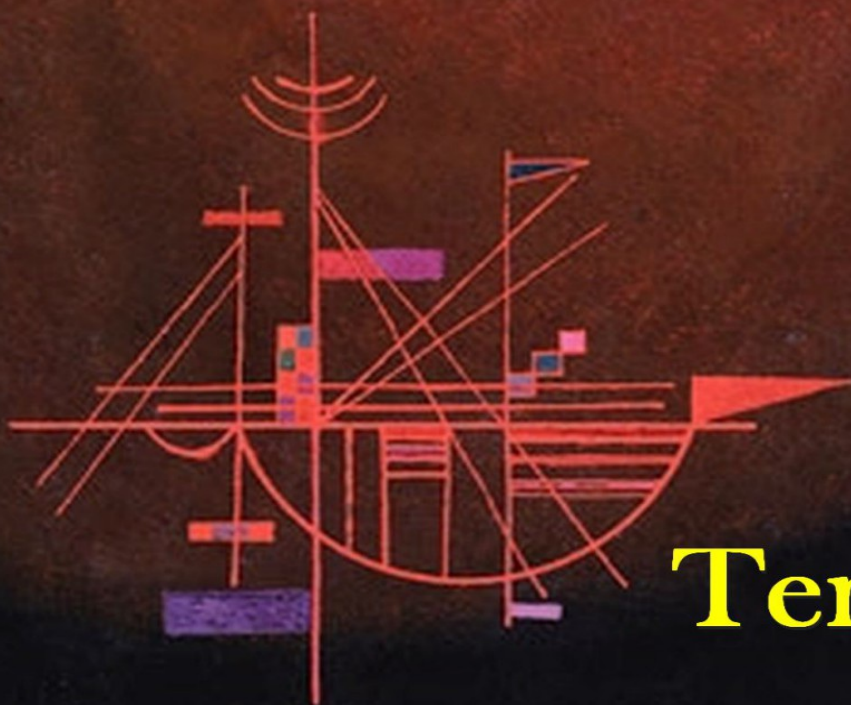


# **WARLORD OF KOR**



**Terry Carr**

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

### **GOD, MACHINE—OR LISTENING POST FOR OUTSIDERS?**

Horng sat opposite the tiny, fragile creature who held a microphone, its wires attached to an interpreting machine. He blinked his huge eyes slowly, his stiff mouth fumblingly forming words of a language his race had not used for thirty thousand years.

“Kor was ... is ... God ... Knowledge.” He had tried to convey this to the small creatures who had invaded his world, but they did not heed. Their ill-equipped brains were trying futilely to comprehend the ancient race memory of his people.

Now they would attempt further to discover the forbidden directives of Kor. Horng remembered, somewhere far back in the fossil layers of his thoughts, a warning. They must be stopped! If he had to, he would stamp out these creatures who were called “humans.”

## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

Rynason

His mental quest led him too close to a dangerous secret.

Manning

His ideas for colonizing that world didn't include survival for its native beings.

Malhomme

This ruffian-preacher could be the one man that everyone might have to trust.

Mara

She wanted to save the aliens, but did they want to be saved?

Horn

In the recesses of his brain was the key to a dead civilization—or a live menace....

Kor

Was it a legend, a king, a thing, or a trap from another galaxy?

# ONE

Lee Rynason sat forward on the faded red-stone seat, watching the stylus of the interpreter as the massive grey being in front of him spoke, its dry, leathery mouth slowly and stumbingly forming the words of a spoken language its race had not used for over thirty thousand years. The stylus made no sound in the thin air of Hirlaj as it passed over the plasticene notepaper; the only sounds in the ancient building were those of the alien's surprisingly high and thin voice coming at intervals and Rynason's own slightly labored breathing.

He did not listen to the alien's voice—by now he had heard it often enough so that it was merely irritating in its thin dryness, like old parchments being rubbed together. He watched the stylus as it jumped along sporadically:

TEBRON MARL WAS OUR ... PRIEST KING HERO. NOT PRIEST BUT ONE WHO KNEW ... THAT IS PRIEST.

Rynason was a slender, sandy-haired man in his late twenties. A sharp scar from a knife cut left a line across his forehead over his right eyebrow. His eyes, perhaps brown, perhaps green—the light on Hirlaj was sometimes deceptive—were soft, but narrowed with an intent alertness. He raised the interpreter's mike and said, "How long ago?"

The stylus recorded the Earthman's question too, but Rynason did not watch it. He looked up at the bulk of the alien, watching for the slow closing of its eyes, so slow that it could not be called a blink, that would show it had understood the question. The interpreter could feed the question direct to the telepathic alien, but there was no guarantee that it would be understood.

The eyes, resting steadily on him, closed and opened and in a few moments came the Hirlaji's dry voice.

THE GREAT AGE WAS IN THE EIGHTEENTH GENERATION PAST ... SEVEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO.

Rynason calculated quickly. Translating that to about 8200 Earth-standard years and subtracting, that would make it about the seventeenth century. About the time of the Restoration in England, when the western hemisphere of Earth was still being colonized. Eighteen generations ago on Hirlaj. He read the date into the mike for the stylus to record, and sat back and stretched.

They were sitting amid the ruins of a vast hall, grey dust covering the stone floor all around them. Dry, hard vegetation had crept in through cracks and breaks in the walls and fallen across the dusty interior shadows of the building. Occasionally a small, quick animal would dart from a dark wall across the floor to another shadow, its feet soundless in the dust.

Above Rynason the enormous arch of the Hirlaji dome loomed darkly against the deep cerulean blue of the sky. The lines of all Hirlaji architecture were deceptively simple, but Rynason had already found that if he tried to follow the curves and angles he would soon find his head swimming. There was a quality to these ancient buildings which was not quite understandable to a Terran mind, as though the old Hirlaji had built them on geometric principles just slightly at a tangent from those of Earth. The curve of the arch drew Rynason's eyes along its silhouette almost hypnotically. He caught himself, and shook his head, and turned again to the alien before him.

The creature's name, as well as it could be rendered in a Terran script, was Horng. The head of the alien was dark and hairless, leathery, weathered; the light wires of the interpreter trailed down and across the floor from where they were clamped to the deep indentations of the temples. Massive boney ridges circled the shadowed eyes set low on the head, directly above the wide mouth which always hung open while the Hirlaji breathed in long gulps of air. Two atrophied nostrils were situated on either side and slightly below the eyes. The neck was so thick and massive that it was practically nonexistent, blending the head with the shoulders and trunk, on which the dry skin stretched so thin that Rynason could see the solid bone of the chest wall. Two squat arms hung from the shoulders, terminating in four-digitated hands on which two sets of blunt fingers were opposed; Horng kept moving them constantly, in what Rynason automatically interpreted as a nervous habit. The lower body was composed of two heavily-muscled legs jointed so that they could move either forward or backward, and the feet had four stubby but powerful toes radiating from the center. The Hirlaji wore a dark garment of

something which looked like wood-fibre, hanging from the head and gathered together by a cord just below the chest-wall.

Rynason, since arriving on the planet three weeks before as one of a team of fifteen archaeological workers, had been interviewing Horng almost every day, but still he often found himself remembering only with difficulty that this was an intelligent being; Horng was so slow-moving and uncommunicative most of the time that he almost seemed like a mound of leather, like a pile of hides thrown together in a corner. But he was intelligent, and in his mind he held perhaps the entire history of his race.

Rynason lifted the interpreter-mike again. “Was Tebron Marl king of all Hirlaj?”

Horng’s eyes slowly closed and opened. **TEBRON MARL WAS RULER LEADER IN THE REGION OF MINES. HE UNITED ALL OF HIRLAJ AND WAS PRIEST RULER.**

“How did he unite the planet?”

**TEBRON LIVED AT THE END OF THE BARBARIC AGE. HE CONQUERED THE PLANET BY VIOLENCE AND DROVE THE ANCIENT PRIEST CASTE FROM THE TEMPLE.**

“But the reign of Tebron Marl is remembered as an era of peace.”

**WHEN HE WAS PRIEST KING HE HELD THE PEACE. HE ENDED THE BARBARIC AGE.**

Rynason suddenly sat forward, watching the stylus record these words. “Then it was Tebron who abolished war on Hirlaj?”

YES.

Rynason felt a thrill go through him. This was what they had all been searching for—the point in the history of Hirlaj when wars had ceased, when the Hirlaji had given themselves over to completely peaceful living. He knew already that the transition had been sharp and sudden. It was the last question mark in the sketchy history of Hirlaj which the survey team had compiled since its arrival—how had the Hirlaji managed so abruptly to establish and maintain an era of peace which had lasted unbroken to the present?

It was difficult even to think of these huge, slow-moving creatures as

warriors ... but warriors they had been, for thousands of their years, gradually building their culture and science until, apparently almost overnight, the wars had ceased. Since then the Hirlaji moved in their slow way through their world, growing more complacent with the passage of ancient generations, growing passive, and, eventually, decadent. Now there were only some two dozen of the race left alive.

They were telepathic, these leathery aliens, and behind those shadowed eyes they held the entire memories of their race. Experiences communicated telepathically through the centuries had formed a memory pool which each of the remaining Hirlaji shared. They could not, of course, integrate in their own minds all of that immense store of memories and understand it all clearly ... but the memories were there.

It was at the same time a boon and a trial for Rynason and the rest of the survey team. They were trained archaeologists ... as well schooled as possible on the worlds of this far-flung sector near the constantly outward-moving Edge, the limit of Terran expansion. Rynason could operate and if necessary repair the portable carbondaters of the team, he knew the fine points of excavation and restoration of artifacts and had studied so many types of alien anatomy that he could make at least an educated guess at the reconstruction of beings from fragmentary fossil-remains or incomplete skeletons ... or exoskeletons.

But the situation on Hirlaj was one which had never before been encountered; here he was not dealing with a dead race's remains, but directly with members of that race. It was not a matter of sifting fragmentary evidence of science, crafts and customs, finding out what he could and piecing together a composite picture from the remains at hand, as they had done with the artifacts of the Outsiders, those unknown beings who had left the ruins of their outposts and colonies in six galaxies already explored and settled by the Earthmen; all he had to do here was ask the right questions and he would get his answers.

Sitting there under that massive dome, with the quiet-eyed alien before him, Rynason couldn't completely suppress a feeling of ridiculousness. The problem was that the Hirlaji could not be depended upon to be able to find a particular memory-series in their minds; the race memory was such a



conglomeration that all they could do was strike randomly at memories until the correct area was touched, and then follow up from there. The result was usually irrelevant and unrelated information.

But he seemed to be getting somewhere now. Having spent three weeks with Horng, gradually learning a little about the ways of his alien mind, he had at last run across what might be the important turning-point in the history of Hirlaj.

Horng spoke, and Rynason turned to watch the stylus of the interpreter as it moved across the paper. **TEBRON SPENT HIS YEARS BRINGING HIRLAJ TOGETHER. FIRST BY CONQUEST THEN BY ... LEADERSHIP LAW. HE FORBADE ... SCIENCES QUESTINGS EXPLORATIONS WHICH DREW HIRLAJ APART.**

“What were these sciences?”

Horng closed and opened his eyes. **MANY OF THEM ARE FORGOTTEN.**

Rynason looked up at the alien, who sat quietly on a rough stone benchlike seat. “But your race doesn’t forget.”

**THE MEMORIES ARE VERY FAR BACK AND ARE HARD TO FIND. THERE HAS BEEN NO EFFORT TO RETAIN CERTAIN MEMORIES.**

“But you can remember these if you try?”

Horng’s head dipped to one side, a characteristic movement which Rynason had not yet managed to interpret. The shadowed, wrinkled eyes closed slowly. **THE MEMORIES ARE THERE. THEY ARE THE SCIENCES OF KOR. MANY OF THEM ARE WARLIKE SCIENCES.**

“You’ve mentioned Kor before. Who was he?”

**KOR WAS IS GOD KNOWLEDGE.**

Rynason frowned. The interpreter automatically translated terms which had no reliable parallel in Terran by giving two or three related words, and usually the concept was fairly clear. Not quite so with this sentence.

“God and knowledge are two different words in our language,” he said. “Can you explain your term more fully?”

Horng shifted heavily on his seat, his blunt fingers tapping each other. **KOR**

WAS IS EXISTENCE WHICH WE WORSHIP OBEY ADMIRE FOLLOW.  
ALSO ESSENCE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE SCIENCE QUESTING.

Rynason, watching the stylus, pursed his lips. “Mm,” he said softly, and shrugged his shoulders. Kor was apparently some sort of god, but the interpreter didn’t seem capable of translating the term precisely.

“What were the sciences of Kor?”

There was a silence as the stylus finished moving across the paper, and Rynason looked up at Horng. The alien’s eyes were closed and he had stopped the constant motion of his leathery grey fingers; he sat immobile, like a giant statue, almost a part of the complex of the hall and the crumbling domed building. Rynason waited.

The silence remained for a long time in the dry air of the empty hall. Rynason saw from the corner of his eye one of the dark little scavengers darting out of a gaping window. He could almost hear, it seemed, the noise of the brawling, makeshift town the Earthmen had established a little less than a mile away from the Hirlaji ruins, where already the nomads and adventurers and drifters had erected a cluster of prefab metal buildings and were settling in.

“What were the sciences of Kor?” Rynason asked again, not wanting to think of the cheapness and dirt of the Earth outpost which huddled so near to the Hirlaji domes.

He felt Horng’s quiet gaze, heavy with centuries, resting on him. THEY  
WERE ARE THOSE SCIENCES QUESTINGS WHICH KOR  
PROCLAIMED INFORMED WERE SACRED PART OF THE ESSENCE.

“Part of Kor?”

Horng’s head dipped to one side. APPROXIMATELY.

“How is this known? Tebron broke the power of the priesthood, didn’t he?”

TEBRON REPLACED THE PRIESTS. THE KNOWLEDGE WAS GIVEN  
TO TEBRON.

“Including the information that these sciences were prohibited?”

Horng shifted forward, like a massive block of stone wavering. His fingers moved briefly and then rested. THE MEMORIES ARE BURIED DEEPLY.  
TEBRON PROCLAIMED THIS PROHIBITION AFTER

COMMUNICATING WITH KOR.

Rynason's head jerked up from the interpreter. "Tebron spoke with Kor?"

After a pause, Horng's dry voice came. APPROXIMATELY. THERE WAS ... COMMUNICATION RAPPORT. TEBRON WAS KING PRIEST.

"Then Tebron made this prohibition in the name of Kor. When did this occur?"

THE KNOWLEDGE PROHIBITION WAS COMMUNICATED TO HIRLAJ WHEN TEBRON ASSUMED POWER RIGHT.

"The same day?"

THE DAY AFTER. TEBRON COMMUNICATED WITH KOR IMMEDIATELY AFTER OUSTING REPLACING THE PRIESTS.

Rynason watched Horng's replies as they were recorded by the interpreter; he was frowning. So this dawn-era king was supposed to have spoken, perhaps telepathically, with the god of the Hirlaji. Could he have simply claimed to have done so in an effort to stabilize his own power? But the fact that this race was telepathic threw some doubt on that supposition.

"Are there memories of Tebron's conversation with Kor?" he asked.

Horng's eyes closed and opened in acknowledgement, and then abruptly the alien rose to his feet. He moved slowly past Rynason to the base of a long, sweeping flight of stairs which led upward toward the empty dome, trailing the wires of the interpreter. Rynason moved to unplug the wires, but Horng stopped at the base of the stairs, looking up along the curving ramp to where it ended in a blunt, weathered break two-thirds of the way up. Rubble lay below the break.

Rynason watched the grey being staring silently up those broken steps, and asked softly, "What are you doing?"

Horng, still gazing upward, dipped his head to one side. THERE IS NO PURPOSE. He turned and came slowly back to his stone seat.

Rynason grinned wryly. He was beginning to get used to such things from Horng, whose mind often seemed to run in non sequiturs. It was as though the alien's perceptions of the present were as jumbled as the welter of memories he held. Crazy old mound of leather.

But he was not crazy, of course; his mind simply ran in a way that was alien to the Earthmen. Rynason was beginning to learn to respect that alien way, if not to understand it.

“Are there memories of Tebron’s conversation with Kor?” Rynason asked again.

TEBRON COMMUNICATED WITH KOR IMMEDIATELY AFTER OUSTING THE PRIESTS. IT OCCURRED IN THE TEMPLE.

“Are there memories of what was said?”

Horng sat silently, perhaps in thought. His reply didn’t come for several minutes.

THE MEMORIES ARE BURIED DEEPLY.

“*Can you remember the actual communication?*”

Horng’s head tilted to one side in a peculiarly strained fashion; Rynason could see a muscle jumping where the alien’s neck blended with his torso. THE MEMORIES ARE BURIED SO DEEPLY. I CANNOT REACH THEM.

Rynason gazed pensively at the interpreter as these words were recorded. What could have happened during that conversation that would have caused its memory to be so deeply buried?

“Can you find among any of the rest of Tebron’s memories any thoughts about Kor?”

YES. TEBRON HAD MEMORIES THAT HE HAD COMMUNICATED WITH KOR, BUT THESE ARE FLEETING. THERE IS NOTHING CLEAR.

The Hirlaji was shaking, his entire body trembling with some sort of tension which even communicated itself through the interpreter, causing the stylus to quaver and jump forward, dragging a jagged line across the paper. Rynason stared up at the alien, feeling a chill down his back which seemed to penetrate through to his chest and lungs. This massive creature was shaking like the rumbling warnings of an earthquake, his eyes cast downward from the deep shadows of their sockets; Rynason could almost feel the weight of their gaze like a heavy, dark blanket. He lifted the interpreter’s mike slowly.

“Your race does not forget,” he said softly. “Why can’t you remember this conversation?”

Horng’s four-digited hands clasped tightly and the powerful tendons stood out starkly on the heavy wrists as Horng drew in long breaths of air, the sound of his breathing loud in the great space under the dome.

THERE IS NOTHING CLEAR. THERE IS NOTHING CLEAR.

## TWO

The Earthman called the town Hirlaj too, because the spaceport was there. It was a new town, only a few months old, but the gleaming alloys of the buildings were already coated with dirt and pitted by the frequent dust storms that swept through. Garbage littered the alleys; its odor was strange but still foul in the alien atmosphere. The small, darting creatures were here too, foraging in the alleys and the outskirts of the town, where the streets ended in garbage heaps and new cemeteries or faded into the trackless flat where the spacers touched down.

The Earthmen filled the streets ... drinking, fighting, laughing and cursing, arguing over money or power or, sometimes, women. The women here were hard and self-sufficient, following the path of Terran expansion in the stars and taking what they felt was due them as women or what they could get as men. Supply houses did a thriving business, their prices high between shipments on the spacers from the inner worlds; bars and gambling houses stayed open all night; rooming houses and restaurants and laundries displayed crude handlettered signs along the streets.

Rynason pushed his way through a jostling crowd outside the door of a bar. He was supposed to meet the head of his Survey team here—Rice Manning, who had been pushing the survey as hard as he could since the day they'd set foot on Hirlaj. Manning was hard and ambitious—a leader of men, Rynason thought sardonically as he surveyed the tables in the dim interior. The floor of the bar was a dirty plastic-metal alloy, already scuffed and in places bloodstained. The tables were of the cheap, light metals so common on the spacer-supplied worlds of the Edge, and they wobbled.

The low-ceilinged room was crowded with men. Rynason didn't know many of them by name, but he recognized a lot of the faces. The men of the Edge, though they lacked money, education, often brains and usually ethics, at least had the quality of distinctiveness: they didn't fit the half-dozen convenient molds which the highly developed culture of the inner worlds fitted over the

more civilized citizens of the Terran Federation. These men were too self-interested to follow the group-thoughts which controlled the centers of empire, and the seams and wrinkles of their faces stamped a rough kind of individuality even more visually upon them.

Of them all, the man who was instantly recognizable in any crowd like this was Rene Malhomme; Rynason immediately saw the man in one corner of the room. He stood six and a half feet tall, heavily muscled and a bit wild-eyed; his greying hair fell in disorder over his dirty forehead and sprayed out over his ears. He was surrounded by laughing and shouting men; Rynason couldn't tell from this distance whether he was engaged in one of his usual heated arguments on religion or in his other avocation of recounting stories of the women he had "converted". He waved a black-lettered sign saying REPENT! over his head—but then, he always did.

Rynason found Manning in the back, sitting under a cheap print of a Picasso nude with cold light trained on it in typically bad taste. He had a woman with him. Rynason recognized her—Mara Stephens, in charge of communications and supplies for the survey team. She was a strange girl, aloof but not hard, and she carried herself with a quiet dignity. What was she doing with Manning?

He passed a waiter on his way to the table and ordered a drink. Malhomme saw him as he passed: "Lee Rynason! Come and join me in repentance! Give your soul to God and your money to the barman, for as the prophet sayeth, lo, I am dry! Join us!"

Rynason grinned and shook his head, walking past. He grabbed one of the light-metal chairs and sat down next to Mara.

"You wanted to see me," he said to Manning.

Manning looked up at him to apparent surprise. "Lee! Yes, yes—sit down. Wait, we'll get you a drink."

So he was in that kind of a mood. "I've got one coming," Rynason said. "What's our problem today?"

Manning smiled broadly. "No problem, Lee; no problem at all. Not unless you want to make one." He chuckled goodnatureedly, a tacit statement that he was expecting no such thing. "I've got good news today, by god. You tell

him, Mara.”

Rynason turned to the girl, who smiled briefly. “It just came over the telecom,” she said. “Manning has a good chance for the governorship here. The Council is supposed to announce its decision in two weeks.”

Rynason looked over at Manning, his face expressionless. “Congratulations. How did this happen?”

“I’ve got an inside track; friend of mine knows several of the big guys. Throws parties, things like that. He’s been putting in a word for me, here and there.”

“Isn’t this a bit out of your line?” Rynason said.

Manning sat back, a large man with close-cropped dark hair and heavy features. His beard was trimmed to a thin line along the ridge of his jaw—a style that was popular on the inner worlds, but rarely seen here on the Edge. “This *is* my line,” he said. “God, this is what I was after when I took this damned job. Survey teams are a dime a dozen out here, Lee; it’s no job for a man.”

“We’ve got sort of a special case here,” Rynason said evenly, glancing at Mara. She smiled at him. “We haven’t run into any alien races before that were intelligent.”

Manning laughed, and took a long swallow of his drink. “Twenty-six lousy horsefaces—now there’s an important discovery for you. No, Lee, this is peanuts. For that matter, they may be running into intelligent aliens all over the Edge by now—communication isn’t so reliable out here that we’d necessarily know about it. What we’ve found here isn’t any more important than all the rubble and trash the Outsiders left behind.”

“Still, it *is* unique so far,” Mara said.

“I’ll tell you exactly how unique it is,” Manning said, leaning forward and setting down his glass with a bang. “It’s just unique enough that I can make it sound important in my report to the Council. I can make myself sound a little impressive. That’s how important it is; no more than that.”

Rynason pursed his lips, but didn’t say anything. The waiter arrived with his drink; he threw a green coin onto the table which was scooped up before it



had finished ringing to a stop, and sat back with the glass in his hand.

“Is that your pitch to the Council?” he asked. “You’re telling them that Hirlaj is an important archaeological area and that’s why you should get the governorship?”

“Something like that,” Manning nodded. “That, and my friend at Seventeenth Cluster headquarters. Incidentally, he’s an idiot and a slob—turns on quadsense telemuse instead of working, drinks hopsbrau from his own sector. I can’t stand him. But I did him a few favors, just in case, and they’re paying off.”

“I think it’s marvelous the way our frontier policy caters to the colonists,” Mara said quietly. She was still smiling, but it was an ironic smile which suddenly struck Rynason as characteristic of her.

He knew exactly what she meant. Manning’s little push for power was nothing new or shocking in Terran frontier politics. With the rapid expansion of the Edge through the centuries, the frontier policy of the Confederation had had to adapt itself to comparatively slipshod methods of setting up governments in the newly-opened areas. Back in the early days they’d tried sending out trained men from each Cluster headquarters, but that had been foredoomed to failure: travel between the stars was slow, and too often the governors had arrived after local officialdoms had already been established, and there had been clashes. The colonists had almost always backed the local governments, and there were a few full-scale revolts when the system had been backed too militantly by Cluster headquarters.

So the Local Autonomy System had been sanctioned. The colonists would always support their own men, who at least knew conditions in the areas they were to govern. But since this necessarily limited the choice of Edge governorships to the roustabouts and drifters who wandered the outworlds, the resulting administrations were probably even more corrupt than they had been under the old system of what had amounted to centralized graft. The Cluster Councils retained the power of appointing the local governors, but aside from that the newly-opened worlds of the Edge were completely under their own rule. Some of the more vocal critics of the Local Autonomy System had dubbed it instead the Indigenous Corruption System; it was by now a fairly standard nickname in the outworlds.

The system made for a wide-open frontier—bustling, wild, hectic, and rich. For the worlds of the Edge were untamed worlds, raw and forbidding, and the policy of the Councils was calculated to attract the kind of men who not only could but would open these frontiers. The roustabouts, the low drifters of the spaceways ... men who were hard and strong from repeated knocks, who were looking for a way to work or fight their way up. The lean and hungry of the outworlds.

Rynason glanced across the table at Manning. He was neither lean nor hungry, but he had that look in his eyes. Rynason had been around the Edge for years—his father had travelled the spacers in the commercial lines—and he had seen that look on many men, in the fields and mines, in the spaceports, in the quickly-tarnished prefab towns that sprang up almost overnight when a planetfall was made. He could recognize it on Manning despite the man's casual, self-satisfied expression.

“You don't have to worry about the colonists here,” Manning was saying to the girl. “I'll treat 'em decently. There'll be money to be made here, and I can make it without stepping on too many toes.”

Mara seemed amused. “And what would happen if you *had* to step on them to make your money? What if Hirlaj doesn't turn out to have any natural resources worth exploiting—a whole civilization has been here for thousands of years? What if the colony here starts to falter, and the men move on?”

Manning frowned at her for a moment, then gave a grunting laugh. “No chance of that. It's like Lee was just saying—this planet is an important discovery—we've got tame aliens here, intelligent horsefaces that you can lead around with a rope on their necks. That alone will draw tourists. Maybe well set up an official Restricted Ground, a sort of reservation.”

“A zoo, you mean,” Rynason interrupted.

Manning raised an amused eyebrow at him. “A reservation, I said. You know what reservations are like, Lee.”

Rynason glared at the heavier man, then subsided. There was no point in getting into a fight over if's and maybe's; in the outworlds you learned quickly to confine your clashes to tangibles. “Why did you want to see me?” he said.

“I want your preliminary report completed,” Manning said. “I’ve got to have my complete report collated and transmitted within the week, if it’s to have any effect on the Council. Most of the boys have got them in already; Breune and Larsborg have promised theirs within four days. But you’re still holding me up.”

Rynason took a long swallow of his drink and put it down empty. The noise and smell of the bar seemed to grow around him, washing over him. It might have been the effects of the tarpaq in the drink, but he felt his stomach tighten and turn slightly when he thought of how Earth’s culture presented itself, warped itself, here on the frontier Edge. Was this land of mercenary, slipshod rush really what had carried Earthmen to the stars?

“I don’t know if I’ll have much to report for at least a week,” he said shortly.

“Then give me a report on what you’ve got!” Manning snapped. “If nothing else, turn in your transcripts and I’ll do the report myself; I can handle it. What the hell do you mean, you won’t have much to report?”

“Larsborg said the same thing,” Mara interjected.

“Larsborg said he’d have his report ready in a couple of days anyway!”

“I’ll give you what I’ve got as soon as I can,” Rynason said. “But things are just beginning to break for me—did you see my note this afternoon?”

“Yes, of course. The part about this Tedron or whatever his name was?”

“Tebron Marl. He’s the link between their barbaric and civilized periods. I’ve only begun to get into it.”

Manning was waving for more drinks; he caught a waiter’s eye and then turned back to Rynason. “What’s this nonsense about some damned block you ran into? Have you got a crazy horse on your hands?”

“There’s something strange there,” Rynason said. “He tells me this Tebron was actually supposed to have communicated with their god, or whatever he was. It sounds crazy, all right. But there’s more to it than that, I’m sure of it. I wanted time to go into it further before I made my report.”

“I think you’ve got a nut alien there, boy. Don’t let him foul you up; you’re one of my best men.”

Rynason almost sneered, but he managed to bring it out as a grin. The role of

protective father did not sit well on Manning's shoulders. "We're dealing here with a remarkably sane race," he pointed out. "The very fact that they have total recall argues against any insanity in them. There've been experiments on the inner worlds for over a century now, trying to bring out total recall in us, and not much luck so far. We're a sick, hung-up race."

Manning slapped his hand down on the table. "What the hell are you trying to do, Lee? Are you trying to measure these aliens by our standards? I thought you had better sense. Total recall doesn't necessarily mean a damn thing in them—but when they start telling you straightforward and cold that they've talked with some god, and then they throw what sounds like an anxiety fit right in front of you.... Well, what does it sound like to you?"

Rynason accepted one of the drinks that the waiter banged down on the table and took a sip. He felt lightheaded. "It would have been an anxiety fit if Horng had been human," he said. "But you're right, I do know better than to judge him by our standards. No, it was something else."

"What, then?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. That's the point—I can't give you a decent report until I find out."

"Then, dammit, give me an *indecent* report! Fill it out with some very learned speculations, you know the type...." Manning stopped, and grinned.

"Speaking of indecent reports, what have we turned up on their sex lives?"

"Marc Stoworth covered that in his report yesterday," Mara said. "They're unisexual, and their sex life is singularly boring, if you'll pardon the expression. At least, Stoworth says so. If it weren't I'm sure he'd tell us all about it."

Manning chuckled. "Yes, I imagine you're right; Marc is a good boy. Well look, Lee, I've told you the position I'm in. Now I'm counting on you to get me out of this spot. I've *got to* transmit my report to Council within a week. I don't want to pressure you, but you know I'm in a position to do it if I have to. Dammit, give me a report."

"I'll turn something in in a few days," Rynason said vaguely. His brain was definitely fuzzy now from the tarpaq.

Manning stood up. "All right, don't forget it. Trick it out with some high-

sounding guesses if you have to, like I said. Right now I've got to see a man about a woman." He paused, glancing at Mara. "You're busy?"

"I'm busy, yes." Her face was studiously expressionless.

He shrugged briefly and went out, pushing and weaving his way through the hubbub that filled the bar. It was dark outside; Rynason caught a glimpse of the dark street as Manning went through the door. Night fell quickly on Hirlaj, with the suddenness of age.

Rynason turned back to the table, and Mara. He looked at her curiously.

"What were you doing with him, anyway? You usually keep to yourself."

The girl smiled wryly. She had deep black hair which fell to her shoulders in soft waves. Most of the women here grew their hair down to their waists, in exaggerated imitation of inner-world styles, but Mara had more taste than that. Her eyes were a clear brown, and they met his directly. "He was in a sharp mood, so I came along as peacemaker. You don't seem to have needed me."

"You helped, at that; thanks. Was that true about the governorship?"

"Of course. Manning seldom brags, you should know that. He's a very capable man, in some ways."

Rynason frowned. "He could be a lot more useful on this survey if he'd use his talents on tightening up the survey itself. He's forcing a premature report, and it isn't going to be worth much."

"Is that what's really bothering you?" she asked.

He tried to focus on her through the haze of the noisy bar. "Of course it is. That, and his whole attitude toward these people."

"The Hirlaji? Are they people to you?"

He shrugged. "What are people? Humans? Or reasoning beings you can talk to, communicate with?"

"I should think people would be reasoning beings you could relate to," she said softly. "Not just intellectually, but emotionally too. You have to be able to understand them to communicate that way—that's what makes people."

Rynason was silent, trying to integrate that into the fog in his head. The

raucous noise of the bar had faded into an underwater murmur around him, lost somewhere where he could not see.

Finally, he said, “That’s the trouble with them, the Hirlaji. I can’t really understand them. It’s like there’s really no contact, not even through the interpreter.” He stared into his drink. “I wish to hell we had some straight telepathers here; they might work with the Hirlaji, since they’re telepathic anyway. I’d like to make a direct link myself.”

After a moment he felt Mara’s hand on his arm, and realized that he had almost fallen asleep on the table.

“You’d better go on back to your quarters,” she said.

He sat up, shaking his head to clear it. “No, but really—what do you think of that idea? What if I had a telepath, and I could link minds with Horng? Straight linkage, no interpreter in the middle. I could get right at that race memory myself!”

“I think you need some sleep,” she said. She seemed worried. “You’re getting too wrapped up in this thing. And forget about the telepathers.”

Rynason looked at her and grinned. “Why?” he said quietly. “There’s no harm in wishing.”

“Because,” she said, “we’ve got three telepathers coming in the day after tomorrow.”

## THREE

Rynason continued to smile at her for several seconds, until her words penetrated. Then he abruptly sat up and steadied himself with one hand against the edge of the table.

“Can you get one for me?”

She gave a reluctant shrug. “If you insist, and if Manning okays it. But is it a good idea? Direct contact with a mind so alien?”

As a matter of fact, now that he was faced with the actual possibility of it, he wasn't so sure. But he said, “We'll only know once we've tried it.”

Mara dropped her eyes and swirled her drink, watching the tiny red spots form inside the glass and rise to the surface. There was a brief silence between them.

“*Repent, Lee Rynason!*” The words burst upon his ears over the waves of sound that filled the room. He turned, half-rising, to find Rene Malhomme hovering over him, his wide grin showing a tooth missing in the bottom row.

Rynason settled back into his chair. “Don't shout. I'm going to have a headache soon enough.”

Malhomme took the chair which Manning had vacated and sat in it heavily. He set his hand-lettered placard against the edge of the table and leaned forward, waving a thick finger.

“You consort with men who would enslave the pure in heart!” he rumbled, but Rynason didn't miss the laughter in his eye.

“Manning?” he nodded. “He'd enslave every pure heart on this planet, if he could find one. As a matter of fact, I think he's already working on Mara here.”

Malhomme turned to her and sat back, appraising her boldly. Mara met his gaze calmly, raising her eyebrows slightly as she waited for his verdict.