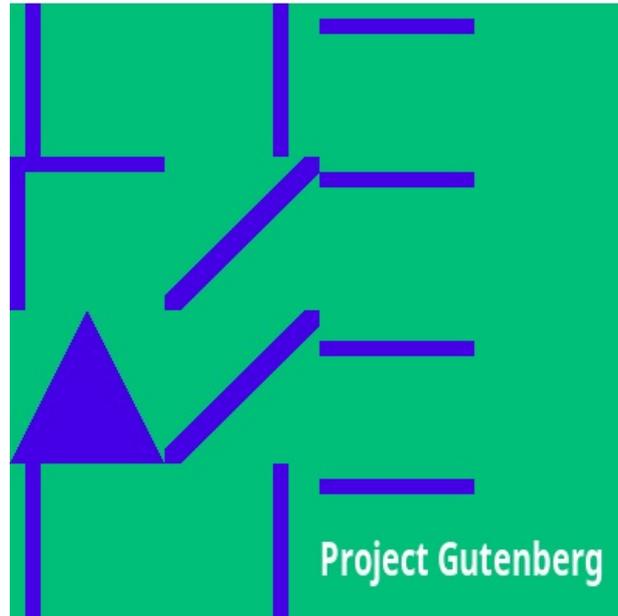

The One and the Many

Stephen Marlowe



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*Only One Question Is Eternal—
What Lies Beyond the Ultimate?*

THE ONE
and
THE MANY

By Milton Lesser

THERE ARE some who tell me it is a foolish war we fight. My brother told me that, for one, back in the Sunset Country. But then, my brother is lame and good for nothing but drawing pictures of the stars. He connects them with lines, like a child's puzzle, and so makes star-pictures. He has fish stars, archer stars, hunter stars. That, I would say, is what is foolish.

Perhaps that is what started it all. I was looking at the stars, trying to see the pictures, when I should have been minding my sentry post. They took me like a baby, like a tot not yet given to the wearing of clothing. The hand came out of the darkness and clamped over my mouth, and I ceased my struggling when I felt a sharp blade pricking at the small of my back.

At first I feared that they would slay the entire camp as it slept and I cursed my brother for his star-pictures, cursed our leader who had sent us here, twenty archers, against the Onist outpost on our country's border. But the Onists had other ideas. They took me away. I had to admire their vitality, because all night we ran through the silent woodlands, and they seemed tireless. I could maintain their pace, of course: but I'm a Pluralist.

I could see their village from a long way off, its night fires glowing in the dark. It was only then that we slowed our pace. Soon we entered the place, a roughly circular area within a stockade, and my captors thrust me within a hut. I couldn't do much worrying about tomorrow, not when I was so tired. I slept.

I dreamed a stupid dream about the Onist beliefs, the beliefs of an unimaginative people who could picture one Maker and one Maker only. I must have chuckled in my sleep.

"YOU'RE AWAKE."

A brilliant statement, that—because I had sat up, squinted into the bright sunlight streaming in through the doorway, yawned and stretched. The Onists, I tell you, lack imagination.

The girl who spoke was a pretty enough little thing for an Onist. She smiled, showing even white teeth. "Do you Pluralists eat?"

I nodded and rubbed my belly. I was to have had dinner after my turn as sentry the night before, and now I felt like I could do justice to my portion even at one of the orgies for which the Onists are so famous.

"Bring on your food and I'll show you," I told her, and she turned her back to walk outside. It was early and the village seemed silent—surely they hadn't intended this one slim maid to guard me! Yet she seemed alone.

I leaped at her, circled her neck with my arm, prepared to make my exit. They would laugh around our fire when I told them of this fine example of the Onist lack of foresight....

Except that the girl yelped. Not loudly, but it was loud enough, and a big muscular Onist came striding in with his throwing spear. He backed me off into a corner, prodding my hungry belly with his weapon.

"Will you behave?"

ITOLD him I would and he backed outside, but this time I could see his shadow across the doorway.

The girl brought food and partook of it with me. I was surprised, because we Pluralists will not eat with an Onist out of choice. Well, I have said they are a strange people. Soon the girl

stood up, patting her mouth daintily with a square of cloth, and in that, of course, she was trying to mime our graceful Pluralist women. "I suppose you think we are going to kill you," she said. Just like that.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't given it much thought. There isn't much I can do about it."

"Well, we're not. We could have done that back at your camp. We could have killed all of you. No, we want to show you something."

I had a ridiculous thought that they made star-pictures, too—even those who are not lame like my brother. I said, "Well, what will happen to me after you show me?"

She smiled. "You still think we're going to kill you. What's your name?"

I told her, but I thought: she can't even keep a conversation going without changing the subject.

"Jak," she repeated after me. "That's a common enough name. We have Jaks among our Onist people, you know."

"No, I didn't. But you probably copied it."

"I doubt that. We were here first, Jak. Our records say so. Probably, you once captured a man with that name, long ago, liked it, and took it for your people."

"*You* were here first!" I sneered. "Maybe that's what your records tell you, but it isn't so. Look: the Makers endowed us with life, then went away in to the sky. By mistake they left one idiot-Maker behind, and he had nothing to do. He made you Onists before he perished, and that is why you think there is only one Maker."

She seemed highly insulted. "Idiot-Maker? Idiot! There was only one Maker, ever, but because your minds cannot conceive of all that glory residing in one figure, you invented a score."

Now it was my turn to be indignant. "A score? Hundreds, you mean; thousands—more than there are leaves on the trees."

"Well, I won't argue with you. Our war has been arguing that point well enough." I was sorry she would not argue. She looked very pretty when she argued, her breasts heaving, her eyes sparkling fire.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Nari. My name is Nari. And don't tell me you had that name first!"

I smiled blandly. "Of course we did. I have an aunt, my mother's sister, who goes by that name. My brother's wife's cousin, also; but she is very ugly."

"And am I ugly?" Nari wanted to know. I guess in that sense at least, women are the same everywhere—Pluralist or Onist, it doesn't matter.

I LOOKED at her. I looked at her so hard that it made her blush, and then she looked even prettier. But I didn't tell her so.

"You will pass, for an Onist," I admitted. "I guess the Onists might consider you pretty; the Onist men might stamp their feet and shout if you go by—but then, they are Onists."

At that, she seemed on the verge of leaving my prison hut, but something made her change her mind. She stayed all morning and on into the afternoon. We argued all the time, except at midday, when she went outside to get our lunch. She stumbled a little and fell half against my shoulder. I moved toward her to hold her up, and it was the most natural thing in the world to take her in my arms and kiss her. She must have thought so, too; she responded beautifully—for an Onist.

After lunch, Nari did not mention the kiss, nor did I. It now seemed the most natural thing in the world not to talk about it. We argued some more, Nari defending her primitive beliefs, I trying to show her the light of truth. But it was no use: the war had been fought and the war would continue.

Later that day we set out. That came as a surprise to me, because I had taken it for granted that whatever the Onists wanted to show me was right here in this little village. A dozen of us went, and when we had been on the trail for some little time, Nari joined us, declaring that she wanted to see it again—whatever it was.

We went for three days, and although these Onists turned out to be better woodsmen than I had thought, still, they could not match the skill we Pluralists have mastered over the generations. I believe I could have escaped, had I wanted to; but I hardly seemed a prisoner of war, and besides, once or twice when we had lagged to the rear of the column, Nari stumbled against me like that day in the hut, and what could I do but kiss her?

It was another village we reached at the end of our march, much bigger than the first. Surprisingly, it looked a lot like a Pluralist town, although it may only have seemed so because I had been out in the woodlands for three days. They took me straightways to the village square, and it was there that I saw the statue.

THESE STATUES of the Makers are rare, and I was surprised to see one in an Onist village. I got on my knees at once to do it reverence. I realize it was impious to look up, but I did—I had to see if it were the genuine thing. And it was, to the last detail. Constructed of the forbidden substance known as metal, it towered three times a Pluralist's height, or three times an Onist's, for that matter. I have always wondered why the Makers did not create our ancestors in their own substance, as they had fashioned us in their image. But that is an impious thought.

A stern gray-haired Onist who said he was Nari's father took me aside afterwards. "Now, Jak," he asked me, "what can you say of what you have seen?"

I shrugged. "I can say that somehow you've found one of the Maker statues. What more?"

"It's one, is it not?"

"Of course it's one. They are rare, but I have seen three, all told, in Pluralist villages."

"And each time they were separate? You never saw a group?"

"No. No, I didn't."

He slapped his hands together triumphantly. "Then that proves it. Each is a copy of the original Maker, but there was only one. Otherwise you would have seen statues in groups. And that is why you are here, Jak: we want you to go back to your people and tell them what you saw."

I shook my head. "What you say isn't logical. So what if the statues are never in pairs or groups? We've only seen a few, when once there must have been many. Also, when your artists do their magic with dyes and create portraits, are they generally done one at a time or in groups?"

"One at a time, so the artist may capture the personality in each face, naturally. I have seen group portraits, but I think they are silly things."

"Exactly." Now I was triumphant. "Exactly as the Makers thought, which is why the statues are always single—"

"But it is impious to say there was more than one Maker! He had all the knowledge in the world at his fingertips, and so there was no need for more than one. More than this world, even: he went to the stars. Or don't you believe that?"

"Of course I believe it. Only, *they* went to the stars, the thousands of Makers. It isn't impious, because if you can think of one being as great as that, try to picture thousands. Yes, thousands. That makes me thousands of times more pious than you Onists."

He shook his head wearily. "What's the use? It is for this we are fighting our war, and we thought if we took one of you here, showed him the undeniable truth of our statue.... Well, will you at least return to your people with a tale of what you have seen?"

I agreed readily enough: probably, the alternative was death. Although Pluralists on rare

occasions have been known to take Onist women as their wives, an Onist prisoner of war was an unwanted thing. The reverse would also be true.

THEY ALL bid me goodbye, except for Nari. I could not find her anywhere in the village, and a little sadly I set out on my long journey back to the Sunset Land. By now our raiding party had finished its work on the small Onist village on the rim of our country, and I could do nothing but return to my people, where we might plan new strategy against the unbelievers.

But I had wanted to bid Nari farewell.

I met her in the woodlands, a travel bag slung over her shoulder like a male's. "I wanted to say goodbye privately," she told me.

"Good," I said, but I knew she was lying. Else why the travel bag?

"Goodbye," Nari whispered, but she was not looking at me. Looking, instead, behind her, at the land of her people.

"Nari," I told her, "I have to admit it. You are very pretty—even by Pluralist standards. You are —"

This time she did not stumble against me. It wasn't necessary. I drew her to me, and I kissed her a long kiss. Then I told her I loved her, and women, I suppose, will always be women, because she said she knew it.

I will take Nari back to our village in the Sunset Land, where we will be married by the laws of my people. And if ever there is to be peace between the Pluralists and the Onists, it may, after all, come on these grounds. The Onists have their beliefs, and so I hate them for their impious thoughts. But the love of a man for a maid exists apart from that.

It won't be easy. Our arguing continued all the way back to the Sunset Land, and Nari is as stubborn as I am firm.

"There is one Maker," she said.

And I told her, "No, there are many."

Or later, as we neared the Sunset Land, we picked up the thread of our thoughts again. Pluralist or Onist, we androids are dogmatic creatures.

"One Robot created us all before he went to the stars," said Nari.

"Robots," I said. "Many Robots." But I kissed her.

THE END

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