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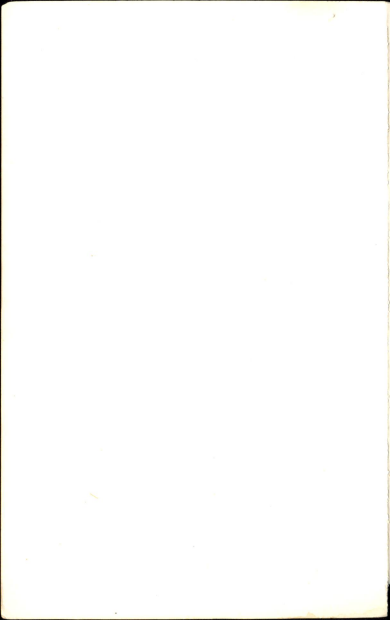
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**All Time And Space
Was Their Battlefield**

THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY



JOHN BRUNNER
Complete & Unabridged



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BEYOND THE TIME CURTAIN LAY GALACTIC VICTORY

Because of a twist in the structure of Time, three strangers were brought unexpectedly together: Red Hawkins of California, Chantal Vareze of London, and a man from the 41st Century. Their meeting seemed an impossible prank of a universe gone mad—but it turned out to be quite otherwise.

For it seemed there was a war going on throughout space and time. A war fought by men of different epochs, on planets of different cultures, but for a cause that all could acknowledge—the very continued existence of creation itself.

And the coming together of these three very unlikely people—a modern man, a lovely girl, and a futuristic soldier—was to prove the master stroke of a super-science strategy that had already brought humanity to the **THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY.**

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

JOHN K. H. BRUNNER, author of *Threshold of Eternity*, is a young Englishman, resident in London, who is making himself quite an astonishing record of science-fiction sales in that country—and now over here. Of this novel, he writes:

“Basically, all I’ve tried to do is to write an adventure story which reflects in its development a few unprovable but, to my mind, stimulating speculations about the nature of the universe—particularly time—and the place of human thought in the whole scheme. The nature of science-fiction is speculation, after all, and it doesn’t matter if some of our fantasies appear rather wild. Who in the nineteenth century imagined anything as improbable as our cock-eyed modern world?

“I believe science-fiction has an important social function, in the sense that if a little green man from Mars wanted to land his flying saucer somewhere on Earth, he would do well to pick the back yard of a science-fiction reader to come down in—there, he’d be less likely to have a shotgun taken to him on principle.”

THRESHOLD OF ETERNITY

by
JOHN BRUNNER

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THE WAR OF TWO WORLDS

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Chapter I

TONIGHT THE sky was velvet black, and a ripe white moon hung over the hill. Red Hawkins hesitated a moment in the doorway, and then limped down the path towards the gate, glancing at the lawn which he had populated with fantastic birds in metal and stone.

With him went the noise which he could never get away from—the tiny, almost imperceptible click of the joints in his aluminum leg.

It stopped when he halted at the gate, and he listened to the silence. The road, which ran from Orris Peak on his right to Three Waters on his left, lay still and cold in the pale moonlight. There was no sign of a movement as far as he could see.

Just as he was turning to go back, it happened.

There was a sudden dazzling flash of light, which hit him like a blow. Instinctively he flung up his hands, but it was over before he could cover his eyes. Stumbling blindly back, he lost his footing and sprawled on the soft grass.

The afterimage burned painfully blue and red on his retinae. It was somehow localized, as if a tiny sun had winked into existence on the road, but it was long seconds before he could bear to look round.

When he did, he saw that the yellow tongue of light which had licked down the garden after him from the open door had disappeared.

He started to get up, feeling annoyed, but something made him freeze in incredulous bewilderment. From no more than

a few yards away, he heard a girl's voice speak loudly and with a hint of anger.

"Merde! De quoi s'agit-il, alors?"

But that was impossible. Barely seconds ago he had seen that there was no one on the road for half a mile either way.

Cursing the patch which had now shaded to green behind his eyes, he got to his feet and called out uncertainly: "Hello! Is someone there?"

"Hello," the girl's voice came back tremulously. "What happened to the lights?" She had a marked French accent.

Lights be damned, thought Red; *where did you spring from?* Without asking her, he went to the gate and made out her shape moving dimly on the roadway.

"Power failure, I guess," he said after a long pause. Now that he paid attention, he could no longer hear the hum from the small electricity generator behind the house.

"Oh no! This fog is bad enough without—" The girl's foot touched something lying in the shadow cast by a tree, and she broke off to look at it. *Fog?* Red repeated under his breath. *Where does she think she is? Los Angeles?*

Then her voice came again, full of horror. "There's a man lying here! He's hurt!"

Red pushed the gate open and swiftly covered the ten paces separating them. As he came up, the girl spoke in a crisp tone. "A light, quick. He must have been run over."

Feeling as if he was having a nightmare, Red cupped his hand round the small flame of his lighter. *Run over? No car has been past in four hours.*

But sure enough, there was a man here: his right arm twisted and outflung, a thin line of blood creeping over his brown, almost Oriental face.

The girl took the stranger's wrist with competent fingers and went on without looking up. "Go and tell the hospital, will you? He needs immediate attention."

"There isn't a hospital nearer than Walton," said Red sharply. "That's twenty-five miles away. Are you nuts?"

The girl turned her face to him. She was extremely pretty;

she had short brown hair, dark shining eyes and an up-tilted nose. With forced patience she answered, "The hospital is just round the corner—I should know. I work there."

"God damn it, woman!" Red spoke more bluntly than he had intended. "There isn't even a doctor nearer than Three Waters."

As if she was taking stock of her surroundings for the first time, the girl slowly looked around. Her eyes widened in terror and her mouth opened to shape a scream. Red made to catch her, thinking she might faint, but she recovered herself and shook her head.

"I'm all right," she said with an effort. "I . . . I— Where is this place?"

"You're about six miles from Three Waters," Red told her. She still looked blank. "Pulman County, Northwest California."

"But I can't be!" she burst out. "I'm in London! I— Oh, *Mon Dieu!*"

Red waited patiently while she struggled to get a grip on herself. "All right," she said after a pause. "If you say so, it must be right. Is that your house over there? I think we ought to get this man off the road."

Silently, Red watched her feel the stranger's injured arm and lay it carefully on his chest. Between them, they carried him awkwardly up the path and into the front room.

When they had laid him on a couch, Red crossed to the light switch and flicked it, knowing it was useless. He found candles and lit one with the last flame of his lighter.

As if she was trying to drive something else out of her head, the girl eased the stranger's arm out of his sleeve. He wore a coverall of unusual design, with nothing under it but a pair of shorts. The cloth of which both were made was very fine.

Red brought bandages, hot water, a clean towel and some disinfectant, together with a piece of board to serve as a splint for the man's arm. Then, seeing that the girl appeared competent to handle things, he went out to the shed behind

the house to see if he could find the trouble in his generator.

The air was foul with scorched rubber. A single glance informed him that it would take a mechanic to repair the set—it looked as if lighting had struck it.

Swearing, he returned to the house, pausing on his way to drape a wet cloth round the clay sculpture he had been working on. He would get no further work done tonight—the flow of inspiration was broken.

He found the girl dabbing away blood from the wound on the stranger's scalp from which the trickle had run across his face. "Shallow," she muttered as he entered. "Could you call a doctor?"

"No phone," said Red shortly.

He didn't want to seem as displeased as he felt, so he added with an effort, "Doesn't look as if he needs any more help than he's getting. Are you a nurse?"

The girl nodded, and applied a bandage to the scalp cut.

Absently, Red picked up the coverall. He found something weighing down a small pocket on its chest, and took it out. It was a cylinder of dull metal, some five or six inches long, and astonishingly heavy for its size—too heavy even to be lead.

He hefted it a second and put it back.

Wiping her hands, the girl turned to him. "That's all I can do for him," she said. "Have you a cigarette, please?"

He shook one from a pack and took one himself, then held a candle for her to light hers.

The girl's hand trembled so much that she could hardly keep the cigarette in the flame, and the plume of smoke she breathed came in jerks, as though she was fighting to control herself.

After the second drag, she dropped it and collapsed into a nearby chair, her shoulders heaving with sobs that racked her body.

Embarrassed, Red retrieved the cigarette before it burned the carpet and waited, watching helplessly, while the fit

passed off. Finally she raised her head, her cheeks tear-stained.

"I'm sorry," she said wanly. "It's just—I think I must have *amnésie*—lost the memory. Until I found I was talking to you outside, I thought I was in London, where I have been working. How . . . how long have I been that way?"

"It's the fourteenth of March," said Red slowly.

"Oh no! A whole *year*?" the girl whispered.

"It's 1957—"

"*Mais c'est ridicule, ça!*" She sat up sharply and began to feel in a sling bag she carried on her shoulder. "Look! Look at these!"

She brought out a pack of English cigarettes, a flimsy white paper bus ticket priced at tenpence, a booklet of stamps bearing the head of Queen Elizabeth II, and a couple of letters addressed to Mlle. Chantal Varèze, St. Peter's Hospital, London W 1. With shaking fingers she indicated the postmark on the last—March 13, 1957.

"The fourteenth of March—that was *yesterday!* not today!" she insisted.

"What do you last remember before you found yourself here?" asked Red after a while.

"I was coming off night duty. It was about—oh, half past seven. It was very cold. There was a lot of mist—not quite thick enough to call fog. The streets were very quiet. But it was March the fifteenth, I'm sure!"

Red didn't want to believe her. And yet he had seen for himself that she appeared from thin air on a bare, cold road. . . .

"You say it was half past seven in the morning of the fifteenth of March. That's Greenwich time. About eight hours ahead of Pacific Standard. It's now," he glanced at his watch "about five to midnight, March fourteenth. Here, that's to say."

She watched with horrified eyes, waiting for him to go on, and—conscious of the grimness of the humor behind his remark—he did so.

"In fact," he finished deliberately, "it looks as if you have just covered about six thousand miles in literally *less than no time*."

Chapter II

Defense fleet (co-ordinates 406513924) —speaking: Two enemy raiders detected and destroyed subject to 41% losses. Request reinforcements.

Anchor team (AD 4070)—speaking, triple red emergency: We've been shifted four years by this one and there's more to come!

Center to all units, triple red emergency: Prepare for violent temporal surge.

Magwareet was in space less than a thousand miles from the milling lights which indicated the anchor team's position, when the temporal surge hit.

It was spectacular, and yet there was almost nothing to see. In fact, there was literally *nothing* to see. The lights of the anchor team were suddenly not there. That was all.

But it threw Magwareet into instant action—not panicky, because controlled, but seeming random in its violence. He slapped open his time map to make sure that the anchor team, and not himself, had been struck; pushed open the lever controlling his defensive screen, and reversed his progress with a shuddering blast on the drive unit.

After that, he had time to be afraid.

When he came to himself again a few seconds later, he found he was mouthing curses, damning the sheer waste involved. There had been sixty men in that anchor team:

each a brilliant, highly trained specialist. Now—if one could say such a thing—they were scattered across history, to recover—perhaps—and fight their way back to bring news of yet another peak of the temporal surge.

He clamped a firm control on his mind. It was no good railing against the universe.

Finding his voice, he spoke into his communication unit, asking for Artesha Wong. In a moment, her hard, familiar voice was in his ears.

"Have you tracked that one?" he asked, and received a counter-question.

"Have they really gone?"

He remembered then that Burma had been with that team, and rage threatened to boil up in him again. Poor Artesha—that two people who meant so much to each other should be torn apart by insensate violence was shameful! He replied as calmly as he could.

"Yes, I'm afraid I saw them go. I'm sorry, Artesha, but out of all of them, at least, Burma is the most likely to find his way back. He'll make it if he has to train the Being to bridle and saddle."

"You can't train a creature maddened with pain," said Artesha. "I'll have a ship out to pick you up in just a moment."

Switching off the communicator, Magwareet sighed and closed his eyes with a twinge of guilt. It was marvelous to be able to relax on the ultimate softness of space. Mostly, there was not enough time to relax.

Not enough: the words burned into his brain. It was always *not enough*—not enough time to rest, or space to move around in. Most ironical of all, there was not enough of *anything* to make maximum use of the potential of the human race.

He was turning slowly relative to the stars. Raising his head, he stared up at them, wondering which—if any—of those in sight had shone on the implacable enemy.

"Do you realise you're beating us?" he whispered into

nowhere. "Do you know that you're wearing us down? And yet it's not you alone, damn it! If it was only you we had to face, we'd wipe the sky with you, and I'd lay bets on our chances. But we're trying to carry a ton weight and fight at the same time. We're doing our best, and it's not good enough."

Where had Burma been tossed to? he wondered. Had he found himself alone, perhaps injured, in the vastness of space beyond Pluto? He was driftwood on a surge of movement that reached clear across the Solar System and a thousand, or a million, years through time.

"Did they bring you? Are you a weapon of the enemy's?" he whispered to the Being. He was inside it here. Throughout the Solar System he was inside it. And yet to it he was no more than the film of oil on one of his blood corpuscles to himself: broad in three dimensions and very short in time.

But the Being was enormous in time. Literally and precisely, it had four dimensions. And it could suffer pain. Every time the defending fleet released its sunfuls of energy to destroy an invader, the Being suffered. Sometimes the anchor teams trying desperately to find a way of repairing its injuries and returning it whence it came failed to control its writhing—and the problem was doubled.

Magwareet felt that he had been hunting a solution to it all his life, and he was infinitely tired. But he knew he could not rest—that no one dared to rest, or the human race was finished.

He opened his communicator again as he noticed mass approaching on his proximity detectors. "Were those raiders just destroyed, the ones that intercepted the city from 129 Lyrae? I didn't hear what happened."

"Yes, they were the same," Artesha informed him as if sparing him only a little attention. "They'd lost the city though—a long way out. Apparently whoever was piloting simply outflew them. I don't know who he is, but he must be brilliant. Sounds as though he might be made for co-ordination."

"Is that the city coming in now?" Magwareet reeled off co-ordinates swiftly to identify what he was talking about.

"That's it," agreed Artesha. "Your ship's coming, Magwareet. I'll see you back here at Center."

Magwareet turned and saw the lights of an unpressurized vessel heaving up towards him from the direction of Spica. The pilot, fastened into his control frame by magnets on his spacesuit, threw out a line and started back the way he had come before Magwareet had done more than catch hold.

There remained a few minutes before he needed to fall again into his role of co-ordinator—one of the chosen few who formed a multiple brain for the concerted efforts of the entire race. He tried to use them to continue his brief rest, but it was no good. It was equally useless to feel angry that he should be a co-ordinator; he was qualified for the job the only way he could be—by doing it well.

He looked down at his proximity detector again, and began to frown. "Artesha!" he said. "That city from 129 Lyrae—there's something wrong with its mass!"

A moment of checking; he waited. Then Artesha answered, alarm showing only in the speed of her words. "It's carrying spin! Vantchuk—get in touch with them."

Straining his nerves, Magwareet listened. At this distance, it was useless to try and make out details of the flying city, but he could distinctly see it: yellow, where no star or planet ought to be visible. It was not one of the complex web of spaceships ringing Sol; he knew their pattern by heart. Vantchuk's voice interrupted his thoughts; he knew that, too.

"There's no reply, Artesha. Something's wrong."

"Turn towards it," Magwareet directed his pilot, and the stars swirled giddily. Anxious voices continued in his communicator.

"They're spinning like a top. No answer from them. The rim of the city must be under about ten gravities, and it's out of control."

"Magwareet!" said Artesha levelly, and his trained mind took over.

"Kill that spin first," he directed. "Their population is about four million, if I remember. We'll need two hundred hospital craft—"

Mechanically, he detailed the supplies they would need, the probable order in which they would use them, and the time it would take. At Center, his orders were interpreted into concrete terms; equipment was loaded, men detailed to report, a computer programmed to double-check Magwareet's proposals—but that was probably not necessary.

The dizzying whirl of the city was already visibly slowing when Magwareet told his pilot to match velocities. A possibility was irritating him as he watched the rescue ships line up nearby, and he called Artesha again.

"Didn't you say that the pilot outflew those enemy raiders? Yet there was no report of an accident or damage from him, was there? A man that good doesn't just let things get out of control."

Artesha spoke soberly. "What are you getting at, Magwareet?"

"I think we'd better hold off the rescue ships for a while. I want a team of trouble-shooters—about fifty—to come in with me ahead of the rescue party."

They did not question his decision. When he clawed at and caught the personnel ropes floating stiffly out from the nearest airlock in the globe enclosing the city, men were waiting.

"Inassul, sir," the commander of the detachment at this lock identified himself.

"All right, Inassul. Let's take a look."

Passing the lock, Magwareet came out on a small platform and steadied himself to get used to the high g, looking about him. He caught his breath at the sight.

This city from another star was fantastic. It sprouted like a forest of beautiful ferns into light bridges of synthetics and tall impossible buildings having nothing in common

with Terrestrial architecture. Of course, its people had never been shackled by gravity; they had been able to build from the start with antigrav.

And they had torn this city up by the roots; they had closed it in with a plastic sheath and mounted it on an interstellar drive. They had loaded it with four million people, of whom one perhaps might be indispensable. They had sunk thousands of man-hours and desperate energy into bringing it where its resources could be utilized—and at the moment of success, disaster awaited.

Here and there the symmetrical beauty was marred by ugly gashes, showing where generators driven to the limit had failed to stand the force of the spin. Arches and walls had tumbled, not downwards towards what had been the ground, but *outwards*.

What kind of disaster? The men in the trouble-shooting team moved forward apprehensively. Staggering a little, Inassul made his way along the broad road facing the lock. Weapon ready for anything he might meet, he pushed at the door-switch of the nearest house and went inside.

Moments later, he reappeared. There was a tremor in his voice when he spoke to Magwareet.

"They're—spread all over the walls," he said. Looking at him, Magwareet saw that his right gauntlet, with which he must have steadied himself, was wet and red.

"Shall I call the rescue party in?" Inassul went on. Magwareet cut him short.

"No! We daren't risk more personnel than are already here until we know what the trouble was. Follow me."

His order was relayed to the parties at the other locks of the city. As they moved together towards the control center, in the middle of the city, he gave directions.

Inside the control room—a hall a hundred feet long—there were men and women lying dead: some at their places opposite panels of signal lamps which still flickered, and others dashed against the walls and roof. A gigantic gap

loomed in the makeshift outer wall on the side opposite the entrance Magwareet had used.

"Why are these people dead?" he exploded. "We're at the center of the city! The acceleration should have been negligible here.

"An enemy shot—" began Inassul.

"Use your head. How did it get through without breaking the plastic sheath and losing the city's air? And look at *that!*"

He threw up an arm and pointed to the gap torn in the wall facing them. Someone called out.

"I saw some pavement torn up while we were coming in—and not far from here! There are several walls broken like that, too."

"That's it," said Magwareet. "Something deliberately killed these people—smashed them, threw them around."

He felt his words drop into a sudden chilly silence. He ended, "And it may—even now—be loose in the city!"

Chapter III

RED WAITED for the moment of calmness to pass. It lasted only seconds. After that, reason insisted that this whole affair was stupid and he became resentful that a wild vision should break into his life and disrupt it. And yet—he could not convince himself.

"I've heard about things like this," said Chantal slowly. "But you never believe them. You class them with ghosts, and you never expect to find yourself involved—"

"You're damned right you don't," said Red, with sudden force. "I'm not going to accept this till I have to. Some ex-

planation *must* exist." And him—the guy with the broken arm. What do you make of that?"

"That he'd been hit by a car." Chantal answered.

"He wasn't. No cars go past here. There's a truck which goes up to the logging camp at Firhill Point with supplies and mail, but no one else lives this way at all. And I was watching when you—arrived. Both of you."

And I don't give a damn how, his mind ran on. *I just wish you hadn't.*

He felt suddenly certain that his careful defences were going to crumble. If his isolation could be disturbed by this fantastic intrusion, he could never feel safe again.

He moved, and the joints of his artificial leg gave their inescapable tiny scraping sound.

"Oh, hell!" he burst out, and Chantal's eyes widened. "All right—it's not your fault."

She turned to face him. "What's not my fault? I didn't ask to be thrown halfway round the world! I don't know how I came to be here, but I know this—I'd give anything to be back where I came from."

They faced each other, meaningless tension mounting between them. A sound between a sob and a shout from the other room punctured it.

After an instant's hesitation, Chantal got up and ran through the door. Red limped after her, to find the man with the broken arm writhing on the couch where they had laid him.

"Have you a thermometer?" Chantal asked, her anger vanishing. Red nodded, and brought one in a moment from the bathroom.

"Fever?" Red inquired in a low tone.

She nodded. "I don't know why. He seemed perfectly all right when I left him."

Suddenly the man uttered a short sing-song phrase, full of strange off-key arpeggio intervals. His voice appeared to cover the range from treble to baritone.

Red picked up the coverall again, hoping for some clue to

the man's nature from it, but all he found was the same impossibly heavy cylinder of metal which he had seen before.

After a while, the writhing was replaced by an even more frightening stillness. It was as if the man was visbly gathering his strength, disciplining his body into rest. Eyes closed, he licked his lips and said something musical and interrogative.

"What can he mean?" Chantal asked helplessly, and at the words the man's eyelids flickered open.

He looked at them without expression, barely turning his head. Then he shifted his gaze to the Indian matting hung against the wall, and shut his eyes again.

"Habla usted español?" he said in a flat tenor voice.

"We speak English," said Red slowly, and the brown-faced man used a four-letter word which startled him and made Chantal turn her face to hide a smile.

"Never so far before!" He struggled to sit up, and found the injury to his arm. The sight of it seemed to dishearten him still further. He stared up, pleading.

"It is broken? And you have used splinters to mend it?"

That's an odd mistake, Red realised suddenly. A simple foreigner would probably not know the word this man was trying to find—but equally probably, he would not know the one that had been substituted.

Chantal nodded, trying to soothe him into lying back calmly, but the man continued with intense determination, "Tell me! Tell me when I am!"

"Lie still," said Chantal comfortingly. "You'll be all right. You've been hurt, and—"

It was then that the exact meaning of the question struck home.

Not "Where am I?" Instead—"When am I?"

Red felt the last of his protective barriers go down. His isolation was forever at an end. He was naked against the world, and his aluminum leg creaked. And squeaked.

"You're in nineteen fifty-seven," he said, and his body began suddenly to tremble with terror.

"Further than ever," said the brown-faced man. "I—I feel

ill. I am not immune to your diseases, sir and madam. Please, have you an illness?"

Staring, Chantal shook her head. "N-no. We are quite well, I think."

The man put his hand up to his heart, and felt its pounding for a moment. Then he realized he was not wearing his coverall, and again struggled frantically to sit up.

"Have I lost it? Did I not have anything with me?"

Chantal reached for the garment and held it as the man rummaged in the pockets. Sinking back, he shook his head. "So it is lost. So they will not know."

"You want this?" said Red sourly, holding up the heavy metal cylinder, and the man seemed to go limp with relief.

"Yes, that is it. Please, hold it up above me with your hands on the ends, and turn them oppositely. It is important."

Red hesitated, but Chantal appealed to him with her eyes. Feeling foolish, he extended his arms and did as the man had said. The hard metal felt as if it was running like water, and it suddenly began to *grow*, pushing his hands apart. With an oath, he let go in amazement, but the thing did not fall. It remained in position, stretching until it was three feet long, and the moment it stopped growing it began to glow.

After a second, the whole room was alight with the luminescence of brilliant green bands apparently within the substance of the cylinder.

Chantal drew back. "What—" Her voice held a sob.

Seeming suddenly lighthearted, the man answered as he studied the shifting patterns of greenness. "It floats because it is not all here, so to say. It exists, after a fashion, for thousands of years both ways." His voice was more certain and his English better now. "You could not understand how," he added.

"What made it so big?" Red demanded.

"It was compressed." The man seemed to hunt for words. "Solid is not really solid. It is mostly empty space. The matter of the map is pushed together—"

"You mean the atoms are packed closer," said Red sharply.

He resented the stranger's assumption that he knew nothing.

Startled, the man glanced from the glowing cylinder to the candles burning round the room. "But you—" he began, know more than I had remembered at this time."

"What we want to know is who you are and where you come from!" said Red harshly. "And why!"

The man closed his eyes wearily. "You could not pronounce my name. Your language has no tonal values. You could call me Burma, for that is where I was born, as you might call someone Frenchie or Tex."

He glanced up. "And who are you?"

"Red Hawkins," said Red sullenly. Chantall spoke her name also in answer to a piercing stare.

"Please, then, Red," Burma went on, "place your hands on the map, at the brightest of the green places."

Red turned away with finality. "I've had enough of this lunacy," he muttered, and Burma sighed.

"You could not know, poor man." He lifted his broken arm towards the cylinder, setting his teeth, but the pain and his fevered weakness overcame him. Slumping back, he spoke in a queer, rhythmic manner.

"Red Hawkins! Do what I tell you."

Astonished, Red found himself turning and lifting his hands towards a patch of green on the cylinder that shone like a cold sun. Angrily, he fought back, and when his arms fell to his sides, his teeth were chattering.

"Nearly," said Burma with detachment, and repeated, "Do what I tell you!"

This time, Red could not stop himself.

There was chaos.

But there was form in the chaos. There was a sense of slow ages unrolling as they existed in total silence and total darkness, and through and beyond it there was an awareness of Being.

Then ground suddenly slammed Red under the soles of his feet, knocking him instantly *upwards* half an inch, and pitiless yellow sunlight was blazing out of a blue sky. They

were on a bare hillside, between bare brown rocks. A few paces from him lay Burma, as if he had been twisted in falling and landed awkwardly, and behind him Chantal moved with a sound of shoes crunching in a gray sand.

When he turned his head, he saw that she had fallen forward, trying to crush the solidity and reality of stone into her hands. She whimpered a little.

Red whirled on Burma. "God damn you, man! What is this insanity? Are you satisfied with what you've done? Look at this poor woman!"

Burma had his eyes shut against the glare. His good hand clutched the cylinder in its original closed form. He looked very ill.

"You must not waste time," he whispered. "A few miles from here you will find men working. Go and bring them here."

Red clenched his fist and bent so that he was able to strike Burma in the face with it. "Stop your babbling! Where are we? How did we come here?"

"You're in my time," said Burma, more faintly still. "You have come three thousand years. Go quickly, Red. I have no resistance to the disease I caught in your era, and I need help."

"Get us back where we came from," said Red passionately. "You're no concern of mine. Attend to your damned business yourself."

Chantal came down the slope from behind him, very pale, and walking as if in pain. A little blood came from a cut on her temple, and her hands were filthy with sharp sand. She spoke quietly.

"Burma is very sick, Red. He needs help, and we can't give it to him."

"Be damned to that! Why didn't he *ask* before? I don't know how he made me do what he wanted, but he forced me, I know, and I won't be ordered around. I didn't ask to come here, and I don't want to stay another minute."

He finished, "If you're so eager to help him, go yourself."

"I—don't think I could." Chantal swayed. "But I'll try, if he says so." She put her hands to her head and brought them away bloodstained; she looked at the redness wonderingly.

"Red," said Burma very softly, "I could make you go—I don't like to, but I can. And I am important to the human race, very important."

"And I'm not, I suppose!" exploded Red.

"Oh, *Red*" said Chantal pleadingly, and turned to Burma. "How far is it to where your friends are?"

"About two miles," said Burma weakly. "It is not far. I think Chantal is hurt, and cannot go."

"Hurt! My God!" said Red with bitterness. "Two miles is not far! Look! Look at this!"

He made a violent gesture, and pulled up the leg of his trousers. The sun glinted blindingly on a shaft of polished metal.

Chantal fell silent. Burma, screwing up his eyes against the light, stared at the prosthetic leg for a long while.

"I'm very sorry, Red," he said at length. "I did not know. But I am too ill to undo what has been done. I promise that—if you still so wish—you will be returned to your time the moment I am safe and well."

He opened his eyes full and gazed at Red. "You cannot understand the importance of what is happening, but I give you my word that I must reach help if a terrible disaster is to be avoided. I throw myself on your mercy. I will not command you to go."

As Red stood hesitant, his anger fading, a flash of incredible light made the sunshine turn to shadow, and after a moment was followed by a sound like a million claps of thunder rolled into one.

"What—what is happening?" Red asked. Burma looked at him steadily.

"We are losing a war," he said. "The human race is losing a war."

Chapter IV

MAGWAREET LOOKED at the suddenly drawn faces of the men with him. Apprehensively, they half-turned to keep the surrounding area in view.

"What could it be?" said Inassul.

"I don't know. Is the communication equipment in order, somebody?"

A tall man standing near that panel gave a swift glance at the dials and flicked down a bank of switches. The sound of Center's never-ceasing random scramble broadcast filled the air for a moment. "It's working," he said.

Magwareet shouldered his way over and pressed the call button to bring in Artesha. "Have we an expert on the biology of 129 Lyrae?" he demanded.

"I'll find out. What do you want one for?"

Magwareet explained briefly. "We'll have to get rid of—whatever it was—before we dare risk the rescue crews coming in."

"Magwareet!" she said sharply. "You aren't thinking of going after it yourself?"

"Don't be silly, Artesha. Without accurate data, there will have to be a co-ordinator directing the search." He tried to deny to himself that his real reason was a desire for action that he himself could see the result of.

Artesha went on, arguing against it, but there was a sigh from the circle of men, and in the silence when she stopped speaking for a moment, a heavy scratching sound came to them. They waited. Inassul moved to look through the gap torn in the wall. Excitedly, he beckoned.

"Only we won't have to go in search of it," countered Magwareet softly. "It's coming to look for us . . ."

They drew back, their weapons in their hands. Someone said something when the tension grew intolerable, and at once the scratching sound changed—was *here!*

Something gigantic and powerful smashed down the wall at a different point, bringing the panels of the roof falling in a welter of plastic and a tangle of wiring. A man screamed, and sprawled with his scalp cut across. They had a glimpse of a creature slate-blue and glistening. Then a weapon hissed, and a bolt of energy seared the edge of the gap.

As they flinched from the brilliance, a stench filled the air like something rotting, and the beast tossed in agony. It turned, and crashed away through a nearby building.

"I got it!" yelled the man who had fired. Magwareet snapped into action.

"Got it be damned! It's hurt, and gone wild! We must get after it before it does more damage. Inassul, tell Center what's happened, and the rest of you follow me."

They went after it at a dead run.

What kind of beast is this? Magwareet found himself wondering. It was gigantic, and incredibly strong. Had it been picked up when they rooted out the city's foundations, lain dormant until driven crazy by the strain of the interstellar drive?

"It's probably heading for home!" he shouted to encourage his companions. "It won't be far now."

"We passed a park where the ground had been torn up," panted someone alongside him. "We took it for where something had been installed underground. I think it might have come from underground!"

"They wouldn't have brought it in the zoo," Magwareet yelled in answer. "Far from here?"

"Another half-mile!" the man told him.

And in another few minutes they found themselves on the outskirts of an open space, where stacks of supplies that

might be useful here in the Solar System had been piled. The track of the beast through them was twenty feet wide.

There, in a patch of broken trees, they found a burrow that slanted downwards steeply; the earth around it was freshly turned. From its mouth the stench of putrefaction poured like steam.

"Find out if the park is walled off below the surface!" Magwareet rapped, and men broke away to check. The chances were good that the park was a miniature ecological unit, set in a basin of concrete, but there was no telling whether the beast might not be strong enough to break through.

In a while, the men returned, and reported that though there was a subsoil barrier, it extended only as far as the heavy bed of clay a couple of hundred feet under them. But one of them had passed a stack of subsonic detectors on his way, and had brought one of the instruments back with him.

Handling it with skill, he turned around to let the stream of pulses from its generator filter into the ground. In an astonished tone, he said, "The ground's riddled with tunnels! Look here—you can see them showing up when the sound bounces off the walls. This hole leads into a maze."

Magwareet weighed the chances of finding the beast in its warren against the risk of having it recover and break out to wreak fresh havoc. There was only one possible decision—so he made it.

"Disperse through the park!" he rapped, hoping that the beast would not burrow up and come out somewhere else—but it was stupid to think of guarding the whole city with the few men he had. "But I want a volunteer to come down with me and see if we can find the thing!"

There were shouts, and several men stepped forward grimly, but Magwareet chose the man who had had the intelligence to realize a subsonic detector would be of use. He asked his name, and was told Tifara.

"Well, Tifara, this is a damn fool thing to do—but it has

to be done. If we flush the beast," he added, looking round, "and it breaks out again, kill it. Immediately! And let me know as quickly as possible. All right, Tifara—let's go."

They stepped over the edge of the huge burrow and began to walk gingerly down.

The going was difficult, and the stench overpowering. After a little way, Magwareet closed the helmet of his spacesuit and breathed his canned air to escape it.

"I think the beast must be bleeding," said Tifara after a while. "Look—the ground is smeared with something slimy. That's why it's slippery."

"Good," nodded Magwareet. "That'll weaken it. I hope it hasn't gone too far This must be its only burrow to the surface. I expect it was driven by fear when the interstellar drive started up."

They were sixty-odd feet below the surface when they came to the first parting of the ways. They looked for signs of the slimy ichor the creature was losing, and found them in only one of the two tunnels, so they followed it.

"It's bleeding less heavily," said Magwareet. "I only hope it doesn't stop altogether."

But the trail thinned and grew more scattered, until they sometimes had to go five or ten yards before coming across another drop. The next time the ways parted, they had seen no ichor for some distance.

Flashing his light down each passage in turn, Magwareet could make out no obvious sign of which to choose. "Go a few yards along that one," he instructed Tifara. "If you find any spoor, come back at once. I'll try this way."

Tifara nodded, and went out of sight. Magwareet stepped boldly forward, and discovered that after ten yards his branch of the tunnel bent sharply. The roof got lower, too, and then dropped abruptly to meet the floor.

Puzzled, he flashed his light up and down, wondering why the dead end.

Stones and earth rattled about his ears; he flinched and turned to run, fearing a roof-fall.

For an instant he knew pure, paralyzing fear. There was no longer a tunnel before him. Instead, a flat slate-blue surface glistened wetly in the light of his lamp.

So, like it or not, he had found the beast.

But it did not move again, and when he swung his lamp over it, he saw that there was a gash in one of its thick, flexible limbs where the earlier shot had struck home. It had simply fallen in the tunnel, and writhed with its last strength to cut off his exit.

There was a simple way out, at least. He felt for the weapon at his side and turned the power control over to violent preparatory to cutting a hole through its body. If it moved anything like a Terrestrial creature, he was facing its belly; the soil smeared over most of its skin accounted for his not having noticed it at once.

A cry came from the other side. "Magwareet! Are you there?"

"I'm here," Magwareet shouted back. "Stand clear—I may have to burn a way through."

"Is it dead?"

"It soon will be if it isn't," Magwareet answered grimly. It was not until the words were uttered that he realized the speaker was not Tifara. Faint, excited words filtered through to him.

Then someone cried in a passionate tone, "Don't shoot, Magwareet! Don't shoot!"

"What?"

"Don't shoot," the speaker insisted. "This isn't an animal from 129 Lyrae!"

"Who are you?"

"Kepthin! I'm a biologist. Somebody sent for me. This isn't from 129 Lyrae, don't you understand?"

"What's that got to do with it? Am I to stay here for good?"

"We'll get you out in a moment," came the faint reply. Then there was buzzing in which he could hear no meaning. Fuming, Magwareet paced the little area he had, wondering

what was going on. After half an hour, his patience could hold out no longer.

He walked rapidly to the beast's body and was filling his lungs to yell at the people he could still hear moving beyond, when he noticed something he had not realized before.

What he had taken for a chitinous carapace on the animal was torn around the great wound in its limb, and in the lamp-light he could see the shiny gleam of metal.

Astonished, he rapped tentatively on the slate-blue surface. It sounded hollow at several places. A fantastic suspicion filled his mind.

Rasping and scraping broke in on his thoughts, and over the prone body of the beast a power shovel tore away the roof of the tunnel. As soon as the gap was wide enough for Magwareet to pass, the operator withdrew to let him scramble through.

On the far side he found Inassul, Tifara, and a small man with excited eyes whom he knew must be Kepthin, with a group of other people, all violently agitated.

"Glad you're safe!" said Tifara. "Magwareet, you've no idea what's happened! This is incredible."

"As soon as I realized this animal wasn't Lyran, I had all work stopped," Kepthin broke in. "But I didn't suspect what we would discover. It's alive, too, as far as we can tell—at least, it has a circulatory system and that's still going. But we never suspected—"

"Suspected what?" said Magwareet in a deflating tone, an extreme contrast to Kepthin's enthusiasm. "That this damned thing is wearing a spacesuit, and therefore is probably the first living specimen of the Enemy to enter the Solar System?"

"Well—yes," said Kepthin, disappointed. "But isn't it wonderful?"

"No. It's terrifying. If one could get in this way, why not others? Are our defences no good? Are we going to find millions of these things suddenly among us?" Magwareet felt sweat break out all over him.

Then his communicator came on, and he heard Artesha's

voice. "Magwareet! They've found Burma—he made it back."

"I'm so glad," said Magwareet sincerely. *Poor Artesha*, he thought, *she must have suffered hell for a while.*

Chapter V

AFTER THE first few minutes, the journey took on the air of a sort of challenge to Red. He had not attempted such a walk since he lost his leg as a child. At that time, he had counted it a triumph to be able to walk a level street and appear only to have a sprained ankle. But this was different.

The heat made sweat crawl in rivulets out of his hair, and the coarse dry sand found its way into his shoes until his good foot felt as if the bottom was being scraped with hot needles. The glare blinded him, the dust choked him, the irregular rocky surface made him lose his footing, but he got up again, cursing, and carried on.

Then the socket of his prosthetic limb started to chafe, and grew unbearable. After nearly a mile, he stopped to take it off and line it with his handkerchief, but the relief that it gave lasted only a short distance, and he set his jaw against the agony.

It felt like an eternity before he stood up on a rocky outcrop and looked down across a valley alive with men.

There was a—building? Not quite. It had a naked appearance, as though it was all functional and purposive, without decorative cover. About it, huge shining machines went very quietly about their business, and men in coveralls, seeming not to mind the heat and light, attended to them.

Staggering, he started to descend the slope, shouting.

His call attracted attention at once. Two men working not

far away broke off and answered in the same incomprehensible language Burma had used in delirium.

"Help!" Red called. "Here! Come here!"

After momentary hesitation, one of them did. Approaching, he studied Red's clothes with astonishment, waiting.

"Do you speak English?" Red demanded. The man nodded.

"Little," he said. "You—from somewhere else?"

"I'm from 1957!" said Red, feeling suddenly worn out.

"You un'erstan' time move?" the man said in astonishment. "You know how?"

"Two miles back that way there's a guy called Burma. He's one of your people. He brought me here. He's ill. He wants help."

The other shook his head in dismay. By this time, they had attracted more notice, and to the accompaniment of a faint hum an aircraft of some sort hovering above the valley turned towards where they stood. Its pilot, though, seemed to see something while dropping, and hesitated fifty feet up before bringing the craft swiftly to earth.

A door slid back and a stout woman got out. She rapped two short sentences at Red's companion, received an answer, and then looked at Red.

"You know you're not in your own time," she said in English that was fluent but badly accented. "How?"

Red sat down on a rock at hand and waved back the way he had come. "Ask a guy called Burma. He knows all the answers. You'll find him two miles back there."

The woman nodded, spoke again in her own language, and without more ado took her aircraft away in the direction Red indicated. As it rose, Red grew suddenly aware that the man remaining behind had drawn a snub-nosed weapon and was leveling it at him.

"What—" he began, but a spray mist from the muzzle enveloped him, stinging his eyes and nose. He cried out. Before he had time to get furious, he saw that the man had turned it on himself also.

"Is to make clean," the man explained haltingly. "You from other time, have other—"

As the man hunted for the word, Red felt the stinging die down, and with it a dozen unnoticed aches and pains, and a mild catarrh which had bothered him for several days. He nodded to show he understood, and wondered what incredible brew of medicaments could be in that fine spray.

"Have you any water?" he asked, and pantomimed drinking. The man nodded, and gave him a flask from a pocket in his coverall; the movement stretched the fabric and revealed the outline of a short cylinder lumping the man's side.

Red drank deeply and returned the flask with a word of thanks. After that, he just sat silently, watching the business of the valley go ahead.

The aircraft buzzed quietly and with amazing swiftness overhead, coming to rest on the opposite slope. Red could just make out that two people disembarked—presumably Burma and Chantal—before it returned to where he sat.

The stout woman got to the ground and looked Red over with interest. "Burma told me what happened," she said. "We thank you much. Brings important information. Wish you please to come with me."

Tiredly, Red got up. *Burma made a promise*, he thought. *I hope to hell he does something about it soon.*

He noticed the woman's eyes on him curiously as he got stiffly through the door into the cabin of the aircraft; it was no larger than that of twentieth-century planes, though he could see no controls except a glowing plate set below the forward windscreen. The woman followed.

Without noise or vibration, they rose smoothly and flew across the valley, landed, got out, and crossed a patch of scraped ground to enter a metal building shaped like an enormous penny—a hundred feet across but barely eight high. Inside the entrance, the woman spoke sharply to a waiting man, and the door shut behind them.

A few yards along a softly lit corridor, and they came into a room where Chantal sat with a calm-faced girl beside her.

She looked pale and apprehensive, but someone had already dressed the cut on her temple and her hands were covered with some flexible transparent material, protecting the grazes.

"I am Maelor," said the stout woman, suddenly relaxing. She pronounced it with a drop of a quarter tone on the second syllable. "I know you are called Red because Burma said to me. Please sit, Red, and be comfortable. You limp. Are you hurt?"

Red nodded a little, and the calm-faced girl took a box of what must be medical equipment and knelt before him as he sat down in a plump chair. She made to remove the shoe on his metal foot.

Red half-stopped her, and then leant back with a grim expression. What the hell was the use of trying to hide it here and now? This was no concern of his; in a little while they would be away from here, and able to forget it.

The girl's face changed startlingly when she found the prosthetic limb, but she recovered at once and carefully rolled up his trouser leg to remove it. Something soothing went on the stump and quieted the fiery pain.

Red looked across at Chantal. "Are you all right?" he said.

She nodded, and stirred a little. "They have some wonderful things here, Red," she said. "I know that medicine in our time could never have done this for us. It's hard to believe that we've really come three thousand years, but that convinces me."

Red felt startled. He had not seriously questioned the fact himself. He had merely accepted it as something to resent.

He turned to Maelor, still standing nearby. "How soon are you going to send us home?" he said harshly.

Maelor hesitated oddly. "It will take a little time," she said reluctantly. "Is your leg all right now?"

"Yes thank you. Burma told us that as soon as possible we would be sent home. How soon is that?"

"Perhaps longer than Burma hoped," admitted Maelor reluctantly. Red scented the dullness of obstinacy in her singsong voice, and reached for his leg.

"All right," he said, strapping it on. "I think Chantal and I might like to look around for a bit and enjoy the sun while we're waiting. After all," he continued with bitter irony, "we don't often get a summer holiday in midwinter. Coming, Chantal?"

She seemed completely overwhelmed; nodding, she got to her feet and approached him. Together they started for the door, only to find Maelor in front of it.

"I sorry," said the stout woman. "It impossible at the moment." Then, reading rebellion in Red's eyes, she put her hand on a switch set in the wall. "You wish proof, then. Prepare for a shock, please."

Part of the wall folded away.

It took Red's eyes a long time to adjust to what he saw. At first he could make out only blackness; then a flash of sunlike brilliance took his point of focus out beyond the window—for that was what it was—and he was abruptly staring into infinity.

He gasped, and clutched at Chantal, who opened her mouth, said nothing, and turned away.

He rounded on Maelor standing impassively by. "Where are you taking us?" he insisted.

"To Center. That is in space. We are not on Earth. I do not know what you know of the universe from your time—"

"Enough," Red told her harshly. "What's the idea of all this?"

"Earth is—not very safe. We are at war, against species from another star. They have often attacked Earth, so we—I think I know how to say it—Earth has been evacuated."

The memory of that gigantic thunderclap and the flash which had drowned the sunlight leapt to Red's mind, and he felt a sudden terrifying awe at the picture of so much power. The fear disgusted him, but he could not lose it; he had to mask it with rage.

"I want to see Burma!" he said. *The size of the job! Evacuating—how many? Thousands of millions of people?*

"Bring him here! We want a few explanations. You have no right to drag us away like this—"

Into the middle of a conflict that might crush us

"Burma is busy," began Maelor, and Red cut her short.

"Get him here!"

Maelor gave a little sigh. She pressed the switch which shut out the stars, and Red and Chantal felt a load off their minds. Then she went out.

"Don't worry," said Red grimly. "I'll soon fix this guy Burma when he shows up."

He wondered as the minutes passed whether he was going to appear after all, but after interminable waiting the door opened again, and Burma stood expressionlessly in the entrance. Red strode forward.

"I dare not spare you more than a few minutes," said Burma flatly. "You'll get more benefit out of it if you let me speak."

Red stumble-tongued; Burma continued in the hiatus.

"I'm afraid I hadn't realized how big a job it would be to return you to your own period. Listen: when I was hurled back to 1957 I went a thousand years further into the past than anyone has ever been before. We do not possess the equipment—we do not have the sheer power—to repeat it." He hesitated, as if making a calculation, and finished, "It would take the whole output of the sun for over a year to achieve it!"

Shaken, Red slowly, "Then—how was it you?"

"It was not our doing. But Maelor can spare the time to make it clear to you."

"Where are we going?" demanded Chantal, and Red shook his head.

"It would mean very little to you if I explained. We are going to Center, but Center is all over the Solar System. You will be taken to a woman called Artesha."

He turned to Maelor and uttered a brief command in his own language before starting towards the door. "I'm sorry,"

he said with a hint of a sad smile as he left. "But we are desperately short of time."

"Who is that man?" said Chantal as soon as he had gone. Maelor frowned.

"It is hard to tell you," she began, and Red cut her short.

"We aren't complete savages," he said bitterly.

"I know. Well then, he is expert in putting together knowledge about the thing which moved him far in time. He is chief of anchor team, trying to stop temporal surges."

"And what are they?"

Haltingly, Maelor tried to explain. Gradually the picture of the age to which they had come built up in their minds, bringing with it a sense of reality and immediacy which frightened them. The immensity of the job!

But afterwards Maelor started to question them in turn, and Red was startled.

"You speak English—it's common among you," he pointed out. "Don't you have the history of our time?"

"I'm afraid not," said Maelor soberly. "You see, there was a war."

They thought that over in silence.

"Our language is based on English, though," Maelor went on. "It is compressed, and more complex, but by slowing down and thinking all the time about what to say, most of us can make ourselves understood to you."

"After three thousand years?" said Chantal.

"There has been world-wide communication since only a century after your time. When everyone could hear everyone else speak—even people of the past, recorded—the language changed very slowly compared to before."

"This war—" Chantal pressed.

Maelor shook her head. "How much I can tell you I do not know. I cannot let you know something you could use on your return."

Somehow the prospect of return didn't excite Red quite so much this time—but what place was there for him or Chantal in a world like this?

Chapter VI

TIRED, DIRTY and hungry, Magwareet hauled himself out of the lock at the entrance to the city. The rescue teams drew aside to let him pass, without wasting their attention on him—and that was as it should be.

Now what kind of a mess is the human race in?

The oxygen salvage vessels suckled up like gigantic leeches and sucked the air out of the plastic sheath as soon as the survivors were safe; before Magwareet had finished his report to Artesha they had begun to break the city up for invaluable scrap.

Hanging in space, he watched the job, wondering what Burma would have to say when he got in.

At length they brought up a gigantic bundle of girders from the heart of the city, strapped a drive unit on the tail end and launched it into space. Magwareet thumbed the forward stud on his suit and swung down to face the man making up the package.

"Where's it for?" he said.

The man told him, and Magwareet clamped himself on. "Okay, I'll take it," he said, and without another word his gauntlet jammed the drive control over to full.

Acceleration jamming him against the back of his suit, Magwareet watched the skeleton of the city vanish. He had never flown one of these bundles before, but he had to make the trip and he dared not waste the time it involved.

He cast off from the bundle of girders and left it to circle for days, months, or years, and made the last few miles to the nearest part of Center on his suit power.

Exactly where he was, he didn't know. It mattered not at

all. Every part of Center—distributed across millions of miles in thousands of sections—was exactly the same distance from all the others in what was important: time. He stepped through the lock, stripped off and hung up his suit, and walked through a door.

It led into Artesha's presence.

For a few moments he stood under her calm, unvarying gaze. Then he inquired, "How about this Enemy, Artesha?"

"I'll know when Kepthin has his team together. I've had to pull off half dozen of the top remaining men on the anchor teams—the chance of finding a weakness in the Enemy is worth risking losing more personnel to a temporal surge. *Just worth it.*"

There was a click from the door through which Magwareet had previously come, and he turned to look at the visitors from the past.

Red did not know what he expected to see when Burma nodded at him to pass through the doorway. A larger room, certainly; this was only fifteen feet by twenty, lit with softly glowing panels like the one he had seen in the aircraft back on Earth.

Back on Earth!

He thrust it out of his mind and watched Burma. Chantal likewise waited, although he could see she had begun to ask something. Burma's attitude had changed subtly, and he walked forward with the air of a lover towards his loved one. Yet there was no one in sight except a tall, rather ugly man in blue.

Red had a brief shock from that, but when Burma spoke he was answered not by the man in blue, but by a voice from all around them. He guessed at a radio link.

After a moment Burma turned towards them, smiling. "I want you to meet friends of mine," he said. "This is Magwareet, who is a co-ordinator—a director of work. He will be supervising the control of the new temporal project."

The man in blue nodded stiffly, and Red fancied he saw superiority over these barbarians from the past mirrored in his eyes. He said sharply, "Tell him we'd be glad if you'd hurry up!"

Magwareet asked a question of Burma in their language. The answer came as an interruption in the same unlocalized voice as before. Burma nodded as if at an order, and went on, "And this—is Artesha"

"What—where?" Red looked around him, and Chantal shook her head in puzzlement.

"Here," said Artesha. "All around you."

"Not a machine," said Magwareet suddenly in a resonant voice. "Artesha was badly injured in an Enemy attack—so badly, that we could not rebuild her body. But because she was very important, we made a record of her mind. We can do that. After that, people gave her a home in the circuits of Center. Now she runs it."

He looked for understanding on Red's face; this senseless antagonism had to be overcome. The girl Chantal was not permanently warped as he was—only shocked and shaken. But Red's mind bore a deformation as real as his artificial leg.

"Is it working?" he demanded of Artesha.

"I think so."

Indeed, the pride which was plain in Burma's face had struck Red forcibly. "And—you, Burma?" he asked with difficulty.

"I'm her husband," said Burma, without a flicker.

To have lost not a leg, but a body! The thought terrified Red; it had figured in nightmares since he was a child—imagination had painted the picture of him losing the rest of his leg, his other leg, his arms: being cased forever in metal and unable to die.

"Now," said Artesha levelly, and Burma leaned forward.

"Red, we need knowledge of your time which only you can give us. We need your help."

"It's no business of mine!" Red answered savagely. "I

should have been three thousand years dead—not here, in this crazy world.”

“So you won’t help us?”

“No!” Red felt sweat crawl on his forehead.

“*Not even if we give you back your leg?*”

There was a moment of almost complete silence.

“You—can do—that?” said Red in a strangled voice.

“I do assure you—we can do that,” said Burma.

In an instant the conflict in Red’s mind had resolved. Blind chance had taken away his leg, but it was people who were going to give it back. His barrier against mankind broke down, and he was suddenly conscious of his oneness with these inhabitants of a distant age.

“I’ll do anything you want,” he said, and was content.

When they had taken Red and Chantal away, Magwareet remained silent for a while, to let Burma and Artesha talk as they wanted. When they had spoken together, he raised his head.

“Artesha, why are these two so important?”

“I don’t really know,” said Artesha frankly. “But—I don’t think I could explain it even to you, Magwareet. I’ve been part of Center now for almost fourteen years, and I’m so absorbed in it now that I’m becoming able to put together information. You might say I get hunches, that’s all.

Magwareet accepted that. “Burma, I’ve only heard sketchily from Artesha what happened.”

Burma gave a quick summary, ending, “But from back there, Magwareet, the time map looked as if it was on fire! The surge which threw me up in 1957 wasn’t the furthest back by several hundred years. I suspect that there are surges running possibly as far back as the creation of the world.”

“What caused the sudden violence of yours, though?”

“I can’t tell you. The only man who could would be Wymarin. Is there any news of him?”

"No," said Artesha after a fractional pause to search her gigantic memory. "What was he doing?"

"I believe it was some of his work which stimulated the Being. Not the destruction of the Enemy raiders. You see what that means?"

"If he can stimulate the Being deliberately, he's half way to controlling it," said Magwareet flatly.

"Exactly. And so we shall have to find him or one of his aides. We haven't a hope of tracing the computer memory he was using to record his data—the temporal surge will have wiped it clean with overlaid energy."

"But how could we find him, if he's been thrown anything like as far back as you were? If he was in a position to operate his time map, he'd be back. His is anchored to the same now as yours, surely."

"I've been thinking about that," Burma answered. "Beloved, have we any data on co-existence within a temporal surge?"

"You mean—could you use the same temporal surge again?" Magwareet suggested. Burma nodded.

Artesha answered slowly, "No one has ever tried it. But you could go back to the moment when it struck with no difficulty. Short-range displacement is simple. It would be risky—"

"It's my job, Burma," said Magwareet, "and not yours. You're needed here and now with an anchor team. You're a specialist. Agreed, Artesha?"

Artesha did not reply for a second. Then she said with relief, "Agreed. Magwareet, it won't be so risky after all. That surge has four secondary peaks—two at each end. One of them is due to come up in empty space in about four hours from now. You'll only—"

Another pause. "They've stepped up the power of a map past the safety limit, and it seems that there's been anachronistic exchange between several of the peaks in the far past."

"Dangerous?"

"Probably. Magwareet, get up a team quickly and go look

for Wymarin. Burma, take over what you think is the most promising remaining anchor team and try to duplicate his work, in case we don't find him."

"Are you saying that to keep me out of harm?" said Burma.

"I love you," said Artesha. Sincerity formed the words. "But I could not do anything I thought was not the best course for the human race."

Burma bowed his head and went out, leaving Magwareet to look thoughtful.

"How about this specimen of the Enemy?" he said. "It worries me—"

"Kepthin is coming up to see us now," Artesha reported, and almost as she spoke the little biologist entered.

"We've got our Enemy alive," he said proudly. "His metabolism is oxygen-using, fortunately, so he didn't stifle when his spacesuit was punctured. We think we've figured out how he got into the city—when the pilot reported he had outflown the Enemy scouts, someone checked back and noticed that one of them was somewhere missing.

"Vantchuk has been over the information, and he thinks that the Enemy abandoned his scout, boarded the city through the sheath holding its foundations, and made his way up to the control center to destroy the communication equipment. Unfortunately for him, someone realized what was happening and sent the city deliberately out of control. The Enemy seems to have lost his temper at that, and killed the survivors."

"What did he hope to gain?" asked Magwareet.

We haven't begun to communicate with him yet. Vantchuk points out, though, that he could have turned on the star drive and crashed billions of tons of matter either into the atmosphere of Earth or even, possibly, into the sun. And that much might—possibly—have unstabled the nova balance."

"This presupposes that they're capable of suicide to gain an advantage," Magwareet pointed out. "Artesha, how does that tie in with our theory of their psychology?"

"It doesn't," said Artesha bluntly. "It's either all wrong, or there was another reason for the Enemy's action. As we have it figured, the Enemy is capable of desperate action only out of desperation." She sounded cheerful.

"And that," supplied Magwareet, "implies that we are doing them more damage than we believed!"

The relief was amazing. He set his shoulders back.

"All right, Artesha. I'll go assemble my team—I'll be taking Red and Chantal, of course—and we'll ride that same temporal surge that Burma was thrown out on. Wymarin must have surfaced at one of the secondary peaks, surely."

"If his time map isn't operating, you're going to have to find him by using only trace instability. Admitted, it will be strong if he's been thrown three thousand years, but there'll be a lot of interference from your instruments, after they've done the same distance."

"If necessary, we'll land and make up fresh ones with native materials," Magwareet answered. "Keep us posted if you can about the Enemy."

"Good luck," said Artesha. Magwareet thought she sounded wistful, and wondered why.

Chapter VII

THE ORGANIZATION of his project presented Magwareet with small difficulty—except lack of resources. Fresh possibilities came to him even as he was issuing orders.

Essentially, the plan was simple. The temporal surges tended to break—like waves—into two or more branches at either end of their millennium-long sweep. Anything absorbed

at either end was transposed by a mechanism no one quite understood to the opposite one. Limited time travel had been one of the first by-products of the study of the Being, but it took tremendous power. They could afford enough to return Magwareet's team to one of the peaks of the temporal surge which had tossed Burma and his team far into the past. They would break out at one of the other earlier peaks.

And it was not so difficult to pick one stranded time-traveler out of Earth's teeming millions, because any matter displaced in time acquired a certain characteristic surplus of energy which could be detected over a range of millions of miles, looking on a time map like a tiny whirlpool.

Of course, the instruments with which this energy was detected would be carrying a similar charge, but it was a peculiar aspect of the temporal surges that they affected organic matter more readily than inorganic, and even human beings more readily than animals. Which was one of the million unanswered problems which had been shelved as not so urgent as others.

It would take a while to make the expedition ready, and he would not have to supervise everything. In accordance with the precept that it was a co-ordinator's business to know all he could, he went to see what was happening to the Enemy.

They had placed him in what they estimated to be ideal conditions for him, in a large open room somewhere in Center's sprawling complex. Then they had collected every available spare man or woman who might contribute to the effort, and gone ahead studying the captive.

When Magwareet entered, he was shaken to find the result so impressive. *It's fantastic how much the human race has learned!* he reflected. *Surely we don't deserve to go under.*

The Enemy was large, he already knew, but stripped of his bulky spacesuit he appeared somehow more impressive. His five-limbed, pale golden bulk lay on a specially designed support; artificial feeding devices poured hastily synthesized nourishment into his body; people milling about him were

studying the wound left by the blaster shot and carefully repairing it.

But there were strong bands holding down those five thick limbs.

He mingled with the crowd and sought out Kepthin to ask about progress.

"He's unwilling to communicate, of course, but we're working on something to relax the higher nervous centers. They're trying hypnosis over there, you notice?"

"How's that possible?" said Magwareet, staring. "You don't know that much about its brain yet, do you?"

"Brain!" Kepthin chuckled. "This thing has a mixture of memory-devices that beats even Regularan life-forms!"

"Hypnosis is only a way of confusing someone's interpretation of external reality. If we can find characteristic rhythms in the Enemy's metabolism, we can heterodyne them. Failing that, we'll just have to synthesize the right kind of 'printed' molecules to make it obey our wishes."

Excusing himself, he hurried off, but his last remark sounded so confident and matter-of-fact that Magwareet remained gazing after him.

Red hardly dared to believe what he had been promised, but he went eagerly with a silent guide through corridors and into a clean, light place that could only be a hospital. Here a smiling young woman in blue came to meet them.

"Welcome!" she said. "I hear you want your leg replaced."

That was enough to make it seem real.

The woman informed them that her name was Teula, and that she ought to apologize for the fact that very few people were paying attention to them despite their uniqueness. She explained that nowadays almost literally nobody had any spare time at all—the race had organized its efforts so thoroughly. She expanded the apology with a flashing smile to include Chantal, who seemed to have been brought along merely because everyone associated Red and her in their minds.

"Teula, how long has this war been going on?" she asked.

"Well, I believe the first contacts with the Enemy were made about a hundred and fifty years ago, but it didn't develop into a life-and-death struggle until less than a century back. I can't give you the details, though—it was before I was born."

"Naturally," Red started to say, and then caught himself. "How old are you, then?"

"Sixty-four." Teula seemed quite unconcerned that she appeared thirty or less. "That's a by-product of the war. We had to keep our valuable people alive as long as possible, and then we found it was quite as easy to keep everybody alive. . . . We used to think a life of a hundred-odd years was enough. I think we're going to get used to living over a thousand, eventually."

All this talking had not prevented her from getting on with her job. She had deftly removed Red's prosthetic leg—with an approving remark about its workmanship—cut away the end of the stump with a scalpel that did not hurt and apparently froze the blood before it could run, and then fitted a sealed box over the end. Into the box ran tubes carrying suspensions of organic material.

Then she slipped his good leg into a long cylinder from which depended many cables, explaining that an electronic brain would scan it and ensure that the replacement was an exact mirror image of it.

"And that is all," she stated, in less than half an hour. "But there is one further thing. You won't get far if you don't catch up on our language. English is all right—"

"You speak it excellently," said Red.

"But I talk very fast—notice? I'm trying to talk at the speed I'm accustomed to. You'll see what I mean when you learn Speech. That's what we generally use." She uttered three fluctuating phrases and added, "That was the whole of what I've just been saying in a quarter the time."

A quick step across the room, and she was bringing unrecognizable items from a cupboard. "If you're expecting a

teacher, by the way, or a recorded language course, you aren't getting either. We can't waste time like that nowadays. Chantal, would you lie down?" She indicated a flat soft surface built out from the wall.

Chantal obeyed. Humming, Teula arranged her gadgets. "Your leg should take about eight hours, Red, and this course in Speech about six. I'll wake you up together, though."

"Wake us up? What—" began Red, but with a smile full of mischief. Teula shook her head.

"Go to sleep!" she said in the odd sing-song way which had enabled Burma to command Red earlier. And they did.

There was a sense of time having passed, but not of intervening awareness, when he woke. For a few moments he simply lay still, wondering what had happened in his head.

"So you're conscious," said Teula's voice from behind him.

"What did you do to us?" asked Red, and was interrupted by a cry from Chantal.

"Red! You're talking Speech!"

"So are you!" They gazed at each other in amazement for a moment, and then he turned to Teula. "Is it hypnosis?"

"Partly."

"But—no, damn it, you can't teach a language in six hours!"

"True. But Speech is developed from English according to certain very inflexible rules. You've been taught those rules so thoroughly that you automatically use Speech. It's similar to the process involved in learning shorthand. A few weeks will be needed for you to acquire a full working vocabulary, just as you'd need to learn how best to combine the symbols of a shorthand system. But you can make yourselves understood anywhere from now on. Excuse me—I must notify Magwareet that you're ready to see him."

She left them alone. Turning to Chantal, Red found himself at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry," he said at length. "I was very rude to you, and inconsiderate—"

"I understand why," Chantal answered softly, and it was

astonishing how much more complete and precise her meaning was in this new tongue. "How's your leg?"

"Why—why, I—I'd forgotten about it. . . ."

Delightedly, Red swung his *legs*—for the first time since childhood he could think that—to the floor, and walked up and down staring at a pair of living feet. After a moment, Chantal spoke again.

"Red, I was scared for a while. I was afraid of what people might be like in this age. But if they could make you *forget* something which had obsessed you and blinded you for years—just like that—" She gained assurance and spoke up boldly. "I have never dreamed that anyone could be cured so swiftly!"

And I was ill, thought Red. I was crippled more in my mind than in my body, and I wouldn't admit it.

Now, though, he could admit it without pain, and he was very glad.

A panel slid back, and Magwareet appeared in the gap. He looked tired, but there was confidence in his bearing.

"Congratulations on your new leg, Red," he said. "Maybe you'd like to give it its first tryout on the way to the observation room. I don't know if you've been told, but you're already aboard the ship which is taking us back to your time."

Chantal blinked, and he chuckled. "No, we are not going to return you summarily! You are going to be useful, both of you." He beckoned, and they followed him from the room.

"We're headed for the nearest peak of the same temporal surge which threw Burma into your time," Magwareet explained as they went along. "There was a man working with the same team—called Wymarin—who had achieved the best results so far on understanding the nature of the Being. We've got to look for him. It may be futile, but it's a chance, at least."

At that point they came into the observation room. It was small, but it had a view on to infinity.

This time, they could enjoy looking at the stars.

There was only one other person in the room—a young-

looking man before a group of lighted control panels whom Magwareet presented as their pilot, Arafan.

And at the same instant a loudspeaker on the wall came to frantic life.

"Magwareet! Magwareet! Artesha here! There's an Enemy raider—a big one—heading for you at top speed!"

Chapter VIII

MAGWAREET hardly changed externally, but his relaxed attitude tensed indefinably. There was a short pause.

"I see him now," he answered. There was nothing but a smear of red on the illuminated plate he was staring at. "Arafan, what's his course like?"

"If he carries on as he is," the pilot reported unemotionally, "he'll sink right into this end of the temporal surge."

"Artesha, we'll have to get something after him—catch him! We daren't have an Enemy raider loose in the twentieth century!"

"Agreed." Artesha's voice was inhumanly level. "Magwareet, step up your generators to maximum. I want as much trace instability as possible on the maps. I'll have a squadron of ships after you as fast as possible."

"Right." Magwareet moved across the room in one easy bound, and his hands began to move like water rippling on a bank of controls. Arafan tensed, watching the viewplate.

"There he goes!" he said, and pushed a lever home.

"Is this the first time anything like this has happened?" Chantal asked, and Magwareet replied without turning.

"Yes. As far as I know, the Enemy has never before struck the end of a temporal surge."

He glanced at Arafan's viewplate. "Anything following us?"

"Can't tell! We're co-existing with the anchor team Burma was with, now. It'll be impossible to sort out anything else till either we or they drop into normal space again."

"Then there's nothing else we can do," Magwareet said. He turned on his heel and stared at Red and Chantal. "I suppose you want to be told what's happening. Well, somewhere 'behind' us there ought to be enough ships to take that Enemy raider apart. But—it's difficult to make it clear—roughly, things go through a temporal surge in the order they enter it in real time, and original relationships are preserved. I think by your time it had been discovered that there are things called operators—actions which have equal reality with the things they affect. Our relationship with the Enemy is unchanged because the operator which has been applied to us—the temporal surge—acts only *along* the world-line, and not across it."

He shrugged. "So until we return to normal space, we don't know what's happening to us, or the Enemy, or the ships following us. What's worse, there has never been a chase like this before."

"Why can't the ships following do what we did—enter the surge at the same moment as us? You can jump in time—"

"That jump gives a surplus of temporal energy, which is what we use to detect something out of its original time. The more you have, the slower you pass through the surge. The Enemy has none except what it's getting now; we have twenty hours' worth, and we can't tell how much the ships behind us have because we don't know how far they had to jump in time to enter the surge."

"Anchor team's splitting!" reported Arafan.

"What?"

"They've hit a sort of eddy! It's tossed some of them back into normal space. . . ."

"When the fleet gets here, we'll have to pick up anyone we can." Magwareet brightened. "Maybe Wymarin or one of his staff will be among them!"

"We're going to emerge," warned Arafan. "*And there's the Enemy!*"

It was vast beyond imagination. It lay across the Milky Way like a black rod, and it was like no ship Red and Chantal had ever imagined. It was pentagonal in section, and the ends of its long shaft were multifaceted lenses gleaming with cold fire.

"Do you imagine they know where—when they are?" Chantal breathed.

Magwareet shot her a glance and spoke dryly. "It took us years to figure out about the Being. If they've solved the problem this soon, they're cleverer than we are."

The Enemy raider rolled—so slowly, it seemed. As it turned, something that glinted rushed across the sky—out of control.

"That must be one of the anchor team's ships!" said Magwareet.

There was no sign from the Enemy, except that one facet of one jeweled end blazed like a sun, but the racing ship became a Catherine wheel of incandescence and bloomed into a flower of yellow fire.

"If Wymarin was aboard—"said Magwareet, biting his lip. Arafan leaned forward, turning to the viewport as if to confirm what his instruments reported.

"They know *where* they are, at any rate," he said. "Look!"

Again the huge ship was turning, this time so that its axis lay along a line that intersected a tiny blue-green disc in the sky. Red realized in sick horror what it must be, even as Chantal uttered the words.

"Red, surely—that's Earth!"

A thousand fantasies filled their minds. Were they back in their own time? If so, then they themselves before they met each other were walking about on that tiny planet. If the Enemy struck—if it did damage—what would result?

Incoherently Red asked the question. Magwareet snapped at Arafan, "Go after them!" and wiped his forehead. "I don't know," he confessed to Red. "We think that our interference

with the past is already accounted for, but we have never had outside intrusion before. And there's the fact that we can't detect what happens in the past as the result of a temporal surge until it's peaked in real time.

The minute disc that was Earth grew larger. He came to a decision. "Arafan, we'll have to decoy them. Why didn't I have this ship armed? Oh, what a mess!"

Red had been wondering why they themselves had not shared the fate of the anchor team's ship. He had his answer in Magwareet's next utterance.

"Are you screening out everything, Arafan?"

The pilot nodded.

"Can you drop the screens so that they catch sight of us and get them back up before they can fire on us?"

"No," said Arafan.

"I suppose not. . . ." Magwareet went to the viewport and leaned against it on his outstretched arms, palms flat. He stared at the Enemy, as if working a complex calculation.

"Arafan, that ship has a blind spot. It's a belt round the middle of the shaft. The facets only radiate at right angles to their plane surface, don't they? They can't fire on anything subtending an angle smaller than—oh, about nine and a quarter degrees is my guess—to the two ends. Could you get that close?"

"We'd have to creep up," the pilot answered. "I'm not sure our screens would mask the drive energy at short range. Want me to try?"

"We've got to try!" said Magwareet. "Where are those ships?"

Arafan's face was quite composed as he turned the ship. The Enemy grew abruptly larger, until it almost filled the viewport, its faceted ends just touching the edges of the transparent plastic. Then he shut off the power, and they began to drift towards the mid-point of the vast pentagonal shaft.

The tension climbed steadily towards the intolerable. Red

felt he must scream in another second, or hide his eyes, or—best of all—run. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Chantal, when he stole a look at her, was gazing through the port with fascination, as if hypnotized. Arafan had somehow managed to lose himself in the symbols on his instruments and forget reality, but Magwareet knew he was risking their lives on guesswork, and even though he had been trained for years to guess, and guess right, he still suffered that terrifying fear of being mistaken.

“Arafan,” he said softly. The pilot inclined his head. “When I say *now!* drop the screens. Wait a moment. Let them get a good sight of us. Then raise the screens again and head directly outwards.”

Arafan’s head swung round as if jerked by a rope. “Are you crazy, Magwareet? Straight into the full blast of their armament?”

“Do as I say! All right—now!”

And an indefinable mist cleared from the viewport, so that they saw the Enemy apparently close enough to touch.

“They’re nearly within range of Earth,” Red heard Arafan say in that long moment when they lay naked and defenseless. Magwareet gazed at the broad expanse of metal, thinking of the big, five-limbed creatures inhabiting it.

He grew aware that they had been dangerously long here. “Arafan!” he rapped. “Screens up! Head outwards!”

The pilot’s face had gone completely white. His hand reached out towards a control lever, and remained, shaking like a leaf, inches from it.

“I—I daren’t do it,” he moaned.

Red glanced at the side of the Enemy ship, and saw with blank despair that it had already begun to change position and bring them within the field of fire of its weapons. If that sunlike power struck them when the screens were down—

Magwareet waited the instant necessary to think out and co-ordinate all his movements. Then he leapt across the room and slammed into the control board, falling on to it as on to a floor, face down. His head struck the screen control, one

hand found the power and the other the course director. He was barely in time.

The viewport was suddenly blinding with red light, and a shrill alarm rattled at the edge of hearing. Fatalistically, they waited for disaster. All except Magwareet, who had slumped to the floor with blood crawling down his face.

Arafan recovered slowly and rose to his feet, looking at the injured Magwareet with awe. "I should have known better than to distrust a co-ordinator," he said.

"Why? What's happening?" Red and Chantal spoke together.

"The radiation pressure is pushing us back! There's power equivalent to a small star driving against us. In a moment, we'll be able to start our own engines and get out of harm's way." He dropped back into the pilot's seat.

Sure enough, after another few seconds the red against the port faded and vanished, and the Enemy was no more than a stroke against the stars.

Magwareet stirred and picked himself up. Chantal ran to help him, but he shook his head when she asked if he was badly hurt. He looked meaningfully at Arafan, who bent his head in acknowledgment, and then, wiping blood from the cut on his head, turned to the port.

"Here they come!" he said with infinite relief.

Like a checkerboard of multiple suns the ships of Earth sprang into being. They caught their breath at the sight. There were hundreds of them, and they brought an overwhelming impression of power. It was very comforting. But it seemed they had no more than appeared when they returned into nothing.

"What—" began Red.

Again the Enemy had turned, and now it was clear that the blue-green disc aligned with it was really a round planet rolling about the sun. Its polyfaceted end looked like the eye of an evil insect focused on its prey.

A transient flicker illumined the interior of the eye.

And the defending ships were back. But this time they were like novae erupting, and the Enemy glowed.

It shone like a red-hot wire, except for its ends, which almost instantly began to swing again, but more swiftly, while each of their facets became a piece of a star. One of the novae flared up and winked out.

But the glow whitened.

The lensed ends became uniform masses of intolerable light, and Red noticed with a start that the viewport had darkened until the stars were no longer visible—only the greater-than-sunpower of the fighting ships.

A dozen of the circling attackers passed into nothing, and there was a shift which altered their arrangement. But they had also closed in.

"How come they are destroyed so far away when we took all they could give at close range?" Red wanted to know.

Magwareet answered absently, "We have a lot of delicate equipment on board. The energies in a temporal surge wipe clean the electronic patterns in computer memories unless the insulation is very good indeed. So we're carrying at least twice as much screening as any of those ships out there."

The circling novae were definitely fewer now. Some twenty or thirty of them must have been seared into nothing by the mighty alien. Their pattern changed again. Red felt Chantal shiver as she stood close to him.

Unexpectedly Magwareet uttered a jubilant cry. "We've got them!"

Almost imperceptibly the balance had shifted, and the central shaft of the Enemy ship was now noticeably brighter than its ends. At the same time a bluish tinge crept into the luminescence.

"What do you mean?"

"They're having to switch their available power from attack to defense. Once they do that, it's only a matter of time."

The blueness spread steadily until it covered even the

ends of the Enemy. Blazing, the attackers moved in for the kill.

Finally, the blue light began to shift back down the spectrum, becoming yellower, and at last taking on a hint of red. Last of all, it sank beyond the visible, and the remnants of the mighty ship turned into a cloud of dust.

There was complete silence in the room.

"Won't they have seen that back on Earth?" Chantal said eventually, and Magwareet shook his head.

"There was a ship standing by between us and Earth doing nothing but shift radiant energy up the scale and convert it into high energy particles. All Earth will have detected is a slight increase in cosmic rays." He went across the cabin, muttering, "Excuse me."

There was a blank plate set in the wall, with pressbuttons under it. He punched one of them and said, "Commanding officer, please."

The plate lit to show a fat woman in a coverall soaked with sweat until it clung to her like a second skin. She gave Magwareet a wry smile.

"Think I'm the senior surviving officer. That was a hell of a ship, co-ordinator. Must be their biggest and latest design!"

"It could be. I want you to give a detailed report to Artesha on your return. I also want your ships—when they re-enter the temporal surge—to look out for the other peak we passed shortly before emerging. There's an eddy close to it, and some of the anchor team Burma got lost with have been thrown out into normal space nearby. Check on them and if Wymarin or one of his assistants is among them, let me know. Okay?"

"Agreed," said the fat woman. She gave another wan smile, said, "A hell of a fight!" and disappeared.

"It was indeed," said Magwareet to the air. "I hope I never have a closer call. Well, I wonder what the detector teams have come up with. You might as well come down with me, Red and Chantal."

"There *are* other people on board?" Red said haltingly.

"Eight of them."

"Did they know what was going on?"

"No. . . . They were studying temporal maps, so they'll have registered the appearance of the Enemy raider and of the fleet, but they don't have details. This way."

The room was directly beneath the pilot's cabin; its walls were lined with green-glowing time maps. Five women and three men listened quietly as Magwareet recounted the history of the past few minutes, but made no comment. Red remembered that these were people fighting for existence, who had been schooled out of wasting their time.

"Found anything?" Magwareet asked when he had finished.

"Here," said a girl with dark hair, and pointed. "This is anachronistic, but it's an exchange with the close peak where the anchor team was broken up. See?"

"Oho no," said Magwareet slowly, studying the green pattern. "Yes, it's right in this moment, isn't it?"

"Is it bad?" Red put in tentatively.

"It may be. It may be very bad. For some reason we can't fathom, anything picked up in a temporal stage is more likely to be organic than inorganic, and most likely to be human. The mass of this one is small, but diffuse—which means several people or animals. And if they're people—"

"What?"

"Then 1957 has been invaded by a bunch of the most bloodthirsty savages in history—a war party from the twenty-third century Croceraunian Empire."

Chapter IX

CHANIK, commander of the war party, would have been perfectly invisible to anyone in the Dead Place at the foot of

the hill. But it was said that there were still people in some of the ruined cities who knew the magic of the Old Days, and Chasnik had a powerful respect for magic of the kind which had produced the prismatic binocular periscope through which he was surveying the scene. Therefore he kept as much of the rock between him and the Dead Place as possible.

The Fist of Heaven had been merciful here; it had struck not the city itself but the low ground on the other side of the river. Probably the rush of air and the wild-fire had done more damage than the actual blow. Some twenty or twenty-five of the towers were still standing.

A hint of movement at his side disturbed him, and he scowled down at the fresh-faced boy of nineteen who crouched there. Chasnik had not yet figured out exactly what he was going to do to the official who had ensured that he—he, Chasnik, fourteenth in the roster of raider captains of the Croceraunian Empire!—was sent out this time with a freshly graduated novice magician.

Still, he wore the symbols: there was power in the blue tattoos across his body and arms, and obviously someone thought highly of his ability.

Grudgingly, Chasnik stepped aside and let Vyko get at the eyepiece of the periscope. After a quick look, the boy nodded.

"Quiet enough," he said. "My bones don't show any risk in the near future, but—"

"But what?" Chasnik demanded harshly. "There have been too many reports of miracles lately, Vyko! I'm not going into any Dead Places, no matter how nearly intact they may seem, until I'm trebly sure of what I'm doing."

Vyko colored slightly, but he answered boldly enough. "Do you not see this?" he demanded, bunching his right fist and raising it towards Chasnik's face. "Do you not know the mark of the Eyes that See? I tell you, Chasnik, that there is no danger in the immediate future for me or anyone who is with me."

Chasnik grumbled to himself; he had never really liked the

fact that it was not the commander of the party but the magician who could see ahead who made the plans.

"In fact," finished Vyko almost to himself, "I have never known the future seem so uneventful."

"Nonetheless, I wish to try it for myself," said Chasnik. "Crettan!"

"Captain?" A man slid down the side of the hill like a ghost.

"Cross the valley and breathe on the Dead Place with the Breath of Terror. That way we shall know if there is anyone with power there."

"Aye, Captain," said Crettan. He didn't look pleased, and Chasnik eyed him sharply.

"Well, what is it?"

"This Dead Place is largely undamaged," said Crettan haltingly. "I have heard that—suppose there are—suppose they strike me with the Fist of Heaven!"

"Blasphemy," said Vyko quietly, before Chasnik could reply. "The Fist of Heaven is not at the call of men. I shall require an hour of penance from you at camp-time tonight."

Crettan scowled and withdrew; in a few minutes they saw his horse, laden with the generator of the Breath of Terror, slip away into the hills.

There was nothing to do now for a while but wait; Chasnik whispered orders up the hillside, and the party of men relaxed into comfortable positions. Then he found himself a spot and was annoyed when Vyko dropped beside him.

"Sorry about that, Chasnik," said the magician informally. "This stuff is all very well for the men—I had to drive the point home—but it's a nuisance."

Chasnik could never get to enjoy the casual way in which Vyko, a beardless boy, assumed equality with him. He only grunted in reply, and, seeing that the captain was not in a talkative mood, Vyko bent to the periscope and studied the Dead Place.

His heart pounded. This was the first time he had come out as staff magician for a war party, though of course he

had made a few trips as a novice. Furthermore, this was the first nearly intact Dead Place he had approached, and he longed to find out what those enigmatic ruins concealed.

Oh, there would be the obvious things, naturally—it was the war party's main purpose to discover and scout the sources of metal, plastic and other materials in such ruins. But Vyko, despite his education, despite his carefully nurtured ability to see the future, still wondered how right the stories were. . . .

These people—of the Dead Places—had angered Heaven, so it was said, and been struck down for their arrogance. Their seed—himself and Crettan and Chasnik and the rest—had been scattered abroad. But there were books, a few carefully preserved volumes, which hinted at something else. Vyko wanted to find more of those books.

And of course there were the flying things. Vyko had been present at the burning of one of them. It had been huge and silvery, and made a great noise as it came to Earth, but before any sign had come from it, the senior officer present had given a slight nod, and the Breath of Terror had eaten it up. Occasionally, they were still seen, but they no longer landed if they could help it.

An hour passed as the sun sidled towards the horizon. At last, from the other side of the Dead Place, the Breath of Terror wafted gently across an acre of shattered brickwork and concrete. Vyko found himself hoping that there had been no valuable books in that part of the Dead Place.

"Now," said Chasnik eagerly. "Now we shall see."

They waited for a tense minute to see an answering weapon strike from one of the broken towers. Nothing happened. Nothing—

But there was no Dead Place.

There was a tract of cultivated land.

There was no rock sheltering them. They lay out, exposed, on a naked hillside.

In the valley, a machine was at work—if it was work, for it seemed to consist entirely of traveling back and forth, leaving

the turned brown soil a dusty gray when it had passed. Even as they watched, a big black carriage that traveled at enormous speed with no draft animals went by on a brown track between the fields.

Chasnik's military training asserted itself; a few quick orders before anyone had time to think, and they were safe behind sparse cover. Then he looked around, seeing Vyko nearby.

"What can have happened?" Vyko said in wonder.

"That's a fine question for you to ask!" stormed Chasnik.

"You're supposed to *know* all that."

From up the hill came a keening, as the men realized what had happened. Someone cried, "A miracle!" and Chasnik yelled at him to shut his mouth.

"Well?" he asked Vyko. "You said the future was uneventful. Now a sorcerer in that Dead Place has picked us up by magic and put us somewhere else. I call *that* an event." He was being heavily ironical to help control the nervousness he felt.

Vyko shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered. "Chasnik, I believe a great boon has been granted to us." His eyes shone. "I haven't yet got the feel of what is to come, except that it is great and terrible. But look yonder—did you ever see such a machine? There are men with it, too! And that black carriage—there's only one answer."

"That being?"

"We are being granted a sight of the Old Days! We have been moved in time."

Fear showed in Chasnik's black eyes for a moment, but he answered roughly, "Magicians' jargon! Nonsense! I'll accept a sorcerer can move men in space—I've heard of such things often enough—but in time! No, we must have been sent to one of those places to the east of the Empire where these men with strange powers live. And therefore we have a fine chance to add to the Empire!"

That'll teach them to send me out with a freshly qualified staff magician! he added to himself, and went on to picture

the advance in status a whole new province of the Empire—especially one with so many secrets—would get him.

“It’s something I’ve always dreamed of,” Vyko went on, but Chasnik flung up a hand and almost started out from cover at what he saw.

Panicked—presumably—Crettan had again loosed the Breath of Terror, and the strange machine and its attendants had flared to nothing. The ground about it was charred.

“Idiot!” said Vyko softly. Crettan’s racing horse now came into sight, being ridden as if he was fleeing a thousand devils. “Oh, the idiot! Chasnik, he will give away our position if he comes charging up that way.”

Chasnik nodded. He glanced up automatically to note the position of the sun—which was bright in a cold clear sky—set the range of his gun to maximum, and aligned it on Crettan’s body.

They were beautiful weapons, these, Chasnik thought, as the man and horse tumbled together in death. He did not understand quite how they operated—something about total conversion of incident illumination into beamed sonic frequencies capable of disrupting protein molecules was how the magicians referred to it. They were little use at night or on a cloudy day, of course, but for ordinary occasions, sighting one of them on a man’s neck or skull was enough to dispose of him in a second.

Maybe—one day—they’d discover how to make them again.

“Conference!” said Chasnik shortly, and the section commanders slid down the hill towards him.

“Sorcerers must have lived in that Dead Place,” he began, glancing at Vyko as if challenging him to contradict. “We seem to have been moved somewhere else by magic.”

The NCO’s stiffened and made as if to move closer together.

“However!” said Chasnik. “This has great possibilities!”

He went on to paint the rosy future awaiting men who added new ground to the Empire—skillfully, Vyko had to

admit so that soon enough this apparent disaster had become an apparent blessing.

Not entirely, though; a few of the older NCO's looked thoughtfully at their young staff magician while Chasnik was speaking—wondering, perhaps, whether he was competent to protect them after they had been struck by this kind of magic.

"So we will range out until we discover a center of population," Chasnik finished, "and base our further moves on what we discover there."

It took them only minutes to assemble and move off; Vyko rode thoughtfully at Chasnik's side as they made for the track leading through the fields.

For half an hour or so they progressed warily, seeing little sign of life.

Then a strange noise on the track ahead warned them of the approach of another of the carriages without draft animals. This one was going too fast for them; a hundred-man war party could not melt instantly into the landscape.

The car halted with a screech of brakes, and a scowling man looked from one of the rear windows, his mouth opening in astonishment at the sight of Chasnik's men. He called out.

"Why—he speaks almost our language!" remarked Vyko.

"Is that so peculiar?" said Chasnik. Tension showed in his voice, and several of the men seemed to be drawing back from the apparent power the car represented.

Assuming a bold front, he rode forward to the car.

"Who are you?" the scowling man demanded.

"Chasnik, fourteenth captain of the Croceraunian Empire," said Chasnik shortly. The man blinked.

"Show me your identification papers!"

"Men do not address an Imperial officer that way."

"Why, you—" The man started to get out of the car. Chasnik motioned, and at once a hundred men were visible, weapons poised and aimed towards the car.

"That's right," said Chasnik silkily. "You are plainly a man of some authority. You will get out and come with us."

Two soldiers advanced and took the scowling man roughly by the arms; another dealt with the driver of the car. It was standard policy to obtain a hostage as early as might be. It was a useful bargaining point.

"And the carriage?" said Vyko wistfully.

"Destroy it." Chasnik signaled the man with the Breath of Terror, and the car flared up.

"You won't get away with this," the man panted. "I am important—I will be missed. There will be search parties, and when you are caught—"

"Just as I want it," Chasnik replied. "Camp down, men! Full defensive circle. It's easier for them to come to us than for us to go to them."

With quiet efficiency the circle was made. In twenty minutes the war party commanded ten square miles of ground. Securely bound, the strangers were thrown to the ground in the middle of the ring.

But before the men could vanish under their improvised screens, there was a howling overhead and one of the flying things circled them three times. On the third pass Chasnik lost patience and ordered it fired on, at which it flew off.

"That will bring them!" said the captive somberly. Vyko turned to him.

"You mean there are *men* in those things?"

The captive stared, and then laughed. Vyko tried to press him, but the man was not willing to answer, and when Chasnik saw what was happening, he forbade it.

The captive, though, was right. Barely an hour had passed when there were rumblings from up the valley, and a scout came in to report that wagons bearing troops were on the way. Chasnik nodded, and ordered fire to be held for the time being.

"Oh, but this can only be the Old Days!" said Vyko as he studied the transport arriving, the strangely armed men deploying into the landscape. Another aircraft swooped overhead; Chasnik had not been counting on having to be invis-

ible from the air as well as the ground, but he had done his best to rectify his earlier mistake.

"You're the expert on them!" said Chasnik biting. "Look yonder! Does that not seem like an officer?"

Vyko studied a trio of men who had emerged into plain sight and were walking in irregular echelon in their direction, weapons in hand. "It does," he agreed, meaning the leader.

"Go down and parley with them, then," said Chasnik.

For a horrible moment Vyko felt himself on the brink of a precipice. He recalled what was most likely to happen to anyone attempting a parley with Croceraunians. But then his strong urge to find out more of this wonderful age triumphed. If he only got a chance to ask some questions!

With an almost happy smile at Chasnik, he rose into sight.

The trio ahead stiffened and halted. The officer was the first to regain himself after seeing Vyko's odd clothing, and the outlandish tattooing on his body. "Come forward without hurrying!" he directed.

Vyko did so, heart hammering. The others made no move until he was thirty feet from them, when the officer gestured. "All right, stop there. Who are you and where do you come from?"

Vyko debated his answer for an instant. There was one possibility, of course; this man might understand some of the esoteric signs used by magicians, and see the necessity for talking away from Chasnik's suspicious eyes.

He started to make the sign demanding secret conference, but the trigger finger of the soldier on the officer's right was over-close to the firing pressure. An enormous fist seemed to slam Vyko in the stomach, and he dropped to the earth in a black haze.

Chasnik, watching, rapped the order to strike, and in a few moments the war party had all but wiped out their opponents.

Before the sun set, they were masters of the countryside as far as they could see, including two unsuspecting villages and several miles of metaled road.

Chapter X

THE ARRANGEMENT of the half-dozen small ships aboard which an anchor team carried out its work was always haphazard, depending on the whim and conveniences of the team's director. It did not much matter, since the Being's 'substance' was reasonably homogeneous over any given area.

Its presence could only be detected by the most sensitive instruments, though; it registered on them more as a tendency to displacement in time than as anything more tangible.

As he pushed his way through the airlock of the nearest ship belonging to the team he had selected, though, Burma could not help wondering what kind of configuration the director had adopted this time. It was a good team—that was why he had picked it—but from the arrangement of the ships it looked as if they had simply been allowed to drift in a circular orbit until they were haphazardly placed.

It was good to have the familiar tools of his trade about him again, after his nightmare plunge into what he could not help thinking of as a barbarian era. It almost, but not quite, stopped him wishing that it had not been necessary to do away with sleep. The combination of hypnotic relaxation and selective removal of fatigue poisons which the race had been forced to develop doubled an individual's thinking time, was completely harmless and even aided longevity. But he missed—how he missed!—the ability simply to turn himself off for a while.

We never knew, his mind ran on idly. We never knew just what a human being could be made to do until we had to find out. Yet and still we're being made to do it. How long can we stand the strain?

He came into what should have been the busiest part of the ship, and stopped dead in his tracks.

Among the elaborate and immensely valuable set-up of equipment, there was one weary-looking woman of sixty monitoring a single input trace on the temporal band.

He spoke with a kind of controlled fury. "What the hell is going on?"

The woman looked up and half spat at him. "So they finally remembered us! Who are you?"

Burma ignored that, and pursued, "This is supposed to be a fully operating anchor team! Where is everyone? What do you think you're doing?"

Stung, the woman retorted, "Ask Artesha! They put out a call yesterday for the top men in alien psychology to investigate this Enemy they captured, and every blasted member of this team was sent for except me!"

Burma forced himself to calm down, but he was still fumbling. Mistakes like this were inevitable when you were trying to administer the fighting efforts of a race of some quintillion-odd individuals through a central agency. "All right," he said, and told her who he was. "I'll have this settled in quick time. Artesha!" he added, opening the communicator on the wall.

"I'm sorry," said Artesha when he had explained the situation. "I was getting around to that—I wanted to break up the team and disperse it because the odds are slightly in favor of us getting results with the Enemy before we get them with the Being. After all, we have more knowledge of their psychology—"

"We did have," corrected Burma. "Artesha, you aren't computing with the fact that Wymarin stimulated the Being—are you? I have only the faintest idea how he managed it, but I know he was on to a brand new line. Listen!

"We've found only one way of directly affecting the Being before—that's by an atomic explosion. It doesn't like high energy levels. Maybe they affect it like a hot fire does a man. Anyway, we can't find traces of its presence much

closer than Mercury to the sun, and every time there's a really big explosion it writhes.

"But Wymarin had an idea. He's been pushing the possibility of the thing being intelligent in a way comprehensible to us. Mostly, we've been assuming it's the four-dimensional equivalent of an amoeba, because it exhibits the same kind of actions and is equally shapeless so far as we can determine.

"He tried to *communicate* with it. He wanted to see if we could explain to it what it was doing to us, so that it would help us to move it out of this area of space. And if it was the result of his communicating with it that caused that last outsize temporal surge—the one that caught me—"

"I see," said Artesha. She sounded as nearly excited as she could get. "I can't return all your experts, but there must be some who've completed their contribution to the study of the Enemy. Why did you pick that team, anyway?"

"Because there were experts in psychology here as well as in continuum mathematics," Burma answered. "The same reason you took them for the study of the Enemy."

"I'll have your people with you in quick time," Artesha said, and signed off.

Burma turned from the communicator to find the woman eying him. "I'm sorry," she said reluctantly. "I didn't know who you were. I'm Lalitha Benoni."

Burma acknowledged the introduction. "Had your team been attempting anything on the lines Wymarin tried?" he demanded.

"No. We were thinking in terms of the Being reacting to stimuli. Mainly, we were trying to set up a pattern which fitted the way it starts away from atomic explosions and suchlike, in the hope of discovering a stimulus that would drive it away. Owing to the Being's four-dimensional nature, we assumed the prod would need to be pretty complex."

"I wish co-ordination wasn't so difficult!" said Burma feelingly. "We've got nine thousand-odd anchor teams all over the Solar System, and we haven't yet solved the problem of making the information obtained by one available to all

immediately. When did you last check your digest computer?"

"Yesterday. I haven't had a red-tabbed signal in since, though." Lalitha spoke defensively.

"One of the mathematicians on another team worked out the end results of driving the Being away." Burma was surveying the equipment as he spoke; it seemed in good order. "It would literally wreck the Solar System. The sun would nova; the planets would leave their orbits—everything. But of course it wouldn't be red-tabbed, since this was probably the only team which really needed the information. No, it's as well the pattern has been broken. We'll be able to get down to our own problem with fresh minds."

He was referring to the fact that after one of the anchor teams—or indeed any of the groups of super-specialists who were the brain of the race working as a whole—had functioned smoothly together for some time, there grew up among them a mutual understanding which approached telepathy, which was wonderful so long as they remained on the same task, but which made it appallingly difficult to change their line of research.

"Put the digest computer on to sifting the data of the last year for items regarding communication with the Being," Burma added. Nodding, Lalitha did so. Burma began to hum to himself as he continued studying the machinery. It was good; the former director of this team had been an imaginative man.

"What a hell of a waste!" he burst out suddenly. Lalitha made an inquiring noise, and he went on, "Sorry. Your team has done some fine work. I was just thinking it was a shame that driving the Being away should turn out to be too big a risk after all."

Lalitha nodded, and the digest computer burped its little 'ready' signal. "Already?" said Burma, alarmed. "I expected there wouldn't be much on the subject, but if the computer got through the lot so quickly there can be hardly anything."

There was hardly anything—four completed preliminary

studies, two of which he had helped Wymarin to program for their own team's computers, and an unfinished simultaneous broadcast which had been recorded while Wymarin was actually carrying out his experiment.

"Oh, good man!" said Burma, seizing it. "This is like finding treasure!"

The record was notated in the chicken-scratch markings of telemetered instrument readings, but he could follow it without trouble. At the end, he frowned. "Tantalizing!" he exclaimed. "Just when it starts to show a response, the temporal surge built up and its energies jammed the broadcast! Lalitha, put a computer on to analyzing the trend of these recordings, will you? I can't see a predictable pattern, but it's worth trying, I suppose. Wymarin's such a brilliant intuitive reasoner, though, I suspect he would just have been relying on his subconscious to lead him on until he found something that worked."

There was a cough at the door and a man entered. He looked around before coming over. "Gevolan," he introduced himself. "Artesha told me you were starting something big here?" The sentence ended in the faintest of inquiries.

"As soon as possible. How's the study of the Enemy?"

Gevolan shrugged. "We can't hypnotize it, so now it's up to the chemists to synthesize something we can use to inject our commands into it." He wiped his face. "It's made me wonder what would happen to any poor human being who fell into Enemy clutches—"

"None have," said Burma shortly. "All right, Gevolan. I'll give you the set-up. After that, it's up to you. I hope that search party of Magwareet's does find Wymarin—otherwise we'll be like a bunch of blind men trying to find a dark star in the Coal Sack!"

Gevolan stared, and then laughed. "I come from around there," he said. "I was evacuated from Arauk. We never used that simile, because it's a matter of record that a blind man *did* once find a dark star in the Coal Sack."

"I hope we have that kind of luck," said Burma flatly.

Chapter XI

MAGWAREET wished achingly for a second that he had all Artesha's resources at his command. This was too big a problem for any one man. . . .

But he was responsible. He studied the time map for a long time before coming to his decision.

"Arafan!" he shouted, and the pilot's voice came back through the communicator. "Get us to Earth as quickly as possible!"

"At once," confirmed Arafan. Magwareet turned to look at a map of the land masses of Earth stuck on one wall, lettered in drastically abbreviated symbols. With one backward glance to make certain of the spot, he stabbed at it with his right forefinger. "Red! Whereabouts is that in your time?"

Red swallowed; the tension of their venture close to the Enemy raider was still tight in his stomach. "It looks—" he began, and had to start again. "It looks like the middle of the Soviet Union!"

Magwareet nodded. "The Croceraunian Empire grew up from the wreckage of what you knew as China and Mongolia. We know more about them than we do about their predecessors, but there has always been something puzzling about their fantastically rapid expansion." He frowned. "They had a sort of bastard science which they treated as magic, but it gave them results. . . . I've read their scriptures—they speak of miracles and being able to see into the future."

Arafan's voice broke in on them. "We're at the edge of atmosphere," reported the pilot.

"Trace still there?" Magwareet said, and the technician beside the time map confirmed it. "Coming up!" he shouted, and made for the control cabin.

The sight from the viewport was awe-inspiring. They could see the vast spread of the Eurasian land-mass dotted with clouds like smears of dirty white paint. The terminator between night and day was creeping towards the area for which they were making.

"Are we screened?" Magwareet said absently, and Arafan nodded. "Okay, take her down. It shouldn't be hard to spot what we're looking for—if I know anything about those Croceraunians, they couldn't be in one place for ten minutes without starting a fight."

It was eerie to swoop across the country whose reputation for secrecy and unapproachability had supplanted that of Tibet, looking at what might be the greatest secrets of all, unnoticed and uninterrupted.

"There!" said Magwareet at last, and pointed. A column of lorries loaded with armed men was tearing along a poor road at the limit of safety. "Another few miles and—yes, that's it!"

Circling under Arafan's deft touch, the ship surveyed the whole scene of battle. It was clear even to Red and Chantal, who knew nothing of military strategy: the ring of oddly-clad barbarians, many of them sheltering behind dead horses like Indians in a Western film, was standing off an army. Every now and again there was a puff of fire which did something indistinguishable but fatal to the Russian infantry.

"But there are so few of them!" said Chantal. "Can they really do much damage?"

Magwareet answered wryly, "They're carrying probably the finest portable weapons ever developed—sonic guns, atomic grenades, and what they call the Breath of Terror—a sort of universal catalyst which accelerates natural oxidation. Look, there goes one of the tanks."

There was only a drift of mist, but the wind brought it up to the side of the tank, and in a moment it had flared bril-

liantly into dust. A man carrying a clumsy pack got up and ran twenty yards before dropping behind a rise and repeating the process on another tank.

Arafan swore; they had noticed nothing, but he explained, "Being screened has its disadvantages! An aircraft nearly collided with us, going like lightning!"

"What are you going to do about this?" Chantal demanded practically, and Magwareet gave her a slight sad smile. "I have a job for you and Red. I'm sorry to say it, but you're—comparatively—expendable. We carry no weapons, and it would be useless to signal one of the ships that came after us to destroy the Enemy raider—their armament is just too powerful. It would take half the countryside with it.

"I'm going to ask you to go out there—screened, so that you're invisible—pick out the Croceraunians, and beat them over the head. It will be dangerous, because I don't think the screens will protect you against either the Breath of Terror or a high-velocity bullet. I must be candid—it's either you, or an indispensable technician."

Red looked at Chantal. "Me, I'll go willingly," he said. With the new-found clarity in his mind, he could tell that his urge sprang from the fact that now he was a whole man he wanted to match himself against other men—violently if need be.

Chantal looked doubtful. "Do you think I'd be any good?" she said. Magwareet laughed.

"Take these," he said, unscrewing two heavy insulated handles from a master control panel; each was about two feet long, very light and strong, with the upper end terminating in a hard, resilient grip three inches around. "And take these too." He held out pairs of goggles made of smoky gray plastic.

"With these you'll be able to see each other and the ship. *No one else can.* But they will hear you if you talk, or notice footprints in soft ground.

"We'll bring the ship down to about ten feet and hover above you. Knock out your men and leave them—we'll pick

them up, put them in storage and figure out what to do with them later."

Red dropped the ten feet to the ground, rejoicing in the equal strength of his two legs. He turned and broke Chantal's fall for her, and found himself suddenly staring at her with open eyes for the first time.

Like himself, she was now wearing the ubiquitous coverall which was the human race's standard costume of the time. But her face was flushed with excitement and nervousness, and her brown hair was ruffled round her pretty head. Her right hand was clasped round the improvised club Magwareet had given her, and there was something purposeful in her entire appearance.

He realized that he had been feeling, without noticing, the same air in the women he had met since his fantastic adventure took him with Burma over three thousand years of time—something utterly different from the women he had known in his own day. This was a woman who was a partner, an equal, knowing her own capabilities and willing to make the most of them.

He had barely time to absorb the knowledge when the sharp snap of a rifle reminded him that they were in the middle of a battle.

"Down!" he said under his breath, and they dropped side by side into the slight dip which was the reason for their being put down here. He looked up first, seeing their ship gigantic over them, and then searched the ground for a sign of the Croceraunians.

They did not have to look far. Moving with the skill of a practised warrior, one of the barbarians dodged from a piece of cover which Red thought could not have concealed a mouse, and fell over them in an attempt to gain fresh protection.

The man's mouth was already opening in a scream of fear at finding invisible demons on the ground when Red, having no time to club the man, jabbed him in the midriff and took

the breath out of him before bruising his knuckles under his jaw.

"Onel!" he said with deep satisfaction, and they moved out across the ground.

Whispered directions from the door of the ship were essential to their success, for the Croceraunians had taken cover from aerial observation as well as surface spotters. They moved cautiously round the perimeter of the defenses, knocking men out one by one.

Fortunately, the Russian attackers, slow to realize that the barbarians were in fact gone, not lying quiet in ambush, did not close in at once. Scientifically, enjoying the effort of pitting themselves against the Croceraunians whose military expertness would more than have matched the advantage conferred by invisibility if they had caught on, Red and Chantal' carried on.

But it was getting dusk when there was nothing left except the little group of three at the very center of the ring who would be the captain of the war party and his second and third in command.

"Red!" Magwareet whispered urgently. "We've spotted big aircraft heading this way! You'll have to clean up the rest quickly—I suspect they're going to bomb."

Chantal drew in a quick breath.

"Okay," nodded Red. He felt very tired, but oddly exhilarated. "I reckon we can run most of the way. Look, Chantal—see that knob of ground? Keep behind it, and drop when you get there."

On the last word he started forward, keeping low. The ship sidled tidily after them.

It was getting dark, but the three remaining Croceraunians were keeping a stern lookout. The noise of Red's awkward arrival brought one of them sharply to his feet, and after he had looked round and seen nothing, he ordered one of his companions to scout the sound.

Nothing could have been more convenient. Red's club rose

and fell on the back of the man's neck the moment he was hidden from the others.

And a howl filled the air. A jet aircraft, diving!

There was the sound of rapid explosions, and the ship over them staggered, exactly like a man who has had a blow. Red's goggles had slipped a little, and he was amazed to look up and find that he could see the retreating plane quite clearly *through* the ship without them. The magnitude of the technical achievement shook him.

Another plane dived, and another, and the two surviving Croceraunians raised small weapons and fired on it—with no effect, of course, for they were hitting the screens of the hovering ship. Red found a stone and threw it to one side, distracting their attention; with a gesture to Chantal, he rose and ran down the slope.

But tiredness slowed them both, and at the sound of their feet the barbarians swung around. It was very nearly dark now, and they obviously felt prepared to take on opponents they couldn't see. He thought for a horrible instant that Chantal had been hit, but she had only stumbled, and then he was on his own man in a tangle of arms and legs.

The man was strong, and an able fighter, but the moment he realized he could not see his antagonist he faltered long enough to let Red club him.

Rising, Red looked round for Chantal. She had been less lucky; her man, who had an air of authority, had set his jaw grimly and was throwing punches by guesswork—she had knocked his weapon flying with her club. One of them connected just as a further blast of cannon shells hammered on the ship above, and Chantal staggered back. At the same moment a Russian sniper found that the Croceraunian, who was of course not screened, was visible to him, and a bullet whined off a rock into the air.

Still backing, Chantal's foot found the outstretched leg of a man who had been lying on the ground since before the struggle started. She fell to the earth.

The Croceraunian's next blow found only air; off balance,

he too lost his footing, and Red was on top of him. In a moment, he was ready to be hauled aboard the ship with the rest of his war party, leaving only corpses marked with Russian bullets behind. An explanation would be found for them—somehow.

Red picked up one of the clumsy packs holding the Breath of Terror—it would not do to let *that* fall into twentieth century hands!—and prepared to start back into the ship. He looked round for Chantal, and saw her kneeling by the man she had fallen over.

“Are you all right?” he demanded anxiously, and she nodded.

“Red, I thought this man was dead. He’s breathing! And look—he’s no more than a boy! He’s pretty badly hurt, but I think we can fix him up. Help me get him aboard.”

As they had moved Burma, they lifted him together. The memory of that first meeting made him wonder if it could really have been so recently, as he counted time. He felt as if he had been a different person then, and that it was ages ago.

Finally they scrambled through the airlock into the ship, and Magwareet was smiling at them.

“That was great work, and quicker than I expected,” he said warmly. “Do you know it’s only been two and a half hours?”

“I feel tired enough to have been working for a week,” said Red, wiping his forehead.

“I’ll have that put right,” said Magwareet. “We’re already moving away from that place, you know,” he added as an afterthought. “Now we’ve straightened out that mess, we can get on with our real job. Through there you’ll find a wash-place. Clean up, and when you’re through come to the control cabin—I’ll fix your tiredness for you.”

He went out, and Red and Chantal followed his directions into the washroom. It was small, but there were two basins and two of the quick, efficient hot-air dryers that had supplanted towels—there was always air available, but cloth was precious.

The water—re-cycled, absolutely pure, and just the right temperature—soaked the weariness out of their pores. Turning away after drying his face and hands, Red found himself looking straight at Chantal.

"You're—you're quite a person, aren't you?" he said awkwardly. "You seemed to take better to that job than I did, for a start."

"I suppose my job prepares me for anything," she answered with a faint smile. "And I had done almost the same sort of thing before—I was in the French Resistance when I was twelve! But you did better than I did, really."

There was a pause. Red went on, "I'm surprised I believe in what's happening, you know. Thrown into a completely strange world—"

The words touched something deep in Chantal's mind. Her face twitched, and she was suddenly clinging to him, seeking support and comfort. "It's terrifying!" she whispered. "Red, I'm so glad you're here too—on my own, I'd go mad!"

He stroked her hair as she pressed her face against his shoulder. "I know what you mean," he said with deep sincerity. "And I'm glad not only because I've got someone else from my own world for company—but because the someone is someone like you."

She raised her head and looked at him, and at that it seemed quite natural for him to kiss her.

"Do you know something?" he said tenderly when they drew apart again. "I've always been afraid to do even that! I was so scared that a woman might pity me and pretend not to I didn't dare do that!"

"They've given you a lot, haven't they—Magwareet and Burma and their people?"

"So much," said Red steadily, "that I'll do anything and everything I can to recompense them."

Chapter XII

ANCHOR TEAM, Burma speaking, emergency: Any team engaged in investigation of possible communication with the Being, any team having data on patterns of responses of the Being, any team having any relevant information notify at once!

Defense fleet (co-ordinates 902634111)—speaking: Suggest investigation of possibility that Enemy found in city from 129 Lyrae and captured entered Solar System owing to writhing of Being. Artesha's opinion, please.

Center, Artesha speaking: We cannot rule out the possibility that the Being itself is being used as a weapon by the Enemy—nor, in fact, that it is an artificially created weapon. Probability low, but existent.

"So that definitely removes all signs of temporal displacement from this period?" Magwareet said disappointedly. The technicians nodded. "All right, where are the secondary peaks of this surge?"

"We've come so far in time that our instruments are too fogged with surplus energy," the girl with dark hair standing by the time map told him. "There's a chance we could pick up a single individual if we matched times with the secondary peak which came up about three hundred years ago. We can't do it directly from here. The only other important peak of this surge is the one which broke up the anchor team we were chasing—remember? I don't think Wymarin would have stood a chance if he'd been caught in that."

"All right," said Magwareet firmly. "Let's go see. And if we can't pick him out, then we'll just have to land and build ourselves new equipment out of matter that isn't overloaded with temporal interference!"

"Meantime," said the girl calmly, "how about this cargo of barbarians we've just acquired?"

"Could I do anything about them?" asked Chantal, entering with Red just in time to catch the remark. "I was a nurse back where—back when I came from. Maybe I could help fix them up?"

"Fine," agreed Magwareet, after a slight hesitation. "Tesper! Give Chantal a brief run-down on the medical equipment aboard."

"Surely," nodded a small man with his hands full of scribbled notes. "In just a moment."

Arafan's voice came down to them from the communicator. "We're just going into the surge again, trying for the secondary peak! I'll call you as soon as we emerge."

"Thank you," acknowledged Magwareet. "Now I'll see to you, Red and Chantal—might as well grab the chance of a meal while we're going through the surge, at that."

Fed, and remarkably refreshed after a quick course of the hypnotic and anti-fatigant treatment which had added the sleeping time to the thinking time of the human race, Chantal accompanied Tesper through the ship to the place where forty Croceraunian barbarians lay almost literally heaped up. The ship was large, but the crew's quarters were cramped, and Tesper insisted that the medical equipment was hopelessly inadequate. To Chantal, it was a dream.

It took her barely ten minutes to learn the use of the regenerant and healing devices, how to administer the universal antibiotics they had met before, and how to dress wounds with the soothing plastoskin that did the job of a bandage and a skin graft in one. She would dearly have liked to learn *how* the devices worked, but that was for later.

Oddly, her 'barbarian' methods—though they startled Tesper—came in extremely useful. The equipment was not in fact up to dealing with forty injured men, some badly hurt, but there was plenty of clean water—limited only by the speed with which it could be re-cycled and purified—and

with splints and clean rags supplementing the more modern techniques, she went steadily ahead.

The Croceraunians were all finely muscled young men in their thirties, she guessed, except the captain, who was older, and the young man whose legs she had fallen over at the very end of their cleaning-up operation. He—as she had remarked—was no more than a boy, perhaps eighteen.

She lingered longest over him, wondering who he was. His hands and arms were heavily tattooed with complex designs, and she puzzled over their possible meaning. At length, however, giving a final glance around to see all her charges were as comfortable as possible, she returned to the main technical room.

They had emerged from the temporal surge while she was below, and she discovered Magwareet consulting worriedly with his assistants.

“What is it?” she inquired, and Red, who was standing beside Magwareet, broke away and came over to her.

“We’ve reached the limit our equipment can stand,” he said. “Even if Wymarin is down there, we can’t detect him because the screens are fogged. There’s only one thing for it—we’ve got to figure out a way of building new machinery. How?” he added, turning to Magwareet.

The co-ordinator frowned. “You told me a moment or two back you were no expert in history. The fact remains, you certainly know more about this period than I do, and I can’t compute with data I don’t possess. What’s our best chance of making use of such scientific knowledge as there is?”

Red whistled. “Chemistry was the only science that had begun about this time! This is the mid-seventeenth century, isn’t it?” The idea brought a chill of awe. “Even that was strictly trial-and-error. They’re refining metals—some metals—down there. Is that any help?”

“A bit. I had the computers run off the specifications for a thoroughly jury-rigged detector that will serve our purpose. All right, we’ll have to try it. Where do you suggest? England was fairly advanced, I believe. Is—”

"England's out. I speak twentieth-century American, and they'd suspect something funny. No, it'd better be somewhere where I can pass as a foreigner and still get away with speaking only English. And we'll have to go very carefully—I don't know to how great an extent a chemist or alchemist is regarded as a witch in these days. On the whole, I'd make a guess and say that a fair-sized town in Holland would be a reasonable bet."

"Settled," said Magwareet. "Arafan!" He gave directions to the pilot.

"Clothing—money—an interpreter—ouf, this will be a long job!" Red said ruefully. "Still, I suppose it's quicker than starting from scratch."

Chantal came up to him as he watched the European coast swell in the viewports. "Red—you'll be careful, won't you?"

"Of course," he said sincerely, and clasped her hand.

But it was with trepidation that she watched him and Magwareet, carefully screened, drop from the ship and wave good-bye before setting out along a poor-surfaced road towards the flourishing township of The Hague.

"Now we have nothing to do but wait," said Tesper. "I have the oddest feeling, you know, that if only our screens were clear we'd have no trouble. I'm certain Wymarin is actually here! I can't see there's anywhere else for him to be."

"Except several trillion cubic miles of empty space," put in the dark-haired girl by the time map, and Tesper was forced to nod agreement. But he shuddered as he did so.

"How are the barbarians?" he asked, turning to Chantal.

"As well as can be expected." She pushed out the cliché with no apologies. "There's one of them who interests me, though."

"They're all interesting," Tesper answered dryly. "The Croceraunian Empire is one of the most enigmatic phenomena of history! But which, in particular?"

"The very young one. He has tattoo marks all over—"

Tesper looked startled. "Can you describe them?" he said urgently, and Chantal blinked.

"Well, it'd be easier if you came down and looked," she began, but Tesper was already on his way.

She caught up with him as he was looking round and attempting to spot the tattooed boy. "Over there," she indicated, and Tesper hurried across the room. After a quick survey, he breathed a delighted sigh.

"What fantastic luck! Chantal, there's always been one outstanding puzzle about the Croceraunians—what their 'magic' was besides bastard atomic science. Right here we have a chance to find out. This boy was the war party's magician!"

Chantal digested that in silence for a moment. Tesper went on enthusiastically, "Back before the war I'd have given my arm for a chance like this. Now I can only make the most of it. I was a social historian, you see, before I was put on to the temporal survey side. Can you wake the boy up?"

Chantal nodded, and reached for a percutaneous syringe charged with a stimulant. Meantime, Tesper fetched a chair and sat down comfortably alongside the boy's bunk.

After a pause the eyelids fluttered, and then he looked straight into Tesper's face. There was no sign of fear or astonishment in his reaction, and he asked a question.

There was something very attractive about his complete self-possession, and Chantal, though she could not understand what he said, felt herself warm to him at once. Tesper glanced up.

"This is remarkable! He wants to know if he's in a metal bird—he must mean an aircraft! How could he tell?" Stumblingly, he phrased a sentence in the strange tongue, and the boy answered.

"His name's Vyko, and he's the magician of the war party, as I guessed. It's his first time out. He says he told the captain that a powerful magic had sent them elsewhere in time—to the Old Days. *But how can he tell?*"

Fascinated, Chantal watched silently, occasionally ventur-

ing to interrupt and ask what was being said. She could gather only that Vyko remembered being shot, and accepted their healing him as a matter of course. But he had assumed they were powerful magicians themselves, and his terms for understanding the universe were so alien that even Tesper, who had studied the history of his time, had trouble with them.

And then he said something which made Tesper sit up and exclaim. "What is it?" demanded Chantal.

"He's talking about looking into time! He claims he can see the future. This is wonderful. . . . Chantal, I don't know if anyone's told you, but we of my time have a wider perception of now than your people had. I can shift my attention *within* a single instant of now—backwards and forwards. We often tried to find where that came from. Obviously, it was a mutation from the atomic war. That accounts for the fantastic rise of the Croceraunian Empire! With extra-temporal perceptors, perhaps specially bred, they could overcome any opposition."

This was too much for Chantal. She seized on the one important fact, surprised to find herself so vehement about it. "Ask him if Red and Magwareet will get back safely."

A brief exchange: then, "He can't tell. He doesn't know who they are, or anything about this time he's in. But he can tell that nothing is going to happen to harm him in the near future—that's why he's so calm and sure of himself."

"Chantal, this means that the human race can have four-dimensional awareness, and if it wasn't for the risk of monkeying with history and changing it, we'd have the perfect key to communication with the Being right in the palms of our hands."

Chapter XIII

MAGWAREET carried his unaccustomed costume off with an air of distinction, but Red found it uncomfortable and awkward. He fidgeted under the stern gaze of the landlord.

"So yuh meester Komm from Muscovy?" the fat man said. "An' yussef?"

"I've spent a long time there," said Red carefully. The landlord's knowledge of English was scanty enough, and his seventeenth-century accent—though unexpectedly close to some dialects of twentieth-century American—added to the problem. "My master is a student of the philosophical art which men call alchemy."

"Dis gold—ist alchemic?" The landlord rapped one of the thalers they had given him in payment for their accommodation. Red shook his head.

"Alchemical gold," he improvised, "is mystical and not to be used in trade."

The landlord looked relieved, but Red noticed that he put their payment in a separate bag from the rest of the money in his coffer. Turning back to them, he said, "An' yuh vant wat?"

"My master wishes to meet and speak of alchemic matters with the learned men of this city."

"Den go see Meester Porelius. Iss da assay-meester of da kinglich court. Ee'll zendt my apprentist to guide."

He went out, and Red looked at Magwareet. "Are you getting what he says?" he asked.

Magwareet nodded. "What was the office of this man he wants to send us to, though?"

"Assay-master—if I heard him right. That means he's an inspector of currency, and probably an expert in the chemistry of metals. I think we've struck lucky first time."

He glanced down at himself ruefully. "I'm supposed to be used to this kind of costume, but you, who are supposed to come from a barbarian country, look much more at home in them."

There was a knock at the door, and a small boy put his head in. "This will be our guide," Red commented—they were talking Speech, chancing anyone meeting them who knew what Russian actually sounded like. "Shall we go right away?"

"The less time we waste the better," said Magwareet, with a grave expression befitting an adept in the pyrotechnian art. "Lead the way, little one!"

They followed the boy out into the narrow crowded streets which they had already traversed on their way into the town. They had managed to obtain samples of clothing and money while invisible, and having returned to the ship had duplicated them. Properly equipped, they had set out. But two precious days had gone already, and they were only beginning their task.

Passing men laden with goods, men selling fresh water from barrels, itinerant vendors of needles, distinguished citizens with attendants, rough artisans, slatternly women, they were predominately conscious of one thing—a stink which was almost nauseating. Mafwareet suffered even worse than Red. The reason was perfectly plain, of course—from upper story windows maidservants were casually tossing night slops into the streets, horses padded through the muddy pools leaving the inevitable signs of their passage, and the inhabitants themselves were blithely and unselfconsciously unaware of the values of public sanitation. The most resplendently dressed people they met were scratching themselves for lice.

"This is a civilized country?" said Magwareet meaningly as they paused to let a couple of packhorses precede them down a tiny alleyway, and Red shrugged.

"I see what you mean," he agreed. "Unpromising, isn't it?"

The house before which they finally halted was plainly

that of a well-to-do citizen, but—like the majority of those in the town—owing to infirm foundations it was very slightly, but noticeably, on the skew. Their little guide, brushing his hair back with a quick gesture, stretched on tip-toe and raised the knocker.

A pretty young maidservant opened to them, and on hearing their errand, stood back smiling to let them enter. They hesitated on the threshold because of the state of their feet, but there were already muddy marks on the wood floor, and Red remembered that he had heard somewhere of a complaint by an Englishman of the Dutch custom of never wiping one's feet.

They followed the maid into a large, well-furnished room, where she invited them to sit down. Red, after some difficulty—but he was getting used to Dutch by now—discovered that Meester Porelius was out at the moment on some mission, but was due back shortly.

He relayed this to Magwareet. "He's gone to see a goldsmith called Brechtel—as far as I can gather, about some alchemical business. So it seems we're really in luck."

They had not long to wait. Meester Porelius came in in less than ten minutes, with a companion, talking at the top of his voice. Red listened carefully, but caught no more than that something was fantastic and incredible.

Within a short while Porelius himself entered and, bowing to them, invited them to state their business.

"My master," said Red, pleased to find that Porelius spoke good English, "is a learned man of Muscovy, by name Andreev, and we desire to meet and discuss matters concerning the pyrotechnian art and mystery."

Porelius expanded like a flower in the sun, and called for wine to be brought. "Then you will be delighted and amazed to learn that in this very city at the moment is the most remarkable adept in that art who ever existed!"

"Really?" said Red, glancing at Magwareet, who was preserving his dignity with difficulty.

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Porelius. "I have myself been at

the silversmith's this morning, submitting to the test of fire some alchemic gold which was transmitted by Meester Helvetius, physician to the Royal Court of Orange, using some of the Philosopher's Stone which was given to him as a token by a certain Meester Elias some few days ago."

"And the gold stood the test?"

"Most surely. More than that, I saw that it itself had some of the wonderful virtue of the Medicine used on it. For in my presence, gentlemen, I saw it transmute a full dram of silver into gold."

Porelius sat back with a self-satisfied air, and the maid poured wine and brought it to them. Red was so startled that at first he hardly noticed the girl waiting at his side.

"And this—Meester Elias who has the Stone?" he said at length. "What manner of man is he?"

"That I cannot fairly say," admitted Porelius, "for I myself have not seen him. But I have it from Meester Helvetius that he is a small man, beardless, with black hair, and that he is said to be a founder of brass who was taught the Art by an outlandish friend."

Red seized the chance with both hands. "This outlandish friend—perchance he came from Muscovy?"

"It is possible. Know you this Elias?"

"Not certainly. But a fellow adept of my master has traveled to this part of Europe before, and has recounted that he met one pupil especially apt to learn. Now that I bethink me of it, his name might full well have been Elias. If it is indeed the same, my master would much desire to have discourse with him."

Porelius chuckled, and held out his mug for more wine. "He is not alone! I too crave that, as does everyone who witnessed the transformation that took place this morning. We have already criers out to find where he lodges, but no man knows him."

Red's heart sank, but he was puzzled beyond measure to know what sort of person this mysterious Elias might be. If

he was indeed able to transmute metals, he would be an incredibly valuable contact.

There was the chance of trickery, naturally—Red had heard of the astute charlatans who duped whole groups of people with pretended transmutations—but Porelius struck him as a level-headed type, and certainly, if he was the equivalent of Master of the Mint, he could not be deceived in the testing of precious metal.

Fired by his new audience, Porelius continued to enlarge on what he had seen, and the idea in Red's mind grew to a certainty. Elias was their man.

But how to find him?

The best they could do was to extract a promise that Porelius would notify them if anyone found Elias; meantime, he promised to introduce them to such experimenters in the Art as there were at The Hague. With that, they departed.

Then there began a dreary round of meetings with half-sensible, half-bemused mystics and serious but misguided experimenters. Helvetius himself they met, and heard his story—it convinced them completely that Elias was the person they were after. No one else had even the remotest chance of being useful to them. They simply lacked the necessary scientific discipline; their work was confused and muddled with so much esoteric jargon that both sides concluded that their new acquaintances were incompetent.

And still there was no sign of Elias.

Red began to doubt that such a person existed, but Magwareet, oddly enough, was perfectly ready to accept both his ability and his actual transmutation.

"It is entirely possible to transmute metals chemically," was the upsetting remark he made when Red taxed him. "I don't see why you're so distrustful!"

"Well, then—*how*, for goodness' sake?"

"The nearest analogy is by saying it's a biological process," explained Magwareet frowning. "Certain atomic patterns have the property of reduplicating themselves under the right conditions, and it doesn't take the energy of a

cyclotron or one of those other early nuclear devices to force the reaction. But it took the combined resources of most of Center's computers to determine those conditions, and the one thing that does bother me is whether anyone would really have been silly enough to set them up by accident!"

Slightly heartened, Red pursued his search.

They had been there so long that they were almost used to the smell when, one morning, as they were setting off to meet yet another of these experimenters who might help them, they passed a small man in a dark fustian coat, who walked along the muddy road unattended and with down-cast eyes. Magwareet looked at him, looked away, and then turned back with most undignified haste.

"Wymarin!" he shouted, and the little man halted and came back with all the self-possession in the world.

"Thank goodness you showed up," he said mildly. "I thought I was going to have found nuclear physics from the bottom up in order to get home." He looked at them inquiringly. "You don't seem very surprised to see me, I must say."

Red waited long enough to make sure he had his breath back, and then spoke equally mildly. "I suppose you're Elias," he said disgustedly.

"Of course. Where's the ship? I must get back. I've got something very important to tell Artesha."

Chapter XIV

CHANTAL NOTED that Red still limped, automatically, in moments of stress as they entered the miraculous door leading to any part of Center's complex of ships. And it was a moment of stress. Their first meeting with Artesha had

been no more than one in a long series of incredible happenings, but now they knew the nature of that—ex-woman? The phrase rang suspiciously true. They felt awe.

Yet there was nothing beyond the door except that same small room, warm and softly lit. In it, Chantal fancied she could sense *presence*.

There were chairs waiting. Magwareet took one immediately and spoke up. "Artesha!"

"I'm listening," said the detached mechanical voice.

"I'll give you a brief run-down on exactly what we've done, first of all. Then Wymarin should be along. He went straight away to give the details of his last experiment to Burma. And Tesper brought up something in connection with one of the barbarians which I think is very important."

"All right. Go ahead."

It took Magwareet less than five minutes to give a complete account of their trip, and at the end of it Artesha gave a satisfied sound.

"We had a fantastic stroke of luck—finding Wymarin the way we did," ventured Red.

"I wonder," said Artesha thoughtfully. "Wymarin doesn't think so."

"What?" The three of them—Red, Chantal and Magwareet—hunched forward as if jerked on strings.

"Wymarin—I'm monitoring his report to Burma—believes that he succeeded in getting through to the Being, and although the reflex he stimulated did toss him off into time the Being did its best to control the movement and make certain he survived."

They digested that in silence for a moment. Then Magwareet heaved a huge sigh. "Is it true?" he asked.

"I'll leave that to Burma to settle for the time being. I've told him that as soon as Wymarin has given him the information required, he's to try and repeat the experiment with a little less force. I'm ordering out as many anchor teams as we can spare to help hold down the temporal surge if he stimulates one. Here comes Wymarin now."

The door slid aside and admitted not only the little dark-haired man whose alchemical achievements had amazed seventeenth-century Holland, but also Tesper. They greeted Artesha, and sat down.

"Well, Burma is going ahead," Wymarin informed them. "We can expect results in one form or another within a few hours.

"Briefly, what I did was this. I've been struggling for more than ten years now to deduce by pure logic what an intelligent creature existing in four dimensions would recognize as a significant pattern. I had a great deal of help from Kepthin's team, but the one which seems to have been successful was entirely my own idea.

"So I set up a wave-pattern which was symmetrical in four dimensions, and then modulated it in accordance with a number system derived from the co-ordinates of the world lines of the major planets. We already knew that the Being could detect radiant energy—witness the way it keeps away from the sun. I think, though, that I did it too powerfully—the shock actually harmed and pained the Being. But I am absolutely certain it recognized conscious intention behind what I did, and moreover knew that I, not the rest of my team, was responsible. So it looked after me."

He sat back, looking pleased with himself.

"There's something fundamentally wrong with your ideas," said Red suddenly, looking astonished at his own temerity. Magwareet and Wymarin glanced at him, startled.

"Excellent," said Artesha. "Go on, Red—what makes you so sure?"

"Well . . . put it this way. I know how hard it is to get across even to another human being a meaningful statement, even in terms of language. I found that back in my own time—I knew what I was trying to convey when I modeled a figure or a statuette, but a good half the time people misunderstood what I was trying to indicate." He was warming to the thesis.

"I just can't see that you could get across to a creature

whose entire existence has nothing in common with ours, anything based on—for example—number, which is a product of our idea of time-flow. One precedes two, two precedes three, and so on.”

“No, you’re wrong there,” Artesha broke in. “Wymarin’s mathematics is purely non-sequential. But I think your basic point is perfectly valid.

“Wymarin, we’re beginning to break down the psychology of the specimen of the Enemy that we caught. Our only explanation of how he managed to penetrate our defenses is that the Being is actually used by them. It may even be a weapon that they are only gradually coming to control. I want you to go down and see Kepthin and find out from him if the psychological pattern he is constructing agrees in any important features with the one you postulate for the Being. If it is—”

“If it is,” said Magwareet flatly, “we’ve got to lick the two together, or we’re licked ourselves.”

Looking thoroughly upset, Wymarin nodded and went out.

“How long do you think it’ll take him to be doing useful work again after the break-up of his team?” asked Magwareet. “And have they recovered any more of the personnel?”

“No,” said Artesha thoughtfully. “But I think he’ll readapt quickly. He’s collaborated with Kepthin before.”

“What news is there of the fighting?” was Magwareet’s next question.

“We’re still pulling back. We took an Enemy fleet clear out of the sky—fifty-five ships—when they were pushing towards Tau Ceti. But I think we’re going to have to evacuate there.”

“That’s horribly close to home,” said Magwareet slowly.

“Much *too* close. Magwareet, I’ve tried and tried, but I can’t see a way out. We could run, but there’s nowhere to run to—the Enemy controls space in all directions away from the Solar System. Every time we pull back, we have fewer resources to draw on, less space to maneuver—” Artesha, for

the first time Magwareet could recall, sounded as completely human as she had been before she so nearly died.

"There are still possibilities we haven't studied," he pointed out, trying to sound comforting. "Tesper, yours is very hopeful."

The ex-historian, who had been listening gravely to this exchange, leaned forward.

"Yes, it's this boy Vyko. You already know who he is, Artesha?"

"Staff magician to this Croceraunian war party you had to mop up. Yes, go on."

"Well, he holds the key not only to the problem of what made that Empire so phenomenally successful, but also to communication with the Being, if that's possible. Here we have someone who genuinely possesses a sort of four-dimensional consciousness. I haven't been able to get details yet, because his language—though I speak it fluently—is very poorly suited to conveying the concepts. I'm having him given an intensive course of Speech at the moment."

"You'd better be careful none of the concepts he gets conflict with his ability," said Artesha.

"That's been attended to. Anyway, if there's a single person capable of identifying at all with the Being, he is the one."

"How does his extra-temporal perception work?"

"It isn't extrapolation. That we have found out. Any reasonably good computer can be adapted to prophecy if required. We do it all the time. No, his talent is under conscious control, although it extends more to emotions than actual events. He needs to know, or at any rate be associated with, the people he makes prophecies about, but details of their proposed course of action aren't needed, and he can make forecasts completely without knowledge of the circumstances. He could, for example, forecast the probable fate of his war party when there had been no sign at all of an impending attack, though one was coming."

"How soon can we start making use of this talent?"

"He'll only have to get acquainted with Center and the general situation, that's all."

"I could figure out by pure deduction what it is necessary for him to know," Artesha remarked pensively. "But I don't see why I should waste the time when we have two people who've been through much the same sort of thing. Red, Chantal—I have a job for you. I want you to take Vyko around Center—anywhere you like—and tell him the things which you wanted to know when you arrived here. Let him get the feel of things. You won't have to give him complex scientific or mathematical knowledge—he's educated, according to his standards. Maybe a brief summary of astronomical facts will be required. Do you think you can handle that?"

"No trouble," said Red confidently. "Except that we'll have difficulty finding our way around Center."

"You won't. Time is valuable, so we designed Center in a way that lets anyone at all find their way about after about half a minute's explanation. Magwareet will show you what I mean when we're through here."

Chapter XV

TESPER INTERRUPTED diffidently. "Artesha, there's one very important point we haven't seen to. Our ship brought back forty other Croceraunians besides Vyko, you know. I want to know what effect we're having on history—and what ought we to do with them?"

"We simply haven't got enough information to say." Artesha seemed weary. "As I see it, we'll do least harm if we simply return them to the point at which the temporal surge first picked them up. But these surges have so complicated history we can't be sure."

"Have they?" said Red pointedly. "Are you certain their effect isn't already accounted for in the present?"

"Of course it is!" snapped Artesha. "But *which* present?"

"What do you mean?"

"We obviously can't tell whether the temporal surges have changed anything or not—we live through their consequences. We can't tell whether the present which would have come into existence if you had not gone back in time chasing the Enemy raider, for instance, might not have been favorable to us. In using and interfering with the results of these surges we may be sewing our own shrouds. Before your crew entered that long surge, was the actual present different from what we now remember—different from the present which your actions caused? Somewhere in a five-dimensional continuum there may be someone the equivalent of you, Red, doing something totally different at what appears to be the same moment of time! Think it over—I wish you better luck with it than I've had. Me, I get nightmares from it."

She broke off. "We must also investigate the possibility that the Enemy ship you chased into the twentieth century deliberately entered the surge in order to attack our past. Magwareet, I want you to see that attended to."

"Surely." Magwareet looked unhappy.

"All right. That'll be all for the time being."

Tesper went out straight away, but Red and Chantal waited for Magwareet, who seemed to be making up his mind to something. At length he spoke.

"Artesha, something has been bothering me. That Enemy raider which we followed into the surge. . . . You warned us about it when we shifted twenty hours back in time. Why didn't you warn us when we passed that point earlier? Did you not know about it? If not, *why not?*"

"But I did," said Artesha. "There would have been no point in warning you before you shifted—"

"Listen! We were preparing to leave. Twenty hours before, this raider had entered the Solar System. Why was it not spotted and destroyed before it had a chance to enter the

surge? Why didn't we know about it before we went back?"

"But—" Artesha hesitated. Then she spoke slowly, giving the words an air of puzzlement. "I—I remember the episode twice, Magwareet! Part of it is recorded in each of two memory banks. One time, I knew about it—that must have been the moment when we were passing that instant normally. I could do nothing about it."

"Then there's your answer to the problem of the alteration of history. We do alter it. You couldn't have it destroyed immediately because, in the far past, it had already been destroyed, three thousand years ago.

"Analyze that, and you'll have the whole solution," Magwareet stated shortly. "You're the only person who can do it, Artesha. We've interfered with history to such an extent I'm seriously worried. Did you actually order it to be left alone?"

"I—I don't know! Magwareet, this is terrible! The human race is relying on my judgment, and I'm forgetting things—"

"There is no way in which you can forget things, Artesha. Except through mechanisms in your own brain, and you have the tools to deal with those."

He stood for a moment, gazing at the featureless panels concealing Artesha, and then turned and went out.

Pausing beyond the door, Red and Chantal saw that their companion's face was ashen with strain. He gave them a wan smile. "I'm sorry," he said. "I had to warn Artesha about that—she's the only person capable of psychoanalyzing herself, and although the majority of her mind is now composed of artificial units which can't go wrong, her actual brain-patterns—the human ones—are still fallible. Oh, but this tampering with time is risky!"

He broke off, and showed them the way to get about Center's gigantic complex of individual ships. As Artesha had promised, it worked to such simple rules that only one brief summary was necessary. Then Magwareet took his leave.

As they headed towards the department where Vyko was being taught Speech, Red muttered, "What a fantastic person

Artesha must have been to go through an experience like the one she had and remain sane!"

"I suspect Burma had a lot to do with it," Chantal answered. "Imagine being her husband."

"Something's changed since we've been away," Red exclaimed after a pause. "Do you—smell—tensions in the air?"

Chantal nodded. "People are showing more signs of stress. It must be this news from Tau Ceti. Is that very close?"

"I suppose so—I don't know exactly. Here—excuse me a moment, Chantal." Red turned aside into a washroom, and she waited in the corridor outside for a few moments.

Just as Red returned, a movement at the end of the passage caught her eye, and she gave a terrified gasp. "Look!" she said faintly.

Red followed her pointing. At the far end of the corridor he managed to catch a glimpse of a man turning and going away. The only striking thing that he noticed was the other's hair; it was as red as his own.

"I don't see what you mean," he began, but Chantal cut him short. She put out a hand and touched his shoulder, as if expecting to find him insubstantial.

"Red—didn't you see? Didn't you see the likeness?"

"I couldn't see his face, but I admit his hair was like mine. Well, what about it? Is red hair so very unusual?"

"Red, you don't understand," said Chantal desperately. "That other man was limping, exactly the way you do from sheer force of habit. He wasn't just like you, Red—he *was* you!"

Chantal seemed completely unnerved by the shock, and Red put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen!" he said urgently. "There are people from dozens of planets at Center—I expect lots of them have red hair. And what's so astonishing about a limp? Maybe the guy had a sprained ankle!"

"But with the medical equipment people have now, sprained ankles just don't last."

"Well, this is the medical section we're heading for, isn't it? Maybe he just sprained it a few minutes ago and is going

to have it fixed. Come on, that sounds reasonable, doesn't it?"

Chantal sniffed. "I—I guess so," she agreed reluctantly.

"All right, then. We may very well find him in the room ahead of us. Let's go straight down and look."

Walking a trifle unsteadily, Chantal followed him the few remaining steps to their goal; he pushed open the panel and stepped inside, finding a small bare cubicle.

After a moment a plump woman in green came out to them from the room beyond. "Yes?" she said shortly.

Red explained their mission, and the woman nodded. "All right. I'm expecting to bring Vyko out of his coma in a few minutes now. If you'd just hang on, I'll call you in when I'm ready to waken him."

"Red," Chantal put in. "Red, ask Artesha if anyone like you is going around Center."

He turned to her in astonishment. "Chantal, for goodness' sake! We can't bother her with a figment of your imagination!"

"All right," said Chantal composedly, "I'll tell her. Just a moment!" she called after the plump woman. "Is there any way I can get in touch with Artesha from here?"

The woman stopped dead in the doorway and stared at her. "Er—er, yes, there is. One moment, please." She stepped very briefly out of sight.

When she reappeared, there was a man with her who towered over her, fully six foot six tall; his face was set in a menacing expression, and—most alarming of all—there was something in the woman's hand that they didn't recognize, but which looked purposeful and which she kept very steadily aligned on them.

"Get behind them, Duarak," she said softly. The man moved with the speed of a pouncing lion, and Red and Chantal found him with his hamlike hands poised above their shoulders. "All right, you two. Explain yourselves. I should tell you this gun I'm holding will kill you before you can make a move, and it won't hurt Duarak either!"

"Are you crazy?" said Red in utter disbelief.

"Not at all," the woman told him grimly. "The communicator system here is perfectly ordinary—standard pattern. Artesha is always available from anywhere in Center. I want to know why you asked that question!"

Red felt Chantal relax with a shuddering sigh. He himself couldn't help smiling. "We don't know our way around Center yet," he explained. "The same thing happened to us as happened to this man Vyko you have here. We're both from the twentieth century."

"Have you heard anything about this, Duarak?"

"Not a thing," the brawny man replied.

"All right. We'll have to check, then. Contact Artesha, will you?"

Without taking his eyes off them, Duarak reached for the wall behind and felt for a pattern on the studs below a communicator panel which they had not noticed.

"I apologize in advance if I've misjudged you," the woman in green said unsmilingly. "But since we discovered that the Enemy are oxygen-breathers, we daren't take a chance."

"What is it?" Artesha's familiar voice filled the air.

The woman summed up the situation, and Red and Chantal both felt glad when Artesha made a short and irritated answer. The woman lowered the gun.

"Sorry," she said without expression.

"Artesha!" called Chantal suddenly, as if on making up her mind. "Chantal here. I want to tell you something."

"Chantal!" said Red in annoyance.

"Let her go ahead," Artesha rebuked him. "Yes?"

"While Red and I were coming towards the section where we are now, I'm absolutely certain I saw someone at the end of the passage who looked exactly like him. Exactly—even down to his limp!"

There was a brief pause. "Well, that doesn't surprise me—there are several million people in Center. But what you say about the limp is interesting. All right, I'll work through my memory banks and check up for you. That all?"

"Yes," Chantal confirmed, and when the communicator went dead, looked triumphantly at Red.

"You see? She didn't think it was ridiculous, did she?"

Red muttered something inaudible. "We have a job to do," he said pointedly to the woman in green, and she nodded.

"All right, come along."

Such complete economy had been observed in the use of the space available within the ships of Center that even the theater, where they now found themselves, was barely big enough for all four of them to stand around the couch on which Vyko lay. The tattoo marks on his arms and chest stood out vividly under daylight lamps.

The woman in green went to a cabinet whose shelves were full of shiny sterile equipment; selecting a syringe, she administered a quick shot of some straw-yellow fluid. Waiting for it to take effect, Red noticed the hypnotic equipment which had been used to teach Vyko Speech folded tidily away from the end of his couch.

The magician yawned and rubbed his eyes, exactly as if emerging from an ordinary night's sleep. After a moment, he looked up at them, blinking.

"I—I feel different," he said, puzzled.

"Are you all right?" Red inquired, and the boy nodded.

"Yes, I feel very well. And I—I seem to understand things better." Vyko frowned. "I know where I am, and I know that you've taught me your language by magic. Are you—" He checked himself, raised his body into a sitting position, and made a quick pass with both hands.

"Excuse us," put in the woman in green. "Can you handle everything from here on? Duarak and I are wanted elsewhere."

"Yes, surely," agreed Red absently. "Vyko, I'm afraid we aren't magicians as you mean it. What you call magic, we call science, and it's rather different."

"I have been taught that word, and what it means." Vyko

swung his feet to the floor. "And I can't tell you how wonderful it is. I expect you know all about me, don't you?"

"Well, not very much," Red told him.

"I was what we call a magician, you know, and I was taught all that the priests thought about the world, but I sometimes used to wonder if in the Old Days people had known better. Now I have the chance I've always wanted."

"What exactly did a magician do, among your people?" Red wanted to know.

"Oh, he studied the old books, and serviced small arms, and made the supplies of the Breath of Terror—I can do all those things," he added with pride. "But the most important thing about a magician was that he could look into the future. Priests could do everything else but that."

"And how does this talent work?"

"It's just something you know how to do. You can't explain it. Many times my people tried to teach more people to do it, and failed. It's something you're born with, I imagine."

Comparing Vyko's enthusiastic acceptance of what had happened to him with his own overt hostility, Red felt a pang of shame. This was the right spirit—one of adventurousness.

"Well, we're going to show you all around Center—that's this place where you are now," Red stated. "The same thing happened to us as happened to you. We're from a time in what to you were the Old Days, before the atomic war which destroyed our countries. But the people of this time know far, far more than we ever did."

"How much actually have you been told about where you are, and what everyone is doing?" Chantal inquired.

Vyko seemed to pay attention to her for the first time. He ran his eyes curiously up and down her, noting her obviously feminine body under her coverall. "Are you not a woman?" he said after some moments' hesitation.

Chantal smiled broadly. "Of course," she answered.

"And you also know about—science?"

"A little."

Vyko stood up, shaking his head in a puzzled gesture.

"This is indeed a strange world I have come to. You see, among my people women can be neither priests nor magicians—they are never able to see into the future. Women's duties are domestic, like tanning hides and preparing food and liquor, and bearing children. Is that not so now?"

"Women have always borne children," Chantal replied, managing to keep her face quite straight this time. "But now machines do so many tasks men and women alike can know about science, and think of the same things."

"I see that it would be so," nodded Vyko. "And are these some of the machines?" He indicated the banked medical equipment. "Indeed it is very wonderful!"

"You forgot to answer my question," Chantal pointed out.

"Of course. Well, I know that we are inside a metal boat—that flies above the air. You call it a spaceship. But I do not understand how there is so much *room!*"

Red glanced wryly at Chantal. "Artesha said a lesson in the basics of astronomy might be necessary. Where can we go to show him space, and explain about the war?"

They took him to the master control center from which the plans hatched in Artesha's incredibly complex mind were translated into terms of concrete action. This Vyko understood; once he had come to see what the battleground was—the vast empty reaches of space—he followed quite clearly the strategy of a struggle in four dimensions.

"How does he get a grasp of it so rapidly?" demanded the soft-spoken elderly officer who was their guide around the control center.

"He has rudimentary four-dimensional awareness," explained Red. "We're hoping he can help us to communicate with the Being."

"Darned sight more useful if he could tell us what the Enemy was likely to do round Tau Ceti," said the officer unhappily. "Can he?"

"Maybe he'll be able to when he's been shown all round the setup. Excuse us, we'll have to move on."

And they did so—throughout Center's manifold departments. They saved until last the most overwhelming experience of all, remembering how it had affected them—looking out into deep space at the ball of the Earth.

They had been noticing for some time when they finally entered the ship orbiting closest to the planet that Vyko kept casting curious glances at Red. They hoped, though they felt unready to risk asking, that he was getting to be able to forecast things about them. Holding their breath, they waited as the panels rolled back and displayed the round, brilliantly green sphere that was their birthplace.

But Vyko took it without a qualm. He merely studied it for a few minutes in absolute silence. Then at last he gave a sigh.

"How wonderful to be able to *see* the truth, not guess at it," he said simply.

Red drew a deep breath. "Are you beginning to be able to see into our future, now?" he asked.

"It's very peculiar," was Vyko's slow reply. "Yes, I am, but—Red, I can sense something strange about you."

"What?"

"It's like when you cross your eyes. You see two things which are the same but from a slightly different angle. I find that when I look into your future—only the two things I see are not just the same things from different points. They are separate."

They thought that amazing remark over in silence. Before any of them had a chance to speak again, the wall communicator which was in this compartment of Center as in every other came to life. It was Artesha who spoke from it.

"I was listening to that," she said. "Red, will you take Vyko down to the department where Kepthin is studying the Enemy? I want to know if he can make prophecies about another species."

"Right away," agreed Red, and shut out the view of space again.

The fussy little alien biologist met them in person on their

arrival, beaming all over his face. "We're making fabulous progress," he told them brightly. "Look!"

He waved down at the big hall below the gallery where they were standing. Men and women, with every appearance of extreme concentration, were watching the five-limbed alien creature move in a slow rhythmic kind of dance.

"I don't see—" began Red.

"We're controlling it," Kepthin told him. "Its movements now are the direct result of our orders to it. It took us a lot of trouble, but we managed it. We can prepare coded molecules to make it perform more than twenty complex action patterns now! From the spacesuit the thing was wearing, we've discovered what bands they use for long-range communication. In another few hours we'll be *talking* to it, and it won't be able to lie when it answers. But by the stars around us, its communication technique is extraordinary."

"How?" Red wanted to know.

"It's an extension of the internal cell-to-cell contact. It's got a speech organ in which several billion different molecular patterns can be almost instantly synthesized. If we can adapt that, by the way, we'll have a powerful new means of synthesizing plastics and so on—anyway, as I was saying, it amplifies the normal sub-molecular resonance patterns of about sixty of the possible combinations, and uses them like syllables to construct phrases with specific meaning. It's astonishing."

"Ask Vyko if he's getting anything, or thinks he'll be able to," Artesha requested over a wall speaker. Red realized she must be watching their progress continuously.

Vyko was staring in fascination at the Enemy. When Red repeated Artesha's question to him, he sighed and shook his head.

"I know I shall not be able to feel that creature," he said. "It is not possible even with animals on Earth. I am sorry."

"Oh, it's nobody's *fault*," said Chantal, touched by his obviously sincere regret at failing them, and he gave her a

quick, warm smile. There was something extremely likable about this young barbarian.

"That's a pity," said Artesha thoughtfully. "Still, it was a very faint chance at the best. Red, Burma is setting up the conditions for his next experiment on the Being at the moment. I'd like you to go over with Vyko and see if you have better luck in that respect."

"All right. Can we go out to an anchor team direct from Center?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I've ordered a ship to wait for you at the nearest lock to you now. You'll find spacesuits near the lock entrance, and I've told the pilot to come in and show you how to use them. Being in free space affects people different ways at first, but I think you should enjoy a little trip like this one."

"Okay," said Red, and beckoned for Vyko to follow him.

It was little, their trip, the pilot used high acceleration and it took half an hour. At first it was eerie being carried along between the unchanging stars on a skeleton of metal tubing to which their suits were merely clamped, but after a while they got their bearings and relaxed. The most frightening moment was not when they first felt the absence of gravity before the ship pulled away—the acceleration substituted for it soon enough—but their approach to the anchor team! Their pilot's skill was fantastic; he juggled the flimsy craft between the solid-hulled orbiting vessels so neatly that they missed one by literally six inches.

Sweating, they scrambled through the airlock aboard the control ship of the anchor team and stripped off their suits.

A panel on the wall of the lock gave them directions, and they found their way without trouble to the big technical room. Here there were seemingly endless banks of complex machinery; time maps glowed green from the walls, and many screens bore the red splotches indicating the existence of material bodies in the neighborhood.

Down among the time maps was Burma. As they entered,

he was swearing aloud, and Red gathered that he had made the latest of several ridiculous mistakes. He called out.

Burma looked up. On seeing them, he stopped what he was doing and came over to greet them warmly. But there was something distracted in his manner.

"Is something worrying you?" Red inquired blankly.

"Yes, it is—and it's such a peculiar thing, at that. It's quite put me off my work! Just a few minutes ago, as I was working at the far end of the room, I could have sworn I saw someone at this end who looked exactly like me."

Chapter XVI

IN THE SILENCE with which he and Chantal greeted Burma's statement, Red found time to wonder exactly what was going on at that moment. No one else in the technical room paid any attention; they continued to work. A little distance away, Artesha went on attending to the complex business of Center. Further out, the ships circling the Solar System obeyed her commands, watched and waited and occasionally struck or were struck. All about and around them the Being did whatever it did. (Or was its purpose confined to mere existence?) Beyond that again, the Enemy plotted and planned, struck and were struck.

But everywhere the universe followed its incomprehensible ways: suns radiated, planets cooled, comets swung through their slow, age-long orbits or drifted from sun to sun until their substance was wasted by radiation pressure and they became clouds of the ever-present interstellar dust.

The galaxies wheeled their slow way through time. New members of their family formed from that same dust—taking

an eon about it, and yet not wasting time. Because time was not to be wasted. Time was something—something very abstract—within which they simply *were*, as they were in the insubstantiality of empty space.

And this is our home, thought Red. *Is anything—even seeing the unknown close at hand—more amazing than this?*

When he recovered from the shock, he found himself looking questioningly at Vyko. The youthful magician was studying Burma in a puzzled manner.

“Red,” he said hesitantly. “Red, do you have a—a twin?”

“Yes,” said Chantal with sudden emphasis. “There’s another man going round Center who’s exactly like him.”

Burma watched this exchange wonderingly, and Vyko turned to him, nodding. “That explains it,” he said calmly.

“Explains what?”

“When I try to—feel your future, I get the same sensation that I do when I think of Red.” Vyko repeated his analogy of seeing double. “And as you say you have a—a going-double—”

“Look, what is all this?” Burma demanded. Chantal gave a quick summary of her experience, and Red listened with mounting dismay.

“A going-double is a sign of disaster approaching,” Vyko told them doubtfully. “And yet I do not read disaster in the future. . . . It is said among my people that to see oneself is a mark of death near at hand, and yet . . .” He shook his head as if giddy, and walked a few paces to be alone.

“Is this the result of our tampering with time?” Red asked apprehensively, and Burma looked worried.

“Possibly. We’ll have to get in touch with Artesha about it.”

Artesha sounded actually tired when they told her what had happened. “I’m afraid this is the beginning of something very big,” she said. “And I can’t spare the time to study it properly! We’re getting reports in of an Enemy attack massing—they’ve been at it for days, but up till a little while ago we thought it was aimed at Tau Ceti. It isn’t. The

Enemy are about to mount a full-scale offensive on the Solar System."

"Can we stand it off?"

"I don't know. I think so. We're rushing in extra resources as fast as possible, almost faster than we can handle them, and production of our most modern ships is being stepped up to maximum. Have you had any results with Vyko?"

"We haven't asked him yet," said Red, and called the boy back. "Do you feel any special awareness of—presence?" he asked anxiously.

Vyko shook his head. "There is something," he began, and frowningly changed his mind. "But it is no more here than anywhere else. I have always known of a *sort* of presence."

"That fits," said Artesha. "The Being exists at least as far back as the furthest temporal surges. Have you been through the ship to find whether there actually is a double of Burma on board?"

"But there can't be," said Burma briefly. "How did he get through the airlock without—?"

"Did he get through the airlock?" said Artesha significantly. "Remember, that specimen of the Enemy found its way into the city from 129 Lyrae."

She broke off, and when she spoke again was excited and dismayed. "Tesper has seen his going-double," she said.

"This is too big," said Red abruptly, and Artesha agreed.

"I'll get Magwareet on to it right away. We'll have to turn Center and all the anchor teams inside out."

"Have you considered the possibility that we were deliberately allowed to capture that Enemy?" Chantal put in. "I mean—could it be signaling somehow?"

"That was a chance we had to take. But if, somehow, they are managing to get duplicates of existing human beings into our defenses, we're headed for *real* trouble."

"You had already thought of that," Red realized, recalling the behavior of the woman in the medical section.

"Of course. Magwareet will be over with some helpers to investigate as soon as I can arrange it."

Burma turned abruptly back to his team. "We've got to get this test set up quickly," he barked. "How's it going?"

"It'll take another hour," said one of the technicians. "Then we're all ready."

"Not bad," admitted Burma grudgingly. "I'm afraid you and Vyko will just have to stand around for the time being. Maybe it'll give him a chance to get his bearings properly." Red and Chantal signified agreement.

Withdrawing to one side of the cabin, Chantal murmured, "I can't understand why they take all this so *calmly*."

"I guess they've just been schooled into concentrating on their own problems," Red answered softly. "Time's too valuable to spend worrying about questions you can't solve yourself."

The hour was almost half gone when Magwareet pushed his way into the room, still wearing his spacesuit. Frost was melting on the metal shell, and his helmet, thrown back on his shoulders, was misted inside and out. "Go through the ship," was his curt order to the men and women who followed him, and they dispersed with an air of grim intentness, weapons ready in their hands.

"Sorry to break in, Burma," the co-ordinator said shortly, "but we have to check everywhere that a going-double has been notified. Won't disturb your equipment."

Burma nodded, and carried on working. When the members of Magwareet's party returned, they had nothing to report, and with a short word of thanks, Magwareet prepared to go on elsewhere.

Red felt someone pluck at his sleeve, and glanced down to find Vyko staring at him worriedly. "That man—the one in the metal clothes," he said.

"What about him?"

"He too has a going-double! I don't know where, but I can sense it."

Red raised his voice and yelled after the departing coordinator. Magwareet turned back.

"Has your double been reported from anywhere?"

"No—not as far as I know," Magwareet answered, staring.

"Vyko says you've got one."

The young magician looked almost on the edge of tears. "It is beginning to seem as though everyone in this day and time has one!" he exploded. "Some people's are very close to themselves, and hard to make out, like those of most of the people in this room. But Red's, and yours," Vyko nodded at Magwareet, "they are unmistakable."

Magwareet crossed the room with a bound despite the weight of his suit, and slammed open the communicator. "Triple emergency!" he said. "Anchor team" (he gave coordinates quickly) "Magwareet speaking, to all units, all anchor teams, all ships! Somewhere there is a double of myself. Notify and capture if possible on sighting it. Any other doubles must be reported instantly."

"Wymarin!" said Burma suddenly. "What are you doing here?"

They spun round, to see the familiar dark-haired man who had called himself Elias standing between the banks of instruments.

"You weren't quite ready to test," Wymarin answered. "I came over to see if you were doing exactly what I said."

"Where's he supposed to be?" Red asked a technician near him, whispering.

"Monitoring the test from another anchor team's ships, just in case something goes wrong," was the answer.

Wymarin walked slowly towards them, eyes flickering over the massed dials and lights. "Not quite!" he said at length. "Listen, Burma, I've been doing some figuring on a new tack. Suppose, instead of simply trying my original test on a smaller scale, you do this."

He went off into a language so full of technicalities they could no longer follow. Burma and his technicians, however, seemed to appreciate his reasoning.

Burma, in particular, was shaken when Wymarin had finished. "If I get you right, what you're proposing is to set up a *working vocabulary* based on a number code, which we can key to a mechanical translator and actually speak to the Being!"

"Why not?"

"Hello, Burma," said a voice from the wall communicator. "Wymarin here. You should be almost set to go ahead now, shouldn't you?"

They wheeled together. In the instant when their eyes were all off him, Wymarin's going-double *went*.

Vyko whimpered. "This must be the end coming—for all of us! Never can there have been so many omens of ill-fortune! When every man and woman has a going-double—"

"Quiet!" snapped Burma, and explained to Wymarin—the real one, speaking from the communicator—what had happened. "Of course, we daren't trust what he told us, though it seemed logical enough. I think we'll have to go ahead right away—if there's a chance of communication with the Being, we must grab it. Magwareet, pull your team out of here and get on with your own job. Red, Chantal, do you want to go with him? It's risky, staying here—"

Vyko turned mutely appealing eyes to him, and Red replied firmly that they would stay. Hectic minutes of preparation passed; then everything was set for the great experiment.

Licking lips that had suddenly gone dry, Burma gave one final glance around his complex equipment, smiled forcedly at his anxious-looking team, and pressed the switch to initiate the signal.

Vyko gave a scream of pure terror and slid to the floor unconscious. A glass-encased indicator light burst and showered the opposite panel of dials with broken glass. The dials themselves wavered back and forth, and then stood still exactly like a human being torn between two courses of action.

This much Red took in before Burma indicated a livid green time map before him, and said, "This is it, my friends—we're headed for the beginning of Time."

Chapter XVII

THE INSTANT IT happened, Artesha's fantastic mind began to balance her ledger. The reports that were streaming in did not make reassuring reading.

Net loss: hundreds of thousands of irreplaceable men and women—skilled technicians, scientists, experts in the fields most desperately needed by the human race; material by the millions of tons, including precious records inscribed in the memory banks of Center (that was the first loss Artesha became aware of—it was as if she had lost part of her own memory); ships by the score, both civilian and military.

Net gain: one piece of information about the Being.

It was not enough.

The temporal surge had cut a swathe right through the defenses of the Solar System. A gap yawned towards Polaris which the already extended lines of patrolling vessels could never hope to fill. A few asteroids had gone along with the rest, and a gigantic volume of dust.

Magwareet was the first person to demand whether there would be any change in her previous directives in view of the disaster. She answered briefly that he was too far involved with the problem of the going-doubles to back out now. What she was frantically trying to decide even as she spoke was how much and what had gone from her memory; that could never be replaced, because the energies of the temporal surge would have wiped every trace clean away.

As big, but not so immediately important, a void had been left in her whole life, moreover: in that cartwheeling ship, headed this time for the Being, alone knew where—and when—was Burma, whom she loved.

She contacted Wymarin for the newest data on the chaos boiling through the continuum, and the little scientist gave her a grim summary.

"We can't track this surge, Artesha. It goes beyond the furthest range of our instruments, and it's still gaining momentum when it disappears. We can't begin to guess where they'll wind up. Some of them may witness the formation of the Earth, or starve to death in a Carboniferous forest, or even fetch up with a crash against the wall of the Beginning of Everything.

"Whether the instruments they carry will enable them to find their way back into the surge after they are thrown out at the other end is problematical. I'd say it was highly unlikely. But I'm not the expert on temporal surges—only on the Being. And I can tell you nothing more than this about the effects of that experiment: we probably did succeed in getting through to it when we tried the test for the first time, and I got thrown back to the seventeenth century. But maybe we—sensitized it in that respect. At any rate, the violent result we got when we repeated it suggests something like that."

"Boil down your data—whatever you have—and let me have it as soon as possible," directed Artesha. "There may be something in it—anything—which will give us a clue."

That was a slender hope, she reflected sadly as she broke the circuit on Wymarin's acknowledgment. There were a dozen people clamoring for her attention. Selecting one at random, she found it was Kepthin, the biologist supervising the study of the captured Enemy.

"I've got good news," he opened enthusiastically, and Artesha cut him short.

"Have you been affected by this temporal surge?" she

asked brusquely. "If not, get out of circuit—there are people with troubles waiting."

Kepthin sounded blank. "What surge? I haven't been near a time map for days. I'm sorry if you're in a hurry, but what I have to say won't detain you long. We can communicate with the Enemy—talk to it."

Artesha's spirits rose a fraction. "What have you got out of it so far?"

"Oh, nothing yet. We're breaking its language by analyzing it from basics. But we can duplicate all its speech elements, and in just a little while we'll be able to talk to it fluently."

"Let me know when you do," ordered Artesha, and cut off. She immediately regretted being so short with him—after all, he had brought her the first really constructive achievement in far too long—but she had no time for that.

Kepthin was turning away from the communicator, wondering with half his mind what could have put Artesha in such a panic, and worrying about it, and using the other half to review progress on a slightly-less-than-conscious level, when the doors of the hall opened and Magwareet's team, still cold from space, came in.

The co-ordinator approached him and nodded a curt greeting. "Have you had any going-doubles show up in here?" was the next thing he said.

Kepthin shook his head. "I heard something about them a little while ago, but we've had no cases reported from here." He hesitated. "What exactly is going on?"

Magwareet seemed to have his mind on something else, watching his team fan out discreetly and begin their thorough—though unobtrusive—sweep through the hall. He saw several of them stop and wait until one of the technicians came to a pause in his work, then ask a question.

"That fits," he mused half aloud. "If it is being directed from or by the Enemy, they'd try and draw attention away from the captive—I'm sorry," he added at proper conversa-

tional level. "I was far away." He gave the biologist a quick rundown on the appearance of the mysterious doubles.

Struck by a sudden thought at the end of it, he gave Kepthin a slow glance. "I don't suppose you've run into any creatures which have the power of—of disappearing, in your study of alien biology, have you?"

"What do you mean?"

"We've established that these going-doubles, as Vyko named them, can beyond doubt *disappear*. Without moving, without hiding. They don't do it when someone is watching them—but they're careful to appear only in places where they will not immediately be suspected. Many of them have been observed to go into rooms with only one exit, and never come back; others have just melted into the air when the audience's back was turned."

Kepthin was startled. "No! Nothing like that has been heard of. I suppose you've ruled out the obvious—chameleony, proteanism, transparency, elongation and so on? Those are all fairly common protective devices."

Magwareet looked interested. "Elaborate," he requested.

"Well, chameleony explains itself, I think—instantaneous response to a background in terms of color match and surface texture. There's a creature called Polyglossus Toshii which Hideko Toshi found on Tau Ceti II which can match virtually any color scheme in the infrared range in less than half a second. Proteanism is less common—I can only think of two or three animals bigger than a mouse which use it to any extent, and they're all slow-moving beasts from high-gravity worlds. Transparency—more strictly matching the refractive index to that of the air—is a permanent property of the body substance, and only slightly variable. Pseudocynus ascopos from 129 Lyrae exhibits the phenomenon quite markedly. But it's not something the creature can turn on and off—it just *is* transparent, and that's all. Elongation—again that's not known in any highly organized animals, but there are worms which can expand and contract up to

five or six hundred per cent—far too thin to be visible when they're at full length."

Magwareet shook his head at the end of the long recital. "Our checks would have revealed any tricks like that. No, I'm afraid it isn't just a protective device."

One of his team called to him across the hall in a sibilant whisper. He excused himself to Kepthin, and, giving one final glance at the five-limbed bulk of the Enemy about which the controlled busyness of the gathering revolved, led his party to their next destination.

He had been itching to get around to this one for some time, but he had been forced to wait while the data on the new temporal surge was evaluated. Now, at last, he was free to get at the man whose going-double had made the most spectacular exit of all: Wymarin.

The scientist greeted him absently when he arrived, stood in a brown study for some minutes while he waited for the team to begin their search, and then burst out, "For all the good I've done here, I might as well have stayed behind in seventeenth-century Holland!"

"What do you mean?" Magwareet said quietly.

"Look at the result of our tests!" Wymarin indicated the broad sweep of a time map which shone green from rim to rim. "We've caused the biggest disaster we've yet suffered, and got no profit out of it."

Magwareet waited for him to relax a little; with an effort, Wymarin achieved calmness. "I'm sorry," he went on. "But it's completely disheartening. What can I do for you?"

"What do you know about the appearance of your going-double?"

"I know hardly anything about it. It showed up aboard the main ship of Burma's anchor team, and I only got the barest details over the communicator." He summarized them.

At the end, Magwareet remarked thoughtfully, "Did you ask for details of the change your going-double recommended in the projected experiment?"

"No! Why should I?" answered Wymarin, surprised. "I—oh. I see what you mean." His change of expression might have been comic under other circumstances. "You mean I took it for granted that the recommendations were hostile and designed to cause damage, whereas I shouldn't have done."

"Exactly," said Magwareet, and there was a long pause.

"As it happens," Wymarin said eventually, "even careful planning couldn't have produced anything more damaging than what we actually did. . . . Is there a chance that this going-double of mine will turn up again, and perhaps give us the information?"

"I don't know. So far we haven't had any cases of a reappearance—these duplicates have just shown up, whether for a purpose or not, and never been seen again. I'm inclined to feel that Vyko's beliefs about them may have a grain of truth," he added pessimistically.

"What does he think?"

"According to the legends of his time, to see one's going-double is a sign of impending death."

"Have you *any* idea what they are?"

"Not yet. There is one very suggestive point about them, though. Did you hear that mine had been seen somewhere?" he put in parenthetically. "That is that every one of the originals has been through time, either in a temporal surge or in one of our own ships making a hop."

"Very interesting," said Wymarin. "Anything else?"

"That they can disappear into thin air."

"Well—" Wymarin seemed to be fastening on a new string of ideas to get the memory of the crisis he had caused out of his head. "Well, that isn't unexpected, if they're a by-product of temporal co-existence. . . . Can you narrow it down still further—to people who *have* co-existed with themselves in a temporal surge or otherwise? It strikes me as feasible that on returning to one's own time after having been two ways through the same temporal surge, duplicates might emerge."

"That's the sort of thing Burma is wanted for," Magwa-

reet commented. "All right, I'll try and establish that. All clues are helpful at the moment. But what has that to do with disappearing?"

"Look at it this way. Suppose that our interferences with the past have actually caused divergences in the main time-flow. That's to say, in a fifth-dimensional continuum there exist several parallel presents each dependent on a change effected in the past. Now if a great enough degree of correspondence existed between a place in one of those other presents, and our own present, it is possible that people might take—unknowingly—a turning in a direction which leads through the fifth dimension.

"Assume that the universe has a strong tendency to remain unified. Our original researches into four-dimensional existence suggested that probability. Then my going-double might have been firmly under the impression that he had remained in his own present and was giving information to the Burma of his own present. However, if that information had been acted upon, it would have ironed out one of the distinctions between the two time-streams. Follow me?"

"I do indeed," said Magwareet with rising enthusiasm. "You imply that all the appearances of going-doubles may be the result of this unificatory tendency?"

"Exactly. Now suppose you investigate the idea that a going-double, on vanishing, returns 'through' the barrier between parallel presents. We've got equipment that could detect the space-time stresses I imagine as resulting from that."

"Give me details and I'll get it in hand at once."

The wall communicators suddenly crackled into life, and Artesha's familiar voice came to them. "Attention all units!" she said. "Triple red—this is a major policy factor. I have had a report from Kepthin, head of the team studying the captured specimen of the Enemy. He reports that his technicians have succeeded in establishing communication with it. I have carefully examined his results, and agree with him that there is no reason to doubt our complete failure in attempting to

understand the motives of the Enemy in their war with us.

"Their attacks on the human race are a purely secondary consideration. Their real and only objective is the final destruction of the Being!"

Chapter XVIII

"SOMEWHERE OUT THERE," said Burma in a voice that carried through the room, "suns are being born, planets created. . . . Somewhere out there, if we could only watch and understand, we could find the answer to every question that has ever puzzled the human race."

His words opened up in the imagination of his listeners a vista of incredible knowledge. It was as if their consciousness was suddenly no longer bounded by the walls of the hull; they could feel themselves on the verge of *seeing* the things he spoke of.

Like a cinema film run backwards, Red thought. The whole universe, tracking steadily and faithfully backwards towards its beginning—and they could not see it.

A little stiffly, Chantal went forward and bent to attend to Vyko, lying on the floor. The movement broke the spell, and the crewmen and women turned to seek some task they might use to occupy their minds.

"What has happened?" Red inquired of Burma. The slight, brown-skinned man answered while studying the green-vivid time maps.

"Somehow, we hit the Being on a sore spot. This is a convulsion beside which the one that threw me back into your time was a mere twitch! Any sign of abatement?" he called out, and one of the technicians replied.

"If anything, the surge is building up!"

"On Earth now," said Burma somberly, "men are eking out their existence in caves and shelters made of branches. In a little while, there will be only apes, and before that again the reptiles will rule the planet. . . ."

A curious feeling of inversion came over Red as he heard that; somehow, the way Burma had used *will* in speaking of the past seemed significant, but he could not trap the elusive concept, and Chantal interrupted the train of thought.

"Burma, there's something I don't quite understand. Why are we experiencing normal time even though we're being thrown backwards? It makes it almost impossible to accept the fact!"

"Are we?" Burma said pointedly. "Has it never struck you that if time *were* to go backwards, it would make no difference at all? At any given moment, you would still recall what you thought of as the past; your awareness would be identical in every single 'now,' no matter which way time was flowing. There is no instrument at all by which one can decide the answer."

He broke off. "Is Vyko all right?"

"I think so. But you still haven't really answered my question."

"What we think happens is that the forces inside a temporal surge cause an encapsulation of the space surrounding the transferred object. The distortion of space around the capsule has an effect like the surface tension of a liquid; we can detect its presence only by implication."

There was little they could do during the uncontrolled flight into the past. They monitored their instruments; at intervals they attended to Vyko, who seemed to have fallen into a deep coma. They could theorize about the cause of it, but his consciousness was completely inaccessible.

They were, deep down below a protective illusion of normalcy, frightened beyond words.

Nearly a day had been measured by the clocks on the walls when the first gap appeared in the greenness of the

master time maps. Something crept into the air—a sense of destiny, a sense of survival.

“At least,” Burma told them, studying the instrument readings, “we’re going to emerge into the real universe. After that—”

“After that,” said a technician, “the temporal energies will have overloaded our instruments until they are completely useless. What can we do about it?”

The helplessness of their situation was only too clear. Burma shut the technician up with a scowl, and leaned excitedly forward. “We’re emerging,” he said tensely. “I want you to watch those dials right up until the moment they stop registering altogether.”

The instruments were not the proper ones for studying a temporal surge, but they could be used. They were designed for investigating the fourth-dimensional extent of the Being. They revealed that they would be tossed up from the main peak, not a secondary one; the same could not be said of the rest of the team’s ships, which were scattering already.

“And no time-travel equipment either,” Burma muttered. “At this stage of the universe’s evolution, probably no planets where we could land and construct such equipment—if our ships had been designed for landing on planets!”

They broke free, and for better or worse their doom was sealed.

Burma, tight-lipped, walked briskly from the room. In a few moments he called back to them over the communicator, which was still functioning for some reason.

“Come out here,” he said shortly, and they obeyed without thinking. Red and Chantal were among the first to pass through the door into the only room in the ship from which there was a direct view into space.

“This is a sight no human being has ever seen before,” said Burma into silence, and they stood transfixed.

At first it was incredible; the eyes refused to take it in. Then logic supervened, and they began to be able to understand what they saw.

Beyond the port the sky was on fire. It shone so white it appeared almost cold. Nowhere was there blackness—nowhere at all.

“What we are looking at,” said Burma softly, “is the universe when young. Those are all the stars which we are used to seeing scattered across hundreds of parsecs. Here they are so close some of them are only light-hours apart. Probably the calamitous expansion which we know about has only just begun. ‘Only just,’ of course, in terms of the universe’s age.

“We have come hundreds of millions of years.”

“Why is there no black in the sky?” Chantal demanded, almost with a sob of terror.

Red was so obsessed by a discovery and a memory that he almost failed to hear the answer. The discovery was that, once one’s eyes were accustomed to the sight, one could tell that every star in the heavens was a different color. Most were white—diamond white—with subtle gradations, but some were blue, some yellow, and some few shaded all the way to the deepest imaginable crimson.

When he was a small boy, he had learned that jewels were dug from the ground, and he had pictured a jewel-mine, its walls sparkling, its floors sparkling, its roof sparkling—every inch in sight giving back multi-colored fire.

And here was the reality.

“The universe,” said Burma, “is still so small that the light of the stars does not fade beyond visibility before it makes the complete circle. Beyond the near stars, out there, you can see the other side of the stars which are behind us as we stand now. This universe is like a gigantic hall of mirrors.”

Something J. B. S. Haldane had said in one of his essays came back to Red. What was it? “I imagined myself in a—” What kind of space? *Riemannian*, that was it. “I was standing on a transparent plane. When I looked up, above me I could see the soles of my boots turned backwards. . . .”

He had once tried to express that in visual terms in one of his sculptures, and failed. And now here was the blind force

of Nature interpreting it to him on a scale he had never dared to imagine.

"Do—" He was surprised to find his throat so dry. "Do you think there might be life out there somewhere?"

"I doubt it," said Burma. "Almost certainly there are no planets. Those aren't the stars we know, of course. Those are immense aggregations of dust and gas, barely beginning to radiate—in fact, most of their energy is probably still coming from straight gravitational contraction."

And this is the human race, he suddenly thought. The idea hit him in the pit of the stomach, leaving him limp with awe. *Here am I, tossed into the very earliest days of the universe, and I can speak with certainty of things which no living creature has ever witnessed!*

"Perhaps, after all, time has neither meaning nor importance," he reflected aloud. He looked about him, to find that he was alone with Red and Chantal; everyone else had returned below.

"I don't know if you can understand this," he said after a pause. "But—well, think this over. Just a few centuries ago, maybe even less than that, *time began*. Everything began! You can't say 'before that,' because there *wasn't* a 'before.' There was nothing. Nothing at all!"

Chantal shivered, and her face showed that she was trying to control it; Red put his arm round her and drew her close.

"And here are we, a handful of human beings," Burma finished. "Standing on the very threshold of eternity."

"Red," said Chantal softly, "do you think this was worth it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It seems unlikely that we shall get away from here, doesn't it?" the girl stated flatly. "Do you think it was worth it, for the sake of seeing this?"

Red had not begun to think about it like that; it took him a moment to utter the answer, though he never had a doubt of what it would be. "Yes! Yes, I do!"

"So do I," said Chantal. "I never understood it before."

But I suppose this is the feeling which was the reward for the first people to climb Everest, and Columbus, and whoever the first man was to fly to the Moon."

Burma looked across at them and knew a feeling of envy. For him, there was no one—Artesha was apart from him by uncounted millions of years.

And the husband of Artesha could never be satisfied with anyone else.

Through their stillness cut a cry with the suddenness of a lightning bolt. "What was that?" Red demanded, turning swiftly, but Chantal had already drawn the correct conclusion.

"It sounded like Vyko," she said, and hastened out.

Other members of the ship's crew had already responded to that heart-tearing scream; when Burma and Red followed Chantal, they found her bending over Vyko with a tense expression. The boy's eyes were wide open, but they were unfocused, staring at nothing.

"Vyko! What is it?" rapped Burma, and the boy moaned a little. Passing his tongue over his dry lips, he muttered a few words.

"What did he say?" demanded Red, and Chantal stood up.

"Something about everything coming to a stop," she said uncomprehendingly, and then, as the possible significance of the remark hit her, she put her hand over her mouth. "Burma! Do you suppose—he can see *backwards* in time, as well as forwards? Past the Beginning, I mean?"

"Possibly," Burma nodded. But this guess was immediately demolished by Vyko's next words.

"Nothing!" he moaned. "Nothing at all! Only stars and stars going on forever!"

"What do you mean?" pressed Red, leaning towards him. "Can't you tell us what isn't there?"

"*Something!* Something that's always been there before, in my time and yours. Something huge and friendly and safe. And now I'm alone!"

"The Being," said Burma softly. "He can only mean the

Being. But how did we escape from it, if the temporal surge threw us back here?"

"Inertia?" suggested Red. "The Being, you once told us, disliked the neighborhood of suns and high-energy concentrations. The whole *universe* is a high-energy concentration this early. Suppose it doesn't extend this far back? Then we might have been thrown past the end of the surge by the residual violence. . . ." His voice tailed away.

"*We are alone,*" said Chantal grayly. "Nobody in the universe but ourselves."

"Think how infinitely worse it is for this poor kid," Burma reminded her. "He's lost something that's been a part of his very mind all his life. He's aware in four dimensions, and in one direction there's nothing to see, and in the other everything he knows is too far ahead."

"Look!" said Chantal abruptly, and they glanced back at Vyko. He had relaxed on his couch with a smile of delight on his face.

"Ashtlik!" said Burma. "Has anything happened in the last few moments?" One of the technicians stepped back into the instrument room. "Is it back, Vyko? Is it back?"

"Yes!" whispered the boy in sheer delight.

"We just durated past the end of an important secondary peak!" Ashtlik called out. "Burma, you know this means we've been wrong about the Being from the start! If these surges can extend past its limits, it needn't be a four-dimensional creature—"

"Time enough to worry about that later," said Burma. "Vyko, is everything all right now?"

The boy, his eyes closed, looked faintly puzzled. "No, it's too small. Somehow. But it is really there, I'm sure. I—I think it's trying to talk to me."

"And we wasted all that effort on devising an instrument to communicate with the Being," said Burma, bitterly aware of the consequences of their last disastrous attempt. "We had our instrument in the palm of our hands! Vyko, can you make it understand?"

"Yes, it understands. It's trying to explain to me what it really is. I—I think—" He got up, rather unsteadily, from his couch, and walked towards the observation room, brushing aside the hands that sought to restrain him.

The others followed in silence. Vyko paused before the massed glory of the suns, staring fixedly in one direction, for fully half a minute before he shook his head. "I see," he said, "but I do not understand."

Burma pushed his way forward and followed the boy's line of gaze. After a moment, he leaned forward as if that inch reduction in the distance would help to clarify what he saw. Straining their eyes, the others made out nothing but an oddly-shaped blot of darkness on the shining sky.

"Some time ago," said Burma after a while, and the remembrance that the "ago" was really millions on millions of years in the future again brought shivers to Red's spine, "Artesha gave directions for certain of the ships in Center containing her memory banks to be heavily insulated against high-energy levels. I remember watching the work being carried out. I never got around to asking her why only those few ships were so armored, but I presumed they were repositories of vital information for use in case the Enemy ever did invade the Solar System.

"But the work which was carried out on them left them a different shape from any other ship in the sky. They *are* quite unmistakable."

It was a moment before anyone got the significance of that present tense. Red was the first to try and utter his conclusion.

"You mean—*those*—"

"Yes." It was Vyko, unexpectedly, who answered, in a clear and confident voice. "Those ships over there are part of Artesha's memory. They are the only part of her which can stand the concentrated stress of space and time at this early stage of the universe's existence."

Dryly, the body and voice of Vyko added, "In case you have not yet realized, you are talking to the Being."

Chapter XIX

KEPTHIN TO Artesha: Herewith fullest possible vocabulary of the Enemy language, together with details of their communication bands.

Artesha to all units, triple red: Enemy mass attack being mounted from direction of Tau Ceti.

Wymarin to Artesha: Space-time distortions detected in association with materialization and dematerialization of going-doubles bear strongest resemblance to manifestations already known to be connected with activity of Being. Details separately.

Artesha to all units, triple red: Investigate possibility that Being is non-hostile or actually friendly. Analysis of all its activities urgently reviewable in this light.

Artesha to Magwareet, unofficial: Magwareet, for pity's sake help me!

The desperate urgency of the plea brought Magwareet in panic and haste. But he concealed his emotions as far as he could from Artesha's view, although he was no longer certain if such dissembling was effective with the immense volume of knowledge she had at her command. He had to come into her presence, for it would not be wise to let the conversation he expected get to the ears of everyone.

"What is it?" he asked, as calmly as he could.

"Magwareet, you remember asking me why I didn't warn you of the Enemy raider which flew into the temporal surge you were using to go in search of Wymarin?"

"I do."

"I had the answer. I received a solution signal from the banks I had put to work on it just before Burma initiated his disastrous experiment. I'm certain of that, because the notification is recorded in one of the memory banks I still have.

"But the solution itself, and all the relevant data, were in the banks which have gone into the past."

Magwareet started to say something, but Artesha interrupted. "Let me finish! Do you recall that some while ago I had a group of my memory banks specially insulated?"

"Yes."

"It is those banks that have gone! *Only* those! But they also contained the reason why I had them insulated. I can do no more than guess at the reason why I did it—and all my guesses lead to one conclusion."

"Which is?" Magwareet waited attentively, feeling on the brink of a great revelation.

"That I have had knowledge of the future available to me—somehow—and I haven't made use of it. Magwareet, what *can* have happened to me?"

Magwareet knew that Artesha must have drawn the same—the only possible—conclusion. He steadied himself and voiced it with dispassionate lack of emphasis.

"Someone, or something, must have been tampering with your memory, your whole mind."

"And there is only one possibility, who it could be. The Enemy!"

Magwareet waited a little while longer, and then, realizing Artesha could not supply the missing statement herself, finished for her. "I'm sorry, Artesha. You're wrong. There is a second possibility—and a much more likely one. The only person in the universe who could have tampered with your mind is *yourself*."

If Artesha had had human lungs any more, she would have drawn a long, shuddering sigh. "Yes, Magwareet. Do you suppose that I, like so many other people, have a going-double who is not quite the same as myself?"

The idea staggered Magwareet for a moment. He had a

momentary impression that he had seen a vision of some all-embracing truth, but it was gone, leaving him fumbling for the tail-ends of thought which had in that instant knit together in his mind.

Artesha went on, "But what is the reason for all this? Have the missing parts of my memory passed through that fifth-dimensional gap Wymarin suggested—to be going-doubles of another Artesha somewhere else, and unify the continuum? Why have none come to me? Is the unification of the continuum more important than the survival of the human race, and in *whose* opinion?"

"You're better qualified to answer questions like those than anyone else in history," said Magwareet soberly. "Why ask me?"

"How can I trust myself any longer?" said Artesha, and Magwareet, in a horrifying access of vivid imagination, pictured the breakdown of the entire structure of human effort, through the failure of the support it all relied on. He had to do something swiftly. What was still human of Artesha required comfort, friendship and reassurance like anyone else; Burma had long been accustomed to provide it, Magwareet knew, but Burma was *somewhere* at the back of Time.

"There's one thing you can be certain of," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "That is that all these putative Arteshas, like yourself, are working towards the survival of the human race. You can't do anything else, can you?"

"No," Artesha agreed.

"Have you, since discovering that the Enemy are more interested in destroying the Being than ourselves, studied the possibility of combining with them to do that? After all, we'd be as glad as anyone to get the Being off our necks!"

"We can't do that," said Artesha firmly.

"*Why?*"

"Because—" Artesha's first word was assured, but it stopped as if cut off with a switch. "Why, I know—I know there is a reason, but that must be in the missing banks, too!"

"Where did you get your information from? Kepthin?" Artesha confirmed the fact. "All right, I'm going down to see him. That, at least, we can settle definitely." He started towards the door.

"Magwareet!" Artesha called after him. "Do you think I should go on trying?"

"Yes!" said Magwareet forcefully, and went out.

Magwareet left the presence of Arthesha and went down to *Magwareet left Artesha's presence and went down to see the little biologist in his research hall. He found Kepthin about the chance of a pact with the Enemy. However, him excitedly analyzing the psychological implications of on his way, a general call from Artesha came to him over the Enemy signals which were now being intercepted. When the communicators, and at her urgent command he returned the* Magwareet broached his idea, however, Kepthin shook his head. *way he had come as fast as he could.*

"No, the idea is impossible. What it amounts to is this: the Enemy discovered the existence and possibly also the nature of the Being before we did. (How far it extends, I won't dare guess!) It was the first non-Enemy life form they had ever run across, and they've spread over several planetary systems—about twice as many as we have, I believe. Their background is one of extreme hostility between species, on their home world. They don't keep pets, for instance. So when they discovered the Being localized in the area we inhabit, we automatically became a parallel object for attack. No, getting rid of the Being by joint effort is out of the question."

Magwareet, of course, was completely unaware of what had happened, and Artesha's statement to him was a shock. "I'm where?" he said.

"According to my instruments, you are at present in the Enemy research hall, talking with Kepthin. Listen!"

Artesha opened a communicator, and Magwareet, wondering, heard his own voice mingling with the biologist's in conversation.

"Let's see what happens to this going-double when I call them up," said Artesha grimly. She threw in alarm circuits which shut off the research hall where Magwareet—Magwareet found it upsetting to think of himself in the third person—was, and alerted nearby personnel. Then she spoke.

"Magwareet! Kepthin!"

"Magwareet's not here," said Kepthin blankly. "Why, what is it?"

"*Not there?*" Artesha consulted her instruments again.

"What's the alarm for?" Kepthin pursued. "You're interrupting our work, I'm afraid."

Artesha couldn't answer. She shut off the communicator and spoke blankly to Magwareet. "Didn't you hear for yourself? Magwareet, *how?*"

"Find out from Wymarin if there's been any activity from the Being over the past few moments," directed Magwareet. Things were falling into place in his mind. There was a beautiful simplicity about their arrangement which was almost aesthetically satisfying; it made him certain that he was on the track of a right answer at long last.

"Yes," was Wymarin's report. "Very considerable activity! No temporal surges, but these associated side-effects which I told you were also found when a going-double appeared."

"What I hoped to hear!" said Magwareet jubilantly. "Artesha, listen to this. Let's suppose that the Being does know we're not actively hostile, and the Enemy are. Let's furthermore postulate that it *really* exists in four dimensions, and is free to move through all of them as we are through three.

"Now suppose that *we* artificially move in time. Our actions create alternative presents. There must be hundreds resulting from our recent interference with the time-stream. But the Being's actions *don't* have this result. It would be a contradiction in terms. The Being, we can say, regards our alternative presents as identical, despite their possible superficial differences.

"It appears likely that the Being is responsible for the

going-doubles, doesn't it? I think that what it is actually doing is attempting to assist us in our struggle with the Enemy—witness, for example, the appearance of Wymarin's going-double with the Burma thought, before he knew it was a going-double he was speaking to, was a workable plan for communication with the Being. I don't know in which alternative present that plan was hatched, but I suspect the Being approved of it."

"A hell of a lot of assistance it's given us!" said Artesha bitterly. "It's stripped our defenses with its temporal surges and left us naked to the Enemy over billions of cubic miles of space. I hope you're wrong, Magwareet, because if the Being is taking a hand in our affairs, and we remain without a means of talking to it, how will we ever know what's going on?"

"Only the Being can do that, in all probability," Magwareet answered somberly. "But if my theory is right, it *does* know, because in all those parallel presents it is precisely the same. Our interference with the time-stream doesn't affect the Being in the slightest."

He broke off. "I wonder if the fact that my going-double appeared to Kepthin means that he doesn't have a duplicate—exists only in this time."

"He *must* have a duplicate," contradicted Artesha. "He said that you hadn't been down there, didn't he? The other Magwareet must have been talking to another Kepthin—"

"And yet you noticed them!" exclaimed Magwareet. "They must have been together in this time—either that, or you are breaking through the fifth-dimensional barrier."

"Then it is the Being who has been interfering with my mind," said Artesha stonily. "And the mess it has got us into—"

At approximately that same instant every communicator in Center awoke to life, as well as every one in the entire surviving defense fleet.

"Plan Red," said a crisp voice which didn't quite conceal a hint of panic. "Repeat, Plan Red. Enemy fleet approaching

Solar System from direction Cetus. About one thousand nine hundred major warships, about fourteen thousand medium-class warships, twenty-six thousand raiders and scouts upwards of a hundred thousand. Plan Red!"

"Well?" said Artesha. "At least they aren't coming towards the biggest gap in our defenses, but they'll find it soon enough. I think this is our last meeting, Magwareet, unless we eventually get a chance to pull off Plan Black. It's been nice knowing you."

"The human race has got itself out of some pretty tight corners before now," Magwareet reminded her. "And, as you say, we may manage to pull off Plan Black. See you later!"

On that note of false optimism, he hastened to take up the place prescribed for him in Plan Red.

Plan Red had been Artesha's greatest achievement. It was a means of mobilizing the entire defensive potential of the human race. Every man and woman in the Solar System, and every child old enough to be of use, had a part in it. At the last announcement, they had left inessential tasks and gone to essential ones.

Magwareet's, like the other top co-ordinator's, was in the master operations room. It was anticipated that the influx of data would swamp even Artesha's immense resources for computing. Therefore there were made available people who—like Magwareet—had the co-ordinator's gift of snap decisions on the basis of inadequate information.

He was barely settling into place before the banked communicators, time maps and viewscreens which would be his ears and eyes for as long as the battle lasted, when Artesha came through. "Magwareet, handle Plan Black, will you? As soon as you've attended to it, cut back into Plan Red."

"Right," confirmed Magwareet, and studied the setup.

Plan Black was the last-ditch one. It was known that the Enemy's first move on discovering man had been to englobe the systems the race inhabited; that was why no one knew where the Enemy actually came from. They had been

uncertain for a long time which was humanity's home world, but—inevitably—the slow withdrawals they had forced had led them to the correct conclusion. They had never before assembled so large a fleet to reduce a single system.

It was suspected that from some of the outermost colonies small groups had broken away and penetrated the Enemy's space in search of planets beyond their influence. But it was not certain. Perhaps they had found safety and would ensure the race's survival; perhaps not. In any case, it was probable that the victorious Enemy would hunt them down and mop them up after Earth was defeated.

Therefore—Plan Black.

Center was the nucleus of it. On the closing of one of many thousand switches, at the very last moment possible, all the ships composing Center—or rather, those which had survived—would immediately be thrown into faster-than-light drive. There was no way of reversing the process, short of mechanical failure or reduction of the available power below a certain minimum. Even at the emergency limit of the drive, it would be years before the crew of those ships saw starlight again.

Thus, like the bursting of a spore pod, the human race would erupt outwards among the stars. Some of the ships would be hunted down; some would emerge from the star-drive impossibly far from a GO-type sun; some few would collide with the worldliness of stars or planets and explode into dust.

But some fewer still might perhaps fall within reach of habitable planets thousands of light-years beyond the Enemy. It would be the greatest gamble in history—but it might spell survival.

There was only one person whose chance of that was negligible to the vanishing point, and that was Artesha. Her very mind was spread over so many ships that it was virtually inconceivable that she should live through Plan Black.

Like all other co-ordinators, Magwareet had calculated the chances of survival from that plan so often that he knew its

details by heart. It took him minutes only to carry out all that was necessary to prepare for it—to activate the switches Artesha, or one of her deputies, could throw. Then he turned his attention to the developing battle.

How is the Being going to like this? he wondered as he thought of the gigantic release of energies it would entail. *What a handicap to fight under!*

Artesha was massing the available defense fleet along the Enemy's line of attack; it was the only possible move. There was something enormously impressive about this sight of the concerted power of a whole race.

Until one looked at what it was opposing, that was. Magwareet felt his heart sink as he considered how mankind was outnumbered.

Seeing an opening to join battle, he awaited no orders from Artesha, but ordered up a squadron of heavies to take out the jutting wing of scouts closest to the ecliptic. It was over in moments, and scattered wreckage drifted in space.

The first casualty report came in. "Forty-eight Enemy scouts destroyed," said an unemotional voice. "Our losses—one cruiser disabled, five damaged."

Heartened, Magwareet's companions bent to their controls. But before the next blow could be struck, a voice full of panic rang from the communicators.

"Unidentified fleet approaching from direction Ursa! Repeat, *unidentified!* And there look like millions of ships!"

Ursa! Straight for the gap in the defenses!

Chapter XX

IT WAS THE ONLY time Red and Chantal had ever seen, or were ever to see, Burma at a loss for words. He stumble-tongued for fully a minute, before he made a completely

incomprehensible remark to Vyko.

"Of course! *I* see why not. But why here? Why now?"

"Here is irrelevant. So is now. We are either at the very beginning of the universe, or the very end. That is to say, we are past a point at which the actions of an intelligent being—except myself—are of significance. But it was not until you had passed, as you count time, the point at which you entered this last temporal surge, that you could be of service in exactly the way necessary."

So *that* was why Burma's use of "ago" in speaking of the far future was so oddly meaningful! Red felt astonished at his own intuition, but he had a complete vision of the universe as it must be in exactly the same way that he "felt" a sculpture before he commenced work on it—neither visualizing it, nor imagining its tactile qualities, but a non-separable combination of the two. He could not have drawn a view of one of the works he intended, for the flat projection of it would not have been the same thing. Only under his hands and eyes together could he capture the essential quality he was looking for.

But there was a question he had to ask. "You brought us here for a purpose," he said bluntly. "If you can communicate with us now, you could have done so at any time. All times are alike to you in four dimensions. What is that purpose?"

"It is exactly because all times are alike to me," said Vyko's voice, "that you, as you are, are here now. Burma, you are my interpreter. This boy Vyko is my mouth, because his is the only mind among you which is able to contain four-dimensional concepts naturally. For the others of you—all but two—I have certain small individual tasks which anyone else might have carried out."

Which other two? They looked at one another questioningly. Vyko continued to utter the Being's words.

"My purpose, since you ask it, is simple. To defeat the race which you call the Enemy, since they are intent on destroying me."

"But could they?" said Chantal wonderingly.

"Because I propose to destroy *them*, no!"

And then, all of a sudden, a peculiar thing happened. Vyko's face for a moment went slack and relaxed. At the same instant, Burma's lit up with sudden delight, and he seemed to be listening to something. Then the same thing happened to one of the members of the crew, and another, and another, in rapid sequence. Chantal's expression changed in the same way.

These are the tasks he is choosing us for, thought Red. He wondered what his could be. It was quite natural for him to start thinking of the Being as masculine, since Vyko's youthful but definitely male voice rang in his memory.

Then there was something in his head that was like a memory speaking, but was not one. It said: *You are one of the two needed for a special task. It said: You are a sculptor with a sculptor's mind and a sculptor's way of looking at space. It said: There could be nothing greater for you than to create with pure space and pure time as well. It said: You are to supply what is needful.*

It said: You are to help in molding the universe itself.

They had exactly enough time to become frightened after the panicky voice announced the oncoming unidentified fleet. Magwareet flinched rather than deliberately moved his head to look across his detector screens, and saw that the wild estimate of the number of ships—millions of them—must be very nearly correct. At least there were hundreds of thousands of them.

But it was another thing he noticed on the screens that really shook him. Forgetting that she would already know, he called to Artesha.

"Artesha! You've got your memory back!"

"Yes, I have," said her calm, controlled voice, and he heard a sureness in it that he had been hoping for for an age. "Listen to this, please."

From the communicators throughout Center and through-

out the ships of the defending fleet a voice, quiet and firm, spoke out. It was a voice he recognized.

"I am placing my fleet of approximately one million vessels at the disposal of Center for the duration of the present operation. Please begin to compute with them in your attack plan."

Burma's voice!

Perhaps the Being might know from what unimaginable resource of time or space he had dredged up a million fighting craft. Time enough to worry about that later. Right now, there was a war to be won.

Another race allying with us? Where from?

What about—afterwards? They outnumber us hopelessly!

And then Artesha put sixty thousand ships at his orders, and he began to fight them.

The formation of the Enemy was their standard one: a hemisphere, hollow face towards the Solar System, with a single line of heavy craft jutting from its center and two flat wings of scouts in the plane of the System's ecliptic. The nearest of the scouts had been half a light-year away when Magwareet had sent in his first attack. That distance had already dropped by a quarter, and the minor gap in the formation which he had caused had been filled.

The technique was simple and effective. The jutting spearhead was just out of range of the heaviest weapons carried by the ships at the rim of the semicircle—but only just. It was their business to transfix the oncoming ships like a butterfly on a pin. Whichever way the defenders tried to take evasive action, they would find themselves coming within range of the ships in the hemisphere, who could fire on them without endangering their companions.

By the time the engagement was properly joined, the hemisphere would have begun to contract into a sphere, enclosing their opponents and squeezing them like a ripe orange.

If, by some miscalculation, the fleet proved to be outnum-

bered, outgunned or outfought, the spearhead could accelerate just a little and close the front of the hemisphere, which would thereupon become the rear, concentrating the heaviest armaments on the pursuers.

Of course, the exact diameter of the fleet, its numbers and composition had been worked out in view of the Enemy's knowledge of the human ships' performance, to make certain they could not be encircled before they reached the Solar System. *But*, thought Magwareet with a savage and primitive joy, *they weren't counting on this!*

He had his ships, and an extent of space to marshal them in. Summing up the situation as it developed, he made his plans—with alternatives—submitted them to Artesha as fast as he could talk, received her approval, and waited.

The oncoming spearhead was within a quarter of a light-year when the original defending fleet struck home.

They had re-formed as a cone, point exactly aligned with the heart of the jutting Enemy spearhead. Their degree of stagger was precisely judged so that the rearward ships could distract the Enemy on the rim of the hemisphere while the main vanguard penetrated the middle.

Only this time, unlike many previous times, the head of the cone held its course.

It was like—like crushing together two candles against a red-hot stove. The tip of the cone melted away. So did that of the jutting spearhead. But as the cone grew shorter it grew wider, and soon the spearhead was dwindling the faster of the two.

This was allowed for, of course. The ships at the rear of the hemispherical bowl were there for just that reason. The closer the defenders came, the more withering the fire they had to withstand.

If we'd been our own—thought Magwareet somberly. There could have been only one end to that struggle. But they were not on their own.

The battle, as a unit, was now creeping towards the Solar System, from its original direction of Cetus, south of the

ecliptic. Thus far, the original plan had been adhered to. The Enemy was making his inevitable progress. Now, soon, he would judge that enough of the defenses had been drawn from their regular beats, and send half one of his wings of scouts to try and carry the fight into the System itself. They would probably, knowing men were oxygen breathers, drive for Earth direct, for in the past they had often enough launched over-driven missiles at it from far out in space. That was all right. It was only if they deduced—correctly—that Earth had been evacuated that they would turn their attention exclusively to Center.

Abruptly, Magwareet's estimate proved right. The scouts went into maximum emergency drive and swung north towards the gap in the defenses facing Ursa Major. And stopped as if they had hit a wall.

For, awaiting them there, was a squadron of the newly arrived ships with drives cold, armaments switched off, and screens up in every conceivable electromagnetic and gravitic waveband. The scouts fought like hornets, but they were swamped.

The Enemy reacted quickly. He realized he had walked into an ambush, but assumed that where so heavy a concentration of ships had been made, another place must have been left thin. A ring of ships disappeared from the bowl of the hemisphere, and struck at about the orbit of the asteroids from the direction of Argo. This time, he was temporarily right, and Magwareet's heart sank, for this was the System's most vulnerable area.

The defending ships, lying in wait, took a few seconds to counter the blow. In that time, destruction had been sown, broadcast, and Magwareet was horrified to see that one of the last Enemy to be destroyed had vaporized ten of the outlying components of Center.

Artesha!

Then he blinked, for the wrecked ships were instantly *back*, where they had been before. "Where—where did they come from?" he gasped, before he realized it was aloud.

"From the same place as the rest of the ships," said Artesha, with a hint of a chuckle. "You can stop worrying, Magwareet. We've won. It's only a matter of time."

Silently, beyond the limit of the Enemy's detector range, the friendly strangers had crept around the Solar System. Now some of them—most of them—dropped the pretense and made themselves known. The fleet of the Enemy melted like ice in hot sunlight.

Magwareet laughed aloud in sheer joy as he saw what was happening, and grew suddenly aware that someone had brought refreshments to him where he sat. Astonished, he noticed that the battle had been in progress nine hours.

The person who had brought his refreshments was a boy, no more than ten years old—one of those who had a place, an essential though minor one in Plan Red. Seeing Magwareet turn from his screen, he risked a question in high eager tones.

"How's it goin, Co-ordinator?"

"Well!" said Magwareet with a smile.

The tattered remnants of the Enemy were scrambling out of range as fast as they could, back the way they had come. Magwareet gave them enough time to feel secure, and then, only then, revealed what he had quietly been attending to all this time.

In those nine hours, sixty thousand ships had stolen with their screens up to the rear of the Enemy. When the remnants were already among them, they showed themselves. Outnumbering the Enemy as they now did, by three to one, they finished the job.

Completely.

Ten hours from the start of the battle, there was nothing left of the Enemy's proud armada—except dust.

Chapter XXI

FOR THE FIRST long moment it seemed to Red as if he was looking down on the universe like a flat, broad road racing past beneath him. Then he remembered that this was not possible, and his mind rebelled. He found the presence of the Being in his head, supporting and strengthening him.

There was something about the touch—touch? It was nearer to that than anything. He felt it in exactly the same way he appreciated the form of a sculpture before he began to work on it. There was something *feminine* in it.

And then he understood.

“*Artesha!*”

“Yes, Red. I am the Being. That is knowledge I have had to conceal even from myself before I discovered what I was.”

“How—?”

“By insulating certain memory banks, and filching them away when there was danger of my guessing correctly before I actually did guess correctly.”

“But—”

“I am no longer *in* time, Red! There’s no paradox, for by becoming as I am I grew into four dimensions. After—when there was never to be any more ‘after’ for me—why should I not control my earlier self? After all, I had already done so, so far as my earlier self was concerned.”

“But then—” Red’s mind leapt ahead with the swiftness of intuition—“then you have no more purpose in existing! You have nothing but the present!”

“Exactly. But there is nothing *after* it, because there is no more ‘after.’ Look, since you are puzzled, and I will show you.” She did so, without words, and when it was over Red felt a little faint, but he understood.

“A present in which one is directing the universe is no

small one," Artesha commented dryly. "Now, Red, this is what you have to do. You have a certain way of appreciating form, and space, and of effecting meaningful changes in it. I need that. Because I am completed, and cannot change again, I must borrow it from you."

A small area of the road which was the universe stilled within Red's comprehension, and he studied it. Somehow, it was blurred. He recalled Vyko's description of trying to look into the future of someone with a going-double.

Artesha focused it for him, and he realized it was the span of human history. "Why is it blurred?" he asked.

"Because of time travel, and temporal surges," Artesha told him. "There are several presents at this point of the universe—do you see? What we must do is to choose certain ones which are best for our purpose, mold them so that they are ideal. Then, at a certain point, we must bring them together, fold the presents into one present, and—"

"And?"

"And that is all."

He studied the various parallel presents for a while, getting to know the subtleties which distinguished them. He could not quite work out how they were separated, because each and every one of them was *the* present. Something occurred to him, and he asked, "Why are there no presents in which the human race loses its war to the Enemy?"

"Because the human race wins its war," was the answer, and it seemed sufficient.

"These," he said after another short while, as he might have selected a particular stone or clay mixture for a sculpture.

"They are yours, to do with as you like."

Then began for Red the sheerest ecstasy he could ever have imagined. The time-streams were like clay under his hand, and yet the appreciation of them was not confined to his touch and sight. It was like creating an objective sculpture in his mind alone.

At first he was hesitant, but then he became absorbed in the joy of pure creation, and gave himself up to it.

It was necessary that certain actions occur at certain points. It was very necessary that a sculptor called Red Hawkins should be available at one point; that a Croceraunian war party should do certain things in a time not its own, and that a staff magician called Vyko should not die. These things gave basic form and balance to the creation, like the wire framework for a clay model.

But that was only the beginning. There were details, each tiny, each tending towards the perfection of the completed work. It was also necessary that certain people with an influence on scientific thought should be puzzled by the behavior of sub-atomic particles; that they should scratch their heads over the impossible appearance of a prehistoric monster in the twentieth century. A prophet had to have a vision of angels, and certain aircraft had to be lost to cause it.

It was necessary that a certain warship should sail with her superstructure burning across a boiling sea in the dim dawn of time, and that the crew of another vessel should build themselves shanties of cycad wood on the shores of a carboniferous swamp. Time and natural processes erased the name they had carved to give them an anchor to reality on one of the shanties: *Marie Celeste*.

It was necessary that an army commanded by a king called Cambyzes who had dreams of empire should be defeated by the savagery of a snowstorm deep in the Antarctic. A man called Bierce and another called Bathurst and thousands upon thousands of them had to do something at particular times. For the luckier ones, it was an inexplicable mystery; for the less fortunate, it was hell, or insanity.

And on, and on, and on. . . .

Until at last, there were five presents, and each of them was designed to fit into the others like dovetails.

Red tried to look ahead into the moment when his work would take its definitive form. He failed, because the effort

of distinguishing between the five time-streams now was too great.

"What have we done?" he said, conscious only of an all-embracing weariness which was the end product of having achieved something more than his greatest ambitions.

"You have given the human race a fleet to win its war with," said Artesha. "Watch."

Red did not understand how it was done, but the separate presents folded together and became one, and the objects which were important were in their proper place.

"So it was I who forced those temporal surges," he said. "And it was I who created the going-doubles." He remembered, but the memory was a poor shadow compared with the omnipotence he had briefly known.

Briefly? In a single *now*, like the *now* Artesha in her guise of the Being experienced. But she did not have to return from it to the tyranny of slow-seeping time. She had crossed the threshold of eternity. Almost, he found it in his heart to envy her.

"Listen!" said Artesha, and he heard Burma's voice.

"I am placing my fleet of approximately one million vessels at the disposal of Center. . . ."

The going-doubles had effected the final, incredibly delicate adjustments of the parallel presents. Now, it was complete.

"Now I have something else to do," said Artesha. "I have to alter—very slightly—the whole pattern of the universe, because it is now running, as one might say, at a small angle to the path it can most easily follow."

There was a brief pause. "After I have done so," Artesha went on, her tone seeming to change subtly, "I shall have achieved my purpose, and you will no longer know me. There is a little time—for you—in which you can ask questions if you wish."

Red cudgeled his tired brain. After omnipotence, omniscience . . .

"What is the eventual fate of the human race?" he said slowly, and knew as he asked what the answer must be.

"The same as that of the universe. To—keep going—and stop."

No, that direction was no good. There were too many questions to ask. He changed his mind. "Who was the other person with a special task?" he said. "What was it?"

"Chantal was the other person," said Artesha. "And her task—You know, I think."

"Burma," said Red with complete certainty.

"Of course. That is the one personal desire I have allowed myself in all this work. That is why I have something still to put right. Out of all the reshaping of history we have undertaken, I have left over one special person, who because of what was done was exactly the right person."

Some deep-sunk part of Red's mind flashed—like sunlight caught on a turning mirror—with a hint of jealousy. But his entire being was too suffused with the weariness of utter satisfaction for it to rise to the surface.

"It was too much, and had been for too long, to ask Burma to love a person trapped in metal," said Artesha, with her last hint of melancholy and pity.

Red knew that his tiredness would overtake him and drown him in only a moment. Forcing himself to form the words, he asked, "And what is your purpose—the one you will now achieve?"

"I shall have created myself as I am," said Artesha, and took two planetary bodies away from the Solar System at precisely selected instants of time. The work was no longer perfect, for there was nothing imperfect to compare it to.

It was all there was.

Magwareet stretched himself and rose to his feet. The defense of the Solar System was over. The power of the Enemy was broken, and in due course the still mighty fleet of Earth (it was good to be able to think that again! How wonderful to walk under blue sky, breathe air without

remembering that it was accounted for liter by liter!) would search man's opponents out and finish the job.

Burma, still a little awed at the magnitude of the disaster which had overwhelmed the Enemy, completed the task of assessing his casualties—which were light—and filed the report with Center. Turning away, he found himself looking at a girl with brown hair and an uptilted nose, and for the first time since Artesha's accident found himself admiring another woman without guilt.

Wymarin stared at his instruments, hoping to find a hint of how a fleet whose members almost precisely duplicated the ships already in space in the Solar System had penetrated what he still thought of as the fifth dimension.

Kepthin heard the news of the Enemy's defeat, took a shot of issue alcohol, and went to the research hall where the captured specimen waited dumbly in the confinement they had imposed on him at the beginning of Plan Red. "You poor bastard," the biologist said softly, and wondered in the same instant whether pity was not wasted on the creature. But there was no further need of the specimen now, and on a sudden impulse he brought a gun from a nearby arms rack and ended the Enemy's life.

Vyko awoke from some sort of a deep trance, wondering how it could be that the going-doubles of the people about him no longer affected his visions of the future, discovered that half a day had elapsed, and went to ask someone what had happened. He found time to ask himself how Chasnik, his former captain, would have reacted to the news that his staff magician would wind up planning the actions of a fleet of spacecraft mopping up among the Enemy.

Artesha took in the battle casualty reports with part of her mind; with the rest, she was engaged in analyzing the fantastic facts stored in the data banks of the section of her memory which had been restored to her at the outset of the battle. It would be a long job, but there was a promise of *something* at the end of it. . . .

Artesha began to discover what she had hidden from

herself about herself. In so doing, she began to create herself.

Except that she already *was*, and had been since the beginning and would be until almost the end of Time. Even the Being, she knew, required the universe in which to *be*.

This was neither the beginning, nor the end, for there is, was and will be, nothing but everything, which is the universe.

EPILOGUE

Los Angeles *Herald*, 16th March, 1957: SCULPTOR DIES IN FREAK ACCIDENT. Lightning claims well-known victim. Three Waters, 15th March. Victim of a freak lightning strike was sculptor Lawrence Hawkins at his home near here last night. A bolt struck the artificial leg he wore as the result of a childhood highway crash in which his parents were killed. Dr. Meade J. Calloway, who carried out an examination of his body, said death was instantaneous.

The Weather Bureau reported no thunderstorms in the area on the night in question. Chief Meteorologist Jack Ellis commented: "It may have been due to static electricity building up in a pocket of dry air. Weather does funny things sometimes."

Hawkins's death will be regretted in California art-loving circles. Still in his thirties, he was held to have great promise. He was unmarried.