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# FEAR THAT MAN

by Dean Koontz

## ONE: PURPOSE

*And ye shall seek a new order of things...*

### I

When he woke from a featureless dream of silver, there was nothing but endless blackness on three sides, a blackness so intense that it almost coughed out a breath and nearly moved. And when he woke, he did not know who he was.

The control console—splashed with sixteen luminous dials, scopes, a dozen toggle switches and half a hundred varicolored buttons—told him that this thing under and behind him was a spaceship. That, at least, explained the darkness through the viewplate that wrapped around the other three sides of the guidance nipple. And his misty reflection on the thick plastiglass told him that he was a man, for he had the eyes of a man (blue), the face of a man (severe, but handsome, topped by a tangle of coal dusted hair). But these things were generals. When he tried to concentrate on specifics, there were no answers.

Who was he?

The dials only wavered in answer.

What had been his past?

Only the scopes, pulsating...

And where was he bound?

He sat very still, running through all the things that he did know. This was the year 3456. He knew the names of the cities; he understood the function and order of the empire; the past history of the galaxy was at his tongue tip, quivering. Generals, all.

Who was he? What had been his past? And where was he bound?

He unbuckled and pushed himself from his contour-molded seat, walked behind it, away from the viewplate and toward the rear of the chamber.

Grayness. The room was tomblike, a single-hued conformity of leaden plating, machines, and service stands. Only the glow from the control console added a note of liveliness. Circling the room, he found there was no written log. There was a service stand for that purpose, but it was empty. The logtapes brought only great thunders, crashing and scraping until he was no longer so very certain that there should be a log. After all, if he could not remember his own name, how could he be so damnably sure of these lesser things?

*Bong-bong-bong!*

He whirled, his heart racing wildly in response to the alarm. Waves of yellow light crashed across the room, splashed off the dark walls. He swallowed the lump in his throat, walked back to his chair. He seemed to know how to operate a ship, for his fingers flew across the switches and dials, touched the scopes and traced patterns on them as his mind automatically sifted through the readings they gave, interpreting them. "Report!" he said to the vessel.

There was a moment of silence, then: OBJECT APPROACHING. SPEED NEGLIGIBLE. UNNATURAL.

"Size?"

The ship grumbled as if clearing its throat. He knew, somehow, that it was only seeking an answer tape. THREE FEET BY TWO FEET BY FIVE FEET.

"Time to contact?"

FOURTEEN MINUTES.

"Call me then." He flipped off the computer comline and went to the rear of the cabin. Rather than sit and wait for the speck, he would investigate the rest of the ship. It might hold a clue to his identity. He tugged at the circular wall hatch, swung it inward. Beyond lay a corridor, narrow and low-ceilinged. At the end of it, he knew, lay a room of shielding before the drive chamber. Along the sides were two rooms that he could enter without being burned to death by hard radiation.

In the room to the right, there was a complete laboratory. Long rows of glittering machines lined the walls, humming, chanting to themselves. In the very center of the chamber, there was a table with a flexoplast top. He touched the mattress and watched while the shimmering stuff squeezed his hands, pushed between his fingers, gripped him. It was a surgeon's table. Above it, suspended from the ceiling like bloated spiders, were the robosurgeons—spherical, many-armed, silver-fingered. He shivered. On the third try, he freed his hand from the table, walked into the hall. He did not entirely trust machines like the robosurgeons—machines that were so much like men but without the mercies, faults, or thoughts of men.

The room across the corridor was an armory. Crates of construction explosives sat on the floor, enough to level a city. There were racks of guns on the walls. Vaguely, he knew there were no guns in the world any more. Men of this age did not kill anything but game animals. Guns were mainly for collecting. But these were too new for collecting, and deep within he knew he possessed the ability to use each of them—and to a deadly intent. Against the far wall and next to the cargo portal sat a ground car, broadcasting nubs studding it. With its invincible shield turned on, it was, in effect, another weapon.

There was something bothering him, something more than the mere presence of weapons. Then, as he gazed at the ground car, he knew what it was. Nothing here carried a trade name! The car was void of brand, model, and make. So were the rifles and the throwing knives—and the explosives. All of these things had been produced to provide anonymity for their maker. But who had made them? And for what purpose?

*Bong-bong-bong!*

At first, he ignored the ship's alarm, trying to think. But the ship grew more insistent. He put back the rifle he had been examining and left for the control room.

UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT APPROACHING. CLARIFICATION IN THIRTY SECONDS. The computer's squawk-box grated the words out like sandpaper drawn across sandpaper. CLARIFICATION. IT IS A MAN.

"A man? Out here without a ship?"

THERE IS A HEARTBEAT.

## II

Like a grotesquely misshapen fruit, the body in the red jumpsuit floated in the blackness, directionless, moving with a slight spin that brought all sides of it into view.

UNCONSCIOUS.

He brought the ship in as close as possible, studied the crimson figure. What was a man doing this far from a ship, alone, in a suit that could not support him for more than twelve hours? "I'm going to have him brought in," he said to the ship.

DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD?

"He'll die out there!"

The ship was silent.

Like small animals, his fingers moved. A moment later, the cylindrical body of the Scavenger appeared in the viewplate. It was another almost-alive machine. He tensed with the sight of it. The single eye of the Scavenger focused on the body. On the console screen, there was a close-up of the stranger. The lens caught the face inside the helmet, and he was no longer sure it was a man.

There was a face with two eyes, but no eyebrows. Where the brows should have been, there were two bony ridges, hard and dark and glistening. A mane of brown hair streaked with white lay as a cushion

about the head. The mouth was wide and generous, but definitely not the mouth of a man. The lips were a bit too red, and the teeth that stuck over them at two places were sharp, pointed, and very white. Still, it was more of a man than an animal. There was a look about the face that suggested soul-tortured agony, and that was very human indeed. He directed the Scavenger to begin retrieval.

When the machine had done this and was locked in place on the mother ship, he opened the floor hatch, drew up the body, and carefully unsuited it. The helmet bore the stenciled name HURKOS...

*... He was in a great cathedral. The red tongues of candles flickered in their silver holders.*

*Belina was dead. No one died any longer, but Belina was dead. A rare case. The monster in her womb had slashed her apart. Nothing the doctors could do. When you can't turn to blame other men, there is only one entity to blame: God. It was difficult finding a temple, for there were not many faithful these days. But he had found one now, complete with its holy water tainted with the sacrificial blood and its handful of ancient Christians—ancient because they refused the man-made immortality of the Eternity Combine: they grew old.*

*In the great cathedral...*

*In the great cathedral, clambering across the altar railing and clutching the feet of the great crucifix. On the kneecap, slipping, falling to the feet three times until the bruises blackened his arms beneath the thickly matted hair. Then, grasping at the loincloth, fingers hooked into the wooden folds, pulling himself up, weeping... A foot in the navel, shoving up... screaming into the ear... But the ear, after all, was wooden. The ear merely cast back his condemnations.*

*Candles flickered below.*

*He began swaying, using his weight to topple God. The head did not respond at first. He locked his arms more tightly about it. It began to sway. The head fell, crashing from the shoulders, down...*

*Then toppled the body.*

*He pushed away from it as it—and he—fell.*

*There were sirens and hospital attendants.*

*The last thing he remembered seeing was an old man, a Christian, cradled between the broken halves of God's face, mumbling and content with his sanctuary...*

He pulled himself away from Hurkos, shook his head. That had been the stranger's dream. How had *he* experienced it?

Hurkos opened his eyes. They were chunks of polished coal, dark jewels threatening many secrets. His mouth was very dry, and when he tried to speak the corners of his lips cracked and spilled blood. The nameless man brought water. Finally: "It didn't work, then." Hurkos had a deep, commanding voice.

"What didn't work? What were you doing out there?"

Hurkos smiled. "Trying to kill myself."

"Suicide?"

“They call it that.” He sipped more water.

“Because Belina died?”

Hurkos bristled. “How did you... ?” After a moment: “I guess I told you.”

“Yes. How could I hear your dreams like that?”

Hurkos looked puzzled for a moment. “I’m a telepath, of course. Sometimes I project, some rarer times I read thoughts. A very unstable talent. I project mostly when I’m asleep—or under pressure.”

“But how did you get out there without a ship?”

“After I was released from the hospital—after Belina’s death and the crucifix incident—I signed on the *Space Razzle* as a cargo handler. When we were relatively far out in untraveled space, I went into the hold, disconnected the alarms from the pressure chamber, and left. I won’t be missed until pay day.”

“But why not step out without a suit? That would be quicker.”

Hurkos smiled an unsmile. “I guess a little of the healing did take hold. I guess we can recover from anything.” But he did not look recovered. “Right now, my talent is fading. I can’t see a name in your mind.”

He hesitated. “You can’t see a name... because I have none.” Briefly, he recounted the story of the waking, the amnesia, the strangeness of the ship.

Hurkos was excited. Here was something in which he could submerge his grief, his melancholia. “We are going to make a real search of this tub, you and me. But first, you ought to have a name.”

“What?”

“How about—Sam?” He paused. “After a friend of mine.”

“I like it. Who was the friend?”

“A dog I bought on Callileo.”

“Thanks!”

“He was noble.”

With the preliminaries out of the way, Sam could no longer contain his curiosity. “We both have names now. We know I am a man—but what are *you*?”

Hurkos looked startled. “You don’t know what a Mue is?”

“No. I guess maybe I have been gone too long. Maybe I left before there were Mues around.”

“Then you left a thousand years ago—and you went *damn* far away!”

### III

Hurkos came padding down the narrow corridor and into the main chamber. “Nothing at all!” he said, incredulous.

They had been searching for six hours, looking through and behind everything. Still, no clues. During the time they had pried about together, however, Sam had filled in a few gaps in his education; Hurkos had recounted the history of the Mues. Once, well over a thousand years before, man had tried to make other men with the aid of artificial wombs, large tanks of semi-hydroponic nature that took sperm and egg of their own making and worked at forming babies. But after hundreds and hundreds of attempts, nothing exceedingly worthwhile had come of it. They had been attempting to produce men with psionic abilities valuable as weapons of war. Sometimes they came close, but never did they truly succeed. Then, when the project was finally junked, they had five hundred mutated children on their hands. This was a time when mankind was laying down its weapons for tools of friendship. Most looked upon the wombs as a hideous arm of the war effort that should never have been started in the first place—and they looked upon the Mue children with pity and shame. There was a great public outcry when the government hinted that the Mues might be put quietly and painlessly to sleep. Though some people did not consider them human, the vast majority of the population could not tolerate so horrid a slaughter with the Permanent Peace only months behind them. The Mues lived. In fifteen years, they had equality by law. In another hundred, they had it in reality. And they mated and had more of their kind, although the children were often perfectly normal. Today, there were fourteen million Mues—only an eighth of one percent of the galactic population, but alive and breathing and happy just the same. And Hurkos was one of them.

Fourteen million.

And he could not remember having ever heard of them before.

“Food’s about ready,” he said. Just then the light above the wall slot popped off and the tray slid out.

“Smells good.”

They pulled the tray apart where it was perforated and sat on the floor to eat. “It’s damn eerie,” Hurkos said, spitting the words around a mouthful of synthe-beef. “There should be *some* trademark, *some* scrap of writing, at least *one* brand name!” He paused, swallowed, then snapped, “The food!”

Sam waved him back to his seat before the Mue could spill his dinner in a futile effort to rise quickly. “I already looked. The volume of food basics below the synthesizer is in unmarked containers.”

Hurkos frowned, sat down. “Well, let’s see what we *do* know. First, there is no log. Second, there is no trade name, serial number, brand anywhere on the ship. Third, you have no memory of your own past beyond this morning. Fourth, though you do not remember a thing that happened to you in your lifetime, you do remember the basics of empire history, human history. Except, that is, for a few especially glaring holes. Such as the artificial wombs and we Mues.”

“Agreed thus far,” Sam said, putting down his food, wiping his mouth.

“What’s the matter? You hardly ate.”

Sam grimaced, waved a hand vaguely and let it fall into his lap. “I don’t know exactly. I’m afraid to eat.”

Hurkos looked down at his own tray, paused half-finished with a mouthful. “Afraid?”

“There’s this... hazy sort of fear... because...”

“Go on!”

“Because it’s been made by machines. The food isn’t natural.”

Hurkos swallowed. “There is the fifth piece of data. You’re afraid of machines. I thought so earlier—judging by your reaction to the sight of the robosurgeons.”

“But I’ll starve!”

“I doubt that. You ate enough to keep you going. You just won’t get fat is all.”

Sam started to say something, but in the moment it took for his words to come from his larynx to his tongue, he felt his head being ripped apart by thunders that shook every ounce of his flesh and soul. He opened his mouth, tried to scream, closed it abruptly. There was a chaos of noise in his head, a fermenting, fizzing, erupting madness. He was just barely aware that Hurkos was still talking to him, but he heard nothing. The world of the ship was distant and unreal. The noises, then, were speaking to him in a language of cacophony. Then he lost all awareness, was wrapped into the boomings, the dissonance. He pushed from the floor, found his seat, strapped in.

Hurkos was beside him, obviously shouting. But he heard nothing.

Nothing but the dissonance.

He saw the Mue running, crawling into the flexoplast mattress they had taken off the surgeon’s table. They had decided, since there was no second chair, that the flexoplast—wrapped completely around the Mue as a protective shell—would be a perfect substitute for a chair.

Sam slammed down on the toggles, blasted... then hyperspaced with a gut-wrenching jerk.

Hurkos was shouting from inside his mattress.

The ship moaned.

He reclined in his seat. The ship reached top hyperspace in incredibly short time. And collided with something...

## IV

The thunders, as soon as Sam had thrown the ship out of hyperspace and into Real Space, had faded into silence. He again had control of his body.

Hurkos was rolling all over the floor, bounding off the walls as the ship shuddered, wallowed with the impact.

Sam remembered, suddenly, that they had struck something, and he looked up at the viewplate and the blank expanse of normal space. So near that he could almost touch it, another ship was drifting in front and slightly to the left of him. Perhaps only a mile away. Close for a shield-collision. He punched for open radio and tried to contact the other vessel, but he received no response.

“What the hell were you doing!” Hurkos shouted, freeing himself of the flexoplast and staggering to his feet.

Sam loosened his seatbelt and also stood. He felt as if he was about to throw up, but he fought the urge. “I don’t know! I just lost control of my mind, my body, everything! Someone told me to set a course for the capital.”

“Hope?”

“Yes. It told me to set a course for Hope and to hyperspace. Argument was impossible.”

Hurkos rubbed a sore spot on his arm, bruised because he had not gotten it into the flexoplast in time. “Did you recognize the voice?”

“It wasn’t exactly a voice. It was more like... well...”

There was a sudden pounding noise.

They whirled in the direction of the sound and saw a suited figure against the viewplate, rapping his fist against the glass. He had his suit phone turned up to maximum volume and was shouting something. They moved to the window. The man outside was huge—six feet six if an inch, two hundred and sixty pounds if an ounce. “Open up and let me in!” he was shouting. “Let me in before I tear this tub apart plate for plate!”

He looked as if he just might be able to carry out that threat.

“He must be from the other ship,” Hurkos said, moving to open the outer doors into the Scavenger that served as a pressure chamber.

The figure moved away from the viewplate toward the port. They waited nervously until the chamber closed, equalized with cabin pressure, and the door in the floor was opened.

If the stranger from the other ship had been imposing seen through the viewplate, he was overwhelming seen at first hand, inside the cabin, his head towering dangerously close to the ceiling. He pulled back his helmet, spewing a stream of curses, his eyes two fiery droplets within the flushed fury of his face. His blond hair was a wild disarray, uncombed and completely uncombable. “What the hell are you, some kinda moron? Morons have been wiped out of the culture! Haven’t you been told? You’re a one-of-a-kind, and I have to meet up with you in all this emptiness where—by all rights—we should never even be able to imagine each other’s existence!”

“I guess you’re angry about the collision,” Sam began, “and—”

The big man allowed his mouth to drop to his ankles and bounce back to a more respectable level just below the chin. “You guess I’m angry about the collision! You guess I” He turned to Hurkos. “He guesses I’m angry about the collision,” he repeated as if the stupidity of the remark was the most glaring understatement ever pronounced and had to be shared and discussed to be believed.

“I—” Sam began once more.

“Of course I’m angry about the collision! Damn furious is what I am! You hyperspaced without checking to see if there was another ship in hyperspace within the danger limit. Your field locked in mine and jolted us out into Real Space. What would have happened if our ships had struck instead of just our fields?”



“That’s rather unlikely,” Hurkos said. “After all, the fields are five miles in diameter, but the ships are far, far smaller than that. The odds against our ships striking in so vast a galaxy—”

“A moron spewing logic!” the big stranger shouted. “A real, honest moron shouting scientific gobbleygook at me like it really meant something to him! This is amazing.” He slapped one hammy hand against his forehead in a snow of amazement.

“If you’ll just listen a moment...” Sam sighed, seeing the big man’s lips open for comment even before he had said three words.

“Listen? I’m all ears. I’m just all ears for your excuse! Some excuse that could possibly explain your imbecilic reactions, and—”

“Wait a minute!” Hurkos shouted gleefully. “I know you!”

The stranger stopped talking abruptly.

“Mikos. You’re Mikos, the poet. Gnosos Mikos!”

The rage was swept away in the wash of a wide grin, and the grin became a flush of embarrassment. The huge fist dropped away from the forehead and became a hand again—a hand that was abruptly stuck out to Hurkos as a sign of friendliness. “And I haven’t had the pleasure,” the giant said politely.

Hurkos took the hand, shook it vigorously.

For one short moment, Sam felt as if he were going to collapse. Fear of the colossus had been the only thing holding him up, a fear whose vibrant force coursed through his quivering legs and straightened him with its current. Now, the fear gone, he wanted nothing so much as to fold up his legs, tuck them under his belly, and fall onto his face. Somehow, he held himself erect.

“My name is Hurkos. First and last. I’m a nobody, but I read your poetry. I love it. Especially “The Savagery of Old.”

“That was a damn grizzly one though,” Gnosos said, beaming.

“Spill the blood across the savage face;

Raise the ax, the bow, the gun, the mace—”

Gnosos finished the quatrain:

“Scream the scream that breaks apart the chest.

Killing is the thing you know best.”

The grin on the poet’s face was even wider.

“All the world’s a stage for plundering...” Hurkos began the next stanza.

“Hmmp!” Sam manged to cough without being too conspicuous.

“Oh! Mr. Mikos, this is—”

“Gnossos,” the poet interrupted. “Call me Gnossos.”

Hurkos was more than pleased with the offer of a first name basis. “Gnossos, this is a recently-made friend of mine. Sam, meet Gnossos Mikos, the empire’s most famous and most literate poet.”

The giant hand came forth, engulfed Sam’s own in a warm, dry embrace that almost crushed every bone up to his wrist. “Glad to meet you, Sam!” He seemed to mean it. “Now what malfunction of your vessel caused this recent unpleasantry?”

“I—”

“Perhaps I can help you repair it.”

Later, after the poet had heard the story of the missing trade names, the amnesia, the memory blank, the strange voices in Sam’s head, he rubbed his hands together and said, “You’ll not get rid of me until we discover the roots of this thing. What a helluva mystery! It’s almost worth an epic poem already!”

“Then you aren’t angry?” Sam asked.

“Angry? But whatever for? If you’re referring to the unfortunate collision of our hyperspace fields, please let us forget it. It was very obviously not your fault, and there are far more important things to discuss.”

Sam sighed again, heavily.

“Well,” Hurkos said, “what do you make of it?” He was hunched forward, as they all were, sitting on the floor like a small boy at his father’s knee.

Gnossos rolled his tongue over his wide, perfect teeth, thought a moment. His eyes were crystal blue and, when he stared, it seemed as if he were looking directly through—not at—whatever his gaze fell upon. “It sounds,” he said at length, “as if someone is trying to overturn the galaxy—or the order of the galaxy, at least.”

Hurkos looked at him blankly. Sam shifted, waited for more, shifted again. “What do you mean?”

“Consider the weapons. Weapons have been illegal—except for sport, Beast hunting and collecting—for a thousand years. You say these weapons are obviously not for sporting because of their terrific power, and yet no one collects explosives or new and gleaming guns. Someone, it seems painfully clear to me, means to use them on humans.”

Sam shuddered. Hurkos blanched. The thought had been hanging in the rear of their minds, but neither had allowed it to gain perspective out in the light of the conscious. Now it was looming there—to be feared.

“The trade names,” Gnossos continued, “are missing because this ship and its contents were designed to provide secrecy for their owner and manufacturer. Sam here is being used by someone. He seems to be a tool to overthrow the current order of things.”

“Then he could get orders at any time to kill both of us!”

Sam was perspiring.

“I don’t think so,” the poet said.

“But the order to hyperspace—” Hurkos protested.

“Was a posthypnotic suggestion.” Gnossos waited for a reaction. When their facial expressions registered a modicum of relief, he continued. “Sam here was kidnapped, taken somewhere to have his memory removed. Then they—whoever They may be—implanted a series of hypnotic commands, a sequence of orders. When that was done, they shipped him off to do whatever they had ordered. The first order was designed to be triggered by... oh, let’s say that meal you ate earlier.”

“The food didn’t affect *me*,” Hurkos said.

“But you had no hypnotic suggestions implanted in your mind. Sam did. The food triggered the first, let’s say. Now, perhaps the remaining orders will come at measured intervals. Every sixth hour or something like that. Or perhaps they will be irregularly spaced but with planned intervals.”

“So whoever gave him the orders would not be aware of our presence.”

“Correct.”

Sam interrupted the dialogue. “That’s a relief. I like you both too much to kill.”

“One thing I’ve been wondering about,” Gnossos said. “Why didn’t you acknowledge my radio message just after the collision?”

“We didn’t receive any,” Sam said, perplexed. “We tried to get through to you, but *you* didn’t answer.”

“A broken radio?” Hurkos offered.

Sam forced himself to his feet, walked to the console. “Report on the condition of the radio/receiver.”

WORKING PROPERLY.

“That shoots that theory.”

“But how could my secret master control the radio if he doesn’t even know what’s going on here?” Sam traced his fingers over the seams of the console chair.

Gnossos shrugged, got to his feet. “Maybe we’re wrong. Maybe they do know that Hurkos and I are here and they’re just waiting for the best moment to knock us off. But that’s a question we’ll leave till later. Right now, let’s check out your laboratory. I have an idea.”

The three of them stood looking up at the robosurgeons. Sam shivered at the sight of them: men-talented but not men. He hated every machine he came in contact with, though he was not sure why.

“Someone could have machined the cases for these,” the poet said. “But there are only a few companies that have the facilities to produce the delicate interiors. No one could make his own robosurgeon from scrap without billions in equipment and hundreds of trained minds. Whoever put this together would have had to purchase the factory-made workings.”

Sam flicked the control knob that lowered the machines out of the ceiling. Ponderously, they came.

When the underslung arms had spread to the sides and the machines were almost to the top of the table, he stopped them. Then he caused the main component to revolve so that the access plate faced them.

Gnossos rubbed his palms together: sand on stone. “Now we’ll find a few clues.” He threw back the latches that held the plate on, dropped the cover to the floor. “Every company carries a list of purchases and customers. With one little serial number, we can find the buyer and, consequently, the constructor of this tub.” He bent over and peered into the dark interior of the globe. He looked puzzled.

“Awful dark in there,” Hurkos said.

Gnossos put a hand inside, reached in... and in, in, in up to his elbow.

“There’s nothing in it!” Sam said.

“Oh yes there is!” Gnossos shouted painfully. “And it has hold of my hand!”

## V

Gnossos tore his hand out of the machine, rubbed it against his chest. It was red and raw and bleeding in a few spots.

“What the hell is in there?” Hurkos asked, leaning away from the open machine.

Sam stifled some low-keyed scream he felt twisting up toward his lips.

As if in answer to Hurkos’ question, a jelly-mass began dripping onto the table from the open access plate. It collected there, amber spotted with areas of bright orange. It trembled there, quivered. Piercing, low-scale hummings bathed its convulsing form. There was something like a skin forming over it, the amber and orange changing to a pinkish-tan hue that made it look amazingly like human skin—too much like human skin. The skin expanded, contracted, and there were pseudopods pulling the mass across the table toward the warmth of their bodies.

They had backed nearly to the door. “There were *no* mechanical insides!” Gnossos said, rubbing his hand.

“But it moved,” Sam argued. “It operated like a machine. How could it do that without moving parts?”

The jelly-mass burst in places as bubbles of something reached its surface, flopped open and left pocks. But the pocks were healed rapidly, and the skin was returned to normal.

“That—that thing was its insides, its working parts,” Gnossos said. “The jelly-mass operated the shell like a machine.”

The last of the mess dropped from the bowl of the main component. There was more than could have been contained in the main sphere; apparently all the sections had been filled and were now drained empty. The jelly-mass, shapeless, plunged over the end of the table, struck the floor with a sickening sloshing noise, and moved toward them, arms of simulated flesh lashing out for purchase on the cold floor.

“The armory!” Sam shouted, turning into the hall and flinging the door to the other room wide. Perhaps it

had been the hypnotic training with the weapons that had made him think of guns so quickly. He knew how to kill; he could stop the amoeba, the super-cell. He stepped back into the hall with a rifle in his hands, brought it up, sighted. "Move away!"

Gnossos and Hurkos stepped behind him, moving toward the control cabin. Aiming for the center of the mass, Sam pulled the trigger. Blue lightning flashed outward, sparkling, and illuminated the passageway like a small sun going nova. Despite the light, there was no heat. In fact, the flame seemed to radiate coolness. It struck the jelly, sank into it. There was something like a scream from the writhing slop, though the sounds were most certainly not a voice. It was as if the very molecules of the mass had closed gaps and were rubbing one another. The jelly stopped.

Sam, trembling, released the trigger, started to let air out of his lungs.

And the jelly leaped!

He fired, caught it in mid-jump, sent it crashing backward, blue fire coursing through it like contained lightning flashing in a crystal paperweight. He aimed again, depressed the firing stud.

Nothing.

*Nothing!*

No blue, shimmering flame. No cool but deadly flame. Not even a lousy click! He raised the weapon to look at it, to see if some latch or bolt had not been thrown properly by the automatic mechanism. Then he saw the amber goo beginning to pulse out of the tip of the barrel. Suddenly his hand was burning furiously and there was amoeba slopping out of the powerpack casing inside the handle. He threw the gun down, wiped his hand on the wall, scraping his skin loose in the mad attempt to rid himself of every drop of the jelly.

"Explosives!" Gnossos shouted.

Sam turned, dashed into the armory once more. When he came out, he had three grenades. He ran to Gnossos and Hurkos, panting heavily, his eyes wide, his heart furious as a drum.

The jelly-mass was recovering and had slopped into the hall where it joined up with the smaller clump of stuff that had been the insides of the gun. The two touched each other, glowed purple where their surfaces met, then easily flowed together and became one.

"I think I see why the radio didn't work," Gnossos said. "It didn't *want* to work!"

"The entire ship is alive," Sam agreed.

Hurkos rapped a hand on the wall, listened to the solid sound of it. "It's steel. I'll be damned if it is anything but steel!"

"Inside," Sam said, keeping an eye on the pulsating jelly-mass at the end of the passageway. "Deep inside the plating, there's more goo."

"But the hyperdrive—"

"There mustn't really be a hyperdrive mechanism," Sam said. "The jelly can build up a hyperspace field somehow. There are no machines aboard, I'd wager. Only jelly-cored shells."

“Your fear of machines—” Hurkos began.

“Was gained from whoever—or whatever—built this... this ship-thing.”

The lump had begun to move again, pseudopods slapping wetly against the deck. It was six feet high, a good three hundred pounds.

“You two get into the suits,” Gnosso said, taking the grenades. He still had his own suit on, and his helmet lay within easy reach. “We’ll have to go across to my ship. This one won’t let us live long now that we know part of its secret.”

Sam and Hurkos struggled into their suits, fitted their helmets to the shoulder threads, attached their air tanks. Every little act, though performed at top speed, seemed to take hours. When they were dressed, Gnosso pulled the hatch shut, sealing the main cabin from the hallway where the thing was advancing warily. “Let’s see it get through that!” the poet said, putting on his helmet. “Now let’s get out of here.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t much hope of that,” Sam said from his position next to the control console. “I’ve pressed all buttons to depressurize the cabin and open the exit chamber, but I can’t seem to get any response from the ship.”

Hurkos, eyes wide, jumped to the console, flipped the comline to the computer open. “Let us out!”

But the computer was not a computer. There was a deafening roar from the wire and plastic voice plate. There were screams, thunders, explosions. A thousand rats burning alive. A million sparrows madly attacking one another in a battle to the death.

“Shut it off!” Gnosso shouted.

Hurkos slammed the switch shut. The noises continued. At first, it swept out in irregular waves, shredded them and put them back together. Then there was not even a pattern of waves, merely a constant din of overwhelming magnitude. And there was jelly spewing out of the speaker grid...

Jelly spewing out of the jack-holes...

Abruptly, the speaker grid was gone, thrust away by the surging pressure of the thing behind it. Parts of the console began to sag as the supportive jelly that had filled it was drained away, spat out.

Still the noise. “It’s the same sound,” Sam shouted into his suit phone, “that I heard when I was obeying the hypnotic orders—only it isn’t ordering anything.”

“The grenades!” Hurkos called above the roar as the jelly began to collect on the floor, changing from amber to pink-tan, rising in a pulsating mass. The other glob pressed against the hatch from the hallway. There was the screeching sound of metal being strained to its limits. Soon the hatch would give, and they would be trapped between two shapeless monsters. The jelly would cover them and do... whatever it did to flesh and blood and bone.

Gnosso flipped the cap that dissolved the anti-shock packing in the outer shell of the grenade. He tossed it. Nothing.

“The grenades are jelly too!” Hurkos shouted.

Sam snatched one of the remaining bulbs from the poet. “No. They aren’t machines, so there is no

reason for the jelly to replace them with part of itself. It's just a natural chemical that explodes without mechanical prompting. It just needs a jar. Gnossos didn't throw it hard enough." He wailed the second grenade against the viewplate.

All the world was a sun. A lightbulb. Then the filament began to die and the light went out completely. The force of the explosion had gone, mostly, outward. What had pressed in their direction had been caught by the second mass of jelly that rose to snatch at the grenade—unsuccessfully. Miraculously, they were tumbling through the shattered front of the ship, moving into the darkness and emptiness of space toward *The Ship of the Soul*, the poet's boat that lay silently a short mile away.

Behind them, the jelly came, boiling away in the vacuum, tumbling and sputtering. Steaming, it lashed out with non-arms as it realized its chances for success were diminishing. The thunder of its non-voice was definitely not sound but thought. It bombarded their minds, unable to order them so quickly, unable to control them in their panic.

Hurkos was out ahead, his shoulder jets pushing him swiftly toward the ship's portal. Then came the poet. Finally, Sam. A hand of false-flesh streaked around the latter, curled in front of him, attempting to cut him off from the others. Cut him off. Cut him off and devour him. He choked, maneuvered under the whip before it could sweep around and capture him in an acidic embrace.

And still it came. It grew smaller, boiled and bubbled itself away. But there seemed always to be a new central mass moving out from the hull, leaping the blackness and replenishing the withering pseudopods before they could snap, separate, and dissolve. Finally, however, there was nothing left except a speck of pinkish-tan. It turned amber-orange, then it too puffed out of existence. With it, went the noise.

Inside *The Ship of the Soul*, they stripped, collapsed into soft chairs without animate padding. This was a ship of comfort, not one of destruction. This was a ship built for six people, not for one man, one tool of an insane, unnamable entity without a face or a time. For a while, then, they were silent, composing themselves for what must be said. The moment the composing ended and the discussion began was signaled by a quiet suggestion from Gnossos that they get some wine to help loosen their tongues.

The wine was warm and green, a special bottle opened for a special occasion.

"It was the same sound I heard under the hypnotic trance."

"That means," Hurkos said, staring into his wine as he talked, "that it was the ship itself that was ordering you around. That jelly was the plotter behind the scheme."

Gnossos downed one glass of wine, poured a second from the decanter. "I don't agree. If the ship were responsible for Sam's actions, there would be no reason for hypnotic controls—and really no reason for Sam. If the ship were intelligent itself, it could do everything Sam could do—and possibly better. And when he shot it, it should have been able to order him to throw down the gun. No, the ship was just a cancerous mass of goo that was to convey Sam to Hope. Nothing more."

"But what kind of man could make a thing like the jelly-mass?"

"I think," Gnossos said, "that there is a chance you are the dupe of an extra-galactic intelligence."

"That's absurd! We've never found another intelligent race in the last thousand years. That's—"

“That’s frighteningly possible,” Hurkos reflected. “There are thousands and millions of galaxies out there. How do you know a bunch of jelly-masses didn’t kidnap you, take you away, and decide to train you to overthrow the galaxy?”

Sam finished his wine in a gulp. Heat flooded through his flesh, outward from his stomach. Still, it could not ward off the sharp chill in him. “Because,” he answered in even tones, “that would be one helluva backward way of invading the empire. If these extra-galactics have all this skill, can use something like the jelly for hyperspace travel and making food and operating robosurgeons, they could overturn the galaxy in a month. A week! Hell, that blob even talked to me in a computer voice. Probably forms some crude set of vocal cords when it needs them. And it operated a radar set; it—”

“It’s a living machine,” Gnosso said, almost to himself.

“That’s another thing,” Hurkos added. “Your fear of machines. You got it, obviously, because whoever—or whatever—hypnotized you fears machines also. Because he, it, or they do not use machines. They have blobs instead. We have nothing like this. It almost proves they’re extra-galactic!”

“One couldn’t live in the empire without the aid of machines,” Gnosso agreed. “One would have to be from... Outside.”

“No.” Sam set his glass on the floor. “If there were aliens with this sort of thing, they wouldn’t need me. This is something smaller than an entire extra-galactic race. This is someone who needs help, who needs an automaton to do his dirty work.”

“Agreed also,” the poet said. “Looks like there is a stalemate in this conversation and this line of thought.” He heaved his bulk to a more comfortable position. “Well, I for one, am sticking with you until this mystery is solved. I couldn’t bear to quit with the whole thing raveled up. This could be the most important, most dangerous event of the last thousand years. And one thing that there is just too little of these days is danger. Warring man might have been crude, but he sure as the devil had his fill of danger in a lifetime. Today we travel on, living hundreds of years, and everything is so safe and perfect that we hardly ever experience danger. I’m long overdue for some excitement!”

“Me too, I guess,” Hurkos said. Sam had the feeling the Mue was not terribly comfortable since the jelly-mass had attacked them. But he would not—could not—back down in front of the poet.

“So what next?”

Gnosso rubbed a huge paw across his chin, wrinkled his nose for a moment. “We set this tub on a course for Hope. When we get there, we wait for your next command. We’re going to find out the answers to this.”

“But,” Sam said uneasily, “suppose I am out to overturn the galaxy?”

“Hurkos and I will be right behind you to stop you before you have a chance.”

“I hope so,” he said.

Later, after more wine and much conjecture, as *The Ship of the Soul* plunged through the thick river of the void, they retired, leaning back in their chairs, belting themselves in, and shutting their mouths so that they could neither consume nor converse. And eventually they fell into sleep...

*There was deep and awful darkness, save for the scattered pinpoints of the stars dotting the roof*



*of the night. Then, as the breeze shifted, dawn came crawling over the horizon, tinting the blackness with yellow... then orange... And there was still a hill with a cross upon it. There was a man on the cross. His hands were dripping blood.*

*And his feet were dripping blood...*

*The wounds were festering and black demon mouths.*

*The man on the cross raised his head, looked to the dawn. He seemed very weary, as if he were ready to give up more than the body, the spirit also. There were clumps of matting at the corners of his eyes that interfered with his vision. His teeth were yellow from long neglect.*

*“Dammit, let me down!” he shrieked.*

*The words rebounded from the low sky.*

*“Please,” he said, groveling.*

*The sun was a flaming eye. When it was at its zenith, there came angels, beings of light and awesome majesty. They floated about the man, administering to his needs. Some carried water which they poured between his cracked and crusted lips. And some brought oil with which they anointed him. And still others sponged away the oil and fed him. Then they were vanished into air.*

*The sun was setting. It seemed only minutes since it had risen.*

*“Please,” the man wept. The angels had missed some of the oil in his beard. It glistened there—and tickled.*

*With darkness came the demons. Crawling from under brown stones, slithering out of crevices in the earth, they came. There were dwarfs, slavering, eyeless yet seeing. There were wolves with sabers for teeth. There were things with tails and horns, things with heads that were nothing more than huge mouths. They screamed and cawed, muttered, shrieked, and moaned. They came at the cross, crawling over one another. But they could not reach the man. They clawed the wood of his prison but could not claw him. One by one, they began to die...*

*They withered and became smoke ghosts that the cool wind bore away. They collapsed into dust. They dribbled into blood pools.*

*Then there were stars for a short time.*

*And again came the dawn...*

*And the angels...*

*And the night and the demons and the stars and the dawn and the awesome, awesome angels and the night... It continued at a maddening pace. Days became weeks; weeks turned to months. For years, he hung there. For centuries, he remained. Finally, all time was lost as the sun spun madly across the sky and night with its devils was barely a blink of an eye.*

*“Please!” he screamed. “Please!”*

*The last screams brought them out of sleep, breathing hard. Sam pushed himself up, looked about the*

ship to reassure himself. Then he turned to Hurkos. “What sort of dream was that?”

Gnossos looked curious.

“He’s a telepath,” Sam explained. “Irregular talent. But what the hell kind of dreams were those?”

“That’s what I’d like to know, Sam,” Hurkos said. “I was getting them from you!”

## VI

“*Me?*”

“Well, not really from your mind. *Through* your mind. The generator of those thoughts is very distant. No one in this room. And the mind of that generator is horribly large. Immeasurable. This was only a fraction of the thoughts in it, a small corner of them. In this case, I picked up this trace of thoughts and for some reason my subconscious talent began boosting their vividness and re-broadcasting them.”

“But I wouldn’t have dreamed them without your help.”

Hurkos smiled sadly. “You would have dreamed them just the same and just as completely. You would not have been *aware* of dreaming them, is all.”

“But then what was it? It reminded me of the man on the cross you toppled after Belina’s death.”

“It’s the Christ legend,” Gnossos said. They turned to stare at him. “I make legends my business. Poets work in all sorts of mythologies. There have been a large number of them—and a large number of wild ones too. The Christ legend is not so ancient. There are still Christians, as you know, though damn few. Most of the religion, along with all the others, died out about a thousand years ago, shortly after the Permanent Peace and the immortality drugs. According to legend, the god-figure Christ was crucified on a dogwood cross. This dream seems to be a reenactment of that myth, though I do not recall that the man hung there that long or that there were administering angels and tempting demons.”

“This could be another clue,” Hurkos offered.

“How so?” Sam was ready to clutch at the smallest straw.

“Perhaps your mystery hypnotist is a neo-Christian, one of those who refuse the immortality drugs. That would certainly explain why he would want to overthrow the empire. He would want to convert the pagans, bring the savages into the fold. That’s us.”

“Good point,” Gnossos said. “But that doesn’t explain the blob.”

Hurkos lapsed into silence.

*Bong-bong-bong!*

PREPARE FOR NORMAL SPACE AND MANUAL CONTROL OF THIS VESSEL!

“We’re almost to Hope,” Gnossos said. “Perhaps we will soon be having more clues.”

The flight-control system of the planet-wide city locked them into its pattern and began bringing them

down to a point of its own choosing since they had not requested any particular touchdown spot. Ships fluttered above, below, and to all sides of them. Bubble cars spun across the great elevated roadway, zipping between the buildings, sometimes slipping into tunnels in the skyscrapers from which they often emerged going another direction. They settled onto a gray pad where the flames of their descent were soaked up, cooled, dissipated.

Beyond the pad, on all sides, lay Hope. Super-city. The hope, literally, of a new way of life for billions. They stood at the open portal, waited while the attendant marked their checkslip so that they would have the proper ship to return to, tore it in half and gave them their portion.

“Well,” Gnosos said, “where to?”

“No orders yet,” Sam said.

“Let’s just wander around a bit.”—Hurkos.

“Okay, we will.”—Gnosos.

And they did.

He sat before the thick window that was not really a window at all, and he looked at the thing beyond. It raged, lashing, screaming, roaring like a thousand bulls with pins in their brains. How long? How long had it fought against the Shield, trying to get out? Breadloaf peered deeper into the Shield, clutched his chair and leaned farther back in it. The massive desk nearly concealed his slumped form. A thousand years and more. That was how long. His father had constructed the barrier and the chamber beyond, which dipped into the other dimension. No, not another dimension either—a *higher* dimension. Not another alternate scheme of things, just a different layer of this particular scheme. And when his father had died in a freak accident that the medics could not undo the damage of, *he* had come into possession of the family fortune, the family buildings, the family office structure here in the Center of Hope, the Shield and the tank beyond. The last two things were something one did not advertise. It was a family secret—a big, hoary skeleton in the family closet. The burden was his, and only his.

For six hundred years he had come here every week, sometimes for stretches that lasted days, most often for just a few hours. He came to look at the Shield. And what lay beyond, trapped by it. It was a weight that rested heavily on his shoulders at all times. It was insane to worry. He knew that. The Shield had held for over a thousand years; it would hold forever. It could not fail. It was maintained by machines, and machines had not been known to fail since his grandfather’s time. And these machines were tended, not by unreliable men, but by other machines that gained their power from still more machines. It was foolproof.

Still, Alexander Breadloaf III came once a week, sometimes staying a long time, sometimes just for a few hours. Still he worried. Still—he was afraid.

Crimson exploded across the screen, washed down and turned to ocher at the bottom. Explosions would not shatter the Shield, no matter how violent they might be. Didn’t it understand this by now? A thousand years of explosions, and it still did not understand. That thought left a sorry spot on his soul, but he reminded himself of what his father always said (said so often that it became the family motto): “There is no longer ignorance in men.” Maybe. Evidently. Although he feared that ignorance lurked just below the surface, waiting for a chance...

There was a lovely pattern of blue and silver as it applied certain stress pattern sequences to the Shield. But it had tried that before. It had tried everything before...

Breadloaf pushed himself out of the chair, walked toward the door that led into the hallway. He would get some simple foods, some coffee. And he would return. This was one of those times when a brief glance at it was not going to be enough. It was going to be one of those weeks. One of those *long* weeks.

## VII

In their wandering, they came across many things that amazed Sam despite the fact that he wholly or partially remembered most of them. It was as if he had been told of these things but had never actually seen them. In the seeing lay the wonder. They had gone to the light shows, the toto-experience places. They had seen the parks, the avenues of art. Gnosso knew the city well, that being one of the qualifications of a true poet—to know the beating heart of the metropolis. Or megalopolis? No matter. He explained all things they did not understand, clarified things they thought they knew. It was a marvelous time, save for the constant awareness that another hypnotic trance and order could be on the way, minutes from them, ready to swallow Sam into noisy chaos and use him.

So it was, in the course of their aimless ramblings, they came upon the Christian. Sam noticed that Hurkos bristled at the sight of the man—not because of this individual, but because of the heedless god that supposedly stood behind him.

The Christian was old. He was fifty, ancient in a world where all were eternally thirty or younger. He had evidently been a child of a strong Christian family, for he had not even received anti-beard elements; the heavy shadow on his face gave him an eerie, seldom-seen metallic look. His teeth were yellow and chipped. His skin was wrinkled. Across his chest and back hung the halves of a sandwich sign. The front said: GOD IS ASHAMED! When the man saw them coming, he executed a small heel-turn to reveal the letters on the back of the sign: HE SHALL COME AGAIN TO JUDGE!

“I can’t understand them,” Hurkos said.

Gnosso smiled a thin smile. “Some day, they will all be gone.”

“But why are there these people?” Sam asked. “Don’t the medics prevent mental infirmities in babies?”

“Well,” the poet said, shortening his giant strides to match the smaller steps of his companions, “the original concept of the empire was complete freedom. Mental infirmities were weeded out, true. As a result, the number of religious people dropped over the years. But one cannot limit another man’s beliefs under a system of complete freedom. Religious persons were allowed to practice their beliefs. Though their children might be born as mentally sound as possible, the parents raised them and passed their own superstitions on to their offspring. The number of religious dwindled. But as long as they procreated—and this is a strong part of their faith, these Christians—they would always have children to indoctrinate, to warp. It’s a pity, certainly. But, after all, they are responsible and it is their life and their child. A man can waste what is his if he so choose. I guess.”

“Know the Word,” the Christian said as they drew abreast of him. He handed Gnosso and Sam pamphlets—yellow paper with red print. They were so wrinkled and tattered that it was evident many people had handed them right back in the past. The short-lived traffic of each pamphlet had worn it

severely.

“I’ll take one too,” Hurkos said, holding his hand out.

The Christian made no reply. Hurkos asked again.

“Will you ask this person of tainted blood to cease speaking to me?” the bearded one asked Sam. He was obviously distressed, running his thin, bony hands up and down the edges of the chest sign, toying with little splinters projecting from the edge of the plastic square.

“Tainted blood?”

“They don’t like Mues,” Gnosso explained. “They would never speak to one unless they were dying and needed help. Then, it would be God’s will that they spoke.”

“Why are Mues—tainted?” Sam asked.

“A Mue is not a creation of God, but the work of man,” the Christian snapped. “A Mue is a violation of God’s holy powers of creation.” His eyes gleamed fanatically.

“Prejudice,” Gnosso said. “It’s part of the dogma of every religion—sometimes heavily disguised but always there. Do you know the history of your church, old man?”

The Christian shuffled his feet. He was beginning to feel that it might be best to stay out of an argument with these particular pagans, but his fanatic devotion could not be totally denied. “Of course I do. In the beginning there was—”

“It doesn’t start that far back.” Gnosso laughed. He licked his lips, anxious to launch into the old man. “It doesn’t start with the darkness and the light and the first seven days. It comes along much later. Millennia later. There’s no church until man decides he needs a means of social climbing, something to make him superior to his neighbors. So he forms a church, a religion. By forming it, he can say that he knows what and why God is. He can say he knows the purpose of all things and can, therefore, be a cut above other men.”

“God *chose* Saint Peter to start the church, to be above other men.”

Gnosso smiled patronizingly, almost a saint himself—except for the sharp blade that was his tongue. “I doubt that. You’ll pardon me if I sound distrustful, but I doubt that very much. History is simply littered with men who said God had chosen them to be a leader. Most of them fell flat on their faces. Most of them got trampled down and smashed in the flow of Time and History, which are two things bigger than *any* man.”

“False prophets!” the sign-carrier growled.

“So what makes you think Saint Peter wasn’t a false prophet?”

“What he started is still with us.”

“Duration does not prove worth. Wars lasted a damn sight longer than your religion has, but they were finished and done away with because they were not good things. Besides, your faith is just barely with us. It seems Saint Peter’s work is facing the end that war faced.”

Sam made a face, launched into the conversation again. “But why hate Hurkos for not being directly God-created? If God gave men the power to invent and use the Artificial Womb, then He was involved in the creation of the Mues, though—”

“Men usurped the power,” the Christian said.

“But if God is all-powerful, men could not usurp anything of His. Why, He would crush men who tried—”

Gnossos put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It is not for this reason that Christians hate Mues. As I said, they have to feel superior. There are so few people they can look down on anymore; the Mue offers a perfect scapegoat. Because he is often abnormal physically—whether it be a detrimental physical difference or a beautiful, functional difference—they have something to feel superior about. ‘I am not like you,’ they say. ‘I am normal. I am whole.’”

A crowd had begun to form around the debate. People strained over one another’s shoulders, trying to hear and get a look at the verbal combatants. This seemed to please Gnossos, but it irritated the Christian.

“And my dear fellow,” Gnossos continued in a friendly tone raised a bit for the benefit of those at the back of the crowd, “do you know who started many of the worst wars in the past three thousand years?”

“Satan’s forces”

“No. God, it should be so simple as you say. No, it was Christians, the very people who preached against war. In—”

The bearded man showed his teeth in what could have been a snarl if he had added sound. “I will not pursue this argument any longer. You are in Satan’s employ.” He moved quickly, pushing at the crowd that had gathered. They hesitated, then parted to let him through. He had, very shortly, been lost in the breast of the night to be suckled by its darkness.

“You don’t imagine you did any good,” Hurkos said as the crowd around them dispersed and they began walking again. “You don’t imagine you got through that bony structure he calls a head, do you?”

“No. But I can’t resist trying. He is unreachable by this time. Besides, even if he doubted his faith, he would not allow himself to give that doubt prominence in his thoughts. He has forsaken concrete eternity via the immortality drugs, and now he has nothing to cling to but the hopes of his religion, the promises of his God.”

“Gives me the shivers,” Sam said.

“This is all getting much too morbid,” Gnossos said. “Let’s find a hotel and settle down. My feet are killing me, and there is no telling how much running we might have to do to catch Sam if he gets another order.”

Breadloaf finished the last morsels of his sandwich, licked his gums to remove the sticky salad dressing, took a long swallow of hot, black coffee, and leaned back in his chair as if it were a womb he was asking to swallow him. The room was dark, for the thing behind the Shield was not a thing for well-lighted rooms. Its details were brought out too fully in light. Blackness allowed merciful obscurity.

*Cinnabar horsemen riding green stallions exploded across the screen, were gone in a wash of lavender...*

He liked to pick out patterns in the explosions of color, choose and name them as a young boy might do with clouds *seen* from a green grass-covered hill in summer.

*A dragon's mouth holding the broken body of an amber... amber... amber knight...*

Alexander Breadloaf III wondered whether his father had sat like this, watching the patterns and trying to make something of them. It was a seeking after order, certainly, that was the purpose of watching them. Had his father sat, his great leonine head bowed in contemplation, his heavy brows run together from the forehead-wrinkling concentration? Had he laced his thick fingers behind his waterfall of white hair and watched—actually studied—the Prisoner of the Shield, as the family had come to speak of it?

He doubted it. His father had been a man of hard work and strenuous action. He had built his father's small fortune into a very large fortune, an almost incalculable sum of money. When his engineers accidentally stumbled across the Shield while looking for a non-matter force for construction purposes, when they discovered, to their horror, what lay beyond. The old man took the practical angle. He knew there was a fortune to be made here, more than his already formidable masses of wealth. He had only to enslave the powers already trapped behind the Shield and turn them to work for him. The Shield was maintained. But the powers could never be enslaved. To agree to slavery, the slave must have fear of his master. There was no fear in the Prisoner. Absolutely none.

*Brilliant flashes of white rippled like fish through a sudden sea of smoky burgundy...*

His heart thudded at the bright light, even though he knew the Shield was impenetrable. Take one molecule and expand it. Expand it some more. Make it bigger and bigger and bigger—but don't disturb its natural particle balance. You have a Shield. It will hold back anything, stand against even nuclear power of the highest magnitude. But you also have a doorway into a higher dimension. A barred doorway. No, really more like an unbreakable window. But that window turns the higher dimension into a prison, squeezes it into a confined space (a law of opposites which equalizes the pressure created by the expanding first molecule). The higher dimension is then bound within the tiny limits. It and its inhabitants are trapped, unable to move or to get out.

*Brilliant white on yellow like cat's-eye marbles...*

No, his father had never sat here like this. He was too practical for melancholia. Along about the second hundred years of the Prisoner's confinement, the old fellow had realized—probably with a great deal of bitterness—he could never enslave it and demand things of it. And as the years passed he came to maintain the Shield only because to let it go off would mean the end of his family and possibly all human life. The Prisoner would be seeking revenge—an omnipotent, terrible revenge of finality. By the days of Alexander the Third, this fear of the Prisoner had been compounded by a feeling of moral obligation. The sanity and progress of the empire depended on keeping the Prisoner imprisoned. Always, in the rear of his mind, was the fear that the thing would escape. Sometimes that fear surged to the fore. Times like this. He wanted to run into the streets and scream about the charge behind the Shield. But the Breadloafs had done this thing, had trapped this beast. It would be up to them to watch it for all eternity. And perhaps beyond.

Finally, when watching was not quite enough, Alexander walked to the Shield, stood with a hand upon the coursing energy. "How did you," he said at length to the thing beyond, "become like this?"

It could only thought-speak to him when he was touching the Shield. Even then, the words were tiny and distant: *Letmeout, letmeout...*

“How did you become like this?”

*Letmeout, letmeout, letmeout...*

That was its constant cry. Sometimes there were bloodcurdling threats. But he knew—and it knew—that the threats could not be carried out. Not as long as the Shield was there. It would never answer his question: “How did you become like this?” Not today. It had answered previously, but only when it thought it had something to gain.

“How did you become like this?”

And it had said: *I have always been like this...*

On hydro-beds, reclining, they opened their ears. The hotel room was pleasant and spacious. Gnosos lay before the door so that Sam would have to crawl over him to get out. The lights were soft but adequate, the wine sweet upon their tongues. It was certainly a time for verses.

“Look through the window  
to the streets below;  
It’s the age of sorrow,  
babies in the snow.  
Look through any window  
across a sea of dust;  
Time lies shattered  
in a mobius rust...”

Then it was time to sleep. The wine had been drunk, the verses spoken, and the darkness crept over them. For a time, at least...

*A dream. A dream of an empty tomb and rotting bodies. Except for one single body which stood and walked for the doorway. But there were demons that sprang from nowhere, grasping the body and flinging it down among the corpses, and commanded it to stay dead. Always and everywhere there were slavering, keening demons...*

Then Hurkos lost the thread of the alien thoughts and the trio woke as one. They were all perspiring. The dim glow of the lamps seemed suddenly too dim for the circumstances.

“Not mine again?” Sam asked.

“Relayed from whatever implanted your hypnotic commands. Very far away.”



But the odor of spoiled flesh had carried over into reality.

“Well,” Gnosso said, grumbling and standing, “I can’t sleep now.”

They agreed.

“So let’s go sightseeing again. Maybe the next command will be coming along soon now anyway.”

“Where to?” Hurkos asked. “Is it far? My feet still hurt.”

“Not far,” Gnosso assured them. But they knew a short step to this giant was two steps to them and a little stroll might turn into an arch-breaking trek. “There are a number of these places we could go. This one’s just around the corner. It’s called the *Inferno*.”

## VIII

The *Inferno* was a bar. But more than a bar, a total experience. Everything in the place was geared to some sensory stimulation. Ebony and silver clouds drifted through the rooms and half-rooms, sifted in and out of alcoves and cubbyholes, some just for effect, some carrying scantily dressed performers. Floor panels popped open unexpectedly like the tops of jack-in-the-boxes, spewing out clowns in imagi-color costumes that were purple, yellow, red, green, or white, according to one’s mood. The shimmering fabrics manifested themselves in many ways, shifting color to match your feelings, even as they cheered you up. The floor revolved at a different speed than the walls and in a different direction than the ceiling. Strobe lights flashed. Smello-symphonies flushed through the room, twisting the patrons’ senses to moments of synesthesia where music became an olfactory sensation of indescribable delectability. The erotic cygian perfumes seeped through the air in blue mists, enflaming nostrils and tying the mass of total experience into a congealed whole that throbbed with each wave of the odoriferous substance.

They took a table in the corner, one almost hidden by shadows. The robotender in the center of the table delivered their drinks once Gnosso had compiled an order, punched it out on the silver keys, and deposited the proper amount of coins. They sat sipping the cool liquids and watching the two dozen or so characters in the bar.

“What’s so special about this place?” Sam asked, almost choking on a heavy breath of the perfume. “It isn’t unlike the Grande Hotel Lounge or a dozen other places we’ve been, for that matter.”

“Look at the people,” Gnosso said enigmatically.

Sam did. He could see no way in which they differed from empire norm in dress or habit. He said so.

“Look more closely,” the poet urged. “Look at their faces.”

Sam swung his gaze from the ruddy face to the more distant visages. And it *was* in their faces. The longer he watched, the clearer it became to the eye. But what, exactly, was it? He searched his mind, looking for a comparison, a simile that would make the vision into words. He was just about to give up when the proper words struck him. The look in these faces was much like the look in the faces of the scooterbeasts when they were penned in zoos. In a natural state, the scooterbeast moved as quickly as lightning across a storm sky. They were spinning, careening blurs to the eye. Penned, they pressed their faces to the glass walls and looked mournfully toward freedom, wishing to move again, to travel, to be lightning, to do what was denied them. “I see it,” he said to Gnosso.

“They’re Unnaturals.”

“The ones—”

“Who would like to kill,” Gnosso completed. “They are defects born with many of the old faults: with the desire to kill, an overwhelming greed, and bent toward self-gratification. There is nothing the government can do but take them and make them Sensitives. If they hurt anyone, they also feel the pain. Only ten times worse. Any pain they inflict is returned tenfold to their own nervous system. If they aid someone, they feel the other person’s pleasure. If they kill someone, they feel the death throes and terminal spasms ten times more intensely than the victim. None of them could tolerate that. They do not, therefore, kill or hurt.”

“And they look so normal,” Sam said.

“Outside. Outside, Sam. But on the inside—”

“He knows about the Unnaturals,” Hurkos said, “but he did not know about the Mues. That’s rather curious.”

“We’ll consider it over another drink,” Gnosso said. He placed the order, deposited the coins, waited for the liquor. None came. He pounded the robotender once, then bellowed for the human tapkeeper who was polishing glasses behind the bar. He was growing red-faced as he had been when his ship had collided with Sam’s. A false anger put on merely for the pleasure of appearing furious. The tapkeeper opened the gate in the bar and crossed the room with strides as sure and quick, almost, as Gnosso’s. In his eyes glittered the tenseness, the trapped expression of the scooterbeast with his nose to glass.

“This thing is broken!” Gnosso roared. “I want my money back!”

“Here,” the human bartender said, flipping three coins to the poet. “Now all of you had better leave—please.”

“Why?” Sam asked. This was the second time he had encountered genuine rudeness—once with the Christian, now with the Unnatural. It puzzled him.

“This is not a Natural bar.”

“You’re a natural if I ever saw one,” Hurkos mumbled.

The bartender ignored the wit.

“We are allowed service anywhere,” Gnosso boomed. “Naturals and Unnaturals are not segregated!”

Shuffling his feet, a bit cowed, or taking a new line of tact, perhaps, the tapkeeper said, “It’s just for your own safety that I ask.” There was a mixture of fear and general uneasiness in his eyes now.

“Was that a threat?” Gnosso said, astonished. “Am I with the uncivilized?”

“Not a threat. It’s for your own safety, as I said. It’s because of him—that one.”

They followed the tapkeeper’s thumb as it jerked toward the man standing at the far corner of the bar. The stranger was clutching a glass of yellow liquid, taking large gulps of it without effort, swishing it about in his mouth as if it were mouthwash, chugging it down without a tear. He was huge, nearly as big as

Gnossos, red-haired and red-eyed. His hammy hands clenched into fists, unclenched to grab his drink. Though physically a bit smaller than the poet, he had muscle where Gnossos had run somewhat to fat. The corded masses of tissue that were his arms seemed able to snap anything or anyone to pieces.

“Who’s he?” Gnossos asked.

“Black Jack Buronto.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Hurkos said, slumping even further into his chair. “You must be.”

“Henry Buronto’s his name, but he wins all the time at the gaming tables, so they call him Black Jack. And he carries one too—a blackjack, that is.”

A great many Unnaturals carried crude weapons, wishing they could use them, but never daring to because of the pain echoes that would engulf their sensitized brains. Clearly, Gnossos was fascinated by Buronto. Here was someone a bit different. A poet is, of course, a man of insight if he is a poet of any worth. But he is not a jaded guru if he is fascinated by things unique. Indeed, it is just such a fascination that he needs to hone his mind on. Buronto was unique. Here was someone smiled on by Fortune at the gambling tables. Here was someone, perhaps, stronger than himself. And here was someone, for some reason, to be feared.

“He’s dangerous,” the tapkeeper said.

“Dangerous because he carries a blackjack and wins at cards?”

“No. Dangerous because he would use the blackjack. He could kill all three of you—*split-split-splat*—just like that.” The tapkeeper wrung his hands like dishcloths. He cast a glance at all three of them, searching for some sign of weakness, then looked back to Buronto.

Almost as if he had seen a signal, Buronto started across the room, directly toward them.

“Please leave,” the tapkeeper said.

“I think maybe we had better,” Sam suggested.

“Why?” Gnossos asked. “The blackjack bit? He won’t hurt us. Remember, every pain we feel, he feels ten times over.”

“But—” the tapkeeper began.

“You’re talking about me,” Buronto said, stepping up to their table. And his voice was like the voice of a canary-high and sweet and melodic. The trio stared at one another for a moment, astounded. The tiny voice again seeped from the massive throat. “Were you talking about me?”

Sam tittered, then let go and burst out laughing. Gnossos followed with his thunder-laugh. Hurkos fought it, seeming to be comfortable in his recently self-imposed melancholy and reluctant to leave it.

Buronto spoke again: “Stop laughing at me!”

The word “laughing” was so high-pitched that his voice cracked in the middle of it. And Hurkos too burst out laughing, spraying the table with saliva he had been fighting to hold back with the laugh.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Buronto shouted.

But the tension within the three of them had been at a peak. They had been restless, nervous, on edge since the encounter with the jelly-mass. The constant state of expectancy had honed their nerves to sharp, thin wires that were ready to vibrate wildly if only slightly plucked. And big Black Jack Buronto's voice—or the strange anachronism that passed for a voice—had been the tuning fork that had set them all roaring as the tension drained. They laughed wildly. They laughed without control, tears streaming down their faces. They laughed all out of proportion to the joke.

“Oh, no, no, no,” the tapkeeper moaned. He chanted it over and over as if it were a litany.

“Shut up!” Buronto roared squeakily. His mouth was foaming. Little flecks of mad white... He brought a colossal fist down on the simu-wood table, knocked all the glasses off. But this too only served to send the trio into paroxysms of laughter. Hurkos was leaning on Gnosso, and Sam had his head thrown back, howling.

Black Jack muttered something incomprehensible, all meaning flooded away by burning rage. Clasp one fist in the other, he smashed the wedge of his flesh onto the tabletop, shattered the thing into two halves that stood separately for a moment until the weight of the broken top pulled the laminated leg apart and the table collapsed into the laps of the three Naturals. They ceased their laughter.

Buronto now had a face like a jungle animal. Great swatches of ugly blue discolored the uniform red of his countenance. His teeth were bared and foam-flecked. He snarled and spat and screeched unintelligible things between his teeth. He was mad as all hell and all hell could not have prevailed against him had he turned on it. He latched onto Hurkos' chair, ripped it out from under the Mue and sent him crashing to the floor.

“What the hell?” Gnosso said to the tapkeeper. “He's an Unnatural, but he's also a Sensitive!”

“He's a Sensitive, yes,” the tapkeeper shouted as. Black Jack smashed Hurkos' chair into the wall again and again, more violent with each vicious swing. “He's a Sensitive and feels the victim's pain. But he was more of an Unnatural than the doctors knew. He was also a masochist!”

The color drained from the poet's face as snowy realization swept in to take its place. “Then he likes being a Sensitive because—”

The bartender finished: “He likes to feel pain!”

Buronto had finished with the chair. There was nothing left of it that could be pounded against the wall. Splinters and scraps of plastic lay over the floor and surrounding tables. The wall was worse for the encounter too. Black Jack Buronto, obviously, would not care if he killed a hundred men. A thousand. He turned to them, plodding through the mounting wreckage. He tossed aside anything that stood in his way, knocking over tables, smashing chairs and lamps and robotenders. He lashed out at Hurkos, struck a blow that sent the small Mue tumbling across another table and crashing to the floor in a cloud of broken glass.

Gnosso stepped up to take a swing at the maddened Buronto, but he was a Natural. It was impossible for him to strike out at a fellow man, no matter how deserving of punishment that fellow man might be. Had Buronto been an animal, the case would have been simpler. But he was not. And a thousand years of sanity made Gnosso check his blow even before he started it. And Buronto delivered a punch that set the poet down hard. As Gnosso and Hurkos struggled to gain their feet, Black Jack heaved a table out of the way and came for Sam.

Patrons were moving out of the doors, hiding behind stable objects, not anxious to get involved but not

about to lose out on a good show like this. They waved bottles, hooted, howled, and cheered for Buronto.

And at that moment, the second hypnotic order came to Sam...

A chaos of noise obliterated the lesser noise in the bar. Sam's eyes glossed. He wobbled for a moment as neither he nor the mysterious hypnotic master was fully in control of his temporal self. Then, determinedly, he set out for the door. Buronto, seeing the move and misjudging it for retreat, snarled and leaped over the fallen furniture, reaching the door first. "Not yet. I hurt you first!"

He reached with great, corded hands for Sam...

And suddenly doubled up as Sam struck him a blow in the stomach that would have crumbled a wall—because a wall would not have given as Buronto's stomach did. And Buronto's stomach certainly gave—gave up to Sam's wrist. Whoever was controlling Sam's body did not seem to have anything against violence. The giant *offed*, stumbled, but still managed to clutch Sam's shoulder. Sam brought a foot up, twisted away, and slammed the foot into Buronto's gut, sent him to his knees. Then he was past the Unnatural and through the door.

"After him!" Gnosso's shouted. "He's gotten another order!" The two of them ran past the gasping Buronto and outside. But in the dimness of the night, the streets were empty. Sam was a long time gone.

## IX

The water, chemicals, and lubricants flowed about him in invisible pipes. No, not invisible. Materially nonexistent. There were tubes of force that clothed the liquids. No cumbersome, unreliable, destructible metal fixtures, only pure, raw force adapted to do a better job. Gurgling, the fluids flowed from one part of the giant mechanism to another, covering the block-by-a-block machine quickly and efficiently. This was the machine that kept the Shield up, however, and he was frightened because it all seemed so flimsy. He knew that forces, bent and shaped, were better than actual material parts that could wear out or fail from structural flaws. Still, all those liquids flowing through nothingness, and all of them vital to the maintenance of the Shield...

*Click!*

Breadloaf whirled around—

*Click!*

And around again!

*Clicker-click-tick, hmmmmmmmm.*

The noises bothered him; he interpreted every sound as the beginning of the breakdown. Okay, he had seen it. Now he could leave. He walked to the door, hesitated and looked around. There were other *clicks* and a muffled *clank*. He would go insane just listening to it operate, he told himself. Before the horror of a possible breakdown could flood his mind with sewage of ridiculous fears, he stepped into the hall and closed the door behind. Grudgingly, and yet with a profound sense of relief, he went back to his office.

The orders were coming to Sam in a swift series now. Between the accomplishment of one thing and the next order, there were only seconds in which he had control of himself and knew precisely who he was. He could never remember what it was he had done on the last order, and was engulfed by the next before he really had a chance to investigate his surroundings.

Now he was standing in a great chamber full of machines. That made him—or rather his hypnotic master *through* him—feel uneasy. Machines, machines, machines. Humming, gurgling, sputtering. He had broken in. The street door had not been locked, for hardly anyone locked anything these days. No need to, without crimes being committed. But this floor *had* been sealed. His last order had been to break in here where things flowed through pipes he could not see and machinery throbbed with an overwhelming purpose. But what had he done before that? And what would he do next?

Then the chaos and the noises came, and he was moving...

When he came out, a package he had been holding under his arm was gone. He had not had time to examine it. He did not know what he had done with it. Or what it had been.

Then the chaos and the noises came, and he was moving...

Breadloaf rubbed his fists in his eyes, pulled open a desk drawer and fumbled in it for anti-snooze tablets. He found a bottle, popped two pills in his mouth, swallowed without benefit of water. Recapping the bottle, he withdrew a second container of tiny nerve pills. He was in the process of swallowing one of these when the door flew open, crashing into its slot with a sharp, ear-shattering crash. There was a man standing there, eyes like vacant, unseeing marbles, his hands flung outward like the hands of a stage magician. The tips of his fingers glowed and vibrated with some hideous power that was immediately a thing to be called evil.

And from the fingernails came darts.

Needles of sleep.

They bit into Breadloaf, spreading their red warmth, pulling him down into a Shieldless darkness that forced but denied him to scream...

When Sam was in control of his body again, the first thing that struck his attention was the man slumped in the chair—seemingly unconscious—behind the desk. His every muscle was taut beneath the surface relaxation, as if the death penalty had been the only alternative to unconsciousness. Secondly, there was the screen. It was to the right of him, and for a moment it had been in a low-key color series of magenta and black. Abruptly, it spewed forth oranges and whites and creams that splashed across the room and grabbed his eyes.

He walked to the screen, stared at it. An indescribable chill swept up and down his spine. It was as if the colors were alive and wanted out.

“What do you want? Who are you?”

The voice startled him, and he leaped, his heart pounding. But it had not been the colors; it had been the man, Sam walked to the massive desk. “My name is Sam. I was—”

“What do you want? Why did you do this to me?”

“Do what?”

“I can’t move, damn you!”

Sam hesitated, looked about the room, sensing a ghost scene of what must have transpired. “I paralyzed you?”

Breadloaf’s thin lips moved, and his eyes revolved like ball bearings in well-oiled grooves. Yet the rest of his body was carved from wood, stiff and immovable. “You and the darts beneath your fingernails. What the hell kind of man are you!”

Sam lifted his hands and looked at them. The nails were discolored as if fine bits of flesh had puffed into ashes beneath them, leaving blackened pits. He rubbed one, but the color was definitely not on the surface.

“What kind of man are you!” Breadloaf roared this time, panic flushing every word, every word cored with fear.

“I don’t know,” Sam said finally. “Is there some way I can help you?”

Breadloaf was breathing heavily. “Yes! Go get help!”

“I can’t do that,” Sam said. He stood on the carpet, shuffling one foot over the other, feeling somewhat the hypocrite.

“Why? Why can’t you?”

“It won’t let me.”

“It?”

Briefly, he recounted his story—the jelly-mass, the hypnotic commands. When he finished, the other man’s eyes were wide—too wide to contain anything but horror. “The Prisoner!” he croaked.

“What?”

“The Prisoner of the Shield. You’re under its direction!”

Sam turned instinctively toward the portal of wavering colors. “Then they *are* alive!”

Breadloaf was laughing, and Sam could not get him to stop. It was not the laughter of him and Hurkos and Gnosso in the *Inferno*. This was laughter at the inevitability of some unknown tragedy. He could sense that, but he could not stop the other man. Neither could he leave to get help. His feet would carry him toward the doorway but not through it. There was a mental block that kept him within the room. His memory began to clear slightly, and he could remember what else he had done in this building. He had planted some sort of bomb in the machinery below. And it must be the machinery that kept this... this Shield going.

“A thousand years,” Breadloaf shouted between whoops of laughter. “For a thousand years it tried the same things over and over, and we thought it was too dense to attempt anything different. Instead, it was pretending stupidity, making us lax. And it worked. Just when we were feeling secure, it takes you and

breaks in with ridiculous ease. A thousand years to the Prisoner are like but a day to us.” He laughed again, harshly.

There was sweat on Sam’s upper lip. He wiped it off and became aware of perspiration all over him. He was frightened. A thousand years behind the Shield. And it had only been playing around, using the time as a diversion. A score of centuries had meant nothing to it. He watched it with a loathing that touched the deepest part of him. Were the colors its true appearance or merely the effects of it filtered by the Shield? He thought the colors were a front, not the true nature of it. The true nature could not be something so beautiful and vibrant, surely. A blue splotch rippled up from the bottom, seemed to form a question mark like one would find on a large tronicsign—

Tronicsign!

He remembered seeing the high tronicsign band that ran around all four sides of the Breadloaf Building, carrying letters twenty feet tall. Perhaps the control console was up here. If it was, he could spell out a message for Gnosos and Hurkos. Surely they would be looking for him. It was almost a certainty they could see the towering tronicsign from anywhere in this part of the city. If they were in this part of the city...

“The tronicsign controls,” he asked-said.

“What?” Breadloaf’s eyes slid back and forth in the sockets liked trapped animals.

“The advertising screen. The light letters. Where are the controls for the light letters?”

“Why?”

“Where are they?” There was a tone of command in his voice that he had not known he possessed.

“There’s a master set in the main lounge, but I have a secondary plug-in set in the wall cabinet—over there.”

He found it, plugged it in, began typing out a message that the big boards would hold in glowing—red? amber? blue?—letters. He decided on crimson words against a black background. GNOSSOS/HURKOS... “What floor is this?” he asked Breadloaf.

“Top.”

TOP FLOOR. EXECUTIVE OFFICE. COME QUICKLY. SAM.

There would be waiting then. He paced the carpet briskly, now and then trying to go out of the door but always discovering that the hypnotic suggestions prohibited that. Finally, they came. And they demanded explanations.

He gave them the few he could, told them about the bomb planted below, the bomb that would wreck the machinery, shut down the Shield, and set the Prisoner free—whatever the Prisoner might be. He gave them the location of it, told them how to remove it and how to handle it: gently. They ran to get it. It seemed like a very long time that they were gone—time enough to construct a thousand possible deaths that might result if the bomb exploded. Just when he was ready to count them as deserters, they returned with the bomb and the timer, carrying it as if it were a piece of delicate and expensive crystal.

Carefully, Sam disconnected the timer, lifted the halves of the casing apart, and poured the volatile liquid



out of the single window behind Breadloaf's massive desk. Four breaths were released simultaneously as he turned and said, "It's okay."

"Then this is it!" Gnosso said, the first to recover completely. He paced back and forth, looking at the Shield, stopping to touch it, to examine the point where it went flush with the wall. "This is the thing that has been directing you. But if it is trapped behind this Shield, how did it get to you to hypnotize you? And how did it whip up that jelly-cored ship?"

"I think I can... shed some light on that," Breadloaf grunted. He was still paralyzed, but his fingers were tingling, and he could move his thumbs. The effects were beginning to wear away.

They turned to him. Gnosso crossed the room. "What light?"

"He—" Breadloaf began.

"Sam," Sam identified himself.

Breadloaf blinked appreciation. "Yes. Sam. I think you are all operating under a false assumption. The Prisoner did not *get* Sam. He did not kidnap Sam. Sam is the Prisoner's creation."

"Creation?" Gnosso snorted.

"Yes. The Prisoner imagined Sam, built his imaginings into a concrete entity. It was probably done with a last big burst of the Prisoner's energies."

"That's absurd!"

Breadloaf tried to shake his head, only succeeded in making his lips quiver and his eyes tremble. "No. The Prisoner concentrated, summed up all his resources, and shaped a man and a ship. The ship was not a machine, for machines are alien to the Prisoner's mind. Some places, the dimensions are rather close, due to the warping of the higher dimension. Perhaps at one of these places he forced his thoughts through the thin barrier and made Sam and the ship."

"But why not force himself through at one of those spots?" Hurkos asked.

"He could not do that with what energies he had left. You see, he is much, much larger than the ship and Sam put together, larger by an infinite degree. *He is the entire higher dimension!*"

*Ocher birds fluttered over green and blue oceans...*

"One creature is an entire dimension?"

Breadloaf coughed. "If that creature is God, yes. And that is precisely who the Prisoner of the Shield is!"

## X

"God!" Gnosso shouted.

Hurkos wandered next to the Shield, pressed his face to it, looking into the colors that swirled, folded upon themselves and became new colors, Here, brought to him through modern science, was the being

that prayer could not yield. Technology had replaced faith and with far better results.

“The dreams,” Gnosso said, turning to the dazzling display on the screen. “The dreams Hurkos took from it were the dreams of a paranoid, then; they were the dreams of a being obsessed with demon-persecution.”

Sam’s mind whirled in a nightmare landscape of doubt and nearly unconquerable mountains of unbelief. “And the machines were not machines at all, for God is not the Father of the machine. God is the Father of life, the Father of man who makes the machines. God could imitate the exterior of a machine, but the only way He could make it work was to create a life form—the jelly-mass—to imitate the workings of one. He knows us, physically, but He doesn’t know what we have within us.”

“And God feared machines because they were something above His abilities. He feared the Mues and chose to ignore their existence in your training because they were things beyond His powers—the results of men usurping His rights.”

“A thousand years,” Breadloaf muttered.

“How could you stand it?” Gnosso asked, turning from the Shield. “How could you sit there, knowing?”

“Sometimes, after I had left here and gone into the streets and smelled the fresh air, I thought I could never come back. But when I thought of how much worse it would be if He ever escaped...”

“Of course,” Gnosso said sympathetically. “For a thousand years, men have grown gradually saner, have broken communications with their barbaric past. It’s all because He’s been trapped in your warped dimension tank and can’t influence anything. Isn’t that it?”

Breadloaf sighed. He was able to make fists of his hands now, and he sat exercising them. “That’s it exactly. My father thought he could enslave the Prisoner and make Him work for the family. We knew who He was. He wasted no time in telling us that, in demanding to be set free. But we could not master Him. It became clear that we could never let Him out. At first, of course, it was for the family’s safety. He could, and would, wipe out every Breadloaf. Then, after a few hundred years, when we saw what the empire was becoming, how much better it seemed, how much saner were the councils of man, we realized that much of the ugliness of life had been God’s doing. We had even stronger reasons for keeping Him locked up. If He were ever released”—Breadloaf wriggled an arm at last—“war would come again. Famine as we have never known it. Pestilence. Disease. We have but one choice: keep Him contained.”

“Correction, please. You have no choice but to release Him!”

The voice drew their attention to the door. A man stood there—a Christian judging from his beard. There were a dozen others standing behind him, dirty, unshaven, dressed in the rags of self-denial. One of them was the sign-carrier Gnosso had argued with in the streets what seemed like an eternity ago. He was smiling now, sans sign. He stepped into the room. “Isn’t it strange whom God should choose as His liberators?”

“How did they—” Breadloaf began, struggling against his stiff body.

“I told them!” Sam shouted. The series of hypnotic orders flashed through his memory now. What God had ordered him to do was a burning clarity. He recited the posthypnotic commands that had followed their landing on Hope: “Find a temple and tell the Christians that God is being held prisoner by the Breadloaf family in the Breadloaf Building; I will give you flames upon your tongue as a sign to convince

them. In a Sell-All Hardwaremat, purchase these chemicals and pieces of equipment: ester of glycerin, nitric acid, a watch, a spool of number twenty-six copper wire, and a small construction detonator. Next prepare a bomb of glyceryl tinitrate. Next, break into the Breadloaf Building, plant the bomb by force pump A3A45 in the basement. Next, render Alexander Breadloaf III helpless via drug darts.” He had told the Christians then. They were here on his word.

“It isn’t your fault,” Gnosos said.

Then the echo of an explosion rumbled through the floors of the building, shook the walls. The Christians were destroying the machinery that maintained the Shield. They were planting new bombs to do what Sam’s first one didn’t have a chance to do.

A second explosion rocked the floor even more violently...

And the Shield blinked...

... was gone...

Breadloaf screamed a piercing scream, a thing that he had only half finished with when the black bird with the forty million eyes and the claws of brass swept from the vacant spot in the wall, swooped out on the cold winds and descended on him. The room had expanded, it seemed, to the size of a dozen galaxies. The room was erupting on the way to becoming the macrocosm itself. Yet all of it was filled with them and this thing from beyond their dimension so that it seemed, in another and confounding way, that the chamber had shrunk to the size of a small closet.

There was no up or down.

The stars had lost their glitter and consumed themselves.

With a tongue of sequined pebbles, the darkness ate the light.

Sam was tumbling around within and yet without God, smashing against the pinions of the tremendous feathers, caught alternately in winds as cold as ice and as hot as volcano hearts. On and off, as he fought the crushing expanses of blackness that clutched at him with a million oiled talons, he saw Alexander Breadloaf. He saw him first without skin—peeled and bloody. Next he saw him blackened and a thing of ash. The ashes became other dark birds that bored into the belly of the omnipotent black bird and revitalized it with their frenzy. He saw lightning flashing from Breadloaf’s charred nostrils and worms eating the man’s black tongue. He saw him undergo all the punishments of all imagined hells. And he feared greatly the moment when God would turn on the rest of them, come with claws and with fangs to eat out their livers with His silver-plated teeth.

Feathers sprouted from Breadloaf, black feathers that were oily and bent. With His beak, the thing that was God plucked the feathers from the man, leaving gaping holes that seeped yellow...

There was no warmth; neither was there cold.

Everywhere was fear.

Then, abruptly and without announcement, there were words in his mind. They were Hurkos’ familiar tones: *Listen. Listen to me. I can see Him. I can see God!*

*I can see Him too!* Sam thought-screamed.

*No. I mean, I can see Him with my psionic powers. There is nothing to Him! He's so damned small!*

*Clarify yourself!* This was from Gnossos.

*He is puny. He is not large and forceful. The room is not expanding. Breadloaf is not being charred or eaten by worms. God is trying to frighten Breadloaf to death. Fear and illusions are the only weapons He has left. He has lost His greatest powers. Perhaps from centuries of confinement and the last surge of energy needed to create Sam. He is drained.*

*But all this,* Sam thought.

*A damn fake! I'll send you the true picture. I'm looking, directly through His illusions and delusions. I can see. I'll broadcast.*

In an eye blink, the room was normal. Breadloaf was uncharred. But he *was* dead. His eyes were blank, fish-belly things. His hand clutched his chest above his heart. The tiny transmitter in his heart would be yelling for the medics. He would be reached in time—here in the city—to be given a new heart before brain damage occurred. He would live again.

“Where?” Gnossos asked.

Then they saw it. It was poised on the rim of the Shield itself. It was a small, pink, formless thing. It had not refrained from transferring itself simply because it was too big. It had sent Sam first for the simple reason that Sam would be more effective than it would have been. For a moment the dreams surged back, but Hurkos used his own, greater powers to fight them away. Then the Mue raised a chair, smashed it into the pink slug. Again, again, and again. He mashed with a fury that Sam would not have guessed him to possess.

And Hurkos killed God.

## XI

Breadloaf came through the door of the saloon, stopped a moment to search them out, then smiled as he sighted them. Only seven hours had passed since he had died, but he looked healthy and cheerful. More cheerful, in fact, than they had ever seen him look. He made his way through the crowd, nodding to friends, stopping now and again to shake hands with those who were oblivious to his recent adventure. Finally he reached their table, sat down. “I passed the church on the way. The Christians are moving out of their homes in the basements, bundles on their backs. In a way, it’s a shame. Their lives have amounted to nothing.”

“They can take the shots now,” Hurkos said. He was relaxed for the first time in a long, long while. He had gotten his revenge, more revenge than any man could hope for. Sam had wondered, at first, if Hurkos could be deranged, for he had, after all, killed. But he had not killed a man. Therein lay the key. What he *had* killed was a rung lower than Man, really, therefore an animal. “They can live eternally.”

“Some of them probably will. But they are old, remember. Fifty, some sixty, while the rest of us are thirty or under. It will not be completely pleasant to be eternally near-old in an age of eternal youth.”

“Tragic and ironic,” Gnossos said, sipping his drink. “How do *you* feel?”

“Better than ever,” Breadloaf answered punching the robotender for drinks and trying unsuccessfully to ward off Gnossos’ hand as it thrust coins into the machine.

“I guess so,” Hurkos said. Then: “Gnossos, I killed God tonight. How’s that for an epic poem?”

“I’ve been thinking,” the poet said. “But it would have been better if He had been a Goliath. There is nothing particularly heroic about smashing a helpless slug to pulp.”

Sam finished his drink, set the glass down. “I’m going for a walk,” he said, standing. “I’ll be back in a while.” Before anyone could speak, he turned for the door, struggling through the crowd, and stepped outside. Night was giving way to day; a touch of golden dawn tinted the horizon already.

“You all right?” Gnossos asked, stepping out beside him.

“I’m not sick, if that’s what you mean. Not exactly.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“The purpose of life: to overcome your creator.”

“But what can a walk do? Me? I’m getting drunk.”

“Yeah,” Sam said slowly. “But you know that won’t work. Maybe I’ll get drunk too, later. But now I’ll walk.”

“Want me to come along?”

“No.”

Sam stepped off the curb and into the cobblestoned street. The ways here were twisted, for the aesthetic quality was supposed to be reminiscent of an old Earth city—though much cleaner and far more efficient. He found streets that tangled in on themselves, twisted through tree-dotted parks and between quaint old buildings. With him were memories of the chamber beyond Breadloaf’s office wall, pictures of cold emptiness. He could still feel the cool breeze rippling through his hair from the gaping, empty tank.

He walked past the park where the lake stretched away in the distance. There was a gentle slapping of its waves against the pilings of the free-form walkway that bridged its shallower portions. There was the sound of fish jumping now and again. Somewhere a dog barked. And in his mind, there were questions.

Who was he?

What had been his past?

And where—oh, where!—was he bound?

## **TWO: SOULDRIFT**

*And men shall be torn between the old way and the new...*

(Compiled from several entries in the diary of Andrew Coro)

## I

Long ago, shortly after my mother's blood was sluiced from the streets of Changeover and her body burned upon a pyre outside of town, I suffered what the psychologists call a trauma. That seems like a very inadequate word to me.

To understand this "trauma," one should know some of the events that preceded it. The townsfolk came in the middle of the night and took her, decapitated her, stuffed a cross cut from stale bread into her dead mouth, and charred her on fire fed by the boughs of a dogwood tree. I was five years old at the time.

Those were the days when men still killed, before Hope sprang up as the capital of our galaxy and pushed forth a society where no man killed another man, where sanity ruled. That was a thousand years ago, a century after Galactic War I, before Eternity Combine gave us immortality. And worst of all, that was Earth. The rest of the galaxy was staggering to its feet, aware that something had gone amiss in the great chauvinistic dreams that had dominated for so many hundreds of years. Hope was an idea born in the brighter minds, a last possibility for the survival of what Man should be, a dream of kinglessness, of Utopia unmarred, a last chance but the best chance ever for mankind. Yet Earthmen were still hunting witches.

To hide me from those who would destroy me because my mother was a mutant who could lift pencils (only pencils and scraps of paper!) with her mind, my grandparents locked me in a closet of their house. Smells: mothballs, old rubber rainshoes, yellowed magazine paper. Sights: dark ghosts of wools and cottons hanging about, imagined spiders scuttering viciously through the darkness.

And I wept. There was little else to do.

On the third day, the witch-hunters were certain that I had perished in the fire of the house, for they could not find me and trusted my grandparents because—as a cover against the day he knew was coming—my grandfather had belonged to the witch-hunting group. So it was that on the third day I was brought forth from the closet and into the parlor where my grandmother kissed me and dried my eyes on her gray, coarse apron. On that same day, Grandfather came to me where I sat with my grandmother, his huge and calloused hands folded over each other, concealing something. "I've a surprise for you, Andy."

I smiled.

He took one hand from the other, revealing a lump of coal with eyes a shade darker than the rest of it. "Caesar!" I cried. Caesar was my myna bird, rescued in some unknown, unknowable, miraculous fashion from the holocaust of the exorcism.

I ran to Grandfather, and as I ran, the bird screeched in imitation: "Andyboy, Andyboy." I stopped, my feet suddenly rocks too heavy to lift another inch, and I stared at it. It fluttered a wing. "Andyboy, Andyboy, An—"

And I started to scream. It was an involuntary scream, torn from my lungs, bursting through my lips, roaring madly into the room. The myna's words were mockings of my mother's words. The inflection, though certainly not the tone, was perfect. Memories of my mother flooded me: warm kitchens to burned corpse to storytelling sessions to a headless, bloodless body. Bad and good memories mixed, mingled,

blew each other to larger than life reality in my memory. I turned and ran from the parlor. Wings beat against me. Caesar was a stuck recording.

Grandfather was running too, but he did not seem to be Grandfather any longer. Instead, he had become one of the witch-hunters shooting out the windows of our house, screaming for my mother's death.

Running through the half open cellar door, I stumbled down the steps, almost crashing down to a broken neck on the concrete, flailing at the hideous wings and the sharp orange beak that tried to be her lips. I locked myself in the coal room while Caesar battered himself to tatters against the thick door. When Grandfather finally broke it down, I was on my knees with my head against the floor, unable to scream in anything but a hoarse whisper. My knuckles were raw from pounding them into the concrete, my blood a polka-dot pattern on the smooth grayness.

I was taken to bed, nursed, recovered, and sent off-planet to an aunt's house in another solar system where men were coming of age faster. I grew up, took Eternity Combine's treatments in one of the first test groups, and outlived Caesar, Grandfather, witch-hunters, and all.

Years later at one of Congressman Horner's parties, a psychologist told me it had all been a trauma concerning death and my new perception of it. I told him trauma was a terribly inadequate word and went off to dance with a particularly lovely young woman.

Now, even years after that, I was experiencing fear much the same as the fear that day so long ago when I was five and my mother was three days dead. It was the fear of death, stinking, oppressive, and omnipresent. I am always afraid at the beginning of a hunt. It made no difference, this day, that I had gone on two hundred and fifteen others; it was this one that was immediate and frightening. If I was killed in these jungles, Eternity Combine could never reach me in time to restore me to life. If I died here, I stayed dead. Forever is a long, long time.

Why the risk? It does seem strange that, in a galaxy so diversified, so full of things to do and ways to earn a living, anyone would chose something as dangerous as Beast hunting. But there are always reasons. Man, a part of nature, is never totally illogical. He can generally come up with reasons for his actions. Sometimes, of course, the reasons may give rise to questions... Anyway, Crazy had a good reason for coming on this hunt: this Beast had killed his only brother, who had been on the last team that had gone after it. Crazy wanted revenge. No Hamlet, but every bit as determined. Lotus came because she can't leave us if she knows we're endangering ourselves. She would go insane waiting for us, so she comes along. Me? Money, in part. There was an enormous bounty on this Beast, and I was determined it would be one-third mine. Besides, I was born on Earth and the faults of the place partially warped me. I like to kill. Not anything but Beasts, you understand. I could never bring myself to murder another human being. But Beasts... Well, Beasts are different...

I loaded the last of the cameras into the floater, looked around for the others. "Lotus! Crazy! Let's get a move on!"

"All right, all right," Crazy said, stomping down the steps to the outside entrance of the guest house. We were staying on Congressman Horner's Earth ranch under the supervision of his aide, Sam Penuel, an altogether strange man, until the completion of the job. Horse, being as he weighed three hundred pounds plus fifty and was blessed with hooves, did not use the highly polished, slippery indoor steps of glittering plastiglass. Oh, his full name was Crazy Horse. No it wasn't, either. Jackson Lincoln Puicca was his given name—after the famous general, the famous president and humanitarian, and the famous scientist. But we called him Crazy Horse—mostly because he was crazy—and because he sure did look like a horse.

Crazy was a natural mutant, not a product of the Artificial Wombs. One day there had been a nuclear war spreading through the civilized galaxy. Several generations later, there was Crazy—muscular, bright, shaggy-headed, and horse-behinded. Not a Beast, mind you; a valuable man on a bounty hunt.

“Where’s Lotus?” I asked.

“Out picking berries somewhere. You know her.”

“You know *what* about her?” Lotus asked as she drifted over a nearby corral fence, her blue-fog wings fluttering gently as she glided on the breezes. “What would you say of me behind my back, Crazy?”

Crazy Horse stomped his hooves, folded his hands in supplication. “What *could* I say behind your back, pretty one, when you are possessed of such marvelous ears?”

Lotus settled on the ground next to me. She fingered the delicate, elongated shells that were her elfin ears, looked at Crazy. “Yours are bigger. I don’t think I should make nasty remarks about another person’s ears if mine were distended bladders like yours.”

Crazy snorted, shook his huge head so that his wild mane of hair flopped, fluffed, and covered his baggy ears.

Satisfied, Lotus said, “I’m on time, I trust.”

“Trouble is,” I said, putting an arm around her tiny waist (twenty inches) and looking down on her small form (four feet eleven), “is that you know damned well we’d wait for you all day and not be angry.”

“That’s cause I’m the prettiest girl around,” she snapped, her green-blue eyes adance.

“Not much competition on an all-male ranch,” Crazy muttered.

“And you, Crazy, are the handsomest horse I’ve seen here.” She smiled, and she said it so that he didn’t know whether to be mad or to laugh. So he laughed.

That was Lotus. She was cute as Christmas multiplied by Halloween and Easter—and she knew it, which wasn’t always so bad because she could pull her own weight easily enough. Aside from being one of the best botanists specializing in post-A-war plants, she was our aerial reconnaissance expert since she could fly ahead, land where a floater would never fit, and let us know what was dangerous or interesting that stood in our way. You say, But why a botanist on a bounty hunt? Well, true, we usually stalked killer animals that disturbed the small towns on the rural (since the war) planets. But now and again there were plants which were every bit as deadly as the Beasts. There were those walking plants on Fanner II that latched onto the nearest warm-blooded thing (often human), lashed roots around it, grew through it all night long, absorbed it, and walked away with the sunrise—a few inches taller, sporting a few new leaf buds, and satisfied until darkness came again. Which was every nine hours on Fanner II. Thus, Lotus.

“Let’s get going,” I said. “I want these cameras set before dark.”

“After you, Butterfly,” Crazy said, bowing as low as he could, considering his less-than-human posterior, and sweeping his arm in a courtly gesture of chivalry.

Lotus breezed into the floater like a puff of smoke. Crazy followed, and I went last, dogging the door behind. We had three seats across the front of that tub—Lotus between us. I was pilot.



A floater is a round ball with an inner and outer hull, each independent of the other. This way, if you ever meet an eighteen foot bat, like on Capistrano, you can have an outer hull beaten all to hell and never feel it inside or let it deflect the floater, shunting you off your course. The inner hull carries the drive engines.

I pulled back on the stick, lifted us, set out for the forest-jungle that had spread outward from the Harrisburg Crater. The screens gave us a view of the woods: ugly, festering, and at the edges gray-green ferns with thick leaves interlaced with spidery fluff that held heavy brown spoor balls. Later, these gave way to giant trees that choked the ferns and did away with them but were still just as gray and lifeless.

“You haven’t said much about this Beast that killed Garner,” Crazy said. Garner was his brother. His twin, in fact, though Garner was perfectly normal.

“I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Tell us,” Lotus said, pulling the thin membrane of her wings about her like a cloak. “Tell us all that Mr. Penuel told you.”

“Mainly, we’re the fifth team to be sent after this Beast.”

“The others?” Crazy asked.

“Garner wasn’t its only victim. There were twenty-two in the other four teams all totaled. Twenty were never seen again.”

“The other two?” Lotus asked.

“Rescue parties brought them out—in pieces.”

Below, the world was gray-green...

Five miles into the forest where the huge, gnarled trees were dominant, I set the floater down in a small, rare clearing. Lotus went ahead to check for other clearings and crossings where it might be wisest to place the cameras and their triggers. If anything passes the electric eyes set ten feet before the cameras, it starts the film spinning. Chances were, we would get plenty of strange things on the film, but our killer would be easy to spot in the crowd. We had three descriptions from townspeople—all three making him around eight feet tall, man-like, and ugly. There were a lot of things that fit the first and last parts, but few of these Beasts were man-like. None of the descriptions gave any indication, however, why twenty-two experienced bounty hunters had not killed it.

Crazy was setting up the electric eyes and stringing the trip wire back to me, concealing it with a fine layer of dust. I was rigging the cameras in the rocks and bushes. Both of us had our backs to the same part of the forest.

That was a mistake...

## II

Crazy would have heard it first except he still had his hair down over his ears, hindering his usually keen hearing. When I heard it—the snapping and low, fierce keening—it was almost on top of us. Whirling, I brought my gun up...

And up and up and up... Damn, was it big! Big and quiet, which is a combination we hit upon more often than you might think. It stared down through the trees at us, thirty feet high, its bulbous body burdened by an underslung belly which was slashed, in turn, by a wet, wicked mouth that opened and closed over us like an enormous vise. No long, slow throat-to-stomach affairs. Just open up and—*slurp!* Spiders make me sick. They are a common mutation, and they are always hideous and revolting. This one made me sicker than usual. There were ugly, cancerous scabs all over it, pus-coated hairs hanging heavily from each ripe disease pocket.

“Don’t shoot yet!” I told Crazy. But he didn’t have to be told. More than once, he had seen these things react reflexively to a shot, leap in and chomp up whatever was holding the gun. A big spider is not as large as it looks, because it is mostly spindly legs which can squeeze together fast into a little ball, drop the spider fifteen feet in height, and let it scuttle in under the trees after you. Spiders are handled with gentle, loving care until you’re ready to kill them. Any other way, they’ll kill you first.

“The rocks,” I said quietly, watching the multi-prismed eye watch me. Very slowly, and with grace, we edged our way along the rocks where I had been setting that particular camera. Tiptoes and marshmallow footfalls...

The spider watched, swiveling its strangely tiny head to follow us, a row of fine hairs atwiddle below its eyes. Except for those hairs, it seemed petrified, immobile. In a split second—even before the splitting could be finished—it could be moving faster than a man could ever run.

The rocks we were negotiating were actually the ruins of centuries, tossed here by the A-blast that had leveled Harrisburg, a provincial capital at that time. It was a vast tumble of caves, valleys, mountains of bricks and stone and powdered mortar.

Moving a tentative step, the spider settled massive legs through the brush with a minimum of noise, keened a bit louder, an out-of-tune harmonica.

*Ulysses, you were a punk hero!*

We reached a place where the rock broke open, forming a small valley, closing again four hundred feet away and ending at the mouth of a dark tunnel that led further into the ruins—a tunnel too small for a Beast like this, but not too small for Crazy and me. “Now,” I whispered. “Run!”

We turned, loped into the valley, cutting ourselves off from the view of the spider. Crazy reached the tunnel first. His legs are often an asset when speed is needed—but, God, you should see him try to dance!

I was halfway down the valley when the spider mounted the one valley wall and looked down on us. The colossal red eyes glittered accusingly. Supper had run away. Bad, bad. Then the belly appeared, mandibles open and clacking. *Clackinty-clack-clack!*

*Fsstphss!* Crazy opened fire with his vibra pistol, caught on of the legs. The spider drew its member up, twiddled it madly. Crazy fired again, caught another leg and blew it completely off. The huge limb bounced over the rocks, wedged between two of them, and continued squirming, not yet aware that it was loose, a thing away from its owner and soon to rot.

I ran.

The spider started down into the valley.

I pressed my aching lungs and screaming muscles to even faster operation.

Crazy fired again, caught the Beast in the side, tore it open. But spiders don't bleed, and a fist-sized hole wasn't stopping this baby.

Besides, we had overlooked, in our haste, a very important thing: tunnels make nice homes—for things. Crazy was raising his pistol for a shot at the giant head when a pinkish grub-like creature came wriggling out of the tunnel in defense of its abode, casting off three inch, hard thorns, one of which struck Crazy's arm, sent him tumbling, his gun lost in the stones.

The spider screeched insanely, head hobbling, stomach clacking.

The grub, suddenly a more immediate danger, hissed, arched its ribbed back, and flung itself forward in spasmodic lurches that were immediately followed by the jerking release of the spines that in some places, were hurled with enough force to penetrate rocks. I ran to Crazy, tried dragging him to the walls where the Beasts could attack only from the front. But dragging three hundred and fifty pounds of unconscious horse-man is harder to do than it sounds—and it sounds pretty damn hard!

I crouched behind Crazy Horse, back to the spider, pulled the spine from his arm. There was a lot of blood pumping out of that arm. Entirely too much blood. Nothing there to stop it with, either. I turned to the grub, looked for a vulnerable spot. Most of its belly was calloused, but the first two segments always seemed to be aloft in the manner of a "running" snake. I aimed my vibra-pistol at these first two soft segments, pulled the trigger and held it down. The worm went kicking into the air, turning over and over, tossing off spines that shot over our heads. It crashed back to the ground when I stopped firing, was very still.

But the spider...

It was at the opposite end of the valley now, having used the grub's diversions as a chance to make an easy entry. Behind it, anchored to the rubble, was a thin web structure. It was getting ready to snare us.

Crazy moaned, kicked a foot, lapsed into unconsciousness again, blood all over him, face twisted strangely.

The spider leaped.

All those legs just tensed, and it was moving through the air, hitting the ground, running. Silent.

I fired.

The shot caught it in the legs, folded the spindly members up under it, and sent it tumbling backward like a greasy dust ball caught in a strong draft. After it came to rest, it lay still so long that I thought it was dead. But finally it stirred, stood, and clung to the rubble wall, watching me. I was mentally charting all possible pathways of advancement for it, trying to anticipate its next move. But I didn't expect the silk to come spitting out like liquid smoke from so great a distance. Lazily, it twirled toward us, undulating like a snake formed of mist. The spider could, it seemed, direct two of these lines at the same time, for two of them approached. One struck the wall to the left, curling over a rocky projection halfway up; the second hit an equal height on the opposite wall, lacing through loosely stacked rubble and welding its hold into a solid position. Then the Beast began swinging the lines, wrapping them back and forth from wall to wall, closing us in.

I sat on the ground, braced my back against Crazy, thumbed the controls of the pistol to full power. The

web dropped over us, fouled my hand. I had to spend several valuable seconds untangling the sticky mess from the gun and my fingers. When I raised the weapon again, the spider had advanced fifty feet. I fired. But the web was so dense now that it absorbed the blast, diffused it, dissolved it. Still, I could not dissolve it as fast as the spider could make it.

Another filament dropped across my back. Another curled over my right ear, dropped across my shoulder and down to wind at my waist. Crazy was almost covered. I shot it again. The web absorbed it. The web dissolved. The web was replaced. The spider was keening more frantically than ever, no longer quiet in its advance, now assured of victory, now jubilant. Several sticky strands lashed around me, pinning my arms to my chest. More. Still more. I was being cocooned. The gun dropped out of my hands as circulation was cut down in my arms, my hands made numb and useless.

A strand crossed my face, fouled an eye. It was amazingly cool against my skin.

Another strand curled over my lips, drifted upward into my nostrils and stuck there, tickling.

Crazy was invisible beneath a white drift of the snowy thread.

The spider tensed to leap...

### III

Lotus when there is danger? A helpless, frightened rabbit of a girl? No. That's not Lotus at all. Lotus is a girl who comes fluttering over the treetops when a spider is about to devour her friends and leaps onto the spider because she has no gun.

Why no gun? A knife, that's why. She keeps it in her waistband. Only the red gem handle shows—until she has to use it. Then, lightning isn't any faster.

I was pinned by the web, watching the hairy black mutant dance across the foggy highway it had built when she came into view in the morning sky and spotted the action. She dipped, swayed with half a second's hesitation, then landed on the twisted semi-shoulders behind the Beast's head. She tossed her legs around that neck, riding it like it was a wild bronc and seeming to enjoy the ride as much as the cowboys on real horses back at Horner's ranch. It swiveled its eyes, trying to catch sight of her, but the eyes didn't revolve far enough. Just when they were at the apex of their revolution, she drove the silver blade into the left orb, up to the crimson gem hilt, and slashed downward.

The spider reared.

The stream of web fluid ceased abruptly, and the Beast wobbled backward down the inclined silken plane, throbbing its voice like a thousand flutes gone sour. It staggered sideways like a drunk. I wanted to shout that it might try to roll over on her, but my mouth was blocked with fast-drying web, and I could not move my arms to clear it.

She pulled the knife out, found the second eye with it. The spider flailed, ran at the cliffs, found it too much trouble to climb out and still bear the pain that was wracking it. Blindly, it stumbled from one cliff to the other, seeking some pathway in the darkness and finding none. Then it rolled.

"Lotus!" I screamed. But it came out a choked, reverberating whisper, strained through the matting on my lips.

But she was flying again, her wings beating furiously until they had taken her high enough to catch the low breezes. They fluffed out then, carried her back and forth across the chasm, letting her watch the spider.

It died. Slowly, and with lots of kicking. Once I was sure it was going to blunder onto the web and fall in on Crazy and me, but it never did. When it was down for good, Lotus drifted in to the web, settled very gently at its edge. “Andy! Crazy!”

I tried to call out. The result was a low-key vibration in the web.

“I hear you! I’ll get you out.”

I blessed her elongated ears. A moment later, she began hacking into the silken fiber with her knife. In time, she reached me, cut away the fuzz that bound my arms and closed my mouth. Together, we removed Crazy, ready for the worst.

But it wasn’t that bad at all. He was still unconscious, but the webbing had matted over the grub-spine wound, putting a stop to the blood that had been fountaining from it.

“We’ll have to take him back,” I said.

“The cameras?”

“We were only setting up the second one.”

“You finish.”

“I can’t just—”

“You finish,” she insisted. “I checked ahead. Follow the main trail for half a mile, and you’ll cross six major intersections. That should give us enough coverage to see if the Beast uses these trails regularly. If you bring the floater here first, I can get to the medikit and take care of Crazy.”

“He may be—”

“He’ll be okay. There’re enough supplies in the floater to fix him up without any trouble.”

She was a good nurse; I knew that from wounds of my own she had bound. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll be back in a minute.” Actually, it was four minutes, but when I settled the floater down next to the pieces of web, she already had Crazy uncovered and clean of every fragment of the stuff. I took the cameras, slung them over my shoulders, and set out—lugging what two were meant to carry—keeping my gun drawn and an eye out for hairy trees...

Three hours later, I stumbled back, worn out and showing it. Lotus and Crazy were sitting there laughing about something. “Nice way to get out of work,” I said, standing over them.

Crazy looked up and whinnied that silly whinny of his. “You can have this blasted arm if you want. I’d rather have gone setting the cameras than nursing this.”

“A likely story.”

“We’d better be getting back,” Lotus said. “Looks like a storm, and I don’t want to see what might

come tramping around in the rain.”

It was heavy rain that gave Fanner II’s vampire plants their most voracious appetites.

“Okay. Can you walk, Crazy?”

“I can manage.”

*One day, the men start looking like animals to you. Noses metamorphose into snouts. Eyes grow beadier. Ears suddenly become tufted with hair. Fingernails take on the appearance of claws. And you realize you are allowed to shoot animals: it is within you to shoot animals, though men are off limits. You go to oil your guns... But you also realize you are just imagining them as animals so that you will be able to shoot them and revenge your mother—and maybe wipe out that entire chapter of your life. Deep down, you fear that you want to spill the rich blood of men—spill it and drink it...*

I must have been moaning in my sleep. It was an old and often felt dream, recurring through all the years that I could remember. I say that I must have been muttering, for when I slipped from the dream to the dark reality of the bedroom, there was a light body against mine, lips on my two, and soft velvet wings enclosing us in the closet of our souls... The next morning, we went out to collect the cameras. Crazy’s arm was almost healed, thanks to the speedheal salve and bandages. We hoped that he would be well enough to begin the hunt shortly after noon, in the event the cameras had recorded anything that would interest us.

And the cameras had.

“I don’t like it,” Crazy grunted as the film loop came across the viewer for the sixth time.

“It isn’t the ugliest we’ve met,” I said, trying to reassure myself as well as them. Not the ugliest, but ugly enough. Seven and a half feet, heavier than Crazy. Two arms trailing the ground, six-inch claws on them, and a set of smaller arms in the middle of the barrel chest. The little hands fiddled with each other, lacing fingers, picking insects from each other, scratching in a strange symbiosis. The mouth was a treasure trove—if one happened to be a biologist who valued sharp yellow teeth. The Beast had one sunken eye in the left side of its face, an undeveloped socket where the other one should be. The facial skin was leathery, dark, broken occasionally by tufts of bristly hair. “It doesn’t even look as dangerous as the spider.”

“That’s what I mean. I don’t like it.”

“Huh?”

“I think,” Lotus interrupted, “that Crazy means it looks *too* easy. Anything as easy as this Beast looks would have been knicked out by the first team that went after it. It must have something else besides claws, teeth, and an extra pair of hands.”

It did look evil. And there were those other twenty-two bounty hunters to think about. “What do you think?”

“Can’t say,” Lotus murmured, almost as if she were talking to herself. “That would be like stating the cause of death before the murder.”

“What’s the consensus? Should we back out of this one?”

They both said no.

“We don’t really need the money yet.”

“There was Garner,” Crazy added.

I smiled, shut off the tape loop. “Okay. Let’s get started. Crazy, your arm good enough?”

He peeled off the bandage, flexed the muscular arm. The skin stretched new and tight and delicately across the wound. It was swollen and red, but unscarred. “Never felt better. Let’s go.”

And we did.

## IV

After a short but hot march, we made camp near the cross-way where the camera had caught him. Lotus took the first watch near evening, and I was halfway into the second when I heard something of more than medium size coming along from the right. Unholstering my pistol, I stretched out behind a heavy row of bushes and waited. My infrared goggles filtered away most of the night, giving me a view that was probably as good as the Beast’s.

In a way, I wished it were still dark. This fellow looked a great deal more formidable in person than seen from a little piece of film through the eye of an unemotional lens. First, in the short view it gave, the camera didn’t catch the easy loping motion of the mutant. I decided upon its ancestry pretty quickly: ape. There must have been a zoo around when the big bang wiped out the city and its suburbs—a zoo just far enough out to be saved from a mortal blow. Radiation did the rest. I watched, horrified, as it loped by in the night.

I was sweating profusely, yet the wind was cold.

Pushing up from the ground, I stepped back to my previous waiting post. I had not fired, for I wanted to judge how much it would take to stop this Beast before I leaped out firing my little toy-like gun. Now I had that figured out, and I could wait for its reappearance. I was in the process of sitting down when I saw, from the corner of my eye, that the Beast had returned and was standing a dozen yards away, squinting at me. I cursed myself for forgetting the curiosity and cunning of the apes.

Suddenly, it started for me.

I brought up my pistol, fired.

*Blue-white, blue-white!*

But when the flash was gone and the night had angrily rushed back in to claim its territory, there was no ape-alive or dead. If I had killed it, it would be lying there, a blackened corpse. Had I wounded it, it certainly could not have gotten away that quickly. Which meant that it was still alive, somewhere near.

The night seemed exceptionally black, even with the goggles.

I stood very still, listening. Then it struck me that the Beast might be hunched below the dense brush line, moving along the pathway to a point where it could more easily leap—and dismember me. I cursed myself for missing, tried to reassure myself that it had moved too fast for any marksman to hit. Rather than wait for the attack, I began moving backward through the brush, gun drawn, eyes watering as I kept them pinned to the weeds and flowers, trying to sight anything that would give me a target.

Behind me, a hundred yards away, a small knoll rose in a clearing. If I could back to that, I would be looking down on this area and could spot the mutant as it stalked me, blast it before it could get close. Carefully, I moved toward that knoll. No use in yelling for help. The dense woods would cut that shout to nothingness before it had passed over the ridge that separated me from camp.

The wind was not just cold. The wind was laden with the freezing steam of dry ice. I shivered inwardly and outwardly.

When I reached the knoll, I found it was not a knoll at all. The clearing was filled with a dense clover-like vegetation that was only inches tall at the edge but which grew higher toward the middle until it reached a mushroom-like peak of about five and a half feet. I stopped, turned to go back the way I had come. But I stopped again. Somewhere ahead of me lay the Beast, waiting. I couldn't know where, and it would be certain suicide to try to go back the way I had entered. My only hope was to continue back through this clearing, out of it, up the ridge, down the ridge and into camp. I backed.

It was not as simple as it sounded.

Halfway into the clover stuff, with thick, bushy vegetation up to my shoulders, I became aware of the growling and snuffling that boomed ferociously somewhere very close at hand.

I stopped, stood perfectly still, trying not to breathe even. Somewhere in this clover, somewhere beneath its almost sea-like surface, the Beast moved—and searched. I panicked, fired wildly into the growth. A spot the size of a man was burned away, leaving a black, shadow-filled hole in the sea that did not refill itself. There was still growling, closer now. I forced myself into calm. Shooting without a target would do me no good and might serve to give the Beast a fix on me.

Ice wind whistled around me.

Finally, I saw what I was looking for. A ripple in the surface of the clover. A body as large as the Beast's, moving crouched through the clover, would leave a wake on the top that should be noticeable. I pointed at the ripple, steadied my hand...

And reeled sideways as the Beast leaped! It missed me only by inches, crashing into the clover and disappearing beneath the green surface. I fired at the spot where it went in, but it had moved now and was somewhere else. Heart pounding, I started to survey the surface again.

And again it jumped. This time, though I twirled wildly aside, it caught me a bruising swipe with its claws before crashing into the brush again. Blood spurted from my shoulder, then subsided into a steady, thick flow. Fire shot through every muscle in my arm, and I transferred the gun to my good hand.

Forcing myself to ignore the pain and find the ripple in the clover that marked the enemy, I searched the surface again, half resolved to being mauled by the Beast before I could locate it. Then, just when aching fatigue began to creep upward from my feet, I saw it. Sighting carefully on the lead of the wake, I fired. The Beast staggered erect, clutching its arm, reeled sideways. Shivering, I fired again, opened a wound on its leg. It was bleeding as badly as I was. I sighted for another shot.



Then, suddenly, everything went into a slow, syrupy, fogbound set of events that registered only indirectly on my mind. The Beast was trying to stagger away... I could not shoot... the Beast had done something so that I could not shoot... the trigger was stone to me... the night swallowed him... I passed out.

Later, the sun was up and the birds were singing, and Lotus was pouring something warm into my mouth, forcing me to wake to a beautiful scene: her face. Then Crazy spoiled it by sticking his horsey mug into the picture. "What happened?"

"We found you in that clover, almost dead. What was it?"

I struggled to sit up, managed with their help. My head spun, settled slowly like a great amusement ride reaching its end, came to a full stop. "I shot it, wounded it anyway. It tried to kill me."

"Why didn't you kill it?" Lotus asked.

"I guess... it knocked my gun away."

"No," Crazy said. "You had your gun when we found you. You must have been holding it when the Beast made its getaway. We had to pry it from your fingers. Why didn't you shoot it again?"

I tried to remember. I could picture the blue-white vibra-beam tearing the night apart and sewing it back together. There was some sort of exclamation which I had not made. Then I could not shoot. I explained the memories to the others.

"Hypnosis?" Crazy asked.

"I don't think so. I wasn't spellbound or anything like that. Something... something else."

"I think we should back out now," Lotus said. "We'll just end up like Garner. Sorry, Crazy, but we will! I think we should pack our gear and move out fast."

"No," I said, trying to look more chipper than I felt. "We'll get it. I know we will."

"But there are other jobs—easier jobs," she protested.

"We've shed our blood over this one," Crazy said. "When you spill your blood for a hunt, you're bound to get the Beast no matter what. It goes above revenge."

She fluttered her downy blue wings, looked right through me like only she can. "It's more than that to you, isn't it, Andy?"

"Yes," I croaked. No use hiding anything from Lotus—not with eyes that enter the soul like hers do. "Yes, I suppose it is. Though I don't know what." Then I passed out again.

Two days later.

All my wounds had healed under the speedheals. We had not seen the Beast since, though we were not inexperienced enough to think it had crawled away to die. That is a dangerous assumption in this profession; turn your back for even a second and *bang!* We decided, instead, that it had returned to its lair, somewhere in the forest, to lick its wounds and heal itself. We had ceased to speculate about why I had been unable to kill it when I had the chance, for that was not a happy thing to speculate about. Too

many bad dreams in something like that.

Leaving everything that could not be carried with relative ease, we struck out with inflatable mattresses, food, water, and guns. Most of all, guns. After establishing what our quarry's footprints were like (humanish, four-toed, long and wicked claws tipping each toe) from a set that led away from the clover patch fight scene in a limp pattern, we moved deeper into the woods. On the second day of the trek, we found where it had fallen and had lain for some time until it found the strength to go on. On the third day, we tracked it to the lip of the Harrisburg Crater—where the footprints ceased.

We stood there on the rim of the vast depression, staring across the table of nuclear glass that the triple-headed super-nuclear rocket had made. The crater, I knew from the maps, was two and a quarter miles in diameter. There was a lot of space. Dotting it were thousands of bubbles in the glass. A great number of them were broken and led to the maze of uncharted tunnels and caves that lay under the floor of the crater. Apparently, in one of these caves, the Beast was licking its wounds—and waiting.

“How can we cover all that?” Crazy asked. “It’s big! And slippery!”

“We’ll do it,” I said. I didn’t *want* to do it. I didn’t know why I didn’t order everyone to backtrack, to get the hell out of there chop-chop, on the double. Lotus was right, of course: the reason was more than revenge against a dumb animal. For a moment, I felt like Hamlet on the castle ramparts, talking to a ghost. But that feeling passed. My determination had something to do with that night when I could have killed it but did not. That night when I almost let it kill me. And why? And what about the other twenty-two?

“I guess here is as good a place as any,” Lotus said. “Let’s make camp here.” She swung a hand around, indicating the thirty feet of hard-packed earth that separated the forest from the crater edge. Here and there, a few sparse pieces of vegetation were trying to grow on the no-plant’s-land between woods and glass. They weren’t doing very well, but they made the bleakness a little less bleak.

“Here it will be,” I said, dropping my own gear. “We’ll search the caves tomorrow.”

Nightfall stole in, a black fog.

There were stars in the sky, but the greatest light show of all lay at our feet. For two and one quarter miles ahead, the nuclear glass shimmered with vibrant colors as it gave off the heat of the day. Blues chased reds across its surface while ambers danced with ebonies, locked arms with streaks of green.

I was sitting on the crater wall, dangling my legs, a hundred yards from the main camp. Crazy was back there still eating supper. His suppers lasted two hours, with no time wasted in those hundred and twenty minutes either. Lotus drifted down next to me, folded her tiny legs under her, and put her head on my shoulder. Her hair was cool and sweet-smelling. Also nice: it was black as the night and blew around my ears and chin and made me feel good.

“Beautiful, isn’t it,” I said. There was a burst of orange rimmed with silver.

“Very,” she said as she tried to crawl even closer. She was our consolation. She held the team together. Crazy and I could not last a month without her. Briefly, I wondered how, when she consoled Crazy, they managed, what with his being so big and clumsy and her being so tiny, so fragile. But she never came back chipped or cracked, so maybe the lummoX was gentler than he seemed.

“You scared?” I asked. She was trembling, and it was not cold.

“You know me.”

“We’ll win.”

“You sound so sure.”

“We have to. We’re the good guys.”

I felt something wet on my neck, and I knew it was a tear. I shifted a little and cuddled her and said now-now and other things. Mainly, I just sat there being uncomfortable and damned happy all at once. Lotus almost never cries. When she does, she is worried about one of us—*really* worried. Then you can’t stop her until she’s dried out. You can only sit and hold her. And when she’s finished, she never mentions the fact that she was crying; you better never mention it either, if you know what’s good for you.

So, she was crying. And I was cuddling.

And Crazy was suddenly screaming—

## V

A very long time ago, as I had sat at the upstairs window before my mother made me leave our house, there had come two giant red eyes out of the night mists. They had been as large as saucers, casting scarlet light ahead of them, focusing on the house. It was a jeep covered with sheets and red cellophane and painted to look like a dragon by the Knights of the Dragon to Preserve Humanity. I thought it very funny that grown people should play at such ridiculous games.

Below me now, in the pit that had suddenly opened and gulped down Crazy, a spider, spindly legs bracing it a hundred feet down, was looking up with crimson headlamp eyes. Only there was something worse than a jeep behind these lamps. Much worse.

“Crazy!” I shouted.

“Here. To the left!”

I took the lantern Lotus brought from the camp, lowered it into the steeply sloping tunnel. The spider backed off another fifty feet but no more. Probably a female. Females are more fearless than their mates. Branching off from the main fall were several side tunnels, all filled with sticky eggs and webbing.

“It must have burrowed close to the surface,” Crazy shouted. “I just stepped on the ground. It wiggled, gave, and fell through.”

He had rolled into one of the side tunnels, was caught up in the stickiness and eggs. The web was probably a different variety than the one the other spider had used to entrap us earlier. This one was for protecting eggs and would be even more thick and gummy. The mother spider fidgeted below, wanting to come charging up to protect her eggs, frightened only for a moment. “Lotus!” I shouted. “Climbing cleats and your knife. Hurry!”

She lifted away, was back almost instantly. I slipped the cleat attachments onto my boots, took her knife to cut steps into the tunnel wall. “I’m coming down, Crazy.”

“What about the bitch below?”

“She looks scared.”

“She’ll get over that. Stay out.”

“Crazy, you’re crazy.” I crawled into the sloping cave, hating to turn my back on the spider but unable to negotiate the steep passage headfirst. Every moment I felt as if she were rushing up the tunnel, mouth silently open and ready to kill. Painstakingly, I moved down.

Looking over my shoulder for brief moments, I could see the red eye watching. They never blinked. No lids.

I reached the side cave where Crazy was trapped, dirt packed so tightly under my fingernails that they ached. I hacked away the web, balled it up, and stuffed it behind him. I didn’t want to drop it down the main shaft for fear the jolt would bring the spider plunging upward, stomach open. When I had his head free and his arms loose, he was able to help himself. In short time, he had stripped away the remainder of the sticky thread.

“You first,” I said. “Can you make it up?”

“These hooves give perfect balance.” He kicked out of the egg pocket and started up the incline as if it were just another walkway through some charming garden. I waited until he was almost out, then launched myself on the climb. But all this action had shaken the mother spider to action. I could hear the scuttling of her feet coming up fast.

“I can’t shoot, Andy!” Lotus shouted. “You’re in the way!”

I started to say something (something probably better left unsaid) when the furry legs touched me around the waist, pulled me loose. It was hardly any use fighting the tremendous power behind her grasp. But she wasn’t prepared for all of my weight. She wobbled under me, collapsed, and we both crashed down the slope, twisted around a bend—all her legs kicking furiously—and dropped twenty feet onto a cavern floor.

I was on top of the spider.

She was screaming. God, the screams. They boomed from the walls. Even the echoes threw themselves back and reechoed. Then, despite the pounding of my heart, I saw that this place seemed to be a nest and that more than one spider, judging from excretion, inhabited it. We were alone now, but her screams would soon draw others.

I felt something wet, scrambled for a handhold on the flailing Beast, looked down. My foot was dangling inside her gut! She had rolled onto her back in the fall, and I was mounted on her deadly underside. The mandibles quivered. I jerked my foot back, discovered the knife still clutched in my hand. I was shaking violently—so violently that I feared I might drop my only weapon.

The head reared up as she tried to throw me off. I struck for the eye as Lotus had done earlier, pulled back the blade, was rewarded with gushing blood. She screamed even louder than the impossibly loud screams already filling the cavern, rolled about in fury. I was tossed free, thrown against the wall where I found a large boulder to crawl behind.

The spider did her death dance, flashing legs awkwardly akimbo.

I remained hidden in the rocks, holding tight to an aching arm as if the pressure of my hold would drive the pain off, afraid to look at my wound until I saw the Beast was dead and would never again be rushing me. It took her some time to die, but when she did expire it was with a great deal of thrashing and frothing. When I finally looked at my arm, I could see the reason for the pain: a small piece of white bone sticking through the flesh, white and spotted with blood. Head spinning roller-coaster mad, I felt more than a thousand years old—older, indeed, than the universe itself.

Above, from the tunnel that the spider and I had fallen through, came a noisy scuffling. My head spun even faster, my flesh burned with fever, and visions of the Beast's mate swam through my head to magnify my fears. I got to my feet with a bit of difficulty and felt as if I were walking on a thin cushion of air instead of the rock floor. My eyes were flaming coals someone had dropped into raw sockets, while my head was made of ice—and melting. I staggered out of the large cavern, moving to a tunnel that glittered with light at its end, hoping that this—in some way—would lead me out. Light meant goodness, did it not? Light meant freedom—or is there a brilliant light at the end of death?

The stones seemed to melt and re-form around me. My teeth chattered in my ice head; I perspired.

The end of the tunnel was a branching-off place where the walls became glass and wound erratically under the floor of the vast Harrisburg Crater. Turquoise and crimson ceilings flashed over me, reflecting me as colored mirrors might. The walls threw my image back at me in various shades and sizes, shapes and textures. It was much like a mirror hall at a carnival. Reality was pushed even further from my mind, and delusion and fever grew stronger. I moved to the right with a thousand copies of myself, a shabby army in the corridors of eternity.

My arm had become a flaming tree, its roots grown deep into my chest, constricting my lungs. Panting, I moved on through the winding glass hallways, sane enough to know who I was and that I must get out, but just delirious enough not to think of turning back and retracing my steps. In this manner, I came across the Beast in its lair. *The Beast*.

The tunnel ended in a room where grasses had been dragged in, where bits of rotting flesh from past meals littered the floor grotesquely. There was a natural stairway, uneven, sharply edged, but usable, breaking one wall. It led to the ceiling where a half-moon aperture offered escape to the crater floor overhead. I felt like a man trapped beneath an ice-covered river who finally sees a thin patch overhead. But lying between that escape route and me was the Beast. And, though dying, it was not yet dead.

I stopped, swayed crazily. For a moment, I thought I would fall over onto the mutant and lay immovable while he mauled me. With a great deal of effort, I forced away an almost imperceptible fraction of the fogginess, just enough to keep tenuous control of my body. The Beast watched me from where it lay, its massive head raised from the floor, its single red eye a hideous lantern, bright even in this sparkling room of fantasy walls. It grunted, tried to move, howled. Its leg was a mess. That was the work of my vibra-pistol. It shoved its other leg under itself, pulled to a sitting position, all its weight on the good arm and good leg. It snarled. I saw that, even in its weakness, the Beast was going to attempt to leap.

I looked about for a chunk of loose glass, found one the size of my fist. I bent, growing dangerously dizzy with the effort, picked it up, weighed it in my palm. I brought my healthy arm back, heaved the glass at the Beast's head. It struck its chest instead, knocking it onto its behind. The Beast struggled to a sitting position while I searched for another chunk of glass: the battle of the invalids, nonetheless deadly for its absurdity.

The walls shone, seemed to quickly approach and recede when I moved too much...

I found a sharp-edged piece, brought it back to throw.

And the Beast spoke. “Make Caesar shut up!” it said. “Make him shut up!”

I almost dropped the rock. The walls wiggled crazily. The Beast kept repeating the blasphemy over and over. Then it leaped.

The force of its impact was not as great as it would have been had the Beast been able to use both feet to propel itself. Still, it bowled me over, raked claws down the side of my face as we rolled. I kicked free, rolled across the floor to the far wall. Above was the exit.

“Andy!” Lotus and Crazy appeared at the entrance to the room. It had been they, not the spider’s mate, who had been scrambling down that inclined tunnel!

“Make Caesar shut up!” the Beast recited. “Make him shut up!”

The two of them froze. Crazy had his gun drawn and was about to fire. Now he left the weapon dangling from his fingers, unable to fire upon something that seemed human.

“Kill it!” I shouted.

“It’s intelligent,” Lotus said, rubbing her tiny hands together.

“It is like hell!”

“It’s more than an animal,” Crazy said, the gun useless in his hand.

“It got that phrase from me!” I shouted hoarsely, and I suppose a little insanely. “I said that when I shot it in the woods. It must have been speaking then—something it picked up from a previous bounty hunter—and I thought it was intelligent. That’s why I couldn’t shoot it again. Man does not kill man. But this isn’t a man in any way! This is a myna bird!”

“It got that phrase from me!” the Beast shouted, struggling across the floor toward me, throwing a few cautious glances behind it at Crazy and Lotus. But its old trick was working. It was immobilizing the enemy. Crazy and Lotus couldn’t wipe out all those centuries of pacifism against other humans in one short moment. It talked; that might make it human. And they could not shoot it. “It got that phrase from me!” it said again.

“See!”

“See!” it echoed.

Lotus grabbed the gun from Crazy, aimed. But she could not fire. “Here, Andy!” And she tossed it over the Beast. It clattered against the wall five feet away. Warily, I started after it, every inch a mile to me.

And the Beast was on me.

I kicked out with a last ounce of strength, caught it on the chin, stunned it. But it recovered and lunged again, thrusting claws deep into my hips and twisting them. I howled and found another ounce of strength despite what my body told me about this being the end. I kicked it again, pushed myself ahead a few more inches. My fingers slipped over the gun. It was a hard and reassuring feeling. I seemed to draw strength from the cold metal. Bringing it around, the barrel centered on the brutish face, I choked as my

finger wrapped the trigger.

“See!” he shouted, reaching a long, hairy arm out for me.

Myna bird? Could I be certain?

The arm brushed my chest.

Strange scenes of a house afire, of a woman burning, of people turning into animals flashed through my mind. Noses became snouts everywhere I looked... I pulled the trigger, saw his face go up in a red fountain, and collapsed backward into darkness.

When I came to, it was to see a blue sky overhead, trees flashing by on both banks, and blue water underneath. Crazy had broken the top from one of the glass bubbles, had used it as a boat, placing it in the small river that drifted through Congressman Horner’s ranch. This would be a much swifter route than the one by which we had come.

“How are you feeling?” Lotus asked, rubbing my forehead.

“Relieved,” I croaked.

“I know,” she said, running a tiny hand over my cheeks.

“No. No, you don’t,” I said, turning my face to the glass bottom where the water was revealed in depth.

## THREE: DIMENSIONAL LADDER

*Ye shall know antiquity floating dragon-head on new waters...*

### I

“We will be arriving in eleven minutes, Mr. Penuel,” the hostess said, smiling white-white teeth and sparkling blue eyes. “We drop from hyperspace in three minutes.”

“Thank you,” Sam managed to say between yawns.

She smiled, turned and walked up the aisle, trim legs flashing tan and smooth in the dim light of the passenger cabin.

Penuel... Penuel... It had been ten months now since Hurkos had destroyed the pink grub in Breadloaf’s office. Ten months since the empty tank beyond the wall had poured forth cold air like the maw of a frozen reptile giant. Still, he was not used to his name. Often, he never thought to answer to “Mr. Penuel.” It had been Breadloaf’s suggestion. Penuel was Hebrew for “the face of God,” and Alex was fascinated by the pun.

Penuel... Without Alex, he would still be just plain Sam—and just plain lost. He was still lost, surely, but a little less than he had been that night ten months ago. It had been Alex Breadloaf's encouragement and camaraderie that had saved him in his direst moment. It had been Alex Breadloaf's concern and influence that had gotten him the position as Congressman Horner's aide, a position that swamped him with work and forced him to forget about all the problems plaguing him. He had answers now. Temporary answers, but answers good enough to let him live comfortably with himself as long as he didn't get morbid or melancholy and start recalling his previous funk.

There was a subtle whining and a stiff, prolonged bumping as the giant liner slipped from hyperspace into the real thing.

Sam flipped the switch on the viewer in front of him and stared at the picture embedded in the back of the other seat. Blackness of space, everywhere... then, slowly, the ship's cameras tilted down and to the left, catching the green haze-covered sphere that was Chaplin I, an Earth-type, advanced colony. It looked normal from this altitude, but there had been no radio report from either of Chaplin I's cities. Three and a quarter million people were either sleeping, in dire distress and dispossessed of their broadcasting stations, or dead. The government on Hope wanted to rule out the last thing. Common sense ruled out the first. That left only the middle, and this ship had been rushed to the rescue.

What sort of rescue, no one knew.

It was generally believed that some new sort of Beast had mutated on Chaplin I, since it had been a nuclear target during the last war a thousand and more years ago. With this ugly possibility in mind, one of the top bounty hunting teams had been brought along, complete with a huge, armored, multi-weaponed floater provided by the government. Sam had not seen the bounty hunters, for they had been busy the entire trip checking out their equipment and making trial tests with the functioning of the floater instruments. Aside from them, the only other passengers were two reporters who, when they had discovered that he was merely a representative of Horner there only on a political mission in a political year, lost interest in him rather quickly. And, of course, there were thousands of tons of food, water, medicines, and fifty-five robodocs complete with hypodermic hands and two giant mother-system disease analyzers.

The cloud-shrouded planet spun below, holding menace.

"Unable to raise response," the pilot said, his voice booming along the aisle.

Sam was just about ready to turn the screen off when a thin silver needle detached itself from the clouds below and spun up at them, lazily. It was much too thin for a spaceship. A moment's observation told him it was an ancient, deadly, and accurate missile...

## II

*Raceship*, ponderous, vast, worldship by any other name, vibrated and was alive with activity. Its corridors were its veins, throbbing wildly with the blood that was its crew, its charge, its slavemen. Slug-forms moved rapidly down the winding hallways, their yellow-white bodies stretching at their segments as if their insides wanted to move faster than their skins could manage. All this for the tune of the Racesong. Slug-forms foamed in and out of portals in the honeycomb structure of the great metal walls as they were called to various points to take another duty, perform yet another task. Seek on the tune of the Racesong. Crews of disposal workers pushed down the snaking corridors, regularly clearing



the deck of those slugs who had been pushed to their ultimate point of tolerance and had folded over when their double hearts had burst under the strain of the push-push-push of their existence. The disposal crew heaped bodies-mangled by the tramp of other slugs who had not stopped or gone around the warm obstacle of their dead comrade—on magnetic powered carts that floated silently behind them, unloading the carts later at disposal chutes, dumping the stacks of slugs into the grinning mouth of the fire-bellied dragon furnace that would take care of them quite rapidly. All the while, slugs hurried by, slugs dropped and died. Even members of the disposal crew, to keep with their task, were pushed to great extremes and collapsed to become fodder for the dragon furnace themselves. All of this madness, all of this costly rush was a burden they gladly bore in chaos. They gained a strange solace in the fact that, though they might die, generations upon generations lay in the nests, constantly hatching—hatching faster, in fact, than the tremendous death rate could deplete their numbers. And when a surplus built up, *Raceship* would send off a Spoorship under its direction, and the empire would grow and be greater. There was joy in knowing each death contributed to the goal. This made them wildly happy, this feeling of a united goal to strive and die for.

And this maddening devotion was carefully structured and fostered by the Being in Ship's Core.

### III

The rocket had been non-apocalyptic, but it *had* torn a hole in the bottom of the ship that spelled certain death to everyone inside. Had it been a meteor, the ship could have evaded or destroyed it; but modern vessels were not equipped to defend themselves against seeker missiles, just as they were not equipped to fight in a peaceful world. They would crash now, spiraling downward to smash onto Chaplin I. Unless...

Unless, as Sam realized, they could reach the floater in the cargo hold, back where the bounty hunters were. If they could get into that and get it out of the ship before it crashed, they would save themselves. The floater could operate separately and bring them down safely.

A crackling, unclear and unintelligible, snapped through the shipcom as the pilot tried to say something the instruments would not let him say.

The ship spun faster and faster—down.

The ship screamed in expectation of the end.

Sam unbelted himself, gripped the seat in front, and pulled upward with a great deal of difficulty. He gained his feet and turned into the aisle when the ship took a more violent slant and almost knocked him down again. The hull moaned like a thousand banshees. The terrific stress of the multi-mile fall would start popping rivets shortly.

It was going to be an uphill fight—literally and figuratively. He had to grapple up the incline and reach the cargo-room hatch. Even there, it was not a certainty that he could open it under the vast pressures working against him. But he couldn't just give up and die as the witless, shrieking reporters seemed to have done behind him. Panting, red-faced, with sweat streaming over his face and burning in his eyes, he fought his way, struggling over an ever-increasing inclination.

Something boomed, scraped loudly the length of the hill. The radar module had been torn loose and dragged along the ship.

Sam moved.

At the hatch, he braced his back against the seat to the right and tried turning the wheel that would open the portal. It wasn't easy. He was fighting the pressure of their rapid descent and the heavy wheel. Now and again, the engines kicked in, trying to avert the fast approaching doom, and their jolting did nothing to help him. He felt like a moth trying to lift the candle and take it home. His heart pounded, and his eyes filled with tears. When he thought his chest was ready to break open like a nutshell and expel the meat of his heart, he felt the thump of complete revolution, and tugged on the door. He had just enough sense to pull his hands back as the great circular doorway swung violently backward, drawn by the forces of the plunging ship, and crashed into the wall. Beyond lay the storage chamber and the floater. The ramp into the round ball-like vehicle was open. They had seen him coming and understood his purpose and were delaying their escape.

Behind, the two reporters were fighting each other to be first to the floater after Sam. As a result, neither would make it in time.

Sam was halfway across the room when the deck buckled and tossed him face-first onto the metal plating, cutting his chin. He tasted blood, felt himself slipping backward toward the hatch, losing ground. He grabbed a cargo-fastening ring in the floor, held on. Forcing his vision to clear, he saw that the entry ramp was ten yards away, beyond a slight wrinkle in the deck. Surveying the rest of the floor, he found that he could work his way to the ramp by grabbing the cargo fastening rings and dragging himself over the last thirty feet. But his muscles were so terribly sore!

There was a booming in the front of the ship, and the door between the pilot's cabin and the passenger area sealed itself with a loud sirening. The viewplate had smashed out of—or rather into—the pilot's chamber, probably skewering the crew with thousands of slivers of plastiglass—including the blue-eyed hostess with the trim, tan legs. Soon, similar things would be happening to the hull and the rest of the ship. If they didn't crash first. Which was a distinct possibility.

Reaching for the next ring, he began crawling up the deck. In a surprisingly short time, speed increased with the imminent presence of death, he had reached the runneled gangplank. Hands latched onto him, dragged him into the floater. He looked up to say thanks, saw that his rescuer was a man with the legs of a horse, and slipped willingly into blackness.

## IV

Nests budded.

Nests bloomed rapidly, one after another like roses in a speeded stop-action film.

A new generation came forth, the uncountable generation of an uncountable cycle of generations. The new-hatched slugs worked their jaws rapidly, smashing their gums together, looking for some manner of nourishment. Web hangings flushed about them and guarded them against scraping harshly against deck plating or over raised bolts and seams in the skin of *Raceship*. Almost as one organism, the thousands of pink, young slugs, rising up and standing on only half their segments, mewed piteously—asking, asking, asking. The mists of shock-absorbent webs swayed with their crawling quest, shredded and came down around them. And the mists parted as the sacrifice slugs came forth from their places of waiting, glorying that their time was finally near, finally at hand, finally and gloriously to be consummated. They drew back and threw themselves at the young slugs, opening the pores of their first segments so that

appetite-arousing juices could flow out and permeate the air with a delicious, dank heaviness. The baby slugs responded, whining insanely, gnawing their horny gums into the pulpy body of the elder sacrifice slugs, gnawing and tearing at the flesh, swallowing it in great shreds, foaming over the smell of blood. And still the sacrifice slugs came joyfully, to be fulfilled in purpose.

In the Ship's Core, the Central Being turned to the other matters bothering It:

The slugs in the navigation and tracking quarters had come upon the form of another ship moving out and away from the vessel they had shot down shortly before. If this smaller thing should escape, *Raceship* might be in danger of discovery by the minions of mankind that swarmed in the galaxy ahead. There was great fury among the navigators and radar crews as they worked over the instruments, their pseudopodia grasping at the controls. The smaller ship, the chief tracker discovered, was a ball of some sort. Hollow. Yes, definitely hollow. At first, they feared it might be a bomb. But it moved away from *Raceship*, not toward it. Still, they must get it. It had greater speed, at this low altitude, than *Raceship* had, but the slug-form crew lifted the mountainous ship and set out in pursuit, coasting over the surface of Chaplin I, seeking to kill...

## V

"Are you all right?" a small, china-tone voice whisper-spoke to him as he swam upward through the inkiness that seemed endless, thick, and sticky. But, after all, there was light, and he homed in on the words as if they were a small beacon that would lead him out of his fuzziness into clarity—a very pleasant, gentle beacon.

"He just passed out is all," another, gruffer, voice said.

"You have no sympathy," china-tone snapped.

Sam opened his eyes completely and found he was looking at a tiny, elfin face. Elfin! Pointed ears... small and delicate features... tiny but well-formed body... Wings! A pair of velvet-like wings fluffed gently behind her like sheets on a line, then drew shut. Their color matched the toga that fell to an end above her round and lovely knees. He remembered Hurkos and calmed himself. This was a mutant of some sort—whether a product of Nature or of the Artificial Wombs. A delightful mutation, to be sure. She was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

"Are you okay?" she asked again, tiny lips parting slightly to let the little words out.

Sam groaned, tried to sit up.

"Don't strain yourself," she said, grasping his shoulders in her fine, shell hands in an effort to restrain him, her sculptured fingers pressing him back.

"I'm... okay," he said, fighting off a headache that he knew could not successfully be fought off.

"I told you," the gruff voice said.

Sam turned to the right, looked into the wide, handsome face of the man with the gruff voice. There was a wild mane of hair framing his head, partially covering his two large ears. Memories of being dragged into the floater by a man-horse came back to him. "I guess I should thank you for saving—"

“Wasn’t anything to it,” the man-horse said, flushing slightly and grinning.

“It was my life, though...”

“Don’t praise Crazy too much,” a third voice said. It was Andrew Coro, the man he had met briefly on Horner’s Earth ranch when a Beast hunt had been initiated some months ago. Coro stepped between the girl and the man-horse. “Things like that go to his head, and he gets impossible to live with.”

“Hmmp!” Crazy snorted.

“I haven’t met your... your colleagues, Mr. Coro.”

“Of course not,” Coro said. “I’m sorry. This is Lotus, our nursemaid, comforter, and spoiled friend. She’s also a famous botanist, but she’ll have you seeing plants in your sleep if you get her talking about it. Fair warning. This is Crazy Horse,” he continued, pointing to the other mutant before the elfin girl-woman could respond. “Crazy is our muscle, as you might have guessed—and a bit, I imagine, of our brains also. And me you know, Mr. Penuel.”

“Sam. And I’m pleased to meet you two. You did a fine job for Congressman Horner. Do you have anything for a headache?”

“It’s as makeshift as anything could be,” Andy said.

“It’ll do,” Crazy grunted, crossing his arms over his massive chest and shuffling his hooves on the metal deck.

“Sam? After all, you’ll be sitting there.”

Sam dropped into the homemade chair, fastened the seat belt. Crazy had taken a wall cot and bent it into the rugged form of a chair. Together, he and Coro had bolted it to the deck while Lotus had sewn a spare belt to it. He was reminded of the flexoplast chair in the jelly-mass ship. Suddenly things seemed to be revolving on a wheel, the playing of old events all over with just a few different characters. “I think it will do just fine.”

“Okay,” Coro said, turning and dropping into his own seat. “Now let’s find out what happened to those two colony-cities.”

Coro plotted the position of the larger of the two silent cities, Chaplin-Alpha, set the floater on a high speed, automatic course for the place. As they bobbed along at what seemed like a leisurely pace but was really a wild, lightning-fast streaking, Sam learned to know the trio by their personalities and not just by their physical appearances. Lotus was tender, greatly affectionate, and very proud of her two men. She was also a lever to maintain humility and tranquillity within the group. She did these last two things with humor, not with nagging, and Sam came to appreciate this very much in only minutes. Crazy was quick-witted, quick-tempered, and extremely friendly. He seemed the type who would lend you everything he owned—then kick your head in if you proved no more than a thief. He had a bit of the boyish wonder at the marvelous everyday things in life, a quality which most men lose early and never manage to regain. And Coro... Coro was different altogether. He was friendly, to be sure, and there was nothing but kindness in his manner. But he was not as candid as Crazy and Lotus, not as easy to know. He was withdrawn, and a touch of melancholy tinted his dark eyes, giving him a perpetual look of hurt.

They were talking, despite Coro's warnings, about botany, when he began reducing the floater's speed and shifting from plotogram to manual control. "We're almost there," he said, interrupting Lotus as she related her adventures with a Porcupine Rose.

All four faced front. The conversation had been a diversion, a way to keep their minds off the missile that had torn up their ship, and to stop any questions about who might possibly have fired it in a world of pacifism. Suddenly the screens popped to life under Coro's hands. The city of Chaplin-Alpha swam into clarity before them.

Rather, what *had* been Chaplin-Alpha...

Once a thriving metropolis. Now ashes. How blithely this peaceful society tripped into disaster! Never expecting anything like this because things like this just didn't happen. In the old world, police and rescue teams would have come by the droves. But there had been no police for centuries, and no one had foreseen that the fifty-five robodocs would be shot down before they could land.

Ashes. A gray-white film like the thinnest veneer of snow lay obfuscating all. Rubble lay in mounds like camel humps. Here and there the girders of a building stood like broken, singed bones, some of their stone and mortar flesh still clinging to them. Some places, the rubble stretched in long rows where the buildings had fallen directly sideways to crumble and decay like the body of a huge animal.

Plants. Lotus knew what kinds. They grew snakily from the burned edges, searching through the rubble, seeking sustenance from the two million bodies that, certainly, lay smashed beneath. Some others, dark and with slender leaves like knives, were carbon-eaters, relishing the richness of their coveted food.

"The people—" Lotus began.

"Dead," Coro finished.

"But how—"

"Killed."

Everyone sat silent a moment.

"But men don't kill," Crazy insisted. "Not like this. And since the Breadloaf Shield and the death of God—"

Sam was slightly surprised to hear the casualness with which the man-horse mentioned the death of God. But then, the news media had splashed the story in depth and everywhere. Breadloaf had been interviewed to the point of exhaustion. Hurkos had become a minor celebrity on the variety-talk shows. Gnosso's book *On God's Demise*, was a runaway best seller on any world you could name. Breadloaf's scientists had been badgered, bothered, pumped for opinions and facts. Only Sam had managed, with a great deal of difficulty, to keep his privacy intact. With this bounty of media coverage, the fact of divine expiration was a common piece of knowledge, unquestioned and—ten months after the act—generally unthought of. But what Crazy was saying was correct. Men should be less able to kill than ever. The perpetrator of aggression was gone. Man was saner than ever. This sort of atrocity should be impossible. Men should not have the ability to... and of course, Sam thought, men didn't do it!

"Not men," he said aloud.

"What?" they all said, almost together.

“I’ll wager that it wasn’t men. Not men as we know them.”

“Talk sense,” Coro said. “You’re worse than Crazy.”

Sam strained at his seat belt. “These... killers are from another galaxy, not this one. They might not be men at all.” His mind ran backward to the time in the ship when he still had only a first name and Gnossos had proposed the idea that he was being controlled by extra-galactic forces. Gnossos had been wrong then. But now the theory seemed to fit. He could think of no contradiction with what evidence they now had. Was he just as wrong as Gnossos? “It sounds crazy,” he said, trying to say it all aloud and give it more validity than it now had in the tenuous thought-concepts of his mind. “But think about it. First of all, we do not have men in this galaxy who could perpetrate such violence. Secondly, there is absolutely no way, even if an army of these men existed, that they could secure the weapons to level a city to ashes. They have to be from Outside.”

The others regarded him, trying to find some chink in the reasoning. Crazy spoke first: “But wouldn’t the God who gave us aggression give it to all intelligent species in the universe? I was under the impression that men were actually basically good and sensible and that their bad qualities came from God’s schizoid personality. Now wouldn’t this God from the higher universe control this entire universe?”

Sam started to answer, closed his mouth when he couldn’t think of anything to say. His reasoning seemed sound. When Hurkos had killed the pink grub, the holy worm, then all intelligent species in this universe should have benefited from it. Perhaps God had controlled only part of the universe and... But, no. He had been the entire higher dimension. There had been no other gods with him. That was a fact. Breadloaf’s scientists said it was a fact, and they were hard boys to find fault with. Accordingly, these extra-galactics should not be able to kill, void of blood lust.

But below, a city lay in ruin, concealing two million bodies.

“It must have been fast,” Coro said. “There don’t seem to be any survivors.”

“Let’s take a look at Chaplin-Beta,” Lotus suggested.

“It’ll be the same.” Coro began bringing the floater around in a one hundred and eighty degree turn.

Lotus folded her wings around her pert breasts, hiding her arms and shoulders in a shell of velvet membrane. “Let’s look anyway.”

Coro completed the turn, and all four of them gasped at once when they saw it: a mountain in flight. Rather, a plateau. It was a flat slab of a ship, miles across. The floater was a small pebble beside it, an infinitesimal grain of sand.

“What—” Coro started.

The vast ship was over three thousand feet high, and that was but a fraction of its length and equal to its breadth. It seemed to be a solid piece with no seams and no windows to break its perfect sheen. It appeared to be powered by some magnetic system, as the ground beneath it reverberated in answer to the silent call of its star-shattering engines. The only scars on the great bulk were three rows of tiny holes (tiny from where they sat, but very likely feet across when viewed closely), five hundred holes per row. From the center of the middle row of holes there was a puff of white, and a silver missile like the one that had downed their last ship came spinning lazily toward them.

“Dive!” Sam shouted.

Coro hit the controls, pushing the floater down under the missile.

The projectile whirred past, thrumming like a torpedo. Arcing delicately, it turned back on them, correcting its course.

“It’s self-propelled!” Coro gasped between his teeth like gas escaping from a split pipe. “And has its own radar!”

## VI

In the shells of corridors and maze rooms directly out from the Ship’s Core, the mother-slugs were writhing in the throes of racial creation. Their great soft bodies bulged with the fat of readiness, their saucer-sized cataracted eyes glazed with the ecstasy of their purpose. Above and around them, the thin-shelled nodules of male sperm cells hung suspended in the web matter of the new nests, ripe and thick, waiting dumbly for contact with the reproductive segments of the huge mother-body worms. As if in unanimous accord, the hundreds of giant females began bumping and twisting more violently, writhing madly as their brains dissolved under the enzyme-hormones of sexual stimulation. The brain tissue bubbled and frothed, sizzling without heat, dissolving to form a nutrient atmosphere within the reproductive segment conducive to the fertilization of the male cell and the growth of the eggs into young. The intelligence and memory centers were the first to crumble so that there was no long and painful realization of what was happening to them. The end would be a form of glorious, prolonged orgasm for the mother-bodies.

Squirming and flopping heavily in fierce delight, they reared up, smashing the dangling sperm nodules planted there by mates they would never see, and bathed themselves in the soul fire of the male contribution. The raw, skinless, center segments each sported a brown nucleus throbbing on the surface in a primitive one-two, one-two rhythm. The center segments accepted the male fluid, shivered uncontrollably as it seeped sweetly onto the brown nucleus. The air was sweet and sickly, the web matter wet and heavy with the contents of the burst nodules. On hundreds of mother-bodies, the nuclei, permeated with sperm, began a slow but apparent sinking toward the center of the reproductive segment, there to lodge in the warmth of the rich protein bath that had once been a brain.

The mother-bodies curled and shook.

All segments, save the reproductive central ones, died and began the process of rotting.

A new generation was formed, now only zygotes. Someday, full-grown slugs.

From insanity, comes life...

In the war control room, furthest out from Ship’s Core, the slug crewmen prepared various battle programs to initiate against the spherical enemy who had suddenly disappeared from the radar screens though no missile hit had been made. This meant the enemy understood and employed anti-radar techniques. This made it more difficult than had been expected. They buzzed and they chattered, formulating death.

And in the Ship's Core, the Central Being was, for the moment, unconcerned with the battle against the floating ball and the four humans; unconcerned, also and equally, with the mother-bodies and the cycle of reproduction, since both of these things were so natural, so a part of the general plan. But if truth be known and infinitesimal differences measured, it could be found that the Central Being held a greater deal of interest in the conception of new slugs than in any minor battle. Slugs were life. Life was a tool. Actually, It did not run the slugs as puppets, though strings *were* attached to be pulled and maneuvered whenever the occasion rose. Mainly, however, the Central Being was a planner of the major pattern, an architect of the overall purpose and methods of execution, not of the bothersome detail of day-to-day. In Its mind was the great plan of *Raceship* and of the one hundred and a half another hundred Spoorships that had been moved out to spread the plan and the hopes and the dreams. All the Raceverse lay before the Central Being and Its plans became—of necessity—plans in general, not specific. So It drew some strings some of the time, but rarely drew all strings at any one time. At this moment, It toyed with the plan to eliminate the beings of this galaxy. Ever since the Fall, when the Dimensional Vacuum had caused the Big Drop, It had seen Its duty—to Itself and to *Raceship* and its Spoorships. These strange, two-legged, two-armed, two-eyed beings were a challenge to the concept of *Raceship* and slug-form. And a challenge to what had conceived *Raceship* and slug-form. All of them, every last creature, had to be destroyed. It was an absolute prerequisite to the remainder of the plan of *Raceship*. These beings must die before the overall plan could continue with any degree of integrity. Simply: death to man. Small “m” intentioned.

## VII

Coro quickly wiped the perspiration that had beaded on his forehead and was starting to trickle down into his eyes. “We have anti-radar gear because of the bats on Capistrano. It’s a necessity when you go out hunting multi-tonned radar-eyed things like those.” He thumbed the gear into full operation, jumped the sphere a hundred feet straight up.

Beneath them, the missile streaked back toward the mother ship. With luck, they would get to see it strike the mountainous vessel in a matricide thrust. There was one trouble with a weapon that was completely self-controlled. Sure, it cut down the duties of the war room when you were firing a thousand rounds a minute, but it also left open the possibility of the round returning to strike the gunman. With a yellow cloud of thick smoke, the missile struck the hull of the other ship, tearing a hole ten feet across in the thick metal hide. Even this, however, was a minor abrasion on that great body.

“I think this confirms the extra-galactic theory,” Sam said.

With anti-radar giving them a form of invisibility—temporarily, at least—Coro brought the floater in closer, buzzing only fifty feet over the top of the slab-like vessel. “Still, the death of God should have made them nonviolent tool”

“What now?” Lotus asked.

Sam was surprised that a woman had kept such superb composure through an actual malicious and deadly missile attack. Even he was stifling a scream, but she seemed perfectly willing to accept a flying mountain full of men—if, indeed, they were men—from another galaxy.

“Next? We go in,” Coro said very matter-of-factly. “We go inside the ship.”

All three turned to stare at him, mouths open, as if he were some strange curiosity.



“You’re insane!” Lotus said, almost as if she meant it literally.

“What good will going inside do?” Crazy said, scratching in his tumble of hair.

“He’s right,” Sam said after a moment of silence.

“Right?” Lotus held a hand up to her ear as if to block out this ridiculousness.

“Yes. Andy is perfectly correct. We don’t have the fire power in this floater to shoot them down. Besides, now that we are fighting intelligent creatures and not just Beasts, I am quite sure none of us could pull a trigger anyway. We are ingrained with pacifism. We are and have long been above war. Let’s face it: the only way we can hope to save ourselves and the rest of the galaxy is by first-hand analysis of the problem.”

“Well put,” Coro said.

“How many have to go in?” Lotus asked.

“Not you,” Coro said. “You’re too fragile for this job.” He saw her bristling at the remark and hastened to add a qualifying statement: “Besides, we need someone behind to ready the robodoc unit and prepare for us in case we get hurt in there. And Crazy will stay behind too. This is going to have to be an after-dark, hush-hush sort of thing. With those hooves, Crazy would make too much noise.”

“That’s fine with me,” Crazy said, turning to look back at the giant ship.

“Sam?”

“I’ll go,” Sam answered, wondering where he was finding the reservoir of courage, deciding it was a spill-over from Coro.

Coro brought the floater around, hugging the alien hull, and set a speed matching that of the ponderous vessel. “We wait until they set her down somewhere and until dark. She’s bound to set down for repairs from the missile strike. We take whatever equipment we can use or adapt to use, cut a hole in her side, go in, and find out what we can. All very simple.”

“And dangerous,” Lotus said, looking at both of them with eyes that cut deep and saw much. “Too dangerous.”

At the base of the towering monolith, they looked back toward the grove of trees where the floater lay. They had to strain their eyes to see the vague curve of the outer hull, and even then, it seemed to be a trick of shadows and not really a hard, worldly object.

“What next?” Sam asked, turning back to the impressive black hull before them, the seamless alien wonder.

Coro rapped the metal lightly with the handle of his knife. There was an almost imperceptible change in tone as they moved down the long flank, a tendency to hollowness. They repeated the process again to see if the same change hit them this time. It did. “We cut a hole—here,” Coro said, reaching behind into his backpack, struggling a hand-laser out, thumbed it to full intensity.

They wore space suits, and now, by mutual accord, they flipped the helmets shut and began relying solely on the air supply in the single tanks strapped on their left shoulder blades. There was no way of knowing if these creatures breathed an atmosphere similar to Hope Normal, and they were not about to be gassed by an outrush of foul air when they had cut through the plating.

The laser came on, a blue beam so dark that it was almost black. Coro began slicing into the plate before him. The metal gave to the irresistible cold heat of the beam, and a circular patch fell away. It was half an inch thick, but it was not the entire hull. Beyond lay another layer. They went through twelve in all—like chewing through a Danish pastry—before they were looking through the hull onto a dimly lighted corridor wide as a street in Hope. They were looking out at deck level.

“You first,” Coro said, providing a knee for Sam to stand on. “Then pull me up.”

By the time they were both inside and breathing heavily, the atmosphere analyzer strapped to Coro’s wrist indicated APPROX. HOPE NORMAL.

They took several steps into the corridor, about to take off the clumsy helmets, when their ears were assaulted with the teeming, multi-level rhythms of Racesong...

Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam...

Clutching at, clutching at, clutching at...

Identity...

Clutching identity in a swirling maelstrom.

Sam, Sam... Sam...

He felt buffeted by the harmonious winds, lifted and thrilled by the rhythms of the breezes of the overall song. In his ears, Racesong pulsed, and he could not fight the tiny, tinny vibrations that stirred his hammer, anvil, and stirrup, quivered them, befuddled them, used and yet denied them. It was not a song for him, not a song designed for men. Coruscating tones broke brilliantly against his mind, unaware that he was alien to them.

Sam, Sam... Sam...

The Racesong brought pictures that crashed like towering whitecaps against his mind, swirling backwater in his id, frothing his ego with stagnant foam. Between the impossible crests of the waves, the corridor of the extra-galactic ship was brought back to him in dimness, though he could not retain this picture of reality when the alien thought-song swept into his brain, waves like corundum wheels grinding away at his self-awareness. He could see Coro staggering against the wall, slumping down onto the floor, trying to hold the noises out with hands that merely conducted them.

Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam...

But after the moment of evanescence, came the waves:

*Raceship’s purpose is an immensity beyond the comprehension of any one slug; it is not a tidal current but, indeed, the tide itself. Continents drift before it, and whirlpools of its making suck up islands. Raceship... RACEship... RACESHIP... raceSHIP... Always moving, always growing as more and more sections are thrust outward from the present hull, always putting more and more*

*distance between the outside and Ship's Core. Protect Ship's Core, always... Raceship in the Raceverse...*

Sam tried to raise his arms to shield his ears, useless but an instinctive necessity. Still, his arms raised and lowered jerkily like the arms of a puppet as the waves of chauvinistic propaganda swept him, leaving him in control of himself for only short moments at a time.

*Spoorships coasting outward on invisible but ever-present currents of space, following strange flows and investigating all the eddies of Raceverse. Spoorships with shrines in the Core rather than a real central being...*

Sam, Sam... Sam, Sam...

Coro was on his stomach, writhing in pain, face contorted. Pain? Pain?

*Mother-forms, vomiting eggs from the rotting ruin of their sacrificial bodies, eggs round and smooth and gray, great clusters. All to support Raceship and to build outward to further insulate the Central Being in Ship's Core and to fan the Spoorships that would carry the plan and desires of the Central Being into the unknown...*

Pain? Pain? What pain? There was an overwhelming hypnotic something that swept him with the melody—but no pain. Pain for Coro? Pain?

Sam, Sam...

Clutching at, clutching at identity...

Id... Iden... I... Identi... Identity...

*Webs, hanging. Webs. Giving of self to the young in the webs. The young: wide-jawed. Wide jaws: bite into pulpy flesh, gnash and gush blood through horny gums. Blood Bloodbloodblood for Raceship. The blood of patriots...*

Coro wasn't in pain, Sam realized. Coro was trying, in the short moments between waves of the alien song, to crawl toward the opening they had burned in the hull. Sam collapsed onto the deck, rolled onto his stomach. His eyes were swimming, hazed red as his temples throbbed with pain that was not so much pain as severe weariness. He tried crawling a few inches before the song crashed back again.

*We thank the Central Being for goodness. We thank the Central Being for the continuation of the egg... egg... egg... egg...*

Sam knew he wouldn't make it. Coro had been closer to the hull, and he might. But Sam was lost. Each time, the crawling became more difficult. Each time, the lull between throbs of the song seemed shorter. He realized that he had to combat the song, not just crawl from it. He had to engage himself in some mental task and fight to concentrate on that task when the song was in full blast. If not, the alien thought-concepts would cripple his logic, crush his humanness from him. Quickly, before the next wave hit him, he struck upon a plan. He would trace the submelodies of the song, search the rhythm patterns for some clues. He would play detective to save his mind. He would concentrate on discovering what the Central Being was. He would have to cling to the detective role when the wave came. Over and over, he repeated to himself: *What is the Central Being?*

SHIP'S SCORESHIP'S SCORE

*ship'scoreship'score*

*Central Being° °SHIP'S*

*CORESHIFSCOREship's*

*coreship'scorecentra*

*lbeing° °SHIP's...*

Sam came into the trough between waves, back into reality. His nerves vibrated now, almost to the tune but raggedly nearly beyond control. His mouth was a dirty, dry rag, his tongue a lump of wiped-up dirt. He dragged against the deck, inches only. He was so very tired. Mentally and physically. The undercurrents of the Racesong were opening before him as he traced them under the crest of their influence, to seek the identity of the Central Being. Even the first bars of the submelodies hinted at the Central Being's true nature. But he refused to believe it. Refused absolutely.

*Central Being, Central Being*

*Ship's Core*

*She-hips Co-ore*

*being... being... being...*

Coro was almost to the hole. Sam pushed himself as hard as he could. His mind was spinning with what he had found, twisting and turning to seek a way to discount the submelodies and what they revealed. Coro was out of the hole, tumbling into the tall grass outside, away from the influence of Racesong.

*being...*

*core of being...*

*core of... core of...*

**BEING!**

Sam felt strong hands on his wrists. Then he was being pulled from the ship, dragged brutally across the fine sharp edges of the crude portal and onto the ground. Racesong faded and did not return. But it was—in one way—too late for him. He knew the answer. Maintaining his sanity, he had found out what the Central Being of *Raceship* was.

And, loudly, in the night, he screamed.

## VIII

Coro used the medikit preparedermics, injecting him with alternating doses of semi-sedatives and mild stimulants, rocking his body in a chemical cradle to bring him back from the screaming and the blackness that bubbled in his mind. But it wasn't an easy trip. He had succeeded in getting out of *Raceship* physically intact, but his mental arrangement had suffered severe blows under the uncensored realization

of the nature of the Central Being. But for Coro's expert chemical manipulation, he might have let the desire to scream run rampant and run on.

"What is it?" Coro asked, holding him as an ancient might have held an epileptic, careful that he could not damage himself if he tried again to thrash about. They were still under the overwhelming shadow of the alien monolith, pebbles next to the mountain. "What's the matter?"

"The... Central Being," he managed. His lips were strangely dry, cracking and sore. His tongue felt swollen and furry.

"The what?"

Briefly, he detailed the basics he had learned, holding out on the scream-causer.

"It's alien," Coro said, his voice fatherly and comforting. "But what is there to scream about? I've seen Beasts with stranger methods of reproduction and—"

Sam forced himself to a sitting position, colder than he should have been with the warm breezes fluffing the night. "No. Not just the physical setup of the ship. That's strange enough. But that isn't what—what set me off. It's the Central Being—what the Central Being is."

"What is it, then?"

Sam opened his mouth, closed it and wet his lips. "The Central Being—God," he said with some difficulty.

"Impossible! He's dead!"

"The *old* God is dead. *Our* God is dead."

"Then He didn't rule the entire universe? There was another God who—"

"No," Sam said, waving a hand limply to cut off the questions. He wanted to throw up, to chuck out his meals and his memories. But the latter could not be forced away, and the former would have to be held down if only for the sake of convenience. "He *did* rule all of the universe. Every speck of it!"

"But—"

"But there was a God above Him in yet another universe, a higher dimension. Look at it as a ladder, Andy. We are the bottom rung. Above us was our God—whom we killed. Above that God was this one with a pocket universe of slug ships. When we killed our God, our Keeper, our Master, we destroyed the dimension above us, because He was that entire dimension. The gap created in the ladder caused a sliding down of the rungs. We have meshed with the third rung, and this new God with the slug-forms is in our midst."

"And as warped as the God on the second rung."

"Exactly." He was feeling better as he shared the horror, his cheeks flushing to ward off the cold that was really a cold from within.

"And what does this new God want?"

"To... destroy us." He recalled all the lines of thought that had been radiating from the Central Being,

flooding through the counter-melodies of Racesong. “Destroy us. Wipe us out to the last man, woman, and child.”

“Why?”

“To preserve Its self-importance. We are creatures It never conjured into existence. We are beyond Its control, really, because It is not our God and It is not measurably better than we are. It cannot annihilate us, for It isn’t that powerful. But It can direct Its creatures, the slug-forms, to do the job for It. Since they are vicious fighters and we do not have the power to strike back, it should not be a difficult chore.”

“We have to get back to the floater,” Coro said, standing and helping Sam to his feet. “We’ve got to get word back to Hope somehow. A warning.”

They were nearly halfway across the meadow before they heard the noise and saw the *whoosh* of blue light that gushed from the weapons of the slug-forms surrounding the floater. A steel net had been dropped over the ball, magno-connected to ground pegs spaced every three feet. A tough, tight enclosure, quickly and silently thrown up—even more quickly clamped shut. Lotus and Crazy had probably been achored before they had realized something was happening.

“The hypnodarts,” Coro whispered, dropping to his knees in the high grass.

They knelt, only their heads visible above the grass, and stripped themselves of all unnecessary equipment, equipment which would have been necessary had the Racesong not prevented them from exploring *Raceship*. Then, nervously, they screwed together the two parts of the dart rifles. It was a humane weapon. It caused sleep, but not the ultimate sleep of death. It was, really, the only sort of weapon they could have brought themselves to use against intelligent creatures. Each rifle had a clip of forty darts which slid easily into the butt of the weapon, just above the powerpack.

Running crouched, rifles at ready in the event they were spotted prematurely, the blue explosions of the slugs’ weapons neon-flashing in the dark, Sam was thinking of Hurkos. Of Hurkos clubbing that pink slug that teetered on the edge of the Shield, that wormy thing that had been God. He remembered the stinking mush of fluids that had spilled from the rips Hurkos had made in its hide. He remembered it writhing in death agony. Clubbing, clubbing, clubbing with a vicious, spiteful swing of the arms. Clubbing... But *he* was not going to kill! Only put them to sleep. Just sting them for a split second and then give them a nap. And he was saving the lives of the two Mues inside the floater, he argued with himself. Yes. Of course. That must be the way to think of it.

Wind: cold.

Light: blue.

Night: dark.

These three things swam and erupted through one another, cold-dark-blue/blue-dark-cold like a psychedelic toto-experience show, throbbing through the grass that licked them like a thousand tiny tongues as the scene of violence ahead became plainer, clearer, uglier and uglier.

The slug laser weapon was concentrated on the hull, and although Crazy and Lotus had begun to spin the ship under the net, the beam would soon trace a black line around the sphere and slice it in half.

Sam fought the weariness that ached in every joint of his body. Fatigue, he told himself, was one of those mental disorders you could overcome with the proper tools of concentration. But concentrate as he

would, his legs still throbbed madly, and his lungs heaved like sacks full of hot coals suddenly come to life.

“Here,” Coro said.

They dropped to the earth at the edge of the grass, staring across five yards of open ground to the trees and the indentation in the forest where the floater spun and was fired upon. “What now?” Sam asked, his throat dry and cracked like his lips.

Coro wiped perspiration from his forehead despite the cool breezes playing inside their minds and bodies. “I count... fourteen. But there may be more hidden in the trees. Don’t start fanning your rifle right off. That wastes too many darts. But look how they are standing. They all have their backs to us. If we pick them off, moving inward, the boys in front won’t realize the boys behind are going down.”

“I don’t know about my aim—”

“The gun will handle most of that. You just sight through the keyhole bubble here. The gun will correct for the rest.”

They dropped to their bellies, crawled forward the last few feet until their heads were exposed beyond the tall grass. Sam raised his gun, sighted. The nearest slug on his side was a dozen feet away. His finger encircled the trigger, and he felt things rising in his stomach. Then he forced himself to think about all those guns from the jelly-mass ship—and that he knew how to work them. And they were to kill; these were only to drug. He pulled the trigger, closing his eyes with the soft *whuff* of discharge.

When he opened his eyes, the slug was lying on its side, fuzzy, thin lids closed over its eyes, still alive but out of action for a while. Coro had gotten two in the same time. Carefully, Sam raised his gun again, sighted in on another slug. *Whuff!* This time he didn’t close his eyes. The dart spun forth, buried itself in the tender flesh of the slug-form. The alien started to turn, a pseudopod lashing around to clutch the dart in bewilderment, then it was toppling sideways off its snake-like locomotion tail and onto the ground, its eyes staring fixedly at nothing for a moment before fuzzy lids closed over them.

It was like a game, really.

The slugs were like little cardboard targets, five feet high and relatively easy to hit. When you were on target, they fell over almost instantly. And the blue lights flashed almost as if in notice of a score.

The game neared its end. Six slugs remained standing, still oblivious to the eight unconscious comrades behind. Then Sam fired on the next closest of the gross creatures, caught it in the middle of the back. It bent convulsively, straightened to pluck the dart from itself, and toppled forward. Forward! It struck the slug in front of it a glancing blow. That slug turned to see what was the matter, saw the bodies, and sounded the alarm.

“Fan them now!” Coro hissed.

Sam swung the barrel of the rifle back and forth, not bothering to aim any longer.

Three more slugs toppled to the ground before they could swing their own weapons up.

Another dropped, four darts in its chest.

The two aliens operating the beam weapon swung it off the floater and toward the open meadow, playing

the blue fire over the men's heads and setting the grass on fire behind them. Sam sighted on one of the remaining duo, but they both fell as Coro fanned a burst of darts and caught them in midsection.

The beam winked out.

"Hurry!" Coro snapped. "They might have gotten a message back to their ship."

They were up, running.

"The net!" Sam shouted.

Coro nodded. Together they hefted the heavy beam-projector, palmed what seemed to be the control panel. Blue light burst out of the nozzle, humming. Carefully, they sighted on the cables linking the net to magno-pegs, burning through the heavy strands. Eventually the net slid off the ball, pulled downward by its own weight. They dropped the weapon and ran up the ramp that had opened in the side of the floater to welcome them like the tongue of a favorite dog.

"Thank the stars!" Lotus said, coming into Coro's arms, her wings fluffed out and fluttering slightly, beautiful in the warm yellow light of the cabin. Sam felt as if he were intruding on something private. But after a few messy and misplaced kisses of joy, the two separated.

"Thought you'd never get here," Crazy said, getting out of Coro's pilot seat and into his own chair. "I have the floater ready. We better move, and fast. There's another detachment of those worms leaving the mother ship."

They all turned to stare at the viewplate. A block of yellow light shone where a port had opened in the giant vessel's side. Coro climbed into his chair, keeping his eyes on the screen.

"Where to?" Sam asked as he crawled into his makeshift berth.

"Anywhere," Lotus said, shivering with disgust. "Anywhere that's not near those... those..."

"Agreed," Coro said between clenched teeth.

The floater groaned, leaped. The screen showed a spinning night scene that tumbled and flopped as they moved across the forest, low to the tops of the trees and with full anti-radar gear in operation. As they moved, Coro and Sam tried to explain what they found.

"We have to go on to Hope," Coro said finally.

"Easier said than accomplished," Lotus noted. "We don't have a starship."

"Don't be so negativistic," Coro said, smiling a thin smile that almost wasn't. "We might have a ship. It is a small chance, but we just might be able to get one."

## IX

Food-slugs as large as houses lay pulsating against the warm walls of the growth room, their pink skins glistening with moisture in the mist-laden air. Patches of white spotted the most bulbous portions of the giants, the areas of new flesh tender and undeveloped, as yet inedible. The smaller slug-forms tending



them moved through the tremendous bulks in sanitary linen frocks, their pseudopods testing the toughness of skin near the connection junction where flesh of food-slug met nutrient tubes in the wall. They occasionally took small instruments out of pockets in the nightgown garments they wore, plunged them into the food-slugs and took readings as the cancerous masses throbbed mindlessly, adding cell after cell after cell at a rate that was almost visible. The food deck stretched into the distance, filled to overflowing with the ponderous behemoths that neither thought nor felt nor moved nor laughed. But merely were. A team of butchers slithered down the main avenue between stalls. A forty-car train of magno-carts floated behind them. The butchers stopped at each food-slug that had grown beyond a mark on the floor that was used to make a quick judgment on their readiness. With precision, they used cauterizing lasers to slice huge steaks from the fleshy giants, hefting the fluid-oozing slabs onto the carts and moving ahead—trimming, cutting, butchering for the great crew of *Raceship*.

The reek of life fluids spilled was constantly sucked away by enormous ceiling fans, replaced by perfume-heavy air.

The Central Being examined the work in progress, watched as the skins of the cancerous slugs formed and covered the wounds the butchers had left, as skin on other food-slugs bulged and stretched and reformed to accommodate the ever-increasing supply of meat and fat. And the Central Being approved. This was fine. This was a goodness. And when the gargantuan steaks were spitted and roasted for the crew, when the fat dripped into the fire and sizzled and bloated the air with its fumes, then the crew would also see it as a goodness and would give thanks to the Central Being. This was the plan sliding on polished runners. Only briefly did the Central Being think of the annoying creatures in the floating ball. They were gone now and certainly not worth the bother of a protracted chase. Besides, within the day, the ship would be lifting and setting course for the world called Hope. The center of these creatures' empire. From there, destruction of this blasphemous species would be swift and most gratifying...

Food slugs as large as houses pulsated against the warm walls of the growth room, their pink skins glistening with moisture in the mist-laden air.

## X

“Just as I thought,” Coro said. “They wouldn’t destroy those.”

Beyond the safety fence was the vast expanse of concrete that was Chaplin-Alpha’s spaceport, and the tall, phallic starships, mute dragons making silent testimony to the greatness of the race that had built the city of Chaplin- Alpha.

The city that was now in ashes, Sam reminded himself. The city behind the rolling green hills. The rolling green hills that belied the horror the other-dimensional God and its slug-forms had wrought.

The aliens had left the starships untouched. In fact, some of the ships sported crews of slug-forms clinging like fleas on a dog’s back. There were four slugs to each crew, and they seemed to be painting the hulls black to match the *Raceship*. These vessels would not be large enough to serve as Spoorships, but they would do the slugs well for survey craft—and possibly as battleships against the race that had made them.

Coro settled the floater behind the fence, into the shadows and the grass, cut all power and unstrapped himself. “We just have to go get one.”

“How?” Lotus asked.

“We have dart guns. If we have just a little bit of luck besides, we’ll have it made.”

“Without the luck?” Crazy asked.

“It’s been a pleasant association,” Coro said, smiling another of his non-smiles.

Minutes later they stood before the fence, each carrying a rifle armed with a clip of forty drug darts. The darkness would only shield them for half a dozen feet beyond the fence. Then, once onto the concrete runway, they would be held in the glare of the triple polyarcs, small, clear targets on the sea of smooth, featureless grayness that offered no place for concealment.

“Now comes an unpleasant choice,” Coro said, hunkering down and staring through the chainlink.

“What?” Sam asked, getting down next to him.

“Do we take the nearest ship—which has a four-slug crew working on it? Or do we go to the next ship—which has no crew, but which is three times as far from us?”

“I don’t like the slugs,” Crazy grumbled, shaking his massive head, hair twirling madly for a moment.

“Neither do I,” Sam said. “But we risk three times as much by going to the more distant ship. I opt for the closest vessel and the use of the drug darts.”

“Agreed,” Coro said. Then: “Agreed?”

It was, and swiftly. With a hand-laser torch like the one they had used to cut through the hull of the *Raceship*, they began work on the links of the safety fence. Within minutes they were through, hugging the shadows on the other side where they were thin and shallow. Ahead lay the runway, too bright for comfort. If there were only some cover, some little thing between here and the ship, some stopping point to catch breath. But there wasn’t.

“Together,” Coro said. “Run as fast as you can to the bottom of the ship, then stay with it like it was a lover, ‘cause it offers at least a little bit of shade. From there, we can pick off the painting crew on the mobile scaffolding and use it to get to the portal. Ready? Move!”

Sam’s lungs pounded as he raced across the concrete, gray swimming about him almost as if the deck were liquid, night air biting his cheeks and making them red. He wished he could move as fast as Lotus, but then she seemed to be just skimming the ground, flying more than she was running. He felt so small and so easily seen, naked on an endless plain of nightmare lights. But he couldn’t let himself think about that—or about one of the aliens’ beams picking him out and charring him into a smoldering, writhing mass of human flesh, spouting blood from ears and nose, eyes red with burst vessels. Those were not scenes to be imagined. Only run. Run, run, run until your chest is bursting and your legs are throbbing like footless stumps. Run, run...

But by expecting the worst, he felt spiritually exulted when they arrived at the bottom of the starship unharmed and apparently unnoticed. They stood, still together, with their backs pressed against the cold, cold metal of the hull, sweat on their backs seeming to turn to ice. Breaths pounded in and out of four sets of lungs. Four hearts thumped too fast.

“Carefully again,” Coro said between labored suckings of air.

Quietly, gently they moved along the base of the ship, sliding next to the scaffold wheels. The lace-work steel shot up eighty feet. At the top, spray guns blasted black paint onto the gleaming metal.

“Drop back and fire,” Coro said.

And they did. Darts spurted out of four guns, and the slugs slumped quickly under the hail of needles, dropping spray machines onto the platform beside them. But even the loud clunkings from this didn't seem to draw any unwanted attention.

“Up,” Coro said curtly, boarding the ramp of the scaffold and climbing quickly through the shadows of the metal piping.

At the top, they stepped over the slugs and reached the controls of the mobile scaffold. Coro experimented, found the proper operational procedure, and began moving them toward the main portal to the control cabin of the vessel. The machine hummed softly as it moved, a hum reminiscent of Racesong. They were almost to the portal when the beams burst blue against the hull, announcing their loss of secrecy.

“Cover me!” Coro shouted, holding onto the controls.

The machine suddenly seemed to be moving so damnably slow! Moving slowly toward a port that was abruptly so distant as to seem an impossible quest. The other three turned, kneeling on the platform. There was no cover for them up here, nothing to intercept the beams that flushed outward from the weapons of a block of guards racing across the port deck.

“Can't you move this thing any faster?” Lotus called.

“It's at top speed already,” Coro shouted. “They didn't design it for racing!” A beam smashed inches above his head, pitting the thick metal of the starship.

“Dammit!” Lotus snapped, angry at the machine, herself, all of them for not being able to move faster.

Sam fired a few darts, saw that the slugs were still too far away. The darts dropped lazily, snapping against the concrete thirty yards short. He stopped and watched the advancing guards. There appeared to be an even dozen of them, rolling like snakes, their black and yellow uniform cloaks fluttering idiotically behind them. *Costumed worms*, he thought. *On their way to some ludicrous Halloween ball*. Their anterior segments gripped the concrete and thrust them on. Their pseudopods gripped the sleek, powerful-looking rifles that spat the blue beams.

“Just another minute!” Coro called.

There was a blue explosion next to Sam. He fell flat against the platform, hugging it as if he could melt into it by virtue of the heat of his fear. *They're trying to kill me*, he thought. *They are purposefully trying to blow off my head*. He clutched the dart gun, wanted to retch. The others fell flat and began shooting. The guards were close enough now, and they dropped almost as one as the first wave hit them. Seven fell with the initial round. The other five turned, abruptly anxious to seek cover, went down as the trio fanned them with darts.

Sirens wailed from the polyarcs. More slugs appeared between the ships that dotted the port deck. They rolled about, buzzing in confusion, then came to grips with the situation, armed themselves, and moved toward the starship with cold purpose.

*Clunk!* The scaffold jerked to a stop. “Someone help me with this portal!” Coro shouted.

Sam jumped and ran to the circular hatch. Together, they gripped the large primary handle, twisted it in the direction of a series of red arrows. When it clicked and could be moved no further, they turned to the second wheel and twisted it counterclockwise. The noise on the port deck below was much louder and much closer. A spatter of beams boiled over the plating, leaving shallow pits in the ship’s thick hide.

“Not much more,” Coro groaned between breaths.

Sam began to croak an answer, was flung from his feet and tossed against the hull, smashed back to the deck of the scaffold. A beam had caught his arm, leaving a four-inch wound. The gouge was an inch deep along his biceps. Blood gurgled out, matted in his shirt. Pain throbbled through every nerve and erupted nova-like into his brain. “I’m all right,” he managed to hiss to Coro. “Go on. Hurry!”

Coro turned back to the portal, strained at the wheel to move it the last few crucial inches.

Lotus and Crazy had used all the darts in their own guns just as the door swung open with a sigh. Slugs were clambering up the ramp while others stood on the deck below firing a murderous barrage that pitted metal and singed clothing and skin.

“Go ahead,” Crazy bellowed, grabbing Coro’s unused rifle. “I’ll hold them off a few more seconds, then leap in after you.”

Coro pulled Lotus—she was reluctant to go before Crazy—to the portal and shoved her through, jumped for Sam and helped him in. A hail of beams chipped at the rim of the hatch.

Crazy fired wildly, his hair bouncing.

Coro turned, opened his mouth to call; his mouth stayed open—in a scream. A beam caught Crazy in the chest, tore him open to the crotch and spilled his insides all over the scaffolding. For a split instant the boyish face looked surprised. Then the eyes fluttered shut. He swayed and toppled over the edge of the scaffold, hooves kicking.

## XI

Like a needle sinking through a jar of Stygian syrup, the starship slid silently through the thickness of hyperspace, set on a course for Hope. Lotus lay huddled on a bunk, her wings crumpled carelessly beneath her, her cheeks stained with tears. It had taken both of them to hold her down and hypo enough c.c.’s of sedatives into her to put her to sleep. She wanted to leap out onto the platform, get Crazy back inside—even though he was dead. Dead. A word she couldn’t connect with Crazy, a word distant and unreal. Now, at last, she slept.

Sam stretched out on a bunk, anxious to catch a little nap before they reached Hope and the trouble ahead. A little nap, perhaps, before the longest nap...

*Blackness... Blackness...*

*Concussion! Brilliance! A rectangle of nova-light!*

*The door had burst open, and the shadow-clad figure of a man stood there, framed in the*

*doorway against the burning background of light. His eyes gleamed madly in darkness. Slowly he advanced.*

*Who are you?*

*There was no answer from the shadow-man.*

*Who are you!*

*There was a guttural, awful snarling from the man, the snarls of an animal. He was large as an ox, shoulders as wide as an ax handle, hands like chiseled rocks.*

*Desperately, Sam palmed the light switch, heart thumping like the heart of a bird. Light fired the room—but the flickering light of a strobe. On... off... on... off. The approaching giant was a pulsating, cardboard-like creature in the weird light.*

*On, off, on, off...*

*His face was a twisting mass of shadows.*

*The face of... of...*

*Who are you?*

*The face of Buronto! Black Jack Buronto! A leer split the all too familiar face. Hands reached out to grab, tear, strangle.*

*Don't touch me! Please, please, don't touch me!*

*On, off, on, off, the strobe threw flickering blacknesses and sporadic waves of yellow light over the snarling colossus. The hands fidgeted as they reached out for his throat and...*

*... and then Buronto wasn't Buronto any longer. Buronto was a slug, segmented and pulpy. There was a laser weapon in his pseudopods. Slithering, hissing, he moved toward the bed and...*

*... and then the slug was Buronto once more, leering and...*

*... and then it was the slug, slithering...*

*Buronto-slug-Buronto-slug-on-off-on-off—*

He woke, squeals of terror stuck in his throat, squirming to pass the constricted muscles in his neck and emerge as full-bodied screams. But he knew! He knew how they could fight the Central Being even though they were not violent men. He had the whole goddammed answer!

“Sam!” Coro was saying, shaking him.

With more than a little effort, he forced the grogginess from his mind, sat up. “Andy, I’ve got it! I know how we can stop the Central Being! I know just exactly what we can do!”

“I hope you do,” Coro said. “ ‘Cause I just picked them up on our screens. They’ll reach Hope about two hours after we do.”

## XII

The *Inferno* was just as he remembered it. It assaulted the senses like a thousand pile drivers pounding concrete. It washed, slithered, scraped, chipped, sanded, sheared the mind, split the senses open to an expanded, brighter awareness. Letting the atmosphere of the place pick them and carry them like flotsam in the winds of eternity, they moved along the wall toward an empty table. A clown in an imagi-color suit that was purple to Sam, green to Coro, and blue to Lotus, sprang from the floor, wiggled insanely large plastic ears, and popped out of sight just as an ebony and silver cloud passed with two naked acrobats performing a complicated series of head-, hand-, and shoulderstands.

“Here,” Sam said, raising his voice above the music, and squinting through the perfumed clouds. He pulled out a chair for Lotus. She was wide-eyed, taking in the wonders of the bar. She had forced herself to recover—externally, at least—from Crazy’s death, and she seemed a bit more like her old self. If old selves can be resurrected from the ashes of pain and change. Sam and Coro sat down also.

“What—” Coro began.

“Drinks first,” Sam said, holding up his hand.

“We only have two hours,” Coro said. “Less than two!”

“And drinks will relax our nerves, which are, as you bear testimony to, nearly ready to snap.” He took their orders and punched the robotender for them, depositing the correct change. He also pressed the button requesting a human waiter’s attention. A few moments later, a thin man with eyes like those of an eagle and a long nose pointing to a longer chin, came to their table. “I would like you to find someone for me,” Sam said.

“Sir?”

“Buronto.”

“Who is—”

“Black Jack Buronto. Is he here?”

“Yes,” the waiter said reluctantly, and suspiciously.

“I’d like to see him. Would you tell him that, please?” He placed a bill on the table and shoved it toward the waiter.

“Look, Buronto isn’t just a tourist attraction, mister. He’s—”

“I know all about him. I once knocked him out in a fight.”

The waiter drew back, started to say something, grabbed the bill, and scurried away through the crowd.

“What was that all about?” Coro asked. “Who is this Buronto?”

Sam explained the nature of the man they were after. There was no police force on Hope, no army, no navy, air force, or marines. No fighting force at all and absolutely no possibility of putting one together.

But there was the masochist killer, Buronto. Wasn't he their only chance?

"And you knocked him out in a fight?" Lotus said. Her eyes pierced him as if they were electronic knives, cutting into his bone marrow, flipping through each cell of his mind.

"I was... more or less... under hypnosis at the time. Delirious, really."

"And this is the killer," Coro said, visibly shivering.

Buronto was shoving his way through the crowded room, heedless of whether men fell off chairs when he passed or not. He was still the giant Sam remembered, eyes wild and flaming as they had been in the dream, huge jaw set grimly, hands constantly clenching and unclenching.

"His voice," Sam said swiftly, suddenly realizing these two knew nothing of the anachronism, not wanting a scene like the last one he could remember in the *Inferno*. "It's... well, girlish. Don't laugh. He'd just as soon kill you as let you laugh at him."

"Oh now, just for laughing—" Coro began.

"I mean it. He would kill. The sooner you understand that, the better."

"You wanted to see me?" Buronto asked, stepping next to their table, fists balled and rammed against his hips. "What do you—" He paused, his eyes widening, his nostrils dilating. "I know you!" He coughed with rage, choking on his own gall. "You're the damned punk who—"

"Sit down. Sit down. That's over and done with. I have a proposition for you now."

"You're the squirt who—"

"Sit down and talk this instant or I'll kill you on the spot!" Sam hissed.

The big man looked startled. It was a long gamble, but he didn't know that Sam had been hypnotized. As far as Buronto was concerned, this was a killer, like himself, a man who fought back harder and better than he could. He sat.

"That's better," Sam said. "Now, I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

Buronto laughed, still playing the role of the man who is too big to be bought, too powerful to want to bargain, too awesome to shove.

"Shut up," Sam said evenly. He had to impress Buronto with the arrangement of things the way he saw them. That was: Sam as the boss, Buronto as the loyal sidekick. Never for a single moment could the giant get the idea that he was more powerful than Sam. That would be dangerous. That would be deadly.

"Now look here," Buronto said, though more hurt than angry.

"I don't want to have to get forceful, Jack," Sam said, placing a ridiculously small hand on the enormous shoulder. He could feel the man's muscles looped like cables of steel beneath the shirt. "Don't force me to get aggressive. No need for that at all, Jack. There's something in this for you—something that I'm sure you'll enjoy, something that will easily make it worth your time and effort."

"I don't need money," Buronto said, staring around the table, his eyes fastening on Lotus and looking up and down her tiny form, his gaze lingering on her pert breasts, her slim shoulders, the graceful curve of

her neck, full lips, deep, deep eyes. But he got hung up in the eyes and looked quickly away.

“It isn’t money,” Sam said, hunching over in a more conspiratorial manner. “It’s something you will *really* enjoy.” He dropped his voice even lower. “It’s the only thing that money can’t buy any more.”

Buronto looked at him. Their eyes met and held like magnets. Sam could feel the hatred boiling in those eyes, frothing and foaming, held back only by curiosity and willpower. “The only thing I would truly enjoy at this moment,” Buronto growled through clenched teeth, “would be gutting you and ripping out your heart.”

Lotus gasped and Coro made a choking sound. Buronto looked at them, grinned at their weakness, his broad, perfect teeth almost carnivorous.

Sam laughed. It wasn’t easy, and he was afraid it sounded a bit forced. But he laughed anyway. He brought his hand down on Buronto’s shoulder with every bit of force he could muster, trying to make it seem casual. The friendly slap jolted the giant, and he looked at Sam with fear in his eyes as well as hatred. Good. *As long as he fears me*, Sam thought, *as long as he misunderstands my abilities and powers, some sort of order can be maintained. But if he only knew how my hand stings!* “I’m sure you would like to kill me, Jack. Oh, I’m just positive of that.” His gorge was rising. Vomit stung the back of his throat. With great concentration, he forced it back down, but the bitter taste remained in his mouth. “But don’t try it unless you count on the tables being reversed and your death being the main attraction.”

Lotus swallowed half her drink in a single gulp, batted her eyelashes to hold back tears as the strong liquor burned down her throat.

“But you hit it partly right, Jack. I can give you the chance to kill. Not me, of course. Others. Others who—”

Buronto’s eyes narrowed, and he grabbed one fist in the other as if cracking a large nut. “You’re crazy!”

“Hardly.”

“Impossible.”

“No.”

Buronto looked at the three of them, searching for some sign that it was a put-on, a ruse to make fun of an Unnatural. It wasn’t entirely comforting not to find such a sign. His voice rose an octave with the excitement. “The medics would narco-dart me and keep me in drug stupor the rest of my natural life!”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

Silence a moment.

“Okay,” Buronto said at length. “You have me hooked. What the hell is the deal?”

Sam explained. Several times, he had to threaten Buronto to keep him still and quiet enough to listen. The giant refused, at first, to believe it. Extra-galactics. Slug-forms. *Raceship*. Too much for him and his limited concepts. But after much cajoling and a mass of detailed testimony, he was more willing to believe though still somewhat skeptical. “Well, anyway,” Sam said, “you’ll see for yourself in—” he looked at his watch. “You’ll see for yourself in less than ten minutes.”



“That soon?” Coro asked, his eyes popping open wide.

“You said two hours,” Sam replied. “That gives us just eight minutes.”

“Purgatory is supposed to be longer than that,” Lotus joked. But it wasn’t particularly funny.

Then, abruptly, there was a fierce booming, a whine of metal cooling, and the street outside was alive with a gush of crimson flame. Centuries-old walls cracked open and tumbled before the onslaught.

“They’re early,” Sam said.

Buronto was on his feet, moving toward the door. They followed. The room had suddenly become a place of panic and not a place of entertainment. People shoved and kicked to be the first outside, the first to break for an escape from whatever terrible business was occurring. Buronto stepped aside and let them rush out, aware—as they were not—that it was a great deal safer in the *Inferno* than on a street where fire ate the asphalt and buildings dissolved in deafening roars.

In moments the bar was empty, save for the four of them. They stood in the doorway, watching the black magno-sleds that cruised above the street and between the spires of Hope. There were four slugs per sled, one to steer, one to man the heavy-duty laser cannon, and two to fire laser rifles. They swept down the long avenue, burning down the masses of fleeing people.

“You see?” Sam said.

Buronto’s mouth hung open. “They... they’re killing!”

“And you can kill their Central Being and get your kicks while still playing it legal. Up and up. No sweat. What do you say?”

Buronto turned, stared, eyes flaming with desire that had washed away most of the fear and hatred. “But why don’t you do it? You kill. Why not save the kicks for yourself?”

Sam had anticipated that question ever since he had begun their conversation. At first it had thrown him, the possibility of the giant asking that. He had gone through a dozen answers, considering each and the effect it would bring about, finally rejecting eleven of them. It was no use trying to fake the giant. No sense in putting him on. If Buronto thought for one moment that he was being used, and realized that Sam was afraid and unable to kill, he would turn on them and the end would be swifter and bloodier than anything the slugs could manage. “Because,” he said, smiling what he hoped was rather an evil and superior smile, “it is dangerous. You may have to fight your way from Ship’s Core. The Central Being may be ten times more powerful than we can imagine. Your chances in a battle with It are probably no better than fifty-fifty. I like to kill sure. But not enough to risk dying for the pleasure.” *But you, Sam thought, are willing to die for that pleasure. Or risk fifty-fifty odds for it. Fool that you are, you’ve swallowed the slimy bait, and you’re ready to run to hell and back with the line.*

A blue explosion tore four floors from the middle of a nearby office complex. The top part wiggled, fell. Stone crashed down on the streets, huge hunks of it smashing into the surging crowds that were trying to run from the slugs. Truck-sized plastic mortar blocks tore off heads, ripped limbs free, crushed others beyond identification. Sam saw one man split down the middle by a sliver-like portion of a steel beam. Blood fountained up and gushed over the sidewalk as the man fell forward—one half slightly to the left, the other half slightly to the right, organs spread in between. The people were like animals in panic. Mindlessly, they fled first one direction, then the other. The slugs were moving down both ends of the avenue, cutting them down in a murderous crossfire that would insure total annihilation.

Bodies piled up at a frightening rate, torn and mangled, charred unrecognizable or, when struck directly by a sizzling beam, burned down to the bones with a few pieces of black raggedy flesh clinging to the skull and ribs.

“Okay,” Buronto said. “I’ll do it.”

It was certainly not patriotic fervor that drove him to the decision. He seemed thrilled by the carnage outside. Every eruption of gore seemed to set his eye adance with new flames until they glowed almost like the eyes of a cat at night. Or was that his imagination? Sam wondered. The giant actually seemed to ooze violence.

“Good.” Sam smiled, holding his stomach in check. “Now is there any way out of here besides the front door? That looks particularly unhealthy at the moment.”

“Yes,” Buronto said. “Wait just a minute.” He leaped from the doorway into the turmoil of the street.

“Come back!” Sam shouted convulsively.

“You’ll be killed!” Coro bellowed even louder.

But the roar of the one-sided battle outside had smothered their protests.

A sled was landing a hundred feet from the *Inferno*, and the slugs were starting to debark, rifles hanging from pseudopods, to search the buildings for those who had had the presence of mind to stay inside and hide. Buronto reached the sled before the slugs could set tail to ground. He brought a boulder fist down on the dome-segment head of the nearest slug as it tried futilely to bring its rifle around. The fist crushed cartilage, smashed in on brain tissue. Orange blood spouted through Buronto’s fingers. As quickly as he could, he grabbed the falling slug, using him as a shield, and wrenched the rifle from its already limp pseudopod. A blast from another alien’s rifle caught the dead slug instead of Buronto, ripped a deep hole in it. And by that time the giant had the stolen gun under control.

He fanned the sled party. Blood fountained up in three separate places, drenching the street with a slick film of dull orange. Flesh caught fire and bloomed like gasoline, then subsided to a steady yellow blaze. The slugs either fell instantly or slithered about in circles until the fire had so consumed them that they were not even capable of postmortem muscle spasms.

A second sled drifted across the roofs, and its aft laser shot a long beam at Buronto, just barely missing him. He fell behind the empty sled, raised his gun, caught the alien marksman in the midsection and blew him in two. Thick alien blood rained down and splattered across the window of the *Inferno*.

“He’ll never make it!” Coro shouted over the chaos.

“It’s horrible,” Lotus said, clutching her lover.

“He’ll make it,” Sam snapped. *He has to*, he thought. *He’s our only chance. And, dreams of Hope, how low have we gone and how desperate our situation when our only hope is a madman, a masochist, a vicious killer!* He stared grimly at the destruction. His stomach was beyond vomiting now. The destruction was too great, the killing too overwhelmingly horrible to affect him. It was a dream, an unreality of ghastly proportions but an unreality just the same. That was the only way his mind could accept what he was seeing.

Further down the street, a woman burst into flames, her hair a wild torch...

A child fell, went under trampling feet that bruised, cut, killed unknowingly in blind panic...

Buronto was holding a beam on the guidance module of the second magno-sled. Suddenly there was a curling of black smoke seeping from the underslung bubble, and the sled began hobbling out of control. The slugs on it wrestled against it, found it was a losing battle. The sled started a climb, then choked off and plunged into the wall of another building, pushing fire and debris ahead of it. There were screams from the men and women inside the building. Fire gushed up through the ten floors of the place, singeing away the screams.

Mounting the sled, Buronto fiddled, determining the method of operation, raised the vehicle and turned toward the *Inferno*.

“Get back!” Sam shouted as the giant guided the sled on a collision course with the doorway.

There was a pregnant pause while the alien craft accelerated, then a birth of ear-shattering noise as wood disjoined from plastiglued sockets and the wall around the door shattered and fell inward.

“Get on!” Buronto was shouting. “Get on! Hold fast!”

They boarded, held tightly to the small railing; Buronto gunned the machine, tore through a plastiglass window at the rear of the building, the front of the sled shattering it before them. The shards, sharp and dangerous, showered into the air just as they passed through, fell back after they had passed and were speeding silently down the alleyway, ten feet above the ground.

Buronto clutched the rifle in one hand as if it were a tiny pistol—or a toy from some more violent time. With the other hand, he steered the sled. “Where to?” he called over his shoulder.

“We have the starship hidden,” Sam said. “We figured they would take over the spaceport, so we landed in the Five Mile Park. They shouldn’t bother with that.”

At the end of the alley, another sled and four slugs appeared. They seemed not to notice, for the moment, that these were humans and not other slugs. They came fluttering down the narrow passage, swiftly closing the blocks between them. Buronto raised the rifle, fired straight-on at the pilot of the other sled. The alien was flung apart like a doll, tossed from the sled in pieces. One of the others went for the controls, but the sled bucked before it could reach them, went out of control. It slammed back and forth from wall to wall, still advancing. One of the slugs—at a moment of extreme tilt—slid over the edge, grabbed the railing with pseudopods to pull itself back aboard. The sled swung into a wall again, crushing it, severing it in half and dragging it another fifty feet, leaving an orange smear along the building blocks.

“We’re going to crash!” Lotus shouted, throwing her small hands over her eyes—but peeking through her slender fingers.

Buronto pulled on the stick, lifted the sled. They grabbed and fought the sharp upward slant. The out-of-control craft careened toward them. Buronto took the sled even higher, pushing the drive into whining protest. But the other craft started climbing too. And there was just not any room in which to dive.

### XIII

The Central Being was overwhelmed by Hope. Hope the planet; Hope the city. The other planet—what

had it been?—Chaplin, yes, was interesting. But here—the architecture, the parks, the ports. It was so—the Central Being reluctantly admitted—beautiful. But the forces of evil were often beautiful, often overwhelming. But only gaudiness, never any depth. The Central Being willed Itself to forget the surface shimmering and glittering and to concentrate on other things. Such as the success of the raiding parties and destruction teams. The purpose of the raiding parties was to kill in their assigned areas and leave buildings and other artifacts intact as much as possible so that later historical teams could photograph and catalog the culture. The destruction teams, on the other hand, were concerned with nothing but death. Kill, burn, ruin, crush, obliterate. Both were doing well in their respective areas. In fact, the entire blasphemous race should be wiped from the slate of existence in another month. This world would be bare in another twelve hours. Then on to smaller colony worlds. The easy marks...

## XIV

Sam gritted his teeth, fought against closing his eyes. His ears, already booming with noise, anticipated the crash. No, that was blood rushing. His own blood. Fear blood. The alien sled climbed almost equal with theirs. The distance between closed rapidly.

Twenty yards...

Ten...

Five...

There was a sickening crunch, a severe jolt, and they were rushing past the other sled toward the end of the alley a few blocks further on. Behind, the other sled smashed into the wall, bearing its headless passengers, and crashed into the street. They had had the advantage of being four feet higher when they met the other sled. It had been a deadly encounter for the slugs, their heads sheared away by the bottom of the sled. But *they* had gotten away untouched, miraculously.

Buronto roared with laughter. A laughter, somehow, too deep for his fragile voice. The added depth of bloodlust.

“Land here!” Sam shouted a while later, his voice almost washed away by the whistling wind and the booming of the slaughter progressing in the depths of the center city behind them.

Buronto brought the sled to a jolting halt, gouging out five feet of grass at the entrance to the park. They clambered off and through the gate just as a slug stepped from behind a free-form aluminum statue.

“Watch it!” Coro shouted, catching the movement first.

Buronto brought his gun around, smashed the barrel into the slug’s head, brought it up, down again. Up and down, up and down. Blood sprayed out with every swing.

“That’s enough!” Sam shouted.

Buronto laughed, spittle flecking the corners of his lips. He poked the narrow barrel through the middle of the alien’s chest as if it were a bayonet, gouged the soft flesh, twisted and tore as orange blood poured down the gun and over his hands.

“I said that was enough!” Sam shouted even louder, his face red with disgust.

Buronto looked up, got angry, then realized who he was talking to. He still had that minimum of fear. Besides, this was the man who had given him the chance to kill. “Hurry up, then,” he snapped shrilly.

Sam realized the savage lust of the giant was pushing any thought of servile obedience further and further from his mind. That last had sounded much like an order, not an agreement. “I’ll say who is to hurry and when!” Sam roared.

Buronto looked at him, looked away. “There’ll come a day—”

“But it’s damn far off!” Sam snapped. “*Now*, let’s hurry.”

They moved briskly through the park. The green trees, leafy and rustling with the passage of the wind, the grass as green as a finely woven carpet, the flowers multi-hued and full-bloomed, all belied the horror transpiring in the streets beyond, denied the death and pain Buronto had perpetrated in their midst only moments before.

The ship was where they had left it, almost invisible, half submerged in a large pond, the other half well-hidden by thick masses of Spanish moss strung from the trees like beards. They slopped through the water, activated the portal, and entered the last free ship on Hope.

“Now do you understand?” Sam asked, staring the giant down.

The lights on the control console flashed, pulsated, flooded the room with weird currents of color. Coro sat bent over the monitoring devices, occasionally rubbing a hand across dry lips. The time had come. Almost. Very near. Blessed be the time. Frightening too. Lotus sat beside Coro, a hand on his arm, pointing now and then to different dials and scopes.

“I understand,” Buronto growled.

“No indiscriminate killing. We have to sneak in. If we’re confronted with the choice of killing a guard or sneaking past him—we sneak.”

“I don’t like it.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Or you either?” Buronto said, laughing slyly.

“It’s a matter of necessity,” Sam said wearily. They had been through it ten times now. He could think of no blunter, more forceful manner of putting it. “If you start killing everything that moves, the Central Being will have us pegged and dead before we’re anywhere near It. It’ll blow your head off the first moment It knows you’re in *Raceship*. It’ll win, Buronto. And you’ll be real dead.”

“Okay, okay. I got it well enough. Play it pansy. Gentility is the byword. No rough stuff until we bump off the big boy. But then, mister, I am going to have myself a lot of fun with the slugs.”

“And you’ll have earned it.”

“You too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll be twice as bloody about it, I’ll bet.”

“Most likely,” Sam said, leering false-heartedly. “Twice as bloody.” He wondered how he would handle Buronto after the mission was completed—if it was completed. It was going to be a tight situation. A kill-crazy giant running amok with a laser rifle. How could he control him? If he refused to kill after the Central Being was disposed of, then Buronto would realize his masochism was a front, a trick. What would the giant’s reaction be to that? Or, rather, not what would it be—but how fast would it come? Well, that was a problem he would have to think about later. Later, when he was driven to the wall.

“They seem settled for the duration, Sam,” Coro said, turning from the controls. “*Raceship* hasn’t moved since we’ve been monitoring it. But the battle is raging beyond belief. Millions of people have died. I wish we hadn’t waited for dark.”

“But it is dark now,” Sam answered, standing, stretching. “And we have a much better chance with darkness as a cover.”

Buronto went to get their weapons and a laser hand-torch.

“Look, Sam,” Coro said, moving close and whispering. “He frightens me. And—”

“Me too.”

Coro hesitated. “Yeah. I see. He may be hideous, but he’s the best-looking chance we have. But do you really think he can kill this Central Being that easily?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Our God was weak and easy to dispatch because Breadloaf’s Shield had drained Him of His strength over the centuries. This God has not been drained.”

“Then why the devil—”

“He doesn’t have to kill God,” Sam said, pulling the black hood of the nightsuit over his head.

“What? I don’t understand this at all.”

“Oh, he may kill God. He just might. But it isn’t necessary. If we can get him in there *and let God kill him*, I think—”

But Buronto had returned with a rifle for each of them and a cutting torch. “Let’s go,” he said.

The two of them stepped quietly through the portal into the black blanket of night...

## XV

*Raceship* had settled in the vast wild game reserve that stretched forty-seven miles on a side behind the Congressional Archives. It took a great deal of space to park a boat that big, and as he and Buronto stood among the still forms of oak trees looking at the vessel, Sam wondered how many animals had

been crushed by its descent. And how many tourists.

“They came in that?” Buronto asked.

Sam grinned. It was a difficult thing to do under the circumstances of the moment. “Scare you?” Delicately, delicately lead on the brute...

“Nah! But, Mother, how big!”

The black hull loomed so high overhead that it was difficult to tell just where it ended and the night began. Trees had been snapped off around its base and were jutting outward like splintered toothpicks. The earth had settled under the tremendous weight, and the ship now rested in a pit of its own making.

“Put these in your ears,” Sam said, handing two plugs to the giant.

“What for?”

“There’s an hypnotic command constantly played in the ship. You go in there without earplugs and you’ll be blubbing like a helpless idiot in seconds.”

“But how do we talk?”

“There’s a micro-miniature receiver, transmitter, and amplifier in the tip. It touches the bones of your ear, picks up the vibrations of your own voice from your jaw, and transmits them to me. Mine does the same. Just whisper, and I’ll hear you. Of course, we won’t hear anything else.”

Hesitantly, the big man followed suit, inserting the tight-fitting plugs.

“Now hold your head here,” Sam said, producing a small tin.

“Why? What’s that?”

“Sound-proofing jelly.”

“I’ll put it in myself.”

“Very well.” Sam dipped his fingers into the thick goo, smeared it over the back of the plug and the rest of his ears, handed the tin to Buronto.

“Remember,” Sam said, “when we get inside, no useless—”

“Killing,” Buronto finished. “Don’t worry. Just lead me in.”

“Just to the Ship’s Core,” Sam said. “I’ll take you there, but you won’t catch me fighting this thing.”

“I’m not scared!” Buronto snapped, a child being tested.

“Let’s go.”

They moved from the oaks, crouched and running, darting from one patch of growth to another. They reached the ship without incident. Fifteen minutes later, the laser torch had burned through all the layers of the hull... And the snout of a laser rifle punched through the hole, aimed directly between Sam’s eyes.

There was a blue blast. Sam was falling before he realized he had not been shot. Buronto had burned the alien down. The slug leaned out, hanging for a moment on the edge of the ragged hole, its flesh tearing on the shards of metal poking like fingers from the rim of the crudely cut aperture. The rifle dangled in its pseudopod, trembled almost as a living thing itself, then fell out onto the grass. The slug gurgled, swayed, tore itself further on the metal, then toppled out also, sprawling full-length at their feet. There was a yard-long gash on its side. Things spewed from it, wet and orange.

“Okay that I killed it?” Buronto asked snidely.

Sam coughed, got up. “Yes. Fine. Very good.”

Buronto laughed, half at Sam’s embarrassment, half at the pile of gore he had made.

“It seems to have been a solitary guard,” Sam said, peering into the dimly lighted corridor. “But let’s hurry just the same.” He pulled himself over the sill, disappeared into the ship.

Buronto climbed in after.

Blessed be the time. The time is near.

“This way,” Sam hissed. “Gun at ready, but—”

“No killing unless necessary.”

“Exactly. You learn well. Slow, but well.”

Halfway down this corridor, Sam planted a small transmitter behind the edge of a jutting beam. He looked at his watch-screen. There was a yellow blip near the edge. That was the transmitter. The screen coordinates had been set so that, once they reached a position where their own blips (green) were in the center of the screen, they would be in the middle of the ship, somewhere near Ship’s Core. They moved on.

Though powerful and ruthless, the aliens were unimaginative. The ship was void, in the corridors at least, of any decoration or special styling. Solid gray walls, floors, and ceilings. One step brought them past the same sights as the last hundred had. The last thousand.

There was one danger with the earplugs. They could not hear the Racesong, but neither could they hear the slugs coming. Two aliens slithered into view at the end of the corridor, cloaks of shimmering purple material falling behind them and trailing a few feet on the floor. “Back!” Sam whispered.

They stood against the wall, pressing as tight as they could to its cool surface. The slugs came on, apparently talking, oblivious of their presence. They walked right past the two men... and whirled! Something had registered—but too late. Buronto brought his gun up, then hesitated as if he wasn’t certain whether he should fire or not.

“Yes!” Sam shouted. “Before they call for help!”

*Blue-blue-blue-blue.* And it was over. The slugs were spattered across the floor, a few scraps of their bodies on fire, tiny yellow flames licking the rich fat.

“We have to move faster now,” Sam said. “They find these bodies and we’re sunk.”



They moved, faster now. Sam thought how dreamlike the last encounter had been. Without sound, it had all been a grotesque parody of reality. Death without sound. Murder without screaming. Certainly, the time was coming.

Eventually, after many steps and many turns, the wall to their right turned from gray to a brilliant bronze. They clung to the glittering metal and followed the wall. In a few minutes, they discovered they had walked in a large circle.

“We’re here,” Sam croaked, mouth suddenly dry, every nerve now sharp with fear.

“Where?”

“Ship’s Core. It’s right inside this glittering wall—not more than two hundred feet in diameter.”

Buronto stepped ahead of Sam to a door they had passed twice during their circumnavigation of the chamber. “I’m going to get it over with.”

*So you can kill the slugs for fun, Sam thought. So you can gleefully romp through rivers of nice, thick, orange blood.*

Buronto twisted the knob, almost broke it off. The door hummed, lifted to reveal a shimmering blue chamber hung with webs and permeated with mists. There seemed to be darker hulks concealed in the fog, looming like icebergs. As Sam watched from the hall, Buronto stepped through the doorway, rifle at ready.

## XVI

Buronto stepped further into the chamber. At ten feet, the mists started to close in on him. At fifteen feet, they concealed his legs, his hips, the back of his head.

The floor was spongy, pores beginning to open in it. It bounced as he stepped on it.

“I’m here!” the giant shouted defiantly.

A muffled echo was the only answer.

Then the floor heaved, and the room was alive.

It bucked, swayed, and Buronto went down. Wildy, he blasted it, boring holes through the sponge, holes that immediately healed over and were full again. He tried to stand, but the body of God served as a mat for no creature. Down he went, floor seeming to un-gel and clutch at him. He sank into it, kicked and tried pulling free.

Sam leaned against the wall, gripping himself with his arms. This God was more powerful than the last, undrained. It was able to heal itself where the other whimpered and died. More powerful, but ruling this vastly shrunken universe: one ship and spoors. He watched Buronto’s flesh peel away under the acidic touch of the floor that now resembled a tongue. All in silence, all deadly and still. A play seen through other eyes. And God was winning...

But, Sam hoped, in winning, God would also lose.

Buronto struggled to his feet again, fighting mightily against this much superior force, fighting with panic. Half his face was a bloody pulp. He held the beam on the floor, screaming steadily. Here comes the devil to the gates of Heaven, cursing and spraying foam, tossing the lightning bolts of his black power to tumble down the equal blackness of the divine light...

The floor bucked again. Buronto fell. And this time, he did not get up. The floor frothed, boiled about him, and when the foam steamed away, there were only fragments of steaming, bubbling bone. No worry now about how to handle Buronto. Now all he had to worry about was whether or not the trick had worked. It should have—given one fact as a truth! God must be, like the other God, a sado-masochist by nature, liking to give pain—the omnipotent fist ringed with smiling lips. Surely, the very nature of God demanded that He be a liker of pain and a giver of much of it. If this was true in this case, as it had been with the God Hurkos had killed, then the problem was over. God was now insane.

Only one way to know for sure. Take out the earplugs...

Grabbing them, he ripped them free. The rush of sound almost knocked him down. But no Racesong. Racesong was dead. This was nothing more than a mad, ugly babbling. God had been crushed—mentally, not physically.

Steps in consideration of a program to drive a god over the brink: 1) Assume the god is somewhat insane already (sadistic, masochistic, and a bit paranoid); 2) Bring a killer into the presence of the god, and invite the god to murder the man; 3) The god commits the murder, but in grasping for the radiation of pain, in searching hungrily for the issuance of tortured suffering, the god encounters joy at pain and exultation over oncoming death. Because the god is killing a masochist, not a normal creature.

Sam had gambled that Buronto's joy at dying only for the pain—not for some great cause—would be too alien for the Central Being. It was accustomed to the purpose of the race and would assume any race to have a purpose. A confrontation with a creature like Buronto, one enjoying the pain and dying without cause or reason, would disrupt the divine creature's basics for reasoning. It would throw Its tight, compact scheme of things to the blazes. And there would be nothing to take their place. Once the idea of purposelessness had planted itself, insanity lay only a breath away.

*Perhaps that's part of our superiority, Sam thought, trying to catch his breath. Perhaps man's purposelessness, our aimless wandering, keeps us strong and sane enough to handle all things. Men, living as best suits us at the moment, outlive all great causes and plans.*

Stumbling, so very tired, he moved back the way he had come, back toward the hole in the hull.

Around him, slugs weaved, inundated by the babble.

Racesong was gone.

Some of them moved toward him, menacingly waving rifles, but turned away or dropped the guns in confusion. There was no hypnotic command to kill. No submelody demanding murder. They were lost without the Racesong, without a guiding voice. They could see no real reason to kill now. They were beginning the same long climb man had almost finished. Gradually, they would become saner.

He passed the bodies Buronto was responsible for.

A hundred yards from the hole they had made, he became aware of a slug following him. He turned, stared at it.

It mewed, not angrily.

He turned.

It moved next to him, mewing.

“Go away, dammit!” he shouted.

It mewed, mewed, somehow crossing language barriers with the question it was asking—the question that still lurked somewhere in his own soul.

“Leave me!”

Mewing, water through a flute...

“There will be more gods,” he said, vomit suddenly touching the back of his throat. He threw up on the wall, leaned heavily against the gray metal. He gagged, cleared his throat. “There will be more rungs falling down the ladder now.” He was talking to a hundred ghosts, living and dead, to Gnossos, Hurkos, Buronto, Coro, Lotus, Crazy, all the dead people in the gore-splattered streets of Hope. They tumbled before him, insubstantial. “There will be more gods. But the ladder is structured like a pyramid, each rung smaller than the last, each god more provincial, less awesome. We’ll whip them, sooner or later. We’ll swat them like flies, those awful, ponderous universe-rulers. We are not property, damn it! We are not property! Dammit, dammit, dammit!”

The slug touched him, called sweetly in hissing tones.

“I am not yours,” Sam spit through tightened lips. He turned and staggered toward the hole again.

The slug followed.

At the hole, he turned to it, his face flushed with an anger that had suddenly become undirectable.

It mewed.

“Dammit!” he roared. “Dammit to hell—if there is a hell. Man is his own god. He has to be, if there was ever any purpose.” His mouth quivered, his eyes streamed tears. “And I am not your god!”

He fell through the hole and onto the grass. The slug did not follow.

In the city, the gutters were clogged with the flow of blood as it poured silently into the sewers. The stars were bright. The sky was without a roof. And darkness spoke to the wind.