

Chapter 23

"In the early days," said Karellen, "it was safe for us to go among them. But they no longer needed us: our work was done when we had gathered them together and given them a continent of their own. Watch."

The wall in front of Jan disappeared. Instead he was looking down from a height of a few hundred meters on to a pleasantly wooded country. The illusion was so perfect that he fought a momentary giddiness.

"This is five years later, when the second phase had begun." There were figures moving below, and the camera swooped down upon them like a bird of prey.

"This will distress you," said Karellen. "But remember that your standards no longer apply. You are not watching human children."

Yet that was the immediate impression that came to Jan's mind, and no amount of logic could dispel it. They might have been savages, engaged in some complex ritual dance. They were naked and filthy, with matted hair obscuring their eyes. As far as Jan could tell, they were of all ages from five to fifteen, yet they all moved with the same speed, precision, and complete indifference to their surroundings.

Then Jan saw their faces. He swallowed hard, and forced himself not to turn away. They were emptier than the faces of the dead, for even a corpse has some record carved by Time's chisel upon its features, to speak when the lips themselves are dumb. There was no more emotion or feeling here than in the face of a snake or an insect. The Overlords themselves were more human than this.

"You are searching for something that is no longer there," said Karellen. "Remember- they have no more identity than the cells in your own body. But linked together, they are something much greater than you." "Why do they keep moving like this?"

"We called it the Long Dance," replied Karellen. "They never sleep, you know, and this lasted almost a year. Three hundred million of them, moving in a controlled pattern over a whole continent. We've analyzed that pattern endlessly, but it means nothing, perhaps because we can see only the physical part of it-the small portion that's here on Earth. Possibly what we have called the Overmind is still training them, molding them into one unit before it can wholly absorb them into its being."

"But how did they manage about food? And what happened if they hit obstructions, like trees, or cliffs, or water?"

"Water made no difference: they could not drown. When they encountered obstacles, they sometimes damaged themselves, but they never noticed it. As for food-well, there was all the fruit and game they required. But now they have left that need behind, like so many others. For food is largely a source of energy, and they have learned to tap greater sources." The scene flickered as if a heat haze had passed over it. When it cleared, the movement below had ceased.

"Watch again," said Karellen. "It is three years later."

The little figures, so helpless and pathetic if one did not know the truth, stood motionless in forest and glade and plain. The camera roamed restlessly from one to the other: already, thought Jan, their faces were merging into a common mould. He had once seen some photographs made by the superposition of dozens of prints to give one "average" face. The result had been as empty, as void of character as this.

They seemed to be sleeping or entranced. Their eyes were tightly closed, and they showed no more awareness of their surroundings than did the trees under which they stood. What thoughts, Jan wondered, were echoing through the intricate network in which their minds were now no more-and yet no less-than the separate threads of some great tapestry? And a tapestry, he now realized, that covered many worlds and many races- and was growing still.

It happened with a swiftness that dazzled the eye and stunned the brain. At one moment Jan was looking down upon a beautiful, fertile country with nothing strange about it save the countless small statues scattered- yet not randomly over its length and breadth. And then in an instant all the trees and grass, all the living creatures that had inhabited this land, flickered out of existence and were gone. There were left only the still lakes, the winding rivers, the rolling brown hills, now stripped of their green carpet-and the silent, indifferent figures who had wrought all this destruction.

"Why did they do it?" gasped Jan.

"Perhaps the presence of other minds disturbed them- even the rudimentary minds of plants and animals. One day, we believe, they may find the material world equally distracting. And then, who knows what will happen? Now you understand why we withdrew when we had done our duty. We are still trying to study them, but we never enter their land or even send our instruments there. All we dare do is to observe from space."

"That was many years ago," said Jan. "What has happened since?"

"Very little. They have never moved in all that time, and take no notice of day or night, summer or winter. They are still testing their powers; some rivers have changed their courses, and there is one that flows uphill. But they have done nothing that seems to have any purpose."

"And they have ignored you completely?"

"Yes, though that is not surprising. The entity of which they are part knows all about us. It does not seem to care if we attempt to study it. When it wishes us to leave, or has a new task for us elsewhere, it will make its desires very obvious. Until then, we will remain here so that our scientists can gather what knowledge they may."

So this, thought Jan, with a resignation that lay beyond all sadness, was the end of man. It was an end that no prophet had ever foreseen- an end that repudiated optimism and pessimism alike. Yet it was fitting: it had the sublime inevitability of a great work of art. Jan had glimpsed the universe in all its awful immensity, and knew now that it was no place for man. He realized at last how vain, in the ultimate analysis, had been the dream that had lured him to the stars. For the road to the stars was a road that forked in two directions, and neither led to a goal that took any account of human hopes or fears.

At the end of one path were the Overlords. They had preserved their individually, their independent egos; they possessed self-awareness and the pronoun "I" had a meaning in their language. They had emotions, some at least of which were shared by humanity. But they were trapped, Jan realized now, in a cul-de-sac from which they could never escape. Their minds were ten- perhaps a hundred-times as powerful as men's. It made no difference in the final reckoning. They were equally helpless, equally overwhelmed by the unimaginable complexity of a galaxy of a hundred thousand million suns, and a cosmos of a hundred thousand million galaxies. And at the end of the other path? There lay the Overmind, whatever it might be, bearing the same relation to man as man bore to an amoeba. Potentially infinite, beyond mortality, how long had it been absorbing race after race as it spread across the stars? Did it too have desires, did it have goals it sensed dimly yet might never attain? Now it had drawn into its being all that the human race had ever achieved. This was not tragedy, but fulfillment. The billions of transient sparks of consciousness that had made up humanity would flicker no more like fireflies against the night. But they had not lived utterly in vain.

The last act, Jan knew, had still to come. It might occur tomorrow, or it might be centuries hence. Even the Overlords could not be certain. He understood their purpose now, what they had done with Man and why they still lingered upon Earth. Towards them he felt a great humility, as well as admiration for the inflexible patience that had kept them waiting here so long.

He never learned the full story of the strange symbiosis between the Overmind and its servants. According to Rashaverak, there had never been a time in his race's history when the Overmind was not there, though it had made no use of them until they had achieved a scientific civilization and could range through space to do its bidding.

"But why does it need you?" queried Jan. "With all its tremendous powers, surely it could do anything it pleased."

"No," said Rashaverak, "it has limits. In the past, we know, it has attempted to act directly upon the minds of other races, and to influence their cultural development. It's always failed, perhaps because the pull is too great. We are the interpreters-the guardians. Or, to use one of your own metaphors, we till the field until the crop is ripe. The Overmind collects the harvest-and we move on to another task. This is the fifth race whose apotheosis we have watched. Each time we learn a little more."

"And do you not resent being used as a tool by the Over-mind?"

"The arrangement has some advantages: besides, no-one of intelligence resents the inevitable."

That proposition, Jan reflected wryly, had never been fully accepted by mankind.

There were things beyond logic that the Overlords had never understood.

"It seems strange," said Jan, "that the Overmind chose you to do its work, if you have no trace of the parapsychical powers latent in mankind. How does it communicate with you and make its wishes known?"

"That is one question I cannot answer- and I cannot tell you the reason why I must keep the facts from you. One day, perhaps, you will know some of the truth."

Jan puzzled over this for a moment, but knew it was useless to follow this line of inquiry. He would have to change the subject and hope to pick up clues later.

"Tell me this, then," he said, "this is something else you've never explained. When your race first came to Earth, back in the distant past, what went wrong? Why had you become the symbol of fear and evil to us?"

Rashaverak smiled. He did not do this as well as Karellen could, but it was a fair imitation.

"No one ever guessed, and you see now why we could never tell you. There was only one event that could have made such an impact upon humanity. And that event was not at the dawn of history, but at its very end."

"What do you mean?" asked Jan.

"When our ships entered your skies a century and a half ago, that was the first meeting of our two races, though of course we had studied you from a distance. And yet you feared and recognized us, as we knew that you would. It was not precisely a memory. You have already had proof that time is more complex than your science ever imagined. For that memory was not of the past, but of the future-of those dosing years when your race knew that everything was finished. We did what we could, but it was not an easy end. And because we were there, we became identified with your race's death.

Yes, even while it was still ten thousand years in the future! It was as if a distorted echo had reverberated round the closed circle of time, from the future to the past. Call it not a memory, but a premonition."

The idea was hard to grasp, and for a moment Jan wrestled with it in silence. Yet he should have been prepared; he had already received proof enough that cause and event could reverse their normal sequence.

There must be such a thing as racial memory, and that memory was somehow independent of time. To it, the future and the past were one. That was why, thousands of years ago, men had already glimpsed a distorted image of the Overlords, through a mist of fear and terror.

"Now I understand," said the last man. The Last Man! Jan found it very hard to think of himself as that. When he had gone into space, he had accepted the possibility of eternal exile from the human race, and loneliness had not yet come upon him. As the years passed, the longing to see another human being might rise and overwhelm him, but for the present, the company of the Overlords prevented him from feeling utterly alone.

There had been men on Earth as little as ten years ago, but they had been degenerate survivors and Jan had lost nothing by missing them. For reasons which the Overlords could not explain, but which Jan suspected were largely psychological, there had been no children to replace those who had gone.

Homo sapiens were extinct.

Perhaps, lost in one of the still-intact cities, was the manuscript of some later-day Gibbon, recording the last days of the human race. If so, Jan was not sure that he would care to read it; Rashaverak had told him all that he wished to know.

Those who had not destroyed themselves had sought oblivion in ever more feverish activities, in fierce and suicidal sports that were often indistinguishable from minor wars. As the population had swiftly fallen, the ageing survivors had clustered together, a defeated army closing its ranks as it made its last retreat.

That final act, before the curtain came down for ever, must have been lit by flashes of heroism and devotion, darkened by savagery and selfishness. Whether it had ended in despair or resignation, Jan would never know.

There was plenty to occupy his mind. The Overlords' base was about a kilometer from a deserted villa, and Jan spent months fitting this out with equipment he had taken from the nearest town, some thirty kilometers distant. He had flown there with Rashaverak, whose friendship, he suspected, was not completely altruistic. The Overlord psychologist was still studying the last specimen of Homo sapiens.

The town must have been evacuated before the end, for the houses and even many of the public services were still in good order. It would have taken little work to restart the generators, so that the wide streets glowed once more with the illusion of life. Jan toyed with the idea, then abandoned it as too morbid. The one thing he did not wish to do was to brood upon the past.

There was everything here that he needed to maintain himself for the rest of his life, but what he wanted most was an electronic piano and certain Bach transcriptions. He had never had as much time for music as he would have liked, and now he would make up for it. When he was not performing himself, he played tapes of the great symphonies and concertos, so that the villa was never silent. Music had become his talisman against the loneliness which, one day, must surely overwhelm him.

Often he would go for long walks on the hills, thinking of all that had happened in the few months since he had last seen Earth. He had never thought, when he said goodbye to Sullivan eighty terrestrial years ago, that the last generation of mankind was already in the womb.

What a young fool he had been! Yet he was not sure that he regretted his action; had he stayed on Earth, he would have witnessed those dosing years over which time had now drawn a veil. Instead, he had leap-frogged past them into the future, and had learned the answers to questions that no other man would ever know. His curiosity was almost satisfied, but sometimes he wondered why the Overlords were waiting, and what would happen when their patience was at last rewarded.

But most of the time, with a contented resignation that comes normally to a man only at the end of a long and busy life, he sat before the keyboard and filled the air with his beloved

Bach. Perhaps he was deceiving himself, perhaps this was some merciful trick of the mind, but now it seemed to Jan that this was what he had always wished to do. His secret ambition had at last dared to emerge into the full light of consciousness.

Jan had always been a good pianist- and now he was the finest in the world.

Chapter 24

IT was Rashaverak who brought him the news, but he had already guessed it. In the small hours of the morning a nightmare had awakened him, and he had not been able to regain sleep. He could not remember the dream, which was very strange, for he believed that all dreams could be recalled if one tried hard enough immediately after waking. All he could remember of this was that he had been a small boy again, on a vast and empty plain, listening to a great voice calling in an unknown language.

The dream had disturbed him: he wondered if it was the first onslaught of loneliness upon his mind. Restlessly, he walked out of the villa on to the neglected lawn.

A full moon bathed the scene with a golden light so brilliant that he could see perfectly. The immense gleaming cylinder of Karellen's ship lay beyond the buildings of the Overlord base, towering above them and reducing them to manmade proportions. Jan looked at the ship, trying to recall the emotions it had once roused in him. There was a time when it had been an unattainable goal, a symbol of all that he had never really expected to achieve. And now it meant nothing.

How quiet and still it wail The Overlords, of course I would be as active as ever, but for the moment there was no sign of them. He might have been alone on Earth-as, indeed, in a very real sense he was. He glanced up at the Moon, seeking some familiar sight on which his thoughts could rest.

There were the ancient, well-remembered seas. He had been forty light-years into space, yet he had never walked on those silent, dusty plains less than two light-seconds away. For a moment he amused himself trying to locate the crater Tycho. When he did discover it, he was puzzled to find that gleaming speck further from the center line of the disc than he had thought. And it was then that he realized that the dark oval of the Mare Crisium was missing altogether.

The face that her satellite now turned towards the Earth was not the one that had looked down on the world since the dawn of life. The Moon had begun to turn upon its axis. That could mean only one thing. On the other side of the Earth, in the land that they had stripped so suddenly of life, they were emerging from their long trance. As a waking child may stretch its arms to greet the day, they too were flexing their muscles and playing with their new-found powers.

"You have guessed correctly," said Rashaverak. "It is no longer safe for us to stay. They may ignore us still, but we cannot take the risk. We leave as soon as our equipment can be loaded-probably in two or three hours."

He looked up at the sky, as if afraid that some new miracle was about to blaze forth. But all was peaceful: the Moon had set, and only a few clouds rode high upon the west wind.

"It does not matter greatly if they tamper with the Moon," Rashaverak added, "but suppose they begin to interfere with the Sun? We shall leave instruments behind, of course, so that we can learn what happens."

"I shall stay," said Jan abruptly. "I have seen enough of the universe. There's only one thing I'm curious about now- and that is the fate of my own planet."

Very gently, the ground trembled underfoot.

"I was expecting that," Jan continued. "If they alter the Moon's spin, the angular momentum must go somewhere. So the Earth is slowing down. I don't know which puzzles me more- how they are doing it, or why."

"They are still playing," said Rashaverak. "What logic is there in the actions of a child? And in many ways the entity that your race has become is still a child. It is not yet ready to unite with the Overmind.

But very soon it will be, and then you will have the Earth to your own."

He did not complete the sentence, and Jan finished it for him.

"If, of course, the Earth still exists."

"You realize that danger- and yet you will stay?"

"Yes. I have been home five- or is it six? years now. Whatever happens, I'll have no complaints."

"We were hoping," began Rashaverak slowly, "that you would wish to stay. There is something that you can do for us. . . ."

The glare of the Stardrive dwindled and died, somewhere out there beyond the orbit of Mars. Along that road, thought Jan, he alone had travelled, out of all the billions of human beings who had lived and died on Earth. And no one would ever travel it again.

The world was his. Everything he needed- all the material possessions anyone could ever desire- were his for the taking. But he was no longer interested. He feared neither the loneliness of the deserted planet, nor the presence that still rested here in the last moments before it went to seek its unknown heritage. In the inconceivable backwash of that departure, Jan did not expect that he and his problems would long survive.

That was well. He had done all that he had wished to do, and to drag out a pointless life on this empty world would have been unbearable anticlimax. He could have left with the Overlords, but for what purpose? For he knew, as no-one else had ever known, that Karellen spoke the truth when he had said:

"The stars are not for Man."

He turned his back upon the night and walked through the vast entrance of the Overlord base. Its size affected him not in the least: sheer immensity no longer had any power over his mind. The lights were burning redly, driven by energies that could feed them for ages yet. On either side lay machines whose secrets he would never know, abandoned by the Overlords in their retreat. He went past them, and clambered awkwardly up the great steps until he had reached the control room.

The spirit of the Overlords still lingered here: their machines were still alive, doing the bidding of their now far-distant masters. What could he add, wondered Jan, to the information they were already hurling into space?

He climbed into the great chair and made himself as comfortable as he could. The microphone, already alive, was waiting for him: something that was the equivalent of a TV camera must be watching, but he could not locate it.

Beyond the desk and its meaningless instrument panels, the wide windows looked out into the starry night, across a valley sleeping beneath a gibbous moon, and to the distant range of mountains. A river wound along the valley, glittering here and there as the moonlight struck upon some patch of troubled water. It was all so peaceful. It might have been thus at Man's birth as it was now at his ending.

Out there across unknown millions of kilometers of space, Karellen would be waiting. It was strange to think that the ship of the Overlords was racing away from Earth almost as swiftly as his signal could speed after it. Almost- but not quite. It would be a long chase, but his words would catch the Supervisor and he would have repaid the debt he owed. How much of this, Jan wondered, had Karellen planned, and how much was masterful improvisation? Had the Supervisor deliberately let him escape into space, almost a century ago, so that he could return to play the role he was fulfilling now?

No, that seemed too fantastic. But Jan was certain now, that Karellen was involved in some vast and complicated plot. Even while he served it, he was studying the Overmind with all the instruments at his command. Jan suspected that it was not only scientific curiosity that inspired the Supervisor: perhaps the Overlords had dreams of one day escaping from their peculiar bondage, when they had learned enough about the powers they served. That Jan could add to that knowledge by what he was now doing seemed hard to believe. "Tell us what you see," Rashaverak had said. "The picture that reaches your eyes will be duplicated by our cameras. But the message that enters your brain may be very different, and it could tell us a great deal." Well, he would do his best.

"Still nothing to report," he began. "A few minute, ago I saw the trail of your ship disappear in the sky. "The Moon is just past full, and almost half its familiar side has now turned away from Earth- but I suppose you already know that."

Jan paused, feeling slightly foolish. There was something incongruous, even faintly absurd, about what he was doing.

Here was the climax of all history, yet he might have been a radio-commentator at a race-track or a boxing-ring. Then he shrugged his shoulders and put the thought aside. At all moments of greatness, he suspected, bathos had never been very far away- and certain he alone could sense its presence here.

"There have been three slight 'quakes in the last hour," he continued. "Their control of Earth's spin must be marvelous, but not quite perfect.... You know, Karellen, I'm going to find it very hard to say anything your instruments haven't already told you. It might have helped if you'd given me some idea of what to expect, and warned me how long I may have to wait. If nothing happens, I'll report again in six hours, as we arranged.
"Hello! They must have been waiting for you to leave.

Something's starting to happen. The stars are becoming dimmer. It's as if a great cloud is coming up, very swiftly, over all the sky. But it isn't really a cloud. It seems to have some sort of structure- I can glimpse a hazy network of lines and bands that keep changing their positions. It's almost as if the stars are tangled in a ghostly spider's web.

"The whole network is beginning to glow-to pulse with light, exactly as if it were alive. And I suppose it is: or is it something as much beyond life as that is above the inorganic world?
"The glow seems to be shifting to one part of the sky-wait a minute while I move round to the other window.

"Yes- I might have guessed. There's a great burning column, like a tree of fire, reaching above the western horizon. It's a long way off, right round the world. I know where it springs from: they're on their way at last, to become part of the Overmind. Their probation is ended: they're leaving the last remnants of matter behind.

"As that fire spreads upwards from the Earth, I can see the network becoming firmer and less misty. In places, it seems almost solid-yet the stars are still shining faintly through it.
"I've just realized. It's not exactly the same, but the thing I saw shooting up above your world, Karellen, was very much like this. Was that part of the Overmind? I suppose you hid the truth from me so that I would have no preconceived ideas- so that I'd be an unbiased observer. I wish I knew what your cameras were showing you now, to compare it with what my mind imagines I'm seeing!

"Is this how it talks to you, Karellen, in colors and shapes like these? I've remembered the control screens on your ship and the patterns that went across them, speaking to you in some visual language which your eyes could read.

"Now it looks exactly like the curtains of the aurora, dancing and flickering across the stars. Why, that's what it really is, I'm sure-a great auroral storm.

The whole landscape is lit up- it's brighter than day-reds and golds and greens are chasing each other across the sky- oh, it's beyond words, it doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one to see it- I never thought such colors- "The storm's dying down, but the great misty network is still there. I think that aurora was only a by-product of whatever energies are being released up there on the frontier of space.

"Just a minute: I've noticed something else. My weight: decreasing. What does that mean? I've dropped a pencil- it's falling slowly.

Something's happened to gravity- there's a great wind coming up-I can see the trees tossing their branches down there in the valley.

"Of course-the atmosphere's escaping. Sticks and stones are rising into the sky, almost as if the Earth itself is trying to follow them out into space. There's a great cloud of dust, whipped up by the gale. It's becoming hard to see. . . perhaps It will clear in a moment.

"Yes- that's better. Everything movable has been stripped away- the dust clouds have vanished. I wonder how long this building will stand? And it's getting hard to breathe- I must try and talk more slowly.

"I can see clearly again. That great burning column is still there, but it's constricting, narrowing-it looks like the funnel of a tornado, about to retract into the clouds. And- oh, this is hard to describe, but just then I felt a great wave of emotion sweep over me. It wasn't joy or sorrow; it was a sense of fulfillment, achievement. Did I imagine it? Or did it come from outside? I don't know.

"And now- this can't be all imagination-the world feels empty. Utterly empty. It's like listening to a radio set that's suddenly gone dead. And the sky is clear again-the misty web has gone. What world will it go to next, Karellen? And will you be there to serve it still?

"Strange: everything around me is unaltered. I don't know why, but somehow I'd thought that" Jan stopped. For a moment he struggled for words, then closed his eyes in an effort to regain control. There was no room for fear or panic now: he had a duty to perform- a duty to Man, and a duty to Karellen.

Slowly at first, like a man awaking from a dream, he began to speak.

"The buildings round me- the ground-the mountains- everything's like glass- I can see through it. Earth's dissolving- my weight has almost gone. You were right-they've finished playing with their toys.

"It's only a few seconds away. There go the mountains, like wisps of smoke. Goodbye, Karellen, Rashaverak- I am sorry for you. Though I cannot understand it, I've seen what my race became. Everything we ever achieved has gone up there into the stars. Perhaps that's what the old religions were trying to say. But they got it all wrong: they thought mankind was so important, yet we're only one race in- do you know how many? Yet now we've become something that you could never be.

"There goes the river. No change in the sky, though. I can hardly breathe. Strange to see the Moon still shining up there. I'm glad they left it, but it will be lonely now- "The light! From beneath me-inside the Earth-shining upward, through the rocks, the ground, everything-growing brighter, brighter, blinding-"

In a soundless concussion of light, Earth's core gave up its hoarded energies. For a little while the gravitational waves crossed and re-crossed the Solar System, disturbing ever so slightly the orbits of the planets. Then the Suit's remaining children pursued their ancient paths once more, as corks floating on a placid lake ride out the tiny ripples set in motion by a falling stone.

There was nothing left of Earth. They had teethered away the last atoms of its substance. It had nourished them, through the fierce moments of their inconceivable metamorphosis, as the food stored in a grain of wheat feeds the infant plant while it climbs towards the Sun. Six thousand million kilometers beyond the orbit of Pluto, Karellen sat before a suddenly darkened screen. The record was complete, the mission ended; he was homeward bound for the world he had left so long ago. The weight of centuries was upon him, and a sadness that no logic could dispel. He did not mourn for Man: his sorrow was for his own race, forever barred from greatness by forces it could not overcome.

For all their achievements, thought Karellen, for all their mastery of the physical universe, his people were no better than a tribe that had passed its whole existence upon some flat and dusty plain. Far off were the mountains, where power and beauty dwelt, where the thunder sported above the glaciers and the air was clear and keen. There the sun still walked, transfiguring the peaks with glory, when all the land below was wrapped in darkness. And they could only watch and wonder: they could never scale those heights.

Yet, Karellen knew, they would hold fast until the end: they would await without despair whatever destiny was theirs. They would serve the Overmind because they had no choice, but even in that service they would not lose their souls.

The great control screen flared for a moment with somber, ruby light: without conscious effort, Karellen read the message of its changing patterns. The ship was leaving the frontiers of the Solar System: the energies that powered the Stardrive were ebbing fast, but they had done their work.

Karellen raised his hand, and the picture changed once more. A single brilliant star glowed in the center of the screen: no-one could have told, from this distance, that the Sun had ever possessed planets or that one of them had now been lost. For a long time Karellen stared back across that swiftly widening gulf, while many memories raced through his vast and labyrinthine mind. In silent farewell, he saluted the men he had known, whether they had hindered or helped him to his purpose.

No one dared disturb him or interrupt his thoughts: and presently he turned his back upon the dwindling Sun.