not before you’ve sent that message. Oh, it’s not the idea of being prevented from killing you that bothers me. It’s the idea of not being able to make you afraid. I don’t like that. I don’t like to make use of someone I can neither understand nor frighten.”

“Stalemate,” Corson said.

“What?”

“A term from the game of chess. It means there can be neither winner nor loser.”



"I don't gamble," Veran said. "I'm too fond of winning."

"Oh, it's not a gambling game. More of an exercise in strategy."

"A sort of war game? With time as an unknown factor?"

"No, without involving time."

Veran laughed. "Then it would be too simple for me. No fun at all."

*Time, Corson thought. Here's a neat bit of clockwork. I'm protected by a message that I shall probably send, whose phrasing I don't know and whose very existence was news to me an hour ago. I'm putting my feet in my own tracks to avoid traps that I don't even know are there!*

"And what will happen if I am killed, and don't send the message?"

"You're worried about the philosophical aspect of the matter. I don't know anything about that. Maybe someone else will send me an identical message. Or some other message. Or I'll never get a message at all and stay there and get chopped to bits."

For the first time he smiled, and Corson saw that he had no teeth, only a bar of white and sharpened metal.

"I may already be a prisoner, or worse!"

"One doesn't stay dead for long at Aergistal," Corson said.

"You know that too!"

"I told you I'd been there."

"Hmm! But the worst thing isn't being killed—it's losing a battle."

"But here you are."

"And here I mean to stay. When you're juggling with possibilities, the important thing is the present. One discovers that sooner or later. I have a fresh chance. I intend to take advantage of it."

"Just so long as you don't kill me," Corson said.

"I'm sorry I can't," Veran answered. "Not because I particularly want to, but on principle."

"You can't even hold on to me. At a moment which I shall choose, you'll have to let me go so that I have the chance to send the message."

"I'll go with you," Veran said.

Corson had the impression the man's confidence was waning.

"Then I won't send it."

"I'll make you send it."

A question which epitomized the problem sprang to Corson's mind. He realized he had found the flaw in Veran's argument.

"Then why don't you send it yourself?"

Veran shook his head. "You must be joking. Aergistal is at the other end of the universe. I wouldn't even know what direction to send it in. Without the coordinates you gave me, I'd never have found the way to this planet in a billion years. Besides, consider the Law of Non-regressive Information."

"What sort of law is that?"

"A transmitter cannot be its own receiver," Veran said patiently. "I can't warn myself. That would unleash a series of oscillations in time which would eventually damp each other out to get rid of the disturbance. The space between the point of origin and the point of arrival would be annulled along with everything contained in it. That's why I haven't shown you the text of your message. I haven't lost it—it's here under my elbow. But I don't want to reduce your chances of sending it."

"The universe won't tolerate contradictions," Corson said.

"That's a sadly anthropomorphic point of view. The universe tolerates anything. You can even show mathematically that it's always possible to construct systems of propositions that are rigorously contradictory and mutually exclusive, no matter how powerful the systems may be."

"I thought mathematics was self-consistent," Corson said softly, "From a logical standpoint. The theory of continuity—"

"You surprise me as much by what you don't know as by what you do, Corson. The theory of continuity was undermined three thousand years ago, local time. Besides, it doesn't have much application to your case. What is true is that any theory based on an infinite number of postulates must always contain its own contradiction. It destroys itself, it dissolves into nothing, but that doesn't stop it from existing. On paper."

*So that's why I have to grope my way down the alleys of time, Corson thought. My counterpart in the future can't tell me what I'm supposed to do. Yet there are gaps, and scraps of information leak through that help me to find my bearings. There must be another kind of physics which takes no account of such disturbances. If I tried to get that paper away from him and force the future to—*

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Veran said, as though he had read Corson's mind. "Personally I don't set too much store by the theory of non-regressive information, but I've never dared infringe the law."

Yet, as Corson knew, in the very far future the gods would be do-

## *The Overlords of War*

ing it all the time. They would play with possibilities. The threshold of their interference would be so high the entire universe would be affected. With all barriers down, it would open up, liberate itself, multiply, putting an end to compulsion, making nonsense of what the moving finger writes. Man would cease to be imprisoned in a tunnel linking birth to death.

“Don’t sit there mooning, Corson,” Veran cut in. “You told me that these birds have fantastic weapons they will put at my disposal. You’ve said I’ll never catch the wild pegasone which you claim is at large on this planet without the Urians’ help. And they need me to wreak their revenge for them, they need a trained fighting man to undertake conquests on their behalf and also to tame the pegasone before it breeds and probably brings down on their heads the Security Office, in which case their guns will be well and truly spiked. Maybe you’re right. It all fits together so neatly, doesn’t it?”

He shot out his hand far too quickly for Corson to ward it off or even to dodge back. The mercenary’s fingers brushed his neck. But Veran wasn’t trying to strangle him. He caught hold of the chain on which Corson’s transmitter hung, no larger than a lucky charm. He shut it in a small black shell which he had concealed in the palm of his hand. Corson seized his wrist, but Veran disengaged with a crisp movement.

“We can talk openly now. They won’t hear us any more.”

“They’ll be worried by our silence,” Corson said, at once relieved and alarmed.

“You underestimate me, friend,” Veran said coldly. “They will go on hearing our voices. We shall be chatting about the weather, the art of war, the value of an alliance . . . Our voices, the tempo of our conversation, the length of our pauses, and even the sound of our breathing have been analyzed. Why do you think I went on gossiping for such a long time? Now a little gadget will send them a conversation which may be a trifle boring but as educational as you could wish. There remains one more precaution I must take. I’m going to give you another bit of jewelry.”

He made no sign, but Corson felt himself grasped by strong hands. Fingers he did not see forced his head back. For a moment he thought he was going to have his throat cut. Why kill him now—and in such a messy fashion? Did Veran enjoy being splattered with the blood of his victims?

He felt cold metal at his throat even as he reminded himself Veran had said he could not be killed because of the message.

A tiny catch clicked. The hands let go. Corson felt his neck. A collar had been put on him, light but bulky, like those he had seen some of Veran's men wearing.

"I hope it doesn't inconvenience you," Veran said. "You'll get used to it. You're likely to wear it a long time, perhaps all your life. It's fitted with two separate fuses. It will explode if you try to remove it, and believe me the bang will be big enough to blow you back to Aergistal along with anyone else who's around at the time. And it will inject a very efficient poison into you if you ever try and use any kind of weapon against me or my army, from a club to a transfixer, which is the nastiest gadget I've ever run into. It will even do that if you give orders which might lead to someone else using a weapon against me, even if you get involved in planning a battle with me on the other side. The whole beauty of the thing is that you will trigger it yourself wherever you may be in space or time. It's set to register a specific conscious aggression. You can hate me as much as you like, destroy me in your dreams a hundred times a night, and you will run no risk. And you can fight like a lion. But not against me or my men. You might conceivably try sabotage, but leave me to worry about that. You see, Corson? You can be my ally or stay neutral, but you can't be my enemy. And if you think that's an insult to your dignity, console yourself with the thought that all my personal guards wear the same device."

He gave Corson a satisfied look.

"Is that what you said was called a stalemate?"

"Something of the sort," Corson admitted. "But it's going to surprise the Urians."

"They'll see the point of it. Moreover they've already received a censored version of our chat. And their little transmitter isn't as innocent as it looks. At a suitable signal it can release enough heat to kill you. But if they were a bit cleverer they would use an automatic fuse. Well! I imagine you could use a drink?"

"I certainly could," Corson said.

From a drawer in the table Veran produced a flagon and two crystal goblets. He half filled them, gave Corson a friendly nod, and took a swig.

"I hope you don't resent what I've done to you. I like you, Corson, and I need you, too. But I can't trust you. Everything fits together too

neatly. And the only reason it fits is because you are here, you were there, you will be wherever else. I don't even know what game you're playing, what drives you, deep inside. What you're suggesting to me is treason against humanity. You want me to put myself at the disposal of fanatical birds whose only dream is to destroy mankind, in exchange for my personal safety and ultimately a hell of a lot of power. Take it that I am capable of accepting. But what about you, Corson? You don't seem like a traitor to your species. Are you?"

"I have no alternative," Corson said.

"For a man acting under compulsion you're singularly enterprising. You manage to persuade these birds to make an alliance with me and come and negotiate the deal yourself. More to the point, you bring me here to make it possible. Fine. Assume you were to catch me in a trap. I disappear. You stay with the birds. You've betrayed your species once, by handing me over to beings who from your point of view are worth no more than I am, who aren't even human, and you know you'll have to start again. That doesn't sound like you. The birds wouldn't notice because they don't really know humans, because they think of you as a wild beast which is likely to rob their nests but which can be tamed, or rather cowed. But I've seen thousands of soldiers like you, Corson. Quite incapable of betraying their species, their country, even their generals. Oh, it's not the result of inbred virtue, even though they may be led to believe so, but of conditioning.

"So? One other possibility remains. You're trying to save mankind. You think that Uria, and later on this sector of space, would be better conquered by a man than by one of these feathered fanatics. So you bring me here. You propose an alliance with the Urians because you guess that it will be unstable, that a quarrel will break out sooner or later when the terms of the contract have been fulfilled, and that I'll exterminate the Urians. Maybe then you could get rid of me? You don't even have to say so aloud. It's useless to invoke my help against the Urians if there's a risk of my betraying you. You know the union is potentially explosive."

"Don't forget the wild pegasone," Corson said coldly.

"I shan't. I need it, so at one blow I can deliver Uria from this other danger as well. Am I wrong, Corson?"

"Will you accept my terms?" Corson said.

Veran gave a crooked smile.

"Not before I've taken some precautions."

## CHAPTER 28

This time, they were creeping along the corridors of the cosmos. Through the perceptions of the pegasone Corson could actually *see* time. The beast's tendrils were coiled around his wrists and stroking his temples. Now and then he felt a pang of nausea. Veran, who was hanging on the other side of the pegasone and controlling it, had insisted that Corson must learn to stare time in the face. He hoped that Corson would be able to guide him not only through the maze of the underground city but also through the labyrinth of Ngal R'nda's life.

They were stealing among the crevasses of reality, in a present that was always new. A creature with very acute senses might have noticed a shadow move, possibly blurred colors, or—with a lot of luck—a vast and dreadful phantom. Before it had blinked, brushed away a nonexistent grain of dust, they would have melted into air or through a wall. And if the light were bright enough to show details, it would have revealed no more than a flat transparent outline. The pegasone never remained synchronized with the present for more than a fraction of a second, just long enough to let Veran and Corson get their bearings. For them walls, pillars, furniture, were a mere mist. Living creatures and anything that moved remained invisible. It was the

other side of the coin. One can scarcely spy without the risk of being seen, nor hide without becoming blind.

"It's a pity you didn't get to know this base properly," Veran had said.

"I asked for a week or two," Corson had protested.

A shrug. "Some risks I take, others I don't. I'm not going to hang around for a week while you and these birds rig traps for me."

"What if someone spots us?"

"Hard to say. Maybe nothing. Maybe a timequake. Ngal R'nda may realize what's going on and no longer trust you when you meet him again. Or he might decide to forestall you and launch his attack right away. We'd better not be seen. We mustn't introduce random factors and change history in ways that might affect us. We'll go alone. No escort. No heavy weapons. To use a gun in a past that one derives from is suicidal. I hope you realize that."

"So it's impossible to set traps in the past."

Veran had smiled broadly, displaying the spiked bar which had replaced his teeth.

"I'll be satisfied to introduce a tiny modification, a sub-threshold change which won't be noticed but which I can exploit at the proper moment. You're a valuable man, you know, Corson. You've shown me Ngal R'nda's weak point."

"And I have to come along?"

"Think I'm fool enough to leave you behind? Besides, you know the place we're going to."

"But the Urians will notice that I'm not here. There won't be anything for them to listen to." He touched the black shell around the transmitter he wore, which altered whatever was said automatically into material fitter for Urian consumption.

"We might chance removing it, but that would probably make it emit a warning signal. No, we'll gamble on a short silence. We'll only be away from the present for a few seconds. How old do you think this bird is?"

"I don't know," Corson answered after a brief hesitation. "Old for his species. And Urians live longer than humans—at least they did in my day. He must be about two hundred. Maybe two hundred and fifty if there's been a major advance in geriatrics."

"We'll take the plunge," Veran had said, satisfied. "There's no risk of their picking up messages from your gewgaw before they've even put it around your neck, anyhow."

And now here they were haunting the alleys of time. They had slipped into the underground city, passing through kilometers of rock which seemed like so much fog, and intruded into its galleries like ghosts.

In Corson's ear Veran whispered, "How do I recognize him?"

"By his blue tunic," Corson said. "But I imagine he only spends part of his time down here."

"That doesn't matter. When the pegasone latches on to him it will follow his spoor back to the moment of his birth. Or should I say hatching?"

A fleeting blue shadow . . . and there he was. They had never subsequently lost track of him, or at least only for such brief intervals that Corson had difficulty in believing they covered the months or even years which Ngal R'nda spent on the surface, playing his role of a distinguished and peace-loving Urian. They were tracking back on his life like salmon following a river to its source. The shadow changed color. Ngal R'nda was young and the tunic of the princes had not yet been set on his shoulders. Maybe he was not even thinking of his plan for conquest? But Corson doubted that.

More blue shadows had emerged with the passage of time: other Princes hatched from a blue shell who likewise and for a long while had plotted vengeance. Ngal R'nda had told the truth. He was indeed the last. The approach of his end had spurred him to action. Before him, generations of Princes had been content to dream.

Ngal R'nda vanished for a long moment.

"This is where he was bom, is it?" Veran asked worriedly.

"I haven't the least idea," Corson said, annoyed by the mercenary's tone. "But I presume so. Ngal R'nda is too important to have been hatched far from the sanctuary of his race."

On the instant the shadow of Ngal R'nda reappeared. Corson could not recognize him any more, but he was learning to decipher the responses of the pegasone.

"So what is this trap of yours?" he had asked.

"You'll see." And that was all Veran would say.

They were heading for the moment when the last Prince of Uria hatched out. Did Veran plan to inject him at birth, Corson wondered, with a genetic sensitizer which would only do its work years later, when it was exposed to the proper stimulus? Or implant a bug in his body, no larger than a single cell, which would spy on him all his life, so deeply buried that no surgical operation was likely to dis-



tab it? No, such tricks were too unobtrusive. They might cause too violent a disturbance in the web of time.

The pegasone slowed, came to a stop. Corson felt as though every bit of his body wanted to take off in a different direction. He swallowed hard. The nausea faded slowly.

"He has not yet been born," Veran said.

Employing the senses of the pegasone, Corson perceived a large elliptical room, much like that in which he had witnessed the Presentation of the Egg, but oddly changed. Only a few tendrils of the beast protruded from the wall; it and its riders were hidden in the depths of the stone.

There was little light. A few bright niches gleamed in the polished wall, and in each rested an egg. Right at the back of the room, in a somewhat larger niche, lay a purple one. Corson corrected himself. No, even if it looked purple to the pegasone, it would look blue to a man or a Urian.

That must be the egg of Ngal R'nda. So the niches were incubators. And no one would come into the room until hatching time.

"We'll have to wait," Veran said. "We've come a bit too far."

There was a faint noise, like a thousand miners attacking a distant vein of ore. Corson realized what it was: the young Urians rousing and breaking their shells. The time displacement and the peculiar senses of the pegasone combined to alter and exaggerate the sound.

The pegasone sidled toward the blue egg. Corson was getting better at interpreting the beast's perceptions. He could almost share its all-around vision. Thanks to that he saw Veran move, pointing some sort of device toward the egg.

He said sharply, "Don't smash it!"

"Idiot!" Veran answered. "I'm only measuring it."

The insult betrayed the tension he was feeling. In this crucial moment of Ngal R'nda's life the least shock could introduce a major change in history. Beads of sweat ran from Corson's forehead and down his nose. Veran was playing with fire. What would happen if they made a mistake? Would they simply vanish from the continuum? Or would they pop up in another area of time?

The blue egg was being shaken by blows from within. Now it opened. At its top an irregular piece of shell broke away. Liquid oozed out. The bit of shell slid to the floor. A membrane tore. The top of the young Urian's head appeared. It looked enormous, as big as the egg. Then the shell split apart. The chick opened its beak. It

was about to utter its first cheep—no doubt the signal awaited by nurses outside.

The shell burst completely. To Corson's surprise he realized that in fact the chick's head was no larger than an average man's fist. But of course Ngal R'nda's nervous system had a long period of growth ahead; even more than humans, Urians were born immature.

The pegasone emerged from the wall and locked on to the present. Veran threw aside his harness and produced a plastic bag into which he threw the debris of the eggshell, then remounted the pegasone. Without even fastening his straps he ordered the beast into the wall and out of phase with present time.

"First stage over," he said between his teeth.

In the elliptical room the chicks were uttering their first cries. A door opened.

"They'll notice that the shell has gone!" Corson said.

"You haven't caught on yet," Veran grunted. "I'm going to give them another. If I'm to believe what you told me, they only keep blue shells and throw the rest away."

They leaped to the surface. In a lonely spot—a ravine full of boulders—Veran synched the pegasone again. Corson, feeling giddy, slid to the ground.

"Mind your feet," Veran said. "We're still in our objective past. You can never tell whether breaking a twig may not trigger a major timequake."

He opened the bag and carefully inspected the bits of the blue egg.

"No ordinary eggs, these," he muttered. "More sort of articulated plates, like a man's skull bones. Notice the suture lines? Snug as the edges of a static closure."

He broke off a tiny fragment and placed it in a device he took from his belt, then set his eye to a viewer on it.

"The pigmentation goes right through," he reported. "A real genetic curiosity. I wonder whether they overdid the inbreeding to try to bring it off . . . Never mind that, though. It won't be hard to find a dye of the same shade but not so stable."

"You're going to dye the egg?"

Veran snorted. "My dear Corson, you are incurably stupid. I'm going to replace this shell with a newer model, and that one *will* be dyed. With a substance I know how to neutralize if I have to. All Ngal R'nda's power is due to the color of his egg. That's why he thinks it's a good idea to show it off now and then. Very likely that's

also the reason why there's nobody in the room when the chicks are hatching out. It means no one can pull a switch. That is, not without a pegasone handy. I don't believe this swap will ever be noticed, nor that it will entrain a major timequake. To be absolutely certain I'm going to take the shell of an egg hatched at the same time and of the same size. The real difficulty lies in making the exchange in about one second flat, before someone has time to come in and see us."

"Impossible," Corson said.

"Oh, there are drugs that increase human reaction time by a factor of ten. I imagine you've heard about them. They're sometimes used during space battles."

"But they're dangerous," Corson said.

"I'm not asking you to take any."

Veran made to replace the bits of shell in his bag; then he thought better of it.

"It would be safer still to bleach this and leave it in place of the substitute. You never know . . ."

He carried out some more tests, and finally dusted an aerosol over the fragments. They turned to the color of ivory in a few seconds.

"Back in your saddle," he said with satisfaction.

Once again they dived into the river of time. It was not long before they located a room where dozens of empty shells were lying around. Veran synched the pegasone, inspected various fragments, and finally selected a whole shell of the proper size. It turned a perfect blue under the jet of the aerosol spray and took the bleached shell's place in his bag. Then he produced a pill and swallowed it.

"The accelerator will take effect in about three minutes. It'll give me about ten seconds of superspeed, more than a minute and a half of subjective time. That's as much as I need."

He turned to Corson with a smile. "The beauty of this, you know, is that if anything happens to me you won't know how to get away. I wonder what the Urians would think if they found two men in their incubation room, one dead and one alive. Not to mention a tame pegasone, when all they know about are the wild ones. Oh, you'd have to spin them a pretty yam."

"We'd disappear at once," Corson said. "There would be a major timequake. The whole history of this part of the galaxy would be affected."

"It seems you learn quickly when it suits you," Veran said good-humoredly. "Yes, the real trick is going to be getting back the instant

after our departure. I have no wish to meet myself going the other way. And above all I don't want to break the Law of Non-regressive Information."

Corson didn't react.

"In any case," Veran went on, "the pegasone wouldn't like it either. It's going to be hard to get it to pass itself. It hates that."

*Nonetheless I seem to have done it, Corson thought. Or rather I shall do it. Like all natural laws, the Law of Non-regressive Information must be relative. Someone who understands it perfectly can work out how to break it. That means that one day I shall understand the machinery of time. I'll get out of here. Peace will return and I'll find Antonella again . . .*

It all happened so swiftly that Corson retained only a blurred memory: Veran's kaleidoscopic shadow moving so fast that it seemed to define a solid volume of space, the blue gleam of the broken shell, the cells full of cheeping baby Urians, the door opening with a creak, a sudden smell of chlorine even though he knew the air of the chamber could not enter his suit, a sideslip across time, Veran's voice uttering words so quickly he could barely catch them, a caracole in space, nausea, the sense of being scattered to the corners of the cosmos. . .

"End of stage two!" cried Veran triumphantly.

The trap was primed. Two hundred, perhaps two hundred and fifty years would have to wear away before it would pitch Ngal R'nda, last Prince of Uria, the last warlord hatched from a blue egg, to meet his doom.

*Time, Corson thought as rough hands freed him from his harness, is the most patient god of all.*

## CHAPTER 29

The Monster was sleeping like a little child. Buried five hundred meters under the surface of the planet, gorged with enough reserve energy to fell a mountain, all it wanted was to rest. It was almost totally preoccupied with producing the eighteen thousand spores which would generate its young, and because of that it was vulnerable. Accordingly it had slithered across the sedimentary strata right to this layer of basalt where it had made its nest. The rock was slightly radioactive, and provided a little extra energy.

The Monster was dreaming. In its dreams, it remembered a planet it had never known but which was the cradle of its race. There, life had been simple and good. Although the planet had disappeared more than half a billion years ago—not that the kind of years which Earthmen measured by meant anything to the Monster—an almost flawless recollection of scenes viewed by its far-off ancestors had been transmitted to it by its genes. Now that it was about to breed, the increasing activity of its chromosomal chains heightened the colors and sharpened the details.

The Monster preserved the image of the race which had created its species, more or less in its own likeness, to play the part of a domestic pet, useless but affectionate. If Corson's original contemporar-

ies had been able to explore the Monster's dreams during its brief captivity, they would have found the key to many mysteries.

They had never understood how the Monster, which except on rare occasions avoided the company of its kind, could have developed any semblance of culture, let alone the rudiments of language. They knew of asocial or presocial animals with intelligence comparable to the human, like the dolphins on Earth. But none had developed a genuinely articulate language. According to then-current theory, which had never before been found wanting, civilization and language demanded certain preconditions: the creation of organized tribes or bands, vulnerability (for no invulnerable being would be tempted to change itself to suit the world it lived on, or *vice versa*), and the discovery of how to put inanimate objects to practical use (for any being whose natural appendages were ideal tools for use in its environment was bound to stagnate).

The Monster broke all three of these rules. It lived in isolation. It was as nearly invulnerable as any creature humans had run across. And its ignorance of the use of any tool, even the simplest, was total. Not because it was stupid. One could induce it to operate fairly complex machines. But it had no need of them. Its claws and tendrils were quite good enough for its requirements. Yet the Monster was capable of talking after its fashion, and even—some researchers claimed—of inscribing symbols.

The origin of Monsters posed another apparently insoluble problem. At the time of Corson's first life, exobiology had progressed far enough for comparative evolution to become an exact science. It was theoretically possible by examining a single creature to work out with fair accuracy the whole phylum it belonged to. But the Monster combined traits from a dozen different phyla. No environment that the ecologists could conceive of ought to have produced such a paradoxical beast. That was among the reasons why it was called by no name more precise than Monster. In the view of a biologist who had given up in despair a decade before Corson was born, Monsters were the sole known proof of the existence of God, or at any rate of *a* god.

A long finger of energy brushed the Monster for a nanosecond or so. Stirring in its sleep, it greedily drank in the sustenance offered to it, heedless of where it came from. The second contact, light as a feather touch, half roused it. The third made it alarmed. It knew how to recognize most natural sources of energy. This was artificial. Someone, or something, was trying to locate it.

It realized confusedly that it had made a mistake in absorbing the energy of the first beam. It had betrayed not only its existence but its position. And done the same the second time. It tried to restrain its appetite when the third contact occurred. But it was too scared to control itself, and could not avoid soaking up a fraction of it. When it was afraid, its instincts commanded it to gobble up all the energy available, in whatever form it was offered.

Already it felt new and harsher lances of energy stabbing its weakened body. It began to weep over its lot, a poor little creature unable to control more than a narrow fringe of the future or fission more than ten or so natural elements. It keened for the fate of the innocents between its sides, which risked losing their chance to live.

Nearly six thousand kilometers away, giant avians were surveying their instruments under the interested eye of Colonel Veran. The neutrino beam which was sweeping the bowels of the planet had thrice been absorbed at the same spot. The associated wave train had been subtly altered.

"It is there," Ngai R'nda said worriedly. "Are you sure you can deactivate it?"

"Absolutely," Veran said, displaying arrogant confidence. The agreement had been tough to forge, but it was biased in his favor. His encampment was threatened by Urian guns, but that did not bother him. He had a trump up his sleeve. Turning away, he issued his orders.

Five hundred meters underground the Monster mobilized its resources. It felt hamstrung. The gestation of its offspring was too far advanced for it to be able to move through time. It would be impossible to synchronize the motion of eighteen thousand babies. By now they had acquired enough independence to oppose the efforts of their parent. If the threat materialized, it would have to abandon them. It was a case where the instinct of self-preservation conflicted with that of reproduction. By good fortune some few might survive, but most would never be able to locate themselves in a stable present. They would suddenly coexist with the matter composing them. The energy released would be of the same order as that of a low-yield nuclear bomb. It would not seriously affect the Monster, but it would instantly kill the embryo involved.

Perhaps the solution lay in burrowing deeper into the planetary crust. But the Monster had chosen for its nest a weak point at the junction of crustal plates. A pocket of lava, unusually close to the sur-

face, had drawn it as a warm hearth attracts a cat. In its normal state the Monster would have bathed luxuriously in the lava. But in present circumstances it hesitated. The intense heat would hasten the hatching. Then it would be unable to put enough distance between itself and its young to avoid becoming their first victim.

Should it return to the surface and take its chance? Unfortunately for the Monster, the giant planet where its distant ancestors had been conceived and which it recalled in its dreams had been haunted by predators which would have made a mere mouthful of it. They too knew how to move through time. They had vanished half a billion years ago, but that fact could not influence the Monster's behavior. Its racial memory was unaware of that crucial datum. As far as the Monster was concerned, those millions of years had never happened. It did not realize that its species had outlived its creators and original masters, that it had owed its survival to its role as a pet, found in nearly every home, coddled and pampered by the members of a powerful culture wiped out in a forgotten war.

The surface was out of the question, then, while time travel was forbidden and the deeper strata were dangerous. The Monster, fully awake by now, once more bewailed its fate.

It registered a presence, not far off, a few score kilometers at most. Ordinarily its first reaction would have been to jump through time. But the fear of losing its offspring overcame its terror at being spotted. The presence became more marked, then multiplied. Several creatures of its own kind were approaching. That held no comfort for the Monster. It knew from its own past experience that a Monster at gestation time was a succulent prey. In its species cannibalism facilitated the interchange of genes and thereby prevented the line from becoming decadent through inbreeding. Its creators had known nothing of the sexual mode of reproduction.

At the last moment it tried a prodigious effort and made a vain attempt to escape pursuit. It soared into the air atop a geyser of lava. But Veran's pegasones had foreseen that, and acted in accordance with a systematic plan quite foreign to the habits of their species. They closed in from all directions at once, clear along the segment of time which the Monster controlled. They trapped and immobilized it simultaneously in much the same way as, thousands of years ago on Earth, tame elephants would surround one of their wild cousins and push it into a stockade.

The Monster found itself caught in a web of energy far stronger



and more reliable than the cage aboard the *Archimedes*. At first it went on weeping; then, when its complaints proved futile, it allowed itself to be dragged away and at last went back to sleep, regaining in dreams the deceitful refuge of its long-vanished home world.

## CHAPTER 30

It was weapons-training time. Corson relished the quietness of an existence organized down to the smallest detail. Morning and evening, on Veran's orders, he was learning to ride pegasones. The soldiers who instructed and no doubt kept guard on him either were not surprised to see the safety collar around his neck or else forbore to mention it. Doubtless they had concluded that Corson now formed part of Veran's personal bodyguard.

Veran himself was making plans with Ngal R'nda and the leading Urian nobles. He had apparently gained their confidence completely. They let themselves be persuaded, day after day, to deliver examples of their finest weapons to him and explain the method of their use. The obvious discipline of Veran's little army impressed them, perhaps all the more so because their incurable sense of superiority prevented them from imagining that this man, their servant, could want to break the alliance and threaten them. In Corson's opinion they were sometimes unbelievably naive. Veran's seeming deference filled them

with smug satisfaction. The colonel had ordered all his men to make way for any Urian regardless of his rank, and the order had been obeyed. That proved to the Urians that at least these few humans knew their proper place and how to keep to it. As Veran said oracularly, the situation was developing nicely.

That did not seem quite so obvious to Corson. A formidable war machine was being assembled under his eyes. The Monster, approaching full gestation term, was imprisoned in an enclosure without a breach; since it was too old to be trained, it was to be left for its young to devour.

It seemed to Corson that the union between Veran and the Urians was leading to a result diametrically opposite what he had counted on. It was impossible for him to escape. He would have done so had he only known how. He felt he might be about to witness one of the most terrible military adventures in history. But his future made no sign to him. His destiny seemed to be laid down, but in a direction he had not wanted.

One calm night however, his melancholy thoughts took a less dismal turn,

He was staring at the trees and the sky, wondering how it was that the activity at the camp had not yet been noticed and why nobody from Dyoto or some other city had decided to come and investigate, when Veran approached.

"A fine evening," he said. He was biting on a small cigar, a luxury he rarely permitted himself.

He blew a smoke ring, then said abruptly, "Ngal R'nda has invited me to the next Presentation of the Egg. That's a chance I've been waiting for. It's high time I got him off my back."

He drew on the cigar again without Corson daring to make any Comment.

"I'm afraid he's growing more and more suspicious. For the past several days he's been pressing me to set a date for the start of hostilities. That old vulture has nothing in his head but blood and battle! You know, I don't care for war, myself. It always wastes a lot of materiel and a lot of good soldiers. I'll only resort to it when there's no other way of getting what I'm after. I'm sure that with Ngal R'nda out of the way I can make a deal with the government of this planet. What's so odd, though, is that there doesn't seem to be one. Do you know anything about that Corson?"

A long silence.

"I thought not," Veran said in a voice that had suddenly become sharp. "You see, I've sent spies to various cities around the planet. They didn't have the slightest trouble infiltrating themselves, but they learned practically nothing. That's the worst of these very decentralized societies. It seems this planet doesn't have an official government, apart from Ngal R'nda's limited authority."

"Well," Corson said, "that's going to make things easy for you."

Veran gave him a keen glance. "No, it's the worst thing that could have happened. How am I to negotiate with a government that doesn't exist?"

He stared thoughtfully at his cigar.

"But," he continued, "I only said it seems that way. One of my spies, a bit smarter than the rest, told me a peculiar tale. He says this planet does have a political organization, but of a completely original kind. There's a Council which watches over several centuries and is based elsewhere in time. Some three centuries up, to be exact. It's the craziest thing I ever heard of. Imagine ruling over dead men and kids that haven't yet been born!"

"Maybe they don't have the same idea of government as you do," Corson said softly.

"Yes, they're democrats, aren't they? Maybe even anarchists! I know their theme song. Reduce the administration of people and things to the strict minimum. It never lasts for long. At the first invasion the whole setup goes smash."

"They haven't been invaded for centuries," Corson said.

"Then they're going to learn a nasty lesson. By the way, Corson, there's something else odd, which I haven't mentioned yet. One of the members of this Council is a man."

"What's odd about that?"

"Who looks very like you. I find that a surprising coincidence. One of your relations, maybe?"

"I don't have connections in such high places," Corson said.

"My spy hasn't seen this man personally. He hasn't even managed to lay hands on a document describing him. But he was quite definite about it. He's an expert physiognomist, knows his typology inside out. There's not a chance in a million of his being mistaken. Besides, he's a clever artist. He made a sketch of you from memory and showed it to his informants. Everyone who has seen this man recognized you, Corson. What do you make of that?"

"Nothing," Corson answered honestly.

Veran scrutinized him. "You may be telling the truth. I could put you under a lie detector, but you'd become a moron, at best. And it was no moron who sent that message to me. So unfortunately I still need you. Well, when I learned all this, I tried to put two and two together. They refused to make four. At first I thought you might be a machine, or an android. But you've undergone thorough medical examinations since you've been with us, so I had to scrap that idea. I know everything about you except what goes on in your head. You're not a machine, and you weren't bred in a vat. You think like a man, you have human courage and human faults. A little backward in some respects, as though you hail from a bygone age. But if you are carrying out an assignment, I have to admit you've got the guts to do it by yourself. Of course, not without taking out some insurance for yourself, like that damned message. Corson, why don't you lay your cards on the table?"

"I have a bad hand," Corson said.

"What?"

"I don't have the right cards."

"Maybe not. But you're an ace in somebody's game. And you're acting as though you don't realize it."

Veran dropped his cigar butt and ground it underfoot.

"Let's recapitulate," he said. "This Council possesses the means to travel in time. They hide away in the future, but they must have it because otherwise a government three centuries ahead couldn't administer the present. They already know what I'm going to do, what's going to happen if there isn't a timequake. And they haven't made a move, either against me or against Ngal R'nda. That implies that in their view the time is not yet ripe. They're waiting for something. What?"

He drew a deep breath.

"Unless they have already begun to act. Unless you're a member of the Council on special assignment."

"I never heard anything so silly," Corson said.

Veran, stepping back a pace, drew his gun. "I could kill you, Corson. It might be suicide for me, but you'd die first. You'll never send the message and I'll never land on this world and never have the chance to take you prisoner and kill you, but the timequake will be so fierce that you'll be caught up in it. You won't be yourself any longer, but someone else. What counts, for a man? His name, his

features, his chromosomes? Or his memories, his experience, his personality?"

They gazed at each other. At last Veran holstered his gun.

"I hoped to scare you. I admit I failed. It's hard to frighten a man who's been at Aergistal."

He smiled.

"In the final analysis, Corson, I do believe you. You probably are the man who sits on the Council, three centuries up, but you don't know it. You haven't become that man yet. For the time being you're only his trump card. He couldn't come here himself because he already knew what was going to happen. He would have broken the Law of Non-regressive Information. But he could not trust anyone else. So he decided to send himself as he was in an earlier period of his life, altering the course of events only by such minute touches that they stayed below the timequake threshold. Congratulations, Corson. You have a brilliant future ahead of you—if you live so long."

"Wait a moment," Corson said. He had turned pale. He sat down on the ground and put his head in his hands. Veran must be right. He was experienced in temporal warfare.

"Shock treatment, hm?" Veran said. "Maybe you're wondering why I said all that to you. Don't bother working it out. As soon as I'm rid of Ngal R'nda I'm going to send you as my envoy to the Council. Since I have a future statesman in my hands, I'm going to exploit the fact. I told you I want to make a deal. I'm not going to ask for much: just some gear, like robots and spaceships. Then I'll move on and leave this world in peace. I won't touch it again even if I conquer the rest of the galaxy."

Corson raised his head.

"And how are you going to get rid of Ngal R'nda? He seems to be very much on his guard."

Veran gave a short wolfish laugh. "If you haven't figured that out, I'm not going to tell you. You might double-cross me. But you'll see."

## CHAPTER 31

They had to enter the anteroom of the Egg chamber naked. There they underwent a ritual cleansing and put on yellow togas. Corson imagined he could feel the rays of countless scanners brushing his skin, but knew that was an illusion—the Urians possessed more subtle techniques. He was sure that Veran was going to take advantage of the Presentation of the Egg to try something, but he could not guess what. Almost certainly he could not be carrying a weapon; the Urians knew human anatomy well enough to check all the body's natural hiding places. And if Veran wanted violent action he would have come charging in at the head of his pegasone cavalry: a dangerous tactic, but one which would have invoked time as his ally, even though the Urians had the means to fight back. No, he must have a bolder stroke in mind.

Baffled, Corson passed for the second time through the ranked nobles, and Veran followed him to the front of the throng. He spent a long while wordlessly examining the altar-like box. Then the lights went down. The door irised open and Ngal R'nda made his entrance. To Corson he seemed haughtier than ever. He had recruited these two human mercenaries to his cause. No doubt his yellow eyes were already seeing in imagination the blue standards of Uria floating above the smoking wrecks of cities, or hanging dead still in space

at the prows of starships. He was dreaming of a crusade. There was something of pathetic greatness in him. To think that a creature of such intelligence should have been seduced by the notion of a mere color, a superstition dating back to time immemorial which Veran had summed up and dismissed in three words: "a genetic curiosity."

Yes, it must have something to do with the Egg. Suddenly Corson realized what Veran must have in mind. Full of terror yet also of a Strange pity for the plight of this last Prince of Uria, and with an equally strange admiration for Veran's audacity, he followed with wide eyes the smallest details of the ceremony. He heard Ngäl R'nda utter and the crowd chant after him words impossible to transcribe in human writing, the names of his ancestors. He watched the metal case open, the egg rise on its pillar like a monstrous turquoise. The Urians stretched their thin necks, despite being long accustomed to all this, and their double eyelids blink-blinked as fast as hummingbird wings.

The last Prince of Uria opened his beak, but before he had time to chirp again, there was a commotion. Veran thrust aside the Urian nobles around him, made a leap, flung his left arm around Ngäl R'nda's neck, pointed at the egg with his other hand, and shouted: "Impostor! *Piiekivo! Piiekivol!*"

Corson did not need a dictionary to work that one out.

"It's painted!" Veran shouted. "This scoundrel has tricked you! I'll prove it!"

The Urians were too dumbfounded to move. That was lucky for Veran, Corson thought, but clearly he had been banking on the fact that not even the nobility were allowed to carry weapons into the Egg chamber. There was time for him to rub his palm against the shell. Where he touched it, the surface turned from blue to ivory.

A hell of a trick, Corson thought, panting, feeling his end was near despite the fact that the Urians had completely ceased to pay him any attention.

But that egg was not simply painted. Some sort of chemical had been needed to neutralize the dye Veran had applied two hundred and fifty years ago ... or was it last week? He could have brought nothing in with him. The Urians' scanners would have located a capsule hidden in his mouth, or anywhere else. And if he had smeared something on his skin before coming here, the ritual bath would have washed it off. The trick was impossible.

And then he caught on. Even naked, even thrice washed and

rubbed down with a rough towel, Veran had brought a very active substance with him, a complex liquid that was both acid and alkaline.

His own perspiration.

On the shell the reaction was spreading. Molecular bonds were breaking one after another. The dye was dissolving into colorless constituents or more likely subliming. Veran did not like to leave traces behind.

Shrill whistles arose from the crowd. Claws dug into Corson's shoulders; he offered no resistance. Veran let go of Ngal R'nda, who, beak wide, struggled to regain his breath. Urians in violet togas seized the mercenary, but he shouted, "I proved it, I proved it—the egg is not blue and he's an impostor!"

"He's lying!" Ngal R'nda cried. "He sprayed a dye on the shell! I saw him! Put him to death!"

"Break the egg!" Veran shouted. "If I'm lying the inside will be blue! Break the egg!"

Ngal R'nda was confronted by uproar. Around him Urians formed a circle, still deferential but somehow threatening. It was the chick from a blue egg that these vassals feared, not their warlord. He whistled high, piercing, weary-sounding notes that Corson could not understand. But their import was clear.

"Shall I break the egg?"

Silence. Then more whistling, curt and merciless. Ngal R'nda bowed his head.

"So be it. I shall break the shell which should only be crushed at my death, that its dust might be mingled with my ashes. I, last of the Princes of Uria, shall be the only one of my long line who ever broke the blue shell twice!"

He seized the egg in both claws, lifted it, and smashed it on the base of its pedestal. Fragments fell to the floor. Ngal R'nda seized one of those which remained on the pediment and brought it close to his age-dimmed eyes. He recoiled and fell in a faint.

Then one of the nobles advanced and seized a fold of his blue toga. He pulled on it violently. It did not tear, and Ngal R'nda was dragged with it as in a sack. There was a stampede. Corson felt himself released, then someone bumped into him so that he nearly fell and had to struggle to prevent himself being trampled. At last the tide of bodies swept past him. Mad with rage, the avians were pecking to death the last Prince of Uria. A bitter stench of chlorine filled the air.



Someone touched his arm: Veran.

“Come along before they start wondering how I worked my trick!”

They walked unhurriedly to the door, their ears full of angry cries. On the threshold Veran glanced back with a shrug.

“So,” he said, “perish all fanatics.”

## CHAPTER 32

About once every decade he dismounted, approached a passer-by, and asked, “What year is this?”

Some fainted. Others fled. Some few vanished. Those must know how to travel in time. But he always found some willing to inform him. They looked at the man and the Monster without surprise, and smiled. An old man, a boy, a Urian, a woman.

A question burned on Corson’s lips: “Do you know who I am?”

For their smiles and their readiness to cooperate smacked too much of a miracle. They must know who he was. They were so many guides, beaconing his way. But they simply gave him the date and, if he tried to engage them in further conversation, managed to divert him adroitly into a dead end. Even the child. He was unfit to match wits with these people. In six thousand years culture had advanced a long way. He had not soaked up enough of it. He was still a barbarian, even though he knew some things that they did not

When he saw the Urian, he almost made the blunder of jumping back into time. But the great bird made a sign of peace to him. He wore a white toga with fine embroidery on it, and said with a grimace that Corson took to be a smile, "What are you afraid of, my son?"

At first he had looked like Ngal R'nda. Now Corson realized the resemblance was solely due to his great age.

"I seem to recognize you," the Urian said. "In a time of trouble you appeared from nowhere. I was fresh from the egg then, but if I recall aright I took you to a bath and gave you food before escorting you to a secret ceremony. Things have changed since then, and for the better too. I am glad to see you again. What do you wish to know?"

"I'm looking for the Council," Corson said. "I have a message for them. Maybe several messages."

"You will find them on the seashore, about thirty or forty kilometers from here. But you will have to wait a hundred and twenty years or so."

"Thanks," Corson said. "But I won't have to wait at all. I can travel in time."

"I presumed so," the avian said. "It was a manner of speaking. It is a fine animal that you have there."

"I call him Archimedes," Corson said. "As a souvenir of something that happened long ago."

As he was on the point of remounting, the Urian checked him.

"I trust you hold no grudge against us for what happened. It was a mischance. Tyranny always engenders violence. And beings like ourselves are pawns in the hands of gods. They impel us to battle for the pleasure of the spectacle. They love the dance of fire and death. You resolved the situation with much tact. Someone else might have provoked a bloodbath. All we Urians are most grateful to you."

"All. . . including you?" Corson asked in disbelief.

"The Old Race and the humans. All who live on Uria."

"All who live on Uria," Corson repeated thoughtfully. "That's good news."

"Good luck on your journey, my son," the old Urian said.

So, Corson said to himself, peering through the time fog which rose from the ground to engulf him and his pegasone, *the humans and the natives have become reconciled. Splendid!*

The Urians must have managed to exorcise the demons of war. Their species was not doomed, as he had imagined.

By now he was getting to know the planet well. The location of the beach reminded him of something. That was where Antonella had taken him. By coincidence?

He decided to make a detour via Dyoto. It was an irrational impulse, an urge to make a sort of pilgrimage. He locked the pegasone to the present at the top of a hill, and looked skyward in search of that pyramidal cloud of a city seemingly balanced on its twin vertical rivers.

The sky was empty.

He reconfirmed his position. There was no possible doubt. Up there, a hundred and fifty years ago, a colossal city had reared to heaven. It had not left a trace.

He looked down, into a hollow made by the convergence of three grassy valleys between wooded hillsides. A lake filled it. Corson narrowed his eyes to see better. In the middle of the lake a sharp peak pierced the surface; elsewhere ripples broke around obstacles a few centimeters underwater. Among the vegetation on the shore he recognized other geometrical ruins.

The city had fallen and the vertical river had given birth to the lake. Underground canals were still supplying it and the overflow escaped by a little brook running along the lowermost valley. Dyoto had been destroyed. The force which had upheld its buildings over a kilometer in the air had failed. It had all happened long ago, perhaps a century, to judge by the density of the vegetation.

Sadly Corson recalled its lively streets, the swarms of floaters which poured from it like bees from a hive, that store where he had stolen food, that mechanical voice which had so courteously reprimanded him. And he thought of the women he had met there.

Dyoto was dead like so many other cities overwhelmed by the tempest of war. Perhaps at the bottom of that lake reposed the body of Floria Van Nelle, who had by chance introduced him to the strangeness of this world.

The old Urian had been lying. His smile had been false. The war had occurred and the humans had lost. It must be so, if their cities were in ruins.

He hoped Floria had not had time to realize what was happening. She was unprepared for this or any war. If she had survived for a while, it would have been as a plaything for Veran's mercenaries,

or worse still as a victim of the pitiless crusaders serving whoever had taken Ngal R'nda's place.

So he had failed.

With an effort he resisted the impulse to jump back into the past. He remembered his dream of a city being destroyed and the cry of its inhabitants, who, too late, were foreseeing their doom. Sweat ran down his face. He could not go back now; he had an appointment in the future which he could not escape. Up there, with the Council if it proved still to be in existence, he would have to discuss the problem and find out whether the lumbering wagon of history might yet be diverted down another road. Then there would be time to come back and discover what had gone amiss.

And even if he could accomplish nothing more, he could kill Veran. A cracked bell rang in his head. If he killed Veran he himself would die. This collar would pierce his neck with poisoned spikes. He was not even supposed to think of fighting Veran without killing himself. He could not quit now.

He suppressed his lust for vengeance. Exhausted, he remounted the pegasone and urged it onward.

It went forward sullenly, and for the first time Corson noticed how gray everything was around him. In the impenetrable fog of the centuries, where nights and days were intermingled, he felt the pegasone escape from his control. His fingers tugged on its tendrils, but in vain. The beast, whether from fatigue or under the command of another will, threatened to lock into the present. Disheartened, he let it do so.

The sound of the sea, a slow and regular rhythm. He was on a long beach which the setting sun had gilded. That struck him as odd. Left to their own devices pegasones normally preferred to synch with daylight because of their appetite for energy. But this time his mount had been drawn to twilight.

He opened his eyes wide. Stretched out on the sand before him were three naked bodies, motionless. He took off his helmet, feeling the moist air on his face, and stared at them. Three naked bodies, dead for all he could tell—could this be all that remained of the Council of Uria? One man, two women, like the victims of a dreadful shipwreck, tossed ashore by the tide.

## CHAPTER 33

At Corson's approach, however, the man moved, rising on one elbow to examine him with interest. He smiled. Apparently he had come to little harm.

"Ah, you must be the man from Aergistal," he said. "I've been expecting you."

Corson managed to say, "The Council—"

"Here we are," the man said. "The Council of Uria for this millennium."

Corson leaned over him. "Do you need any help?"

"I don't think so. Why don't you sit down?"

"But these women—" Corson began, dropping to the sand.

"Don't disturb them. They're in communion."

"Communion?"

"We have plenty of time, don't worry. It's a lovely evening, don't you think?"

As he spoke he was scrabbling in the sand. Now he unearthed a crystal flagon, which he opened and handed to Corson.

"Refresh yourself, friend. You're looking very strange."

Corson made to argue, but changed his mind. If this bit of human jetsam said there was plenty of time, who was he to contradict? He set the flagon to his lips. It contained cool wine. He was so surprised he swallowed the wrong way and almost choked.

“Don’t you like it?” demanded the castaway.

“It’s the best wine I ever tasted.”

“Then drink the lot, friend. There’s more. There’s always more.”

Peeling off his gauntlets, Corson complied. A second swig put fresh heart into him. Then he recalled the place and the circumstances.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “I have some field rations with me.”

“Thank you,” the man said, “but I prefer somewhat more delicate fare . . . Oh, how stupid of me not to have thought of that. You must be hungry after your journey.”

He rose on his knees, energetically scooped aside more of the sand, and revealed a large silvery container. He removed its lid and sniffed the contents with approval.

“Help yourself. You’ll have to eat with your fingers, I’m afraid, but we lead a very simple life here.”

To Corson’s astonishment, the dish held what looked like half a chicken, garnished with a sauce and vegetables such as he had never seen before. But the smell made him instantly ravenous, and he ate so eagerly it was a while before he was able to utter the words which a moment ago had been at the forefront of his mind.

“I saw Dyoto!”

“A handsome city,” the man said. “If a little out of style.”

“It was at the bottom of a lake. The war has completely destroyed it.”

Startled, the man rose on his elbows and sat up.

“What war?”

And then he began to laugh quietly. “Oh, of course. You come from the time of the troubles. You must have had a shock, but you weren’t to know.”

“Know what?”

“Dyoto was abandoned. That’s all. Not destroyed. It no longer suited the way we wanted to live.”

Corson struggled to digest the information. “And what way is that?” he said finally.

“The way you see. Very simply. We need the opportunity to meditate. We’re getting ready for”—he hesitated—“for the future, I suppose you’d say.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?” Corson said, rubbing the greasy traces of his food from his fingers with a handful of sand.

“We certainly need you, Corson. But not here, not now.”

"Are you certain you're not short of anything?" Corson insisted disbelievingly.

"Do I look as though I am? Do you mean clothes? But we hardly ever wear them nowadays."

"Provisions! Medicines! I don't imagine the whole of this beach is stuffed with mess tins and bottles of wine. What are you going to do when your stocks run out?"

The man gazed thoughtfully out to sea. "You know, that's a point that had never struck me. I think—"

Corson interrupted fiercely, "Get a hold on yourself! Are you crazy, are you ill? There must be a way to fish the sea, or game to hunt in those woods! You can't let yourself die of hunger!"

"Oh, I don't think that's very likely," the man said. Looking Corson straight in the face, he rose with a smooth movement. He was the taller of them, muscular and well built; long hair hung around his face.

"Where do you suppose that bottle came from?"

Embarrassed, Corson rose in his turn and used the neck of the bottle to draw a line in the sand. "I don't know."

"When we run short of wine, we shall order more, of course."

"Ah!" Corson said, brightening. "You live in the dunes and you've come to dine on the beach. Back there you have servants or robots."

The man shook his head. "Back in the dunes you won't find palaces or even shanties, let alone servants and robots. I don't believe there's a living soul within forty kilometers. I see you haven't yet understood our way of life. We have no roof but the sky, no bed but the sand, no curtains but the wind. Do you find it too warm, too cool? I can attend to that for you."

"So where does this come from?" Corson said angrily, kicking aside the empty bottle.

"From sometime else. Some century in the past or future. I don't know. We decided to let these decades lie fallow. It's a very pleasant spot to rest and think things over. Of course we control the climate, but in this period you won't find a single machine on the planet. Those we do need are tucked away in time. When we want something one of us enters communion and asks for it, and the article in question is sent here."

"What about Dyoto?"

"Some while back, we discovered we had taken a wrong turning. We decided to try another way."

“This one?”

“Exactly.”

Corson stared at the sea. A classically beautiful sunset was in progress, but it was something stirring within himself which made him cheer up. The tideless sea plopped against a rock a few fathoms from the beach like a particularly well-domesticated animal. The invisible sun glowed behind the clouds. By reflex he looked for a moon in the sky, but of course here there was none. The stars, in constellations he had now come to know well, were springing into the sky and shedding their faint light on the world.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” the man said.

“It is indeed,” Corson admitted.

He cast a diffident glance toward the women sunk in coma, sleep, whatever, their attitudes suggestive of abandon. He thought he recognized a head of hair, the line of a back . . . Surely it couldn’t be Antonella! He took a pace toward them, but the man checked him with a gesture.

“Don’t disturb them. They’re in conference right now, discussing you. They’re communing with Those of Aergistal.”

“Antonella . . .” Corson said.

The man turned his head. “Antonella is not here. You will see her later.”

“She doesn’t know me yet.”

“I realize that.” The man’s voice was low, as though he was sorry the matter had been brought up. “It will be necessary for her to learn to know you.”

There was a pause.

“Don’t hold it against us,” he said at length, and added quickly, “Would you rather sleep now, or talk over our business?”

“I’m not sleepy,” Corson said. “But I’d like time to think things over.”

“As you like.”

Thereafter for a long while Corson remained silent, sitting on the sand with his elbows on his knees. The sun vanished completely. Stars danced on the water. The air was as warm as his skin. After a little he took off his suit and boots. He did not yet dare to strip completely, but he felt a growing desire to do so, to rush out into the sea and swim away for ever and ever, forgetting about the overlords of war. Tides here must be very weak, with no moon, nothing but the sun to stir the sea.



Then he roused himself and broke the silence. He spoke at first in a rather uncertain voice as though he were alone and feared to disturb the subtle balance of the night or to alert an enemy, then in a tone of greater determination.

"I'm an ambassador," he said. "Of a strange kind. I used to be a soldier. I've traveled in time. I've heard the gods of Aergistal. I knew that three dangers threatened Uria—the first a creature like the one that brought me here, but wild; the second a plot hatched by the Old Race of this world against the humans; and the third in the shape of a cavalry commander who sprang from nowhere but whom, according to his own testimony, I called here myself. I'm here to speak on his behalf. And, lastly, I'm an ambassador on my own account. I want to rid Uria of all these dangers, but I lack the means of doing so. I was hoping to find help here, even though Those of Aergistal"—the phrase came naturally to his tongue—"told me not to rely on anybody but myself. Provided I succeed, they promised me, I shall gain my liberty and maybe more than that. But I can see they set me an impossible task."

"Oh, I know all that," the man said. "And the task is half accomplished. You haven't done at all badly, Corson, for a man from the far past."

"The Monster is caged up," Corson said, "and the plot has been defeated. But I still have to deal with Veran, the warlord, whose envoy I have the bad luck to be."

The man burrowed in the sand again. "Perhaps you'd like some more wine," he murmured politely. "It will help you to relax."

Corson drank gratefully, then continued. "This Veran literally wants to conquer the universe. He's asking for weapons, and soldiers or robots. In return he is willing to leave this planet alone. But I don't trust him. Moreover the Security Office won't let him do it, and there will be a war. It will take place on Uria, because Veran won't easily be dislodged."

"But you are the Security Office," the man said quietly. "And no war occurred in our past."

"You mean I—" Corson stammered.

"You're the Office's agent for this sector. It's up to you to prevent the war."

"It didn't take place," Corson said slowly, "because here you are. That means that I succeeded. And the Law of Non-regressive Information has been broken."

The man was absently pouring sand from one hand to the other. "Yes and no. It's not that simple. That law is only a special case."

"Then the future can intervene in the past?"

The man let the sand trickle away between his fingers. "Some interventions have negligible consequences. Others are dangerous. But others still are beneficial, at least from the viewpoint of a privileged observer, like you, or me—or Veran. The control of time somewhat resembles ecology, you know. Imagine a world inhabited by insects, birds, and herbivores. The insects break up the soil and encourage grass to grow, the birds eat the insects and pollinate the plants. The herbivores graze on the plants while their droppings and their dead bodies both feed the insects and manure the soil. That's the simplest possible ecosystem. You could kill one insect, or a dozen, without worrying, because nothing would happen to speak of. You could kill a flock of birds, or stuff yourself on meat from the herbivores, without unbalancing the system. But suppose you were to kill every insect over a wide enough area—a continent, say. The birds would fly off or die of starvation. The grass would die in a few seasons, and the herbivores would likewise disappear. You'd have a desert. It follows of its own accord if you seriously weaken any link in the chain. There's a threshold for each point. To you it may appear very high. But . . .

"Well, suppose someone introduced to this imaginary planet some carnivores strong and quick enough to kill the herbivores. At first they would barely be noticeable on the planetary scale. You might scour its plains for years and find no trace of them. But in the long run, not meeting any opposition, they would breed in such numbers that they would reduce the herbivore population. The insects would suffer, then the birds, then the vegetation. The herbivores would be threatened from two sides at once. Then the carnivores in turn would start to die of hunger. If circumstances allowed, a new balance would be struck, quite different from the former and possibly not stable. Then, for one species or another, there would be cycles of plenty and famine. The critical threshold would be much lower than in the first example. Indeed, a single breeding pair of carnivores might be enough to trigger changes whose consequences could not be foreseen. As far as dynamic ecology is concerned, the significant factor is never one of the units in the chain but the totality of them. And the process is incapable of spontaneous reversal. It entrains subtle but decisive side effects. Under the threat from the

carnivores, the herbivores will cultivate speed. The longest legs will save the most lives, and so on.

“To some extent that’s analogous with time travel. But ecological problems are laughably simple compared with those of temporality. You might lay a mountain low or snuff out a star without any serious change in your future. Here and there you might even wipe out a whole civilization with no untoward results from your point of view. On the other hand it might suffice for you to tread on someone’s toe in order to shake your heaven and your earth. Each point in the plenum has its own ecological universe. There is no such thing as absolute history.”

“How can you foresee which?” Corson demanded.

“It can be calculated. It also depends partly on intuition, and partly on experience. And it’s best to look at things from as far away as possible in the future. It’s always more comfortable to consider the various ways that might have led to this present than to try to build one which will lead to a desirable future. That’s why Those of Aergistal enter communion with us.”

He indicated the two women.

“But they can’t tell us everything. They can’t create timequakes that might erase them. They are at the ultimate end of time. For them history is almost absolute, almost complete. Besides, we have to work out our own destinies, even though they must take their places as part of a grander scheme.”

“I understand,” Corson said. “I too have the impression of being a pawn. At first I imagined I had free will. But the more I see of the game, the more I realize I’ve been pushed from one square of the board to another.” He hesitated. “I even thought you might be running the game.”

The man shook his head. “You were wrong. It is not we who have devised this plan.”

“But you do know what has been happening.”

“To some extent. For us, though, you’re a wild factor. You appeared at the appointed moment to resolve a crisis. We have always thought of you as the author of the plan.”

“Me?” Corson exclaimed.

“You and none other.”

“But I haven’t even finished formulating my plan!”

“You have time ahead of you,” the man said.

“But it’s already been put into effect.”

"That means it will exist."

"And if I fail?" Corson countered.

"You'll know nothing about it. Nor shall we."

At long last one of the women moved. She rolled over, sat up, noticed Corson, and smiled. She was about thirty. He did not recognize her. Her expression was absent, as though from overlong use of her inward sight.

"I can hardly believe it," she said. "The famous Corson here among us!"

"I have as yet no reason to be famous," Corson said curtly.

"Don't be rude to him, Selma," the man interjected. "He has a long way to go still, and he's a little upset."

"Oh, I'm not going to bite him," Selma said.

"And," the man concluded, "we all need him."

"How far have you got?" Selma asked Corson.

"Well, I came here as an envoy, and—"

But she cut him short. "I know that. I heard you talking to Cid. But how far have you thought things through?"

"I can neutralize Veran by not sending him this message that everyone claims I sent. But to be candid I wouldn't know how to draft it and still less how to get it to him."

"That's a simple matter of creodes," Selma said. "I'll arrange it whenever you like. And I think that Those of Aergistal will agree to relay it for us."

"Suppose you don't send it," said the man who had just been referred to as Cid. "Who will deal with the Monster and the Prince of Uria? A solution must be sought elsewhere. Veran forms part of the plan. You can't eliminate him so easily."

"I'm afraid I can't," Corson admitted. "And I even suspect it may be because I ran across him at Aergistal that I thought of making use of him. But I'm not sure yet. It's an idea that won't occur to me until much later."

"He's making a lot of progress for a primitive," Selma said.

Cid frowned. "Corson is not primitive. Besides, he has been to Aergistal. He hasn't made do with communion."

"True," Selma said. "I was forgetting." Annoyed, she jumped up and ran toward the water.

Corson mused aloud, "Then who is to deal with Veran?"

"You," Cid replied.

"I can't attack him. I can't even plan an action against him." He

touched his security collar, and added as faint hope sprang up in his mind, "Can you take this thing off me?"

"No. Veran hails from our future. His technology is in advance of ours."

"So there's no way out."

"Wrong. There must be a solution. Otherwise you would not be here. There exists at least one line of probability—one creode—according to which you've carried out the plan. I don't know if you've grasped all the implications yet, Corson, but your future depends on you in the most literal sense."

"I rather had the impression I depend on it."

"Another way of saying the same thing. You see, for a long time men have wondered about the problem of continuity of existence. Was a man the same on waking as when he went to sleep the night before? Might not sleep be a complete break? Why did certain ideas and memories vanish altogether from consciousness, only to turn up again later on? Was there a unity, or a mere juxtaposition of existences? One day somebody stumbled on the truth. Since his beginnings man had lived in ignorance of the greater part of himself, his unconscious mind. Nowadays we are asking ourselves almost the same questions in almost the same terms. How are possibilities related to one another? What connects the past, present, and future of one's existence? Does childhood determine maturity, or the other way around? We don't yet comprehend our own essential nature, Corson, and we shall not do so for a long while yet. But we have to live with what we do know."

Selma came back toward them, her body running with streams of water.

"Corson, you should sleep," Cid advised. "You're tired. May you foresee your future in your dreams."

"I'll try," Corson said. "I promise you, I will try."

And he let himself slump to the sand.

## CHAPTER 34

He became aware of a presence beside him. He opened his eyes and at once closed them again, blinded by the sun high overhead. He turned over and tried to doze off again, but two insistent noises prevented him, the hiss of the surf and the sound of light breathing. He looked again and saw sand at the level of his cheek, sand on which the wind had raised miniature dunes that it was now leveling again. He awoke completely and sat up. A girl was kneeling at his side, dressed in a short red tunic.

"Antonella!" he exclaimed.

"George Corson," she said in a disbelieving voice.

He swept the beach with his gaze. Cid, Selma, and the other woman were nowhere in sight. And the girl—Antonella—had risen and taken a few steps back, as though embarrassed at having been caught staring at him.

"You know me?" he demanded.

"I never saw you before. But I've heard about you. You're the man who has to save Uria."

He looked her over more closely. The fact that she was clad while the others went naked suggested that she must come from a period when the life-style had not attained the ultimate simplicity preferred by the members of the Council. She was younger than he remembered her, almost a teenager. He could not tell how many

years had passed for her between their two meetings. For him it had been a matter of only a few months.

He recalled the other Antonella perfectly. How weird to meet someone you had shared all sorts of adventures with, but who did not know you yet! It was like being confronted with someone who had lost his memory.

“Have you been in a war?” she asked in a voice that mingled disapproval with curiosity.

“Yes. It was—unpleasant.”

She pondered. “I want to ask . . . But I don’t know if I can.”

“Go ahead.”

Flushing, she said, “Have you killed anybody yet, Mr. Corson?”

***What a nasty kid!***

“No. I was a kind of engineer. I never personally stabbed or strangled anyone, if that’s what you wanted to know.”

With seeming satisfaction she said, “I was sure you couldn’t have!”

“But I did press the buttons,” Corson said fiercely.

She didn’t understand that, apparently. At a loss, she felt in her tunic and produced a little case which he recognized. “Would you like some smoke?” she inquired.

“No thanks,” he said, although his mouth watered. “I haven’t smoked for a long time.”

“It’s real tobacco, not a synthetic,” she insisted. “I know they used it in your time . . . didn’t they?”

“Yes, they did. But I gave it up.”

“Same as everybody around here. I’m the only one who still does smoke.”

But she laid the case aside.

***How could I have fallen in love with someone like this? Corson wondered. She seems so shallow, so hollow! Oh, it must be a matter of age and circumstances . . . When did I begin to fall in love with her?***

He searched his memory, and episodes from the adventure they had shared came to the surface like bubbles of gas escaping from the depths of a marsh. Aergistal, the balloon, the recruiting officer, the mausoleum world, the escape, the brief stay at Veran’s camp . . . No, before all that. Long before. He struggled to work it out. It was when he kissed her. No, just before he did that. He remembered thinking she was the sexiest woman he had ever met in his life. And she had not made that impression on him at first glance.

He had fallen in love with her the moment that bright flash had sparked from her igniter. He had detected the hypnotic trick and believed she wanted to make him talk. But what she wanted was to make him fall for her. She had succeeded. No wonder she had given such a mocking answer when he asked why she had not precogged the failure of her trick. Was this a regular custom at Dyoto? He felt anger surge in him for a moment, then calmed down. Since the dawn of time women had set snares for men. It was one of the facts of human existence, and one couldn't blame them.

He thought: *I should have left her to rot in Veran's camp and learn that men have tricks of their own!* But he would not have done that. It was in the camp that he had genuinely come to love her, when she kept such a cool head, and still more on the mausoleum planet, when she had shown herself both human and terrified.

Besides, he had no choice. He would snatch her—and himself—from Veran's grasp. He would set down a bag of provisions on a blue road. So far, his part was scripted. He could not avoid that without creating a timequake in his past. But afterward? When he had sent the message, would he still have to furnish the recruits and the equipment demanded by Veran, the fugitive from Aergistal?

It made no sense. Why should the other Corson, after their escape, have led them to the mausoleum world? Was that a compulsory stop-over, the site of some kind of temporal interchange?

But Corson was coming to know the paths of time well, and he was fairly certain nothing of the kind existed. When he carried out his rescue operation he could just as well bring the escapees here to this beach where the Council was based and leave for Aergistal by himself if his stay there proved to be indispensable. He knew that it was. He had changed at Aergistal. And he had learned much which was necessary to the success of his plans.

He recalled the metal plate laid so conspicuously on the ration bag before the mausoleum door. At the time its message had seemed unclear to him. Searching the pockets of his suit, he found the plate was there even though he had changed clothes many times. Sheer habit must have made him transfer it from one outfit to another.

Part of the text had been erased, although the letters appeared to be deeply incised in the metal.

EVEN EMPTY WRAPPINGS CAN STILL BE USEFUL. THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO MAKE WAR. REMEMBER THAT.

He whistled softly between his teeth. Just suppose "empty wrappings" meant the undead women in the mausoleum!



He had wondered whether they might be endowed with artificial personalities and used like robots. He had even thought they might be plastoids until he realized they were too perfectly detailed. They had been alive. Now they were dead, even though the slow activity of their bodies might make one assume the contrary. He had estimated there might be a million of them even in the small part of the mausoleum he had seen. They represented a formidable potential army, numerous enough to match the maddest ambitions of Veran. Bar one thing—they were women. The colonel had judged it necessary to tighten discipline when Antonella entered his camp. He trusted his men only up to a certain point. He did not expect them to betray him for money or by ambition. But there were biological imperatives he dared not infringe.

Corson put his hands to his neck. The collar was there still, so light he often nearly forgot about it. Solid—cold—motionless, yet more dangerous than a cobra. But the snake slumbered. The idea of using the undead as recruits ought not to amount to an overt declaration of hostility.

Shaken by nausea, he bowed down to the sand, aware of Antonella watching him. The idea of making use of the undead appalled him. But it was much in the style of Those of Aergistal to make use of the leftovers, the war criminals or their victims, to avert a far worse calamity. They were casuists who adhered to the principle of the lesser evil—or rather they were total realists. Because those women were dead, dead for good and all. Empty wrappings! No longer capable of reason, or imagination, or even of suffering except on the most basic level. Perhaps they could still breed; that was a point he'd have to bear in mind. But to give them artificial personalities would be a crime far pettier than to annihilate a city full of intelligent beings by pressing a button. On reflection, it was no worse a transgression than an organ transplant, and surgeons on Earth had settled that problem long ago: the dead must serve the living.

He scraped sand over what he had vomited, swallowed painfully, wiped the corners of his mouth.

"I'm better now," he told Antonella, who was still staring at him in dismay. "It's nothing. A—a fit."

She had offered no help, or even sympathy. She had not made a move.

Too young, maybe, he thought. *Brought up in the silken safety of a world unaware of disease and pain. Hardly more than a pretty*

*flower. Experience will change her. Then I shall be able to love her. By the gods, I'll take Aergystal to pieces stone by stone to find her again! They can't keep her there. She has never soiled her hands with any crime.*

And that justified Corson's presence here. Antonella could not do what he had done, nor what remained for him to do. Neither Selma, nor Cid, nor anyone from their period could do it. They were not hardened as he was. They belonged to another world and fought on a different front. Unluckily for them, it was not free from danger. And it was the role of people like Corson to minimize their peril.

*What we are, he said to himself, we're the road sweepers of history, the sewermen. We paddle in shit so that the way will be clean for the feet of our descendants.*

"Are you going for a swim?" the girl asked.

He nodded, not having recovered enough to speak. The sea would make him feel clean again. The entire ocean might not be too much.

## CHAPTER 35

Cid was back when Corson came out of the water. He found an excuse to get rid of Antonella and described his plan. The general outline fitted together, but certain details remained unclear: the collar, for instance, which he still did not know how to take off. Maybe he

would find out at Aergystal. or during a journey into the future. But for the moment it represented only a minor inconvenience.

Arranging the escape would be quite easy. Veran himself had given Corson a whole range of weapons after he had been fitted with the collar; assuming he had no more to fear from that quarter, he concluded that every available man was indispensable in time of war.

One of the weapons created the light-inhibiting field. By modifying it Corson thought he could increase its range at the cost of exhausting its power pack in a few minutes. Its corollary was an ultrasound projector which enabled you to find your way about in the dark; he also had one of those. The ration bag he would leave on the mausoleum planet formed part of the equipment of his pegasone. There remained the two suits he would give to Antonella and the other Corson, but he expected to pick those up without much difficulty during the confusion caused by his arrival.

Contrary to his expectations, Cid did not react when he came to the most delicate aspect of his plan: the reanimation of the undead girls. The man was either incapable of emotion or very strong-willed. Corson thought the former more likely.

"I have some knowledge of reanimation techniques and synthetic personality implantation," Corson said. "It was being tested on casualties during the Earth-Uria war. But I'll need equipment and perhaps technical assistance."

"I suspect you will find all you need on the mausoleum world," Cid answered. "These sadistic collectors of yours will certainly have prepared for all eventualities. And if you need advice, get in touch with Aergystal."

"How? By shouting at the top of my voice? Do they always keep an eye on me?"

Cid smiled faintly. "Probably. But that's not the way. Didn't you know you can reach them through the pegasone? You've been to Aergystal. The route is indelibly imprinted on your nervous system. Besides, it's not so much a route as a way of seeing things. Aergystal occupies the surface of the universe, which implies that it's everywhere. The surface of a hypervolume is a volume with one dimension less. That's not exact, because the number of dimensions in this universe is probably irrational and may even be transfinite, but for practical purposes it's all you need to know."

"But what do I have to do?" Corson asked in perplexity.

"I don't know pegasones as well as you do, and I've never been to

Aergistal, but I assume it will suffice to establish your usual empathy relation with it and then call your journey back to mind. The pegasone will instinctively make any necessary corrections. Don't forget it can reach quite deep into your subconscious."

Cid stroked his chin. "You see," he went on, "it all began with pegasones, on this planet at any rate. In the old days they were unknown on Uria. Into this probability line, or another adjacent"—with a sad smile—"you introduced the first pegasone. Urian scientists studied its offspring. They managed to work out how they jumped through time. Then they contrived to endow humans with the same talent, at first on a very small scale. I told you, it's less a question of a talent than a way of looking at things. The human nervous system has no special powers, but it does have the ability to acquire them, which is perhaps even better. A few centuries ago, at the beginning of our period of responsibility, the humans on Uria were only capable of cogging a few seconds of their future. For some reason the Old Race, the avians, had even more trouble."

"A good thing too," Corson grunted, remembering Ngal R'nda. "But the people I met on my arrival had the power, and the study of pegasones must have happened later."

Cid smiled again, this time with genuine amusement. "How many people did you actually meet?"

Corson searched his memory. "Only two—Floria Van Nelle, and Antonella."

"They came from your future," explained Cid. "Later on the most advanced or the most gifted entered communion with Aergistal. Everything has become much easier. At least, in a manner of speaking."

He straightened and filled his lungs.

"Now we have begun to move through time without pegasones or machines. We do still need a little device, a memory-jogger, as it were. But soon we'll be able to do without that, too."

"Soon?"

"Tomorrow, or in a hundred years. It makes no difference. Time counts little for those who have mastered it."

"Many will die between now and then."

"You've already died once, haven't you, Corson? And that isn't preventing you from carrying out your mission."

Corson remained silent awhile, concentrating on his plan. What Cid had told him disposed of two problems: how to get the pegasone

to take Antonella and the other Corson to Aergistal, and how to locate the mausoleum world. Because he had been there once, he would know how to get back. Obviously it was impossible for a man to keep track of the billions and billions of celestial bodies in this corner of the universe, let alone follow their relative motions over long periods of time. But he could always retrace a route he had taken once, just as it is not necessary to have read every book in order to know how to read a few.

“We could have given you a certain amount of training,” Cid remarked, burrowing in the sand. “But it would have taken a very long time. And this probability line is rather fragile. It’s better for you to use the pegasone. As for us, we are forcing ourselves to give them up.”

He unearthed an engraved silver-gilt container.

“You must be hungry,” he said.

Corson spent three ten-days on the beach. It was a sort of furlough. But he devoted most of the time to perfecting his plans. From memory he drew on the sand a detailed map of Veran’s encampment. He would have little time to lead the fugitives to the pegasone park and there must be no question of tripping on a tent peg or losing his way in the maze of alleys. He also worked out the principal attributes of the artificial personalities he wanted to give to the reanimated girls. He still did not know how to get them from the mausoleum world to Uria, but there would be time to figure that out when he had dealt with the earlier stages of the scheme.

The rest of the time he spent swimming, chatting, or playing with Antonella, or taking part in the activities of the Council. At first sight they did not appear to be very demanding, but little by little he realized the extent of the responsibilities weighing on Cid, Selma, and the other woman, whose name he now knew to be Ana.

Now and then, for periods of hours or days, they disappeared. Several times Corson saw them come back worn out, incapable of uttering a word. Strangers sometimes sprang from nowhere, demanding advice or bringing information. For long hours, almost every day, one at least of the councillors was in communion with Aergistal. Most often it was one of the women. Were they perhaps more advanced than Cid along the road to mastery of time? Or was it simply that Those of Aergistal preferred them as intermediaries?

Some of the communions seemed to be especially trying. Once he

was awakened by screams. Ana was twisting and rolling on the sand as though in an epileptic fit. Before Corson had time to intervene, Cid and Selma had lain down beside her and gone into communion themselves, and in a few minutes Ana's cries and writhing ceased. The next day Corson did not dare ask what had happened.

Something he did inquire about, on the other hand, was the six-thousand-year history of Uria which he had overleaped. The answers he received, though, were unsatisfying. Six thousand years was an almost unimaginable span of time. Not so long had elapsed between the first space flight from Earth and Corson's birth. Science must have made incredible progress. A whole gazetteer of new worlds must have swollen the empire of mankind. And had not explorers made contact with the very ancient races legend spoke of, those millions of times more advanced than men? The answer to this last question appeared to be negative, and anyway Corson doubted whether humanity would have withstood the shock. Such races must have attained the Aergistal level, where—as the god had said—“there is no more difference.” If they intervened in human evolution it would not be under the crude guise of aggression or peaceful trade. It would be across time.

What surprised Corson most was the nature of the answers the councillors gave him; one could almost describe them as parochial. They knew a little of the history of Uria and of a few score neighboring star systems, but nothing coherent on the galactic level. Even the concept of galactic history seemed foreign to them.

Corson thought at first that must be because it was too vast for any human mind to grasp. Then he realized their very notion of history differed from his. They viewed it as an assemblage of situations and crises of which none was irreversible and all were obedient to complex laws. They were no more interested in a catalog of all possible crises than an engineer in Corson's day would have been in an exhaustive tabulation of solutions to technical problems, or a doctor in a list of every cellular change caused by viruses. Principles were known to exist which accounted for the vast majority of actual situations. The rare occurrence of an event which could not be thus explained led, sooner or later, to the formulation of a new principle, or even a whole new system of principles. The only History which they could conceive of, as Corson found out, was the History of the successive sciences of history. None of them was a specialist in that field.

Moreover at any given moment—inasmuch as that phrase meant anything—there could be found on the various human and alien worlds almost the entire imaginable range of situations. Galactic civilization was one of islands. Each island had its own history and customs, and interference between them was relatively rare. Corson came to understand that war had been the principal bond between the worlds which had been baptized the Solar Powers, just as it had been between those of the Empire of Uria and all subsequent empires.

The question remained, how to find out whether Uria was indeed a key world because it had happened to attract the attention of Those of Aergistal. To Cid the question was meaningless. In Ana's view the Urians were called on to play a special part in the universe because they had been the ones to find a way of conquering time. For Selma, all worlds were equally important and the mastery of time would have been revealed to those species which were sufficiently advanced by Those of Aergistal through means and at a moment which they judged suitable. Corson was no further forward.

He started to have doubts. Sometimes he wondered whether they were altogether sane, watching the way they behaved around him. Was their confidence in their powers a mere delusion? He had scarcely any evidence of their ability to time-jump except their absences. They could be deceiving him, consciously or unconsciously.

On the other hand they knew too much about him, his past, Aergistal . . . and they had shown that they were capable of intercepting a pegasone. Corson was sure they had forced it to lock on to this present. And at least as far as he could tell under normal circumstances they showed no hint of derangement. They acted like ordinary people, perhaps rather better adjusted than the average individual Corson had known before, in a time of war. That too was surprising. People belonging to a culture six thousand years older than his own ought to be *different*.

Then he remembered Touray, snatched from the mythical days of Old Earth, back when men had hardly ventured beyond the limits of their own world. He had detected no real difference in him, either. And Touray had adapted astonishingly well to life at Aergistal, which would not be created for a million years, or more likely for a billion.

He had reached about this stage in his musings when he found out that his companions were indeed different. They were united

by a deep personal bond, whereas Corson's society had recognized only the individual and the functional group. There was an especially strong attraction between Cid and Selma, but it did not exclude Ana—on the contrary. All three of them now and then mentioned larger groups.

They did their best not to shock Corson; while life on a beach might have its idyllic aspects, it did impose some limits on intimate relationships.

Oddly enough, Antonella seemed to remain apart, even more of an outsider than Corson. The three others did not shut her out of their group and even remained on superficially affectionate terms with her, but she was not attuned to them. She had neither Selma's appealing spontaneity nor Ana's rather casual sensuality. She was, or so it seemed, no more than a pretty young girl buzzing around Corson like a bee around a jam tart. She had a less forceful personality than the other two women but—Corson had at least to grant her this—she seemed in no way jealous of them. He ascribed the almost imperceptible, but nonetheless real, sense of distance between her and the others to her lesser experience of life, her more inhibited background, and the fact that she hailed from another time zone. He had never asked her which one. Without reference points any answer she gave would be meaningless. Each time he inquired about her previous life she replied only with commonplaces. She seemed to have no memories worth mentioning. He wondered for a moment why, in her future when she met him for the second time, she would say nothing—or from his standpoint had said nothing—about this restful period on the beach. It was hard to figure that out. Maybe she was afraid of a short circuit in time. Or, more simply, she might have no reason to speak of Cid, Selma, and Ana, who to her by then would be no more than meaningless names.

Whereas at present they were to him real friends. He could not remember having felt such affection for other people in the past. He especially enjoyed the long evenings when they sat sipping wine and swapping ideas. Then it seemed to him as though all his problems had been solved long ago and troubled him no more than would old memories.

"You won't forget to send that message, Selma?"

"It's as though it has already been sent," Selma would reply.

"And you'll put my name to it, George Corson. That old fox Veran knew it even before I had the pleasure of making his acquaint-



ance. And you'll tell him that on Uria he can find weapons and pegasones, and even perhaps recruits."

"Corson, seeing you so worried about this one might imagine it was a love letter!"

"Last time I saw him he was by the great ocean of Aergistal, where sea meets space. I hope that address will be adequate. Now I look back, I recall he seemed to be in difficulties. He must have been retreating."

"We'll send the message to Aergistal, marked 'to be called for.'"

He had once explained to Selma the system of military postal zones which had been in use in his own time, and the *poste restante* mail ships which waited for their particular squadrons for a year, two, ten, sometimes through all eternity. Under robot control they made for a prearranged point and there remained as long as was necessary until their contents were collected. She had found the idea both absurd and comical. He had almost become angry. Then he had realized that to her the idea of waiting for news must be a totally foreign concept. Every day she received news from a time when she would be long dead.

Then he would turn to Cid.

"Are you sure that throwing Veran's camp into confusion will be enough? Are you sure the citizens of Uria can cope with the soldiers and their pegasones?"

"Absolutely," Cid would say. "Apart from Veran none of those soldiers has the makings of a leader. As soon as he is out of the way the rest will put up little resistance."

"Collectively, perhaps not. Individually, I'm not so sure. They're used to fighting under very bad conditions."

"They won't be inclined to fight after what you'll have dumped on them. And don't underestimate the people of Uria. They may not be war veterans, but I'm not certain Veran would have gotten the better of them even without your plan. There would have been a fearful number of casualties, which is what we want to avoid, but in the end Veran would have been brought to his knees. In any case, though, that's for us to worry about."

The prospect of this confrontation filled Corson with anxiety. He knew that Veran's men would be disoriented by the probable breakdown of the strict combat discipline they were used to. But they did possess formidable weapons, and knew how to use them.

"I'd very much like to be there," Corson would wind up.

"No. You'll have other tasks to attend to. You might be hurt or even killed. That would lead to a major timequake."

Since the start Cid had insisted that Corson stay clear of the eventual battlefield. He had agreed without understanding why. He could not get to grips with the idea that this battle had already taken place and in one sense had already been won.

One evening Cid did not launch into his customary thesis. He simply said, "I hope you've finished your preparations, friend. Time is wasting. You must be on your way tomorrow."

Corson gave a thoughtful nod.

That evening he took Antonella to a distant part of the beach. She turned out to be quite passive. He had retained a different memory of her. Now she was neither afraid nor eager, simply compliant, whereas on the same beach three hundred years earlier she had displayed great passion. He was sure of one thing: this was not her first time. But that was of no importance to him. What he did wonder was how many men she would meet before he found her again. Then he dozed off, cuddling her against him.

Next morning he harnessed the pegasone. He had found little time to attend to the beast, but it did not need much looking after. He had thought of trying to contact Aergistal, but he had not put the idea into effect. He preferred not to make inquiries of Those of Aergistal unless he was forced to. When he thought back to the crystal voice he had heard under that purple welkin he felt ill.

Cid was alone on the beach. He approached just as Corson was ready to mount.

"Good luck, friend," he called.

Corson hesitated. He did not want to make a long speech at this parting, but on the other hand he did not want to leave without saying a word to anyone. When he had wakened Antonella had gone, perhaps to spare him a painful goodbye.

*Simply to say thank you doesn't feel like enough.* He licked his dry lips. So many questions still to ask, so many things left unsaid . . .

"May you live here to the end of eternity," he said at last. "To meditate your fill, as you said the evening of my arrival . . . Do you do it only so that you can administer these centuries?"

"No. That's not even the most important aspect of it. We are preparing, as you know, to master time, and this"—Cid gestured to indicate the beach, the sea, the sky—"is our laboratory."

"In order to travel into the future?"

“Not just that. Time travel is almost an incidental. We are trying to get used to the idea of living in a new way. We’ve coined the name ‘hyperlife’ for it. How shall I explain that? Perhaps I could say that what we want is to live in several possibilities at once, maybe in all possibilities. To coexist with ourselves on many probability lines. To be several people at once yet remain our unique selves. To be multidimensional. And think what it will mean when every being can introduce its own changes into history. The changes will combine with each other, they’ll set up interference patterns like ripples meeting on a pond, and some will be favorable and some will be harmful. No human mind could attain hyperlife and still be sane! Everyone is part of another’s possibility. You would have to know somebody incredibly well before risking a change in his destiny and your own. That’s what we are preparing ourselves for, Selma, Ana, and I. It’s a long road we’ve set out on—a long road.”

“You will become like Those of Aergistal,” Corson said.

Cid shook his head. “They’re different, genuinely transformed by evolution . . . No, that’s not the right term. No concept of ours even comes close. They will no longer be human, or avian, or saurian, or descendants of any species you can dream of. They will be all of them at once, or rather they will have been. Really we know nothing of Aergistal, Corson. All we know of it is what we see, not because it’s all we’re allowed to see but because it’s all we are capable of seeing. Almost nothing. We interpret it in the only way we can, and what we see there is ourselves. Those of Aergistal will conquer something which makes us afraid.”

“Death?” Corson said.

“No, death holds no terrors for those who have caught a glimpse of hyperlife. To die once is no great matter if an infinity of other parallel existences remain to you. But there is something we call hyperdeath. That consists in being relegated to mere potential, in being eliminated from all probability lines by a timequake. To be sure of escaping that, one must control every creode in the universe. One must make one’s own possibilities congruent with those of the continuum. Those of Aergistal have succeeded in doing so.”

Corson said slowly, “Is that why they are afraid of the Outside, and have girdled their domain with a moat of wars?”

“Perhaps,” answered Cid. “I’ve never been there. But you must not let what I say upset you. Come back here when you have done what you have to do.”

"I'll come back," Corson said. "I hope very much to see you again."

Cid gave an equivocal smile. "Don't hope for too much, my friend. But return as quickly as you can. There is a seat waiting for you on the Council of Uria. Good luck again."

"Goodbye!" Corson cried, and the pegasone took off.

## CHAPTER 36

He made a preliminary time jump to obtain two space suits. It would be best to organize the getaway in two stages. He decided to step in one minute before the moment of the actual escape. That would allow him to spy out the defenses and sow the confusion essential to the second phase. He had little trouble in slipping into one of the maintenance tents, but, as he had expected, night had brought no relaxation in the vigilance of Veran's camp. He hardly had time to seize two suit packs and remount before the alleys were loud with alarms. The tent he had just raided was in a sector of the camp almost diametrically opposite where Corson and Antonella were imprisoned. The first movement of the guards would be to converge on the site of the robbery. They would have no time to rush back the other way.

He jumped a few days into the past, chose a lonely spot, and examined the suits. Satisfied, he decided to proceed to the second

phase. He locked in on the proper moment and parked his pegasone next to Veran's. Among all the commotion no one noticed him. He was wearing a regulation outfit and might have been coming back from patrol. He at once switched on the light inhibitor and ran along the alleys of the camp as quickly as the blurred image of his surroundings afforded by the ultrasound projector would permit. He estimated it would take at least ten seconds for the most quick-witted of the guards to think of doing the same. Which would not get them much further forward, because they had no idea where the attack was coming from. The range of their projectors was reduced and their beams interfered with each other, fogging the images that they did pick up. The officers would probably waste a minute or so convincing their men that they must shut them off because they were useless. That would be plenty of time, provided that Antonella, warned by her precog talent, managed to persuade Corson to cooperate. And he knew she had succeeded.

Everything worked out as he had foreseen. He had blacked over his faceplate so that the other Corson would not recognize him, and communicated only by signs. It was not the moment to introduce another element of confusion into his earlier mind.

They took off into space, now, then leaped across time. Corson made a few swerves to shake off their pursuers, but the other pegasone followed like a guardian angel. Veran's soldiers did not know their destination and might wander forever through the continuum without chancing on the mausoleum world. What was more, Veran would call off the chase as soon as a patrol informed him that Corson was about to come back.

The mausoleum world ... I *wonder*, Corson said to himself, *when I first discovered it!*

He had shown himself the way to it. It seemed he had managed to break the Law of Non-regressive Information; he had set up a closed loop. There must be a beginning to everything ... or maybe that was simply an illusion? Perhaps, much later, he would come across this planet for the first time and arrange for the information to be fed into the loop. Or did some mysterious bond of which he was at present unaware unite all the possible Corsons? For the moment he dismissed the enigma; he did not possess the data to reach a solution.

At the right spot above the planet he gave instructions to the other pegasone and abandoned it along with Antonella and his

double. He himself jumped into the future. He could discern no trace of his earlier visit. That was a good sign. He had been half afraid of meeting himself face to face, or of stumbling on two bleached skeletons.

He climbed down from his pegasone and—not without apprehension—entered the vast and dismal hall. Nothing had changed. He set to work with deliberation. Time was no longer of much account to him.

Cid had been right. Equipment for reanimating the women and endowing them with synthetic personalities was located in an underground annex to the great hall. But the entry was so well hidden that he had to explore the foundations with the help of his pegasone. Operating it was simpler than he had feared it might be. Much of the job was taken care of automatically. Whoever the warlords were who had assembled this monstrous collection, they must like quick work. Very probably they knew even less than Corson about the principles underlying reanimation.

His hands trembled nonetheless when he set about his first test. He had designed a synthetic personality intended to last five seconds. The woman blinked, opened her eyes, uttered a sigh and slumped back into immobility.

The result of the first more serious trial was very unpleasant. A huge statuesque blonde, almost a head taller than himself, leaped up, gave a wordless cry, hurled herself upon him, and caught him in such a bear hug he almost suffocated. He had to knock her out. Shaken, he concluded he had overdone the folliculin.

To give himself a respite he decided to go back and deposit, at the right moment, the ration bag and the metal plate he had left before the mausoleum door. Now, the bit of metal seemed completely smooth. A few experiments convinced him that it must be sensitive to displacements in time. Its component crystals tended to regain their original relationship after a time jump. So the problem was to engrave the key section of the message deeply enough for it to survive several time trips. He did some figuring and set about inscribing the plate. He wondered what would happen if, say, he changed one of the words. Probably nothing; it would be below the time-quake threshold. But he preferred not to alter the wording which was so deeply impressed on his memory. The stakes were too high.

There remained the problem of conditioning the pegasone which would take Antonella and his earlier self to Aergistal. He decided

on a substitution. He undertook as complete an exchange of data as he could with the beast. He made certain that it would take its riders not merely to Aergistal but to the precise point where he himself recalled being set down. Beyond that he could control the pegasone no further. However, he assumed that under identical conditions the creature would react in an identical manner. The chance of a slip-up would be negligible. Besides, he could doubtless rely on Those of Aergistal to take care of details like that. He conditioned the pegasone to the mere name of Aergistal shouted in a loud voice.

In return he obtained a great deal of information concerning the habits, behavior, and motivations of pegasones. Although the beast's racial memory had been weakened by captivity, enough came across for Corson to form an impression of its home world. To his great surprise he found that the Monster he had learned to beware of—at least in its wild state—was almost as timid as a rabbit. The image it retained of its original masters, who had long disappeared, was not very clear; plainly, though, it both adored and feared them.

The substitution proceeded without difficulty. Corson took the trouble to swap the harnesses. He did not want the other Corson's attention alerted by some unnoticed mark on the straps. He laid the ration bag alongside the road and in clear view of the door.

Then he returned to the period at which he had undertaken to revive the warlords' trophies. He did not know what would happen if he misjudged by a few hours and met himself unexpectedly, but the pegasone's instincts saved him any worry on that score. The beast refused to take the precise path it had already followed across the continuum; it seemed that it could detect its own presence from a few seconds away, and shied off. In one sense it displayed blind obedience to the Law of Non-regressive Information. Corson preferred not to make it go against its nature.

He resumed the preparation of Veran's "recruits." Now he worked frenziedly, eager to complete the job. He was also worried about the chance of being surprised by the warlords and having to settle his account with them. But a few patrols into the future and the near past set his mind partly at rest.

He designed three main types of synthetic personality. Too great a uniformity in the behavior of the women might expose the trick he was playing prematurely. For the same reason he took a random sample of them to avoid the chance of using too many similar physical types. After his first experiments he had intended to make the

## *The Overlords of War*

personalities sexually neutral; in the upshot, despite his reluctance, he did introduce a few feminine characteristics into his programs.

Another question he thought about long and hard was the durability of the personalities. Too short a life might endanger his plan. On the other hand the idea of giving these undead women an over-long existence . . . Even though he was treating them as mere machines, he was repelled by the thought of their lasting long enough to be exposed to the tender mercies of Veran's men. He ended up by settling for personalities with a probable duration of forty-eight hours plus or minus ten percent. After that time Veran's recruits would lose all semblance of life and without adequate supportive facilities would die beyond recall. If the situation worked out as he hoped, it would all be over in a few hours, if not in a matter of minutes. If it didn't proceed that quickly, Veran would have time to regain control over his men even if it meant ruthlessly wiping out his "recruits," and the plan would fail.

At this point Corson was wondering how many bodies to revive. Too limited a number might lead to arguments among the men, who would probably appeal to their leader for arbitration. Too large an invasion, apart from posing problems of transportation which Corson had not yet solved, might excite suspicion among Veran's little army.

He estimated that it must comprise about six hundred men. Accordingly he decided to revive about two thousand women. But that was too many for him to tackle by himself in reasonable time. Unenthusiastically he endowed a score of bodies with personalities which would enable them to act as his assistants, turning them into docile, painstaking, tireless instruments. He had trouble stopping himself from bullying them, for their dumbness and their unchanging smiles got on his nerves.

What it came down to, he told himself, was that no industrialist had ever owned so many slaves, no conqueror had ever led such a horde of Amazons, no sultan had ever boasted such a harem, as he now had at his disposal.

But it was simply not his style.

When he was certain he could revive the whole two thousand in a few hours, he turned his attention to clothing them. Not a single garment was to be found in the mausoleum; as he thought bitterly, butterflies don't wear clothes. He reconnoitered a nearby planetary system and, by shuttling back and forth in time, eventually located a military supply depot which he robbed without compunction. He



hoped his depredations would not unleash a timequake in the planet's history, but he thought it unlikely. From experience he knew that despite computerized records large stocks vanished from the stores of all armies now and then without entraining untoward aftereffects. Some clerk would spend a few sleepless nights inventing a more or less convincing explanation for the discrepancy in his stock of overalls. At worst he would be court-martialed. But that wasn't the sort of person who made history.

Transportation was another matter. He almost appealed to Aergistal. But he put off that ultimate solution. The idea of asking advice from the gods was unbearable. He retained too clear a recollection of the scorn in that great voice. He was willing enough to be a pawn, but by the seven circles of hell he would not let himself become a robot! Perhaps that was a childish attitude, but it was his own.

At last he hit on a solution which though inelegant was nonetheless practicable. With the help of his assistants he dismantled several of the internal fittings of the mausoleum and obtained enough metal plates to build a reasonably airtight container. After all, he himself had traveled from Aergistal to Uria in a sort of coffin. A pegasone could carry a good deal of material across space-time provided the journey was not too long. That was how Veran transported his equipment. He had had to come to Uria from the far end of the universe, and twenty-five men plus their gear was as much as his pegasones could manage. Corson established with a few trials that between here and Uria he might shift two hundred women at one go.

When he gave the signal for departure, he had spent a little more than two weeks on the mausoleum world. He had long ago used up the rations he had brought with him, but he had obtained plenty of extra provisions from the warehouses on the neighboring planet. For lack of anything better he had kept his helpers going on serum and glucose drawn from the life-support system.

He was almost at the end of his resources. He would dearly have liked to rest awhile, but he preferred to spend no longer than he had to on this dismal planet.

With close attention he supervised the revival of the first batch and the implantation of their artificial personalities. A tired smile crossed his face when he saw the two hundred women leave their couches, parting the sterile mist which had served them for shrouds, assemble in the central aisle, and line up as though on parade. Then nausea turned him inside out like a glove.

## *The Overlords of War*

One of his helpers took a step toward him. He waved her—it?—aside.

“It’s okay,” he said. As he would have done to a human being.

But he could read nothing in the splendid violet eyes trained on him, neither comprehension nor pity; they were like soft stones. Reflex, not surprise, had provoked the motion. These creatures could hear, they obeyed his voice, they even possessed a limited vocabulary which he had carefully worked out and included in their programing, but they had no understanding. They did not exist as people. Each time he was tempted to forget their nature, those eyes would remind him, and the overprecise movements they made among the shadows. They were no more than crude projections of his own mind. Behind their eyes there was no one else for him to meet.

The door control at the exit was not deceived. It would not open for the procession of the undead. He had to stand on the threshold while they filed past him, picked up the overalls he had dumped in piles on the grass, and put them on. Then, on his word of command, they drew hoods over their heads and entered the rough metal box he had fashioned where, at another order, they sank into a hypnotic trance. He fastened its door and attached the pegasone’s traces and climbed into his saddle and plunged into time with his cargo of ghosts.

He set down on Uria, near Veran’s camp, in a secluded spot and at a time not long after he had set out on his embassy to the future. He would not be away from here again more than a few seconds, although the return, the revival of another contingent and the second trip would take him several hours. He made ten trips, which took up whole days of his subjective time. The third day he broke down in tears and fell asleep. The fifth day the pegasone showed signs of exhaustion and he had to wait until it recovered, his mind empty and dry. At the moment when he left the mausoleum world for the last time he called his helpers together and pronounced a single word. They collapsed, still smiling.

He aroused the recruits and marched them in a long column toward the encampment. A good distance from the perimeter defenses he halted them in plain sight and hailed one of the sentries. A moment later Veran showed himself.

“You look tired, Corson,” he said. “What have you brought us?”

“Recruits,” Corson said.

Veran made a sign. Gunners trained their weapons on the veiled forms standing in a curve around the camp. Others activated scanners.

“No trickery, I hope, Corson! Otherwise your collar—”

“None of us is armed,” Corson interrupted. “Except myself.”

“No weapons,” a technician confirmed.

“Good,” Veran said. “So you found out how to convince them, up there in the future. I approve of efficiency, Corson. Perhaps even they felt themselves touched by ambition. Advance the first rank. And tell them to take their hoods off so I can get a sight of them.”

Everyone in the camp had gathered behind him, except the pickets on guard duty. Corson noted with satisfaction that the men seemed less alert, less rigidly organized than when he saw them for the first time. Weeks of inactivity on Uria had taken their toll. It was not so much that discipline had slipped as that the atmosphere had changed. Corson’s practiced eye picked out the almost imperceptible evidence: one soldier who had hooked his thumbs in his pockets, another placidly sucking a little metal tube.

He strained to identify by their security collars the members of Veran’s personal bodyguard. He counted just under a dozen of them.

He uttered a single meaningless command. The front rank advanced. Veran made a sign. The defensive wire ceased to glow. Two soldiers rolled a section of it aside. Veran seemed to have lost all suspicion. But Corson knew how crafty the warlord’s mind was. He would not let anyone enter the camp without checking for himself.

After a pause, the second rank followed the first, and the third, and the fourth, their clothing making a rustling sound. Corson shouted another order. He was sure no one in the camp had guessed the true nature of these recruits. They were all tall, and their loose-cut military overalls hid the shape of their bodies. At his voice, in a unison movement, the first rank threw back their heads and let their hoods slip down.

Now there was no sound, not even footfalls or the brushing of cloth on cloth, except for the distant whistling and grunting of a pegasone having a dream.

In the camp someone stifled a sneeze, or a laugh. Then someone else began to shout.

“Women! They’re only women!”

“There are two thousand of them,” Corson said with deliberation.

“They are strong and obedient.”

Veran did not react. His head did not turn by the least fraction of a degree. Only his eyes moved. He studied the faces of the women. Then he bent his gaze on Corson.

“Strong and obedient,” he echoed.

Yonder in the camp the men had started to fidget, leaning forward, craning their necks, their eyes popping from their sockets.

“Well,” Veran said without raising his voice, “you can just take them back where they came from.”

An unarmed soldier, who must have been off duty, jumped the fence at a point where it had not been rolled aside, and headed toward the women at a run. One of Veran’s personal guards took aim at him, but Veran struck the gun aside. Corson understood and admired his quick thinking. He was afraid, but he wasn’t showing it. He hoped this was a trap, that the soldier would fall into it and his fate would serve as a lesson to the others.

But this was no trap, or at least not of the kind he was hoping for. When the soldier was halfway to the women, Corson uttered a key word, clearly but quietly. He did not want the men in the camp to mistake what he said for an order to attack.

The front rank undid their overalls and took a half pace forward. The garments slid to the ground. They wore nothing else. They stood among the tall dense grass, haloed by the sunlight. Their hair fell around their shoulders and over their breasts. They scarcely moved but for their slow deep breathing, and kept their empty hands open, palms to the front.

There was a sort of roar from the camp, not a cry or a call, but a dull groan like a monstrous bellows, a unison gasp from hundreds of lungs.

A score of soldiers rushed forward. Others dropped their guns and gave chase, uncertain whether they were running after the others to bring them back or because they were afraid of getting there last. One of Veran’s guards made to open fire, but his neighbor pushed him off balance. Some of the soldiers took the precaution of breaking the power packs on their weapons before likewise making for the women.

Corson had thought of saying something, addressing the soldiers over Veran’s head despite the risks. But it was no longer necessary. The camp was emptying. Veran was fighting his own men. Bodies fell. Someone was trying to reactivate the perimeter fence, not without trouble, for it was blinking on and off. Clearly Veran was still trying to avoid more than minimal bloodshed. But he had no one around him now except his personal guards. A few other men, demoralized, were fighting with little enthusiasm.

It looked as though Veran was going to give in; Corson saw him

raise his hand. The shots grew fewer. Then night came down. It swallowed up women, camp, soldiers, and all.

Irresolutely Corson took a few steps backward. Then he dropped to the ground. Veran had played his master card, the light-inhibitor. Now perhaps he would turn his guns loose at random on the neighborhood of the camp. Corson tried simultaneously to burrow into the earth and to crawl away. Over the muffled uproar that filled the darkness he heard the sound of a footfall. He rolled over, folded into a ball, straightened like a spring, jumped up, almost lost his balance, struggled to retain it while flailing the air with his hands.

A grip on his arm spun him around. An arm tilted back his chin and crushed his throat. He heard Veran pant in his ear.

"You fooled me, Corson. You were tougher than I thought. I could kill you for getting me in a mess like this! But I'm leaving you the key—the key to your collar. Think of the others."

Something fell between Corson's feet. The grip relaxed. His skull seemed to swell up as though it would burst. He dropped on all fours, gasping for breath. Somewhere in the darkness behind him Veran was running into the forest, in search of the pegasone Corson had not taken the trouble to hide. Corson heard him shout in a mocking voice half muffled by the inhibition field, "I'll get back on my feet, Corson! You'll see!"

There came the fierce howl of a heat beam, shrunk by the field to a wasp-like buzz. Corson ducked. Eyes closed, he waited. Smells rose to his nostrils: smoke, burning wood, scorching meat. Beyond his lids the universe glowed.

He opened his eyes. Day had returned. Still in a crouch, he looked around. More than a hundred of the women had been killed, and a score of soldiers. A dozen more would never be good for anything again. Part of the camp was in flames.

Rising, he turned in the direction of the forest and saw what remained of Veran. The pegasone had vanished.

Veran had played his last card, and lost. He had managed to get himself killed in two ways at once. The heat beam—possibly aimed at him—had touched him just as he was mounting the pegasone. A fraction of a second earlier the beast, alert to the danger, had shied through time without caring what was nearby. It had taken half of Veran with it, and his light-inhibitor.

Somewhere in the universe, Corson thought, there must be a pegasone drowning in night and silence, struggling in unfathomable darkness at the bottom of a well which no energy could reach until

the inhibitor's power pack ran out or until it managed to shake off the device during one of its frantic time leaps. But why should Veran have taken his pegasone, when his camp was full of the beasts? Then Corson realized. He must have wanted access to the memory of that particular pegasone, to find out how and by whom he had been outwitted.

He trod on something. Bending down, he retrieved a little flat blade of blackened metal with a square notch at one end. He raised it to his neck and engaged the collar in the notch. No result. He began to turn the collar slowly. His hands shook and he almost had to stop. A block of ice exploded in his guts. Sweat poured into his eyes. The capillaries in his suit, overloaded, ceased to keep his back and armpits dry. He was suddenly very thirsty.

When he had turned the collar completely around, it fell apart in two sections. He caught them, looked them over for a moment—seeing that their edges were smooth, as though they had been no more than pressed together—and, in a futile gesture, hurled them far away.

He could see no sense in what Veran had done. Had he hoped to get clear so completely that Corson would never again be a threat to him? Had he detected a certain fellow feeling on Corson's part?

An idea came to his mind. Maybe Veran had tried to take the pegasone in the hope of returning to Aergistal. That was the right place for him. And if indeed Aergistal was hell, he had no doubt succeeded.

Corson headed into the camp, hoping to find another pegasone there. The fighting had died down. In a few hours at most the Urians would have the situation in hand. They would meet hardly any resistance. The dying had been finished off. A few lightly injured men were trying to dress their wounds. Guns lay around here and there. But what Corson had been most afraid of was not happening. The soldiers were not maltreating the women. Some were walking about, rather shyly, in the company of three or four beauties, while others, sitting on the grass, were trying to strike up a conversation. They seemed surprised, almost frightened, at the willingness of the girls to cooperate. Maybe they were disappointed.

They would be even more so, Corson thought, forty-eight hours from now . . .

He spotted a soldier wearing a security collar, who sat grief-stricken on a gun carriage with his head in his hands. He touched the man's shoulder.

"The key," he said. "The key to your collar."

The man looked up. Corson read in his eyes stupefaction and alarm. He repeated, "The key of your collar!"

He bent down and opened it, and handed the two pieces to the soldier, who gave a weary smile.

"Take the key," Corson said. "Other men have collars on. See to them."

The soldier nodded, but his expression remained absent. The collar might have left his neck, but no key could release him from the memory of Veran, from the ghost of his dead leader.

Corson picked out a pegasone without meeting any opposition. He strapped himself on with extreme care. He had done what he had to do and closed the loop in time. There remained one more jump for him to make, to the beach where—perhaps—Antonella was awaiting him.

And the Council of Uria, Selma, Cid, and Ana ... his friends.

## CHAPTER 37

On the beach a woman alone: blond, naked, lying face downward. She was either asleep or in communion. There were no footsteps on the sand except hers. Corson sat down nearby and waited for her to awaken. He had plenty of time. Ahead of him stretched a fragment of the eternity on which was founded Aergistal.

He relaxed. He had reached the end of his road. He could afford

to stare at the sea and run sand between his fingers. Later, he too would learn to master time. He had already had a certain amount of practical experience.

The woman roused. She stretched, rolled over, rubbed her eyes. Corson recognized her.

“Floria Van Nelle,” he said.

She nodded and smiled, faintly and almost sadly.

“Where are they?” he demanded, and when she appeared not to understand, went on: “Cid, Selma, and Ana! I must make my report to the Council of Uria.”

“There has been a time slip,” Floria said softly. “Thanks to you, not a very grave one. But in this line of probability they do not exist.”

“They’re dead?”

“They have never existed.”

“I’ve lost my way,” Corson said. “I’m in the wrong place—the wrong time—maybe the wrong universe!”

“You have erased them. They inhabited a parenthesis of history. Your intervention has abolished them.”

Corson felt himself turn pale. He clenched his fists. “They were my friends, and I’ve killed them!”

Floria shook her head. “No. They belonged to another possibility and you have brought about this better one. They knew what would become of them if you succeeded, and they hoped you would succeed.”

Corson sighed. He had had friends and they had vanished, shadows now even fainter than those claimed by death. They had left nothing behind, not a footprint, not a scratch on a stone, not even a name in this universe which to them was forever closed. They had not been born. They were no more than a memory in Corson’s mind and abstract entries in the ghostly records of Aergistal.

*What I touch I wipe away. I am the eraser of the gods.*

He recalled Touray, a good comrade, doubtless tossed back into the crazy chaos of unending battle. He thought of Ngal R’nda, last Prince of Uria, torn to bits by his own devoted followers, and Veran, the cunning mercenary, struck down by his own companions. He thought, with terror, of Antonella. He wanted to ask a question, but words would not come.

“On the other creode I did not exist,” Floria said. “And I was assigned to welcome you when you arrived on Uria. Did you think I turned up by chance? Here I exist, thanks to you. Don’t say you’re sorry.”



Bitterly Corson said, "So we are ripples on the surface of reality, to be reshaped or dispersed by a puff of wind according to the whim of the gods. I've been a toy for Those of Aergistal, the puppeteers who are making over history."

"They are not gods, even if they are somewhat more than we are. They do not act merely from caprice."

"I know," Corson rasped. "They work for the best. They are eliminating war. They're rearranging history so that it will climax with them. I heard all that at Aergistal. To eliminate war, comprehend war, preserve war . . . There they cower like rats at the end of time, scared of the Outside."

"That's only half the story," Floria said patiently. "They are ourselves."

"They're our descendants. They mock us from their billion-year vantage point."

"They are ourselves, Corson," Floria repeated. "We are Those of Aergistal. But we don't know that we are. We have to discover and grasp that truth. They are the sum of everything that's possible, for their kind, for ours, for all others, even for species you cannot dream of and that could not dream of you. They are all the fragments of the universe and all the perceptions of the universe. We are not the ancestors of the gods, nor are they our descendants, but we are one part of them, cut off from our origins or rather from our completion. Each of us is one of their possibilities, a detail, a creode, aspiring in our muddled way to achieve union with them, yet struggling blindly in the dark to assert our separate existence. Something has happened somewhere in space and time which I myself don't understand, though I know it was neither at the beginning nor the end of time. There is no 'before' or 'after.' To them, and already to a tiny extent to us, time is a dimension along which events coexist like objects laid side by side. We are one moment of the long path that leads to Aergistal, toward the union of all possible consciousness, and Those of Aergistal are each and every one of the beings who have ever taken and will ever take that path."

"Gods with schizophrenia," Corson grunted.

"Yes, if that helps you to understand them. Sometimes I tell myself that they must have set out to explore the full range of what is possible, and got lost on the way and became us, and that's the reason for war, this splitting and cracking and crumpling of history which they are so carefully smoothing out. The fact that it has been broken

prevents them, despite their great power, from instantly and completely setting the universe to rights. For what they are, we are also. War is part of them. And we must grope about to rediscover the long, the very long road that leads to them, that's to say to ourselves. They were bom of war, Corson, from this dreadful tumult that shakes our lives, and they will only exist if they abolish it. Here and there they repair a fault, reknot the mesh. We do it, sometimes with their help. You have done it. Do you regret that?"

"No," Corson said.

"To eliminate war," Floria went on, "Those of Aergistal make use of people who have waged it. They know what it's like. Sometimes they come to hate it enough to want to abolish it—really to want that, no matter what the cost. Those who do not immediately arrive at this conclusion spend a certain while at Aergistal. Eventually they understand. In the long run they all understand."

"Even someone like Veran?" Corson said sceptically.

"Even someone like Veran. Right now he's canceling a flare-up in the Lyra region."

"But he's dead," Corson said.

"No one dies," Floria countered. "A life is like a page in a book. There's another next to it. Not after it—next to it."

Corson rose and took a few steps toward the sea. He halted at the edge of the surf.

"It's a great story. Who's to tell me if it's true?"

"Nobody. You'll find that out by snatches. Maybe what you'll find out will be a little different. No one has the monopoly of truth."

Without turning, Corson said—forcefully, almost violently—"I came back to learn the mastery of time, and how to commune with Those of Aergistal. And—"

"You'll learn. Everything you're capable of learning. We need people like you. There are so many outbreaks of war to be put out, like so many fires."

"But I hoped to find peace," Corson said. "And—and I came back for Antonella."

Floria drew close and set her hands on his shoulders. "I beg you—" she began. He cut her short.

"I love her! Or ... or I used to love her. She has vanished too, hasn't she?"

"She never existed. She had been dead for a long time. We took her from the mausoleum world, from that warlord's collection, and

equipped her with an artificial personality, just as you did with Veran's recruits. It was essential, Corson. Without her you would not have acted as you did. But a real human being could not have entered Aergistal."

"Without being a war criminal," Corson said.

"She was no more than a machine."

"You mean she was bait."

"I'm desperately sorry. I will do whatever you wish. I will love you, George Corson, if that is what you want."

"It's not as simple as that," he muttered, recalling what Cid had told him: he must not hold against them what they had been forced to do. Cid had been expunged. He had known what was in store for him, yet he had pitied Corson . . .

"No one dies," Corson said. "Perhaps I'll find her again in another existence."

"Perhaps," Floria sighed.

Corson took a step into the sea. "So nothing is left to me—neither friendship nor love. My universe disappeared six thousand years ago. I've been cheated."

"You are still free to choose. You can wipe it all away, return to square one. But remember! Aboard the *Archimedes* you were about to die."

"Free to choose?" Corson echoed disbelievingly.

He heard her move away; when he turned he saw she was delving in the sand at the spot where it still bore the imprint of her body. When she came back she held an opalescent phial the size of a pigeon's egg.

"There is one more thing you must do in order to become completely one of us. Wild pegasones are no more capable of time travel than a caveman of advanced mathematics. At best they can move a few seconds back or forth. This phial contains an accelerator which multiplies their embryonic power billions of times over. You must administer it yourself at the proper moment. The dose has been carefully calculated. Its introduction into the past will cause no appreciable timequakes from your point of view. So far as your date of emergence is concerned, the margin for error is narrow, but we have taken that into account. A pegasone carries a certain volume of space along when it jumps through time. Now you know all that's necessary. The decision is up to you, George Corson."

He heard and understood. One last thing to be done. The keystone

to be set on the arch. His own hand to be outstretched to himself across a gulf of six thousand years.

“Thank you,” he said. “But I don’t yet know what I’ll do.”

He took the phial and headed for his pegasone.

## CHAPTER 38

Corson jumped more than six thousand years into the past, groped around to get his bearings, made a spatial correction . . . and the pegasone locked into the present. The planet spun around him for a moment until he managed to stabilize himself. He was in a very elongated orbit, the sort which a warship would adopt if it wanted to brush past the planet, spending minimal time close to its surface but needing to discharge something under the best possible conditions and out of the eye of the sun.

He waited, musing. The universe was spread out before him, yet he saw practically nothing of it. It was like a well, infinitely deep and infinitely wide, whereas all that any human—or alien—eye could perceive was the narrow borehole of its own awareness. Tangled together, but never uniting, all those pipelike strands led to the skin of the universe, toward its ultimate surface, where they all at last united at Aergistal. Each point in the universe, so Cid had claimed, possessed its own ecological universe. So must any given observer, any given maker of decisions.

*Everyone tries to read his own destiny on the walls of the well. Everyone, if he can, seeks to alter the design of his life. Unaware, we burrow away and distort the shafts our neighbors are sinking . . .*

But not at Aergistal. Not on the surface of the cosmos. For Those of Aergistal there was no distinction between the ecological universe and the plenum. They could not neglect anything. They could not be unaware of anybody.

Below Corson, Urian scanners were searching the sky. They voiced the fears of another segment of this complicated history. But at this distance the combined masses of pegasone and rider were too small to unleash a reaction from the gun batteries.

Corson hesitated. He could make off, in which case he would most likely be killed in the explosion of the ship. He might perhaps reach the ground in company with the Monster; then, sooner or later, he would fall into the clutches of the Urians. Few prisoners had returned from Uria and none in good shape. He could let Lieutenant George Corson, part-time soldier, specialist in Monsters and ignorant of almost everything about them, continue to the term of his natural destiny. Then he, the other Corson, the time traveler, would be obliterated. Was it worth dooming the other Corson to all those trials which would culminate in the frustration of continuous check and the gall of loneliness? He wondered what the other Corson would decide at the conclusion of his journeyings. Then he recalled that he was that Corson.

Well—was it worth it?

That night of terror in the forest beside the wailing Monster. Floria Van Nelle. She must have known he was going to attack her. Or could she really sense nothing beyond that fringe of a few seconds where the future loomed into certainty? Dyoto, the city he knew to be doomed, and his comical wanderings among its vertical streets. Antonella, who seemed to have sprung from nowhere and in fact had done so. Veran. His captivity. The house of the dead at the end of the blue road. Aergistal, that caldron of war where death itself was no more than a respite. And this web of intrigue, this mad to-and-froing of fanatics and warmakers in which time tore itself apart.

If he did nothing, if he went away . . . The Monster would reach its destination. It had proved how tough it was. It would bear its offspring. In due time Earth would win the war. She would dress her wounds. She would control, by cunning or by force of arms, the nascent Confederation. There would be rebellions, and further wars.

But this, he realized, was ancient history. A warmed-over tale from

six thousand years ago. In the future where he had lived, the war between the Solar Powers and the Princes of Uria had been filed and forgotten. Nobody had won, and in the final analysis both sides had lost. Whatever he did, that would be the outcome. It was no longer important to him, anyhow. He had ceased to be Lieutenant Corson of the *Archimedes*, worried about the course of the war and the safety of his own hide. He had turned into another person altogether.

Process ... He looked at the stars spangling the sides of the universal well, more numerous here than in the sky of Earth. In six thousand years they would still shine in virtually the same places. Each held a mystery, and a promise, and a fragment of History. To Corson the lieutenant they had been only abstract lights, the glints on the teeth of terror. To the new Corson it was more as though each lighted a rung of a scaling ladder by which he could climb over the ramparts of time.

He could leave the lieutenant to eke out the short span of life remaining to him, wipe away all bitterness, accomplish the most perfect suicide of all eternity. But that other Corson in the black hull of the *Archimedes* had had no desire to die.

*Can I divide myself from him?* Corson wondered. And it came to his mind that Floria had spoken only half the truth. Yes, perhaps warfare was the result of shattering that union of all possibilities experienced by Those of Aergistal. But why *Those*, in the plural? Was there not some point at which Those of Aergistal would be revealed as all possible variants of a One? And might not that One have grown bored, and chosen to scatter Himself knowingly into oblivion, becoming each man and all men, each being and all beings? Rock and worm, star and wave, space and time . . .

Am I *dreaming*? Corson wondered. *Or am I remembering?*

He would never know if the other Corson were to die. Along with his life, he would lose the memory of having lived.

Beyond life, there was hyperlife. Like the pages of a book, in Floria's image. A hypercube, a tesseract, contains an infinite number of cubes yet its volume is finite in four dimensions. "Our lives are not infinite, but they are boundless," so the being at Aergistal had said. "You will learn to control time. You will become like us."

So there were at least three levels of existence: the level of potential, that of Cid and Selma and Ana, where one was no more than an entry in the phantom records at Aergistal; the level of linear life, like that of the other Corson, where one was held prisoner by time from

birth to death; and finally the level of hyperlife, which might symbolically be mapped along a dimension perpendicular to the time axis, where one was liberated from time.

What he was reminded of was the notion of excitation states of elementary particles, as defined in primitive physics. Maybe the pioneering scientists of early human history had sensed a great truth. A particle—atom, nucleon, meson, quark—once excited, rose to a higher energy level. It would become something else without ceasing to be itself. It could spontaneously revert to its initial state by giving off in its turn particles of a lesser order, such as a photon, an electron, a neutrino, a muon, or the like.

Now Corson was standing on the threshold of hyperlife. He could fall back to the level of linear existence by emitting the counterpart of a neutrino, his existence of the past several weeks, which would become potential and cease to have significant consequences. It would not vanish completely, but it would have negligible reality, massless and chargeless like a neutrino. Someone in a laboratory at Aergystal would observe the equivalent of a shower of sparks. A spectral cloud chamber would record the discontinuance of a hyperlife.

Not every page of the book could be so drowned in bitterness . . .

Corson reached his decision.

The blackened hull of the *Archimedes* was occulting a cluster of stars above him. He desynched the pegasone, approached, penetrated the screens and armor of the ship. Unafraid of being noticed, he made for the magazine; temporal dephasing would make him effectively imperceptible to any observer on board.

He felt his pegasone hesitate, reluctant to come close to its wild cousin. Calming it, he slipped the phial into the grip of one of its tendrils. He saw himself from behind, his outline distorted by the temporal dephasing and the pegasone's peculiar senses. The tendril coiled around the phial probed through the force screen enclosing the Monster. When the phial was above the creature's maw, he locked his pegasone into the present for a billionth of a second. A flash, a sharp crack. The force screen had chopped off the tendril and the injured beast had shied through time and space.

A leap of a few kilometers, a few seconds.

Away in space Corson waited, staring at the tiny, almost invisible hull of the ship. A very old memory came back to him. Just before the catastrophe he had seen a flash, unbearably brilliant but so brief

he had doubted its reality. He had had no time to puzzle about it then.

A new flash was superimposed on that infinitesimal trace. The *Archimedes* had blown up. And the gun batteries on Uria had remained silent. The orbit her captain had selected had fulfilled its purpose; her approach had gone unnoticed.

*A generator breakdown*, he said to himself.

More likely, though, was that he himself had unleashed the catastrophe. The accelerator had vastly multiplied the powers of the Monster. It had not made use of them at once to flee through time. It had turned against its cage, and the generators could not stand the load.

Shattered, the hull of the *Archimedes* plunged toward the jungles of Uria. It seemed to Corson that something separated from it. An illusion. He did not yet have the power to see across time. But that would come.

He thought of his old comrades, dead now. There was nothing he could do for them. The die was cast once for all.

A long while later the hull reached the atmosphere and burst into flame. The ground batteries finally opened up. Space became full of spy missiles. Corson forced himself to believe that the ship would have been destroyed in any case. Another illusion.

The ship burned out under the heedless stars.

Somewhere on Uria, six thousand years away, another Corson was struggling to stay alive. He did not yet know he would be called on to cancel out a war under the chill gaze of the eons, that at Aergistal he would hear the voice of the true gods, and that he would perhaps enter into hyperlife.

"Why me?" Corson asked himself as once again he took the path toward the future.

*Me—me—me* . . . said echo-Corsons spread out along his lifeline, and all around on the lifelines of alternative Corsons. He felt his mind fill with a murmuring sound such as might give birth to words, the undercurrent of their common consciousness. It seemed he was on the brink of communion with them, these countless Corsons of the ramifying future. He could believe that he was going to know what they lived through, see with their eyes, think their thoughts. But he remained as yet on the threshold of that perfect union, for time had not finished its work, nor had experience, and those Corsons were only just beginning to have the shadow of a chance of existence.