

# The Half Man

Keith Laumer

## 1

“Why don’t you give it up?” Cruthers said. The chief of the Planetary Resource Survey team was a lean, gray-faced, gray-haired man with the fussy, precise manner of a bookkeeper. He addressed his question to a tall, red-faced, middle-aged man in field khakis, and to the boy who sat on the bench beside him adjusting the straps that held the flat compressed-air tanks to his back. The lad was sturdily built, though oddly proportioned; his arms were thick and long, his torso short. Tough membranes linked his powerful fingers. His body, clad only in diving trunks, was hairless, the skin a blotchy greenish color, coarse and leathery. His eyes were large and round, his nose almost non-existent, his mouth small, pursed. He looked too alien to be fully human, too human to be other than a man.

“We’ve come too far to be beaten now, Mr. Cruthers,” the blond man said heartily, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulders. “Gon and I will carry on so long as the Infinite gives us the strength.”

“Mostly the boy’s strength,” Cruthers said shortly, eyeing Gon sourly. “This can’t go on indefinitely, Brother Glad.” He looked the big, florid man in the eye. “I have the authority to order an end to these swimming expeditions on medical grounds. He’s exhausting himself for nothing. It’s obvious there’s no viable culture among the natives—assuming any are left alive.”

“We know they’re alive. And as for culture, it’s not their fault Terra withdrew support, let them revert to savagery,” Brother Glad said in his large voice. “These people are a human creation, no less human for their appearance. It was Terran science that mutated their ancestors, disinherited them and denied them the open air. We can’t slough off responsib-

ility for them!”

“That was three hundred years ago. My job isn’t to emotionalize over what’s past, but to look for ways to build the future. Recommending uneconomic ventures on lifeless worlds isn’t one of those ways.”

“We must stay long enough to establish contact and learn their needs!” the missionary said indignantly. “We owe it to the Merieds to do what we can to lighten their lot.”

“The Meried experiment was carried out in order to open a new world to colonization, to afford an outlet for the human need for a frontier. The test failed. I shall so report.”

“But we could try again—”

“I can’t base my recommendations on sentiment, Brother Glad, however noble. Tomorrow we lift. You may plan accordingly.” The Survey chief turned and strode from the room.

“Don’t despair, Gon,” Glad said to the boy after the door had closed. “I’m sure we’ll have luck today. Think what it will mean, Gon—to meet your own people—”

“They’re not my people,” the boy interrupted. He looked at the stone floor, not at the man. “They look like . . . like freaks,” he added in a mutter.

“We don’t use that word, Gon!” the man said in a whiplash tone. “You, least of all!”

A beige flush mounted the boy’s narrow face.

“I’m worse than they are,” he blurted. “They’re at home here, but I’m not at home anywhere! I can’t stand sunlight, but I can’t breathe water! I swim better than any Terran, but not as well as a baby Meried!”

“There’ll always be a home for you in the Tabernacle,” the missionary said in a gentler voice. “Now come along. It’s time.”

Gon didn’t move.

“Gon, Gon, have you forgotten everything we’ve taught you?” the blond man said in a tone of patience long abused. “Don’t you remember our purpose here, your own privileged role as a unique instrument of the Infinite?”

“I’m not a unique instrument, Brother Glad. I’m a halfbreed monster that never should have been born!”

“Stop it!” The missionary’s voice cracked like a physical blow. “You’re forbidden, ever, to voice thoughts like those! There is a purpose in life for every soul born under a sun! Your purpose is here! Now get on your feet and come with me! I won’t let you fail—us or yourself!”

Reluctantly, the boy rose and followed the blond man as he strode down across the pebbled beach. At the edge of the sea, the older man halted and turned his face up to the sky.

“O, thou who art eternal and without limit,” he intoned, “grant this humble creature of thy making the privilege of leading those who were lost and are found again back to the true path of thy will!”

He turned to the boy.

“Perhaps today is the day, Gon,” he said solemnly. “Good luck.”

The boy shivered, looking out across the wind-riffled water. He went forward hesitantly until an edge of surf washed about his feet, then paused to adjust the breathing mask across his mouth. As he looked back, he saw Brother Glad’s pale eyes fixed on him. He waded on; the chill water surged about his waist, his chest.

*I’m afraid!* He wanted to scream. *I don’t want to go down into this alien ocean. I want to go home.* But instead he drew a deep breath and dived forward into the breaking wave.

## 2

On their barge, anchored ten miles off the lifeless North Continent of the world known as Meries, Cap O’Royle and Pard Kuchel, traders, sat at the cabin table, drinking coffee. For the last five hours they had been busy, loading the displays of Terran manufactured goods into the homemade display racks designed to be lowered over the side for the examination of their prospective customers. Small tools, wrist compasses, patent fish-baits, sea-lights, buckles and straps, small hardware, a few foodstuffs, all the items that twenty years of tramp commerce had taught them would be welcomed by the elusive Merieds.

There was a sudden splash in the diving well at the center of the barge; a goggle-eyed gray-blue face appeared there, water sluicing down across the coarse, almost reptilian skin. The creature’s sphincter-like mouth gaped comically, like a goldfish on a carpet. Water ran from the nostrils, mere slits in the wet-clay sheen of the face. The sea-man made a hoarse, croaking sound, waved a webbed hand and dropped from sight as O’Royle, a stocky, white-haired man, called a greeting.

“They’re here,” he said, rising. “I’ll take the first load down.”

“Damn! Wish old Dreen would give a man more warning! Many times as I’ve seen that ugly face, it still gives me the leaping creeps when it pops

up at me that way!”

“They’re adapted to their environment, Pard, like a bird or a fish. Think of ’em that way and they have a kind of beauty.”

“Hard to believe they’re only ten generations away from normal folk,” Pard said. “I heard somewhere a man could still breed with ‘em. Picture getting that close to one of their females.”

O’Royle grunted. He checked his gauges, closed his helmet and lowered himself into the well. As the blue-green water closed over him, the sea-man swam up, his oversized eyes gleaming in the watery light.

“Hello, Dreen,” O’Royle said, his voice echoing oddly through his underwater microphone. “Good trip up?”

The Meried’s finny head-crest rippled as he nodded, uttering the gasping, clucking sound that was an all-purpose affirmative. He held out a small pouch of soft, slick-wet fishskin.

“I have a few sea-stones for you, O’Royle,” he said in his thin, going-down-for-the-last-time voice. “Not so nice as last time, but big, eh?”

The trader squeezed the pearls out on his palm. They were as big as walnuts, but lumpy, an iridescent milky-blue yellow in color.

“They’re beauties,” O’Royle said. He waved a hand at his stock of goods—mostly small hardware, water-proof power tools. “Take what you like.”

\* \* \*

The Meried took his time looking over the display. Other seamen gathered around. They had brought their barter-goods with them: nets of rare shells, glassy, polychrome corals, sea fruits mutated from Earthly plants. There were swollen ears of sea-corn with yard-long cobs set with fist-sized kernels, purple oceanberries descended from Pinot Noir grapes, clusters of tomatoids, like great green raspberries; hundred-foot salt-melons which would be flensed like whales and the sweet red flesh lifted aboard in hundred-pound slabs, to be ferried ashore and stored in the spaceship’s freezer. The stones O’Royle sold on distant planets, but the foodstuffs he rationed out to himself and Pard over the long years between visits.

“Did you know, O’Royle, there is another party of drymen camped on the shore there, half a swim to the north?” the sea-man said. He pointed off through the murky water.

“Traders?” O’Royle frowned.

“These are no traders. They built a house on the high beach, but they offer no goods.”

"Maybe they're scientists, a mapping party, something like that." O'Royle rubbed his chin, looking troubled.

"They say," Dreen went on, "that there's a man among them who's of the sea, but not of the sea."

O'Royle looked at him questioningly. "You mean a frogman, with scuba gear?"

"No . . . he swims naked in the surf. Yet he sleeps on land. Curious, eh, Royle?"

"Half a swim to the north, you said?"

Back on deck, O'Royle told Pard the news. The smaller man swore.

"Might of known it wouldn't last, having the place to ourselves."

"There's plenty here for everyone, Pard," his partner pointed out. "It might be the best thing for the Merieds to build up trade here, remind the government they're out here."

"I don't mean that. I just don't want strangers poking in, spoiling things. I like it like it is—peaceful."

"We don't own Meries, Pard. But I'm curious. I'm going to take the flitter over and pay a courtesy call. You mind the store."

### 3

As Gon's eyes adapted to the light level, he was able to see the undulating slope that stretched away before him, its surface thickly grown with weed of the strange color that he only saw here, under the sea. A cloud of silt rose like a puff of smoke ahead, as some small sea-dweller took alarm at his approach; at once, with a sharp pain, the nictitating membranes that protected his eyes flicked closed—a reflex never triggered on land.

He swam on, out past the second bar, angling more sharply downward now. Outcroppings of rock broke the bottom here; the luminous lichens crusting them shed an eerie glow through the water. Small shrimp-like piscoids moved in awkward spurts among the stalks of sea-cane. Something large and lazy oozed away across the bottom. Gon drew air from his breather, giving the big fellow a wide berth.

The first chill had passed; as his body warmed, he swam more strongly, questing through the dim water for the elusive mermen.

\* \* \*

O'Royle flew north for half an hour, following the barren coastline of the lifeless continent. Behind the froth-laced beach, gray and tan hills rose

toward distant peaks of stone, untouched by the faintest hint of green. Only patches of dead trees and sere grasses along the strand attested the three-centuries-gone attempt to transplant earthly soil and flora to the young world. Those, and the remnant of the viaformed humans who had been seeded here. The Lost War had wrecked the grand scheme of which they had been a part, cut off the support and aid that would have made the scheme work. Now with a resurgent Terra again feeling her way into the Arm, the Merieds might benefit from some belated assistance, O’Royle reflected. But, more likely, the sea-men would suffer from the rediscovery of their world. The oceans were rich in dissolved minerals; floating refineries could extract them, discharge the contaminating wastes into the sea. It was standard practice on pre-life worlds, but tough on the Merieds. That was the reason O’Royle had never reported his find, twenty-five years ago. Now, it seemed, the secret was out.

He saw the camp ahead, a cluster of pre-fab sheds perched on a knoll of rock above the high-tide line. He settled in near a shed; a stocky man in khakis came forward.

“I’m Brother Glad,” the stranger said, holding out a square hand. “Surprised to see your flier. The others are away, out in the launch.”

O’Royle listened silently to the other’s explanation of the purpose of the Survey Group.

“I understand you have a half-breed in your party,” he said when the missionary paused. “I’d like to see him.”

Brother Glad looked surprised. “There is a lad of mixed blood with me, yes. How did you—”

“Where is he?”

“What’s your reason for asking?”

“This boy—he’s from Terra? About nineteen years old?”

Glad frowned. “And if he is?”

“His name’s Gon O’Royle. He’s my son.”

Glad’s face went rubbery; his mouth shaped itself around words as if trying them for size but finding none that fit.

“I left the boy in school, back on Terra,” O’Royle said. “Why did you bring him here?”

Brother Glad made an effort to reassemble his expression of stern good will. “He belongs here,” he stated. “His destiny—”

“He belongs back on Terra, getting an education,” O’Royle cut off the other’s speech.

Brother Glad’s expression jelled over. “Gon is here doing what the

Infinite shaped him for, what he was born for.”

O’Royle narrowed his eyes. “He was born,” he said grimly, “because a young spacer met a woman in a lonely place, and they fell in love. As for his shape—Gon’s an intelligent boy, a fine scholar. He can lead a useful life—”

“A life of seclusion—a scientist-monk, a misfit in a dead-end! He deserves a chance to live! Here, he can make a unique contribution. He’ll play a role in the Great Plan—”

“Hogwash!” O’Royle cut in. “You’re not going to use Gon as a pawn in your game, whatever it is! Now, do you tell me where he is, or do I have to start looking?”

Brother Glad met O’Royle’s eye. “You may be Gon’s father, but he’s of age. You’ve no claim on him now.”

“And you do?”

“He’s helping me willingly.”

“To do what?”

“His people were disinherited—denied the open land, the free air—by the meddling of our ancestors! I intend to undo that wrong—to bring these unfortunate stepchildren of the human race back to their own world! Gon can help!”

O’Royle stared at the zealot. “Back to their own world? *This* is their world, damn you! They can’t live out of water for more than a few hours!”

“Perhaps—but we needn’t abandon them to such a fate! They’ve regressed since their ancestors were left here; they no longer farm; their domestic animals have returned to the wild. They’ve multiplied, but no start has been made on bringing life to the shore. The experiment, in other words, is a failure. Very well—these people are doomed—but their children deserve the right to rejoin their race, to live normal lives! They’re innocent victims of unnatural tampering with the Infinite’s plan! We owe it to them to give them back what they lost!”

“Where does Gon come into all this?”

“He’s my ambassador to the Merieds. He’ll go among them, bring the good news of their deliverance to them, lay the foundation for the program—”

“You sent him out *there*—into the ocean?”

“Of course. It’s his natural element. He can go among the Merieds as no norm—ordinary man could do.”

“You fool!” O’Royle’s voice was ragged. “Why do you think I took him to Terra in the first place?”

“To be rid of him, I suppose!”

O’Royle’s fists were clenched, but he held his voice steady. “Gon looks like his mother—externally. To normal Terries that makes him a freak, a side-show exhibit. But internally, it’s different. He’s only half Meried. His heart’s not designed to pump under the pressure of more than fifty or a hundred feet of water. And the trace minerals in the water here are wrong; iodine and arsenic and lead can reach toxic levels in his cells in a matter of hours—if he hasn’t drowned by then, or been killed by the local sea-life!”

“Wh—why, Gon’s been swimming every day since we arrived; he’s suffered no ill effects—”

“He’s been lucky.”

“The locals seem safe enough!” Brother Glad snapped.

“They’re used to it,” O’Royle came back. “Gon isn’t. He’s led a sheltered life until now. How long has he been gone?”

“Perhaps an hour, a little more. But, look here—”

“Did he have a set course, any communication link?”

“No set course . . . he was to swim out a few miles, then cast about. I’m not in direct communication with him at all—”

“I’m going after him with scuba gear,” O’Royle snapped. “Do you have a flitter you can take out to search the surface with?”

“No—nothing . . . “

“Then stand by on shore, in case he makes it back here.” O’Royle turned to the door, giving the missionary a hard look. “If Gon dies,” he said, “I’ll be back to see you.”

## 4

Gon saw the Meried at a depth of forty feet, two miles offshore. It was a slim female who appeared before him out of the darkness, her body glowing faintly to Gon’s sea-eyes, slightly magnified by the lens effect of the watery medium. Gon halted, staring into the grotesque mask that peered wide-eyed at him. Then the sea-girl’s small mouth opened, emitted rasping speech resembling the squeaks and chirps of dolphin-talk. For a moment the young half-breed was baffled; then he caught the rhythm of the Meried speech, which he had heretofore heard only on tapes in a sunny classroom on Terra.

“You’re the half-man; I’ve seen you playing in the surf.”

“I . . . I’m Gon O’Royle,” the boy said. His voice, coming through the



pecially designed speaking mask that covered his mouth and nostrils, echoed and grated in his ears. The rehearsed speech he had memorized against this moment froze on his lips as the Meried swam closer, moving herself effortlessly with small flutterings of her fingers and toes, turning to look at Gon from all sides as she circled him, carrying a light spear gun in her hand.

“You are like a sea-man and yet . . . not like,” the stranger said. “What is that you hold in your teeth?”

“I have to have it—to breathe,” Gon said.

“Indeed? Still, you swim well—for a dryman.”

“I’m no dryman!” Gon blurted, and paused, experiencing for the first time in his life a sense of shame at his land-dweller traits.

“You’re far afield,” the Meried said. “We seldom swim these waters. The grampus lairs here. I came searching for a strayed swoat, never thinking to find a half-man instead!” The sea-girl’s mouth puckered into an expression Gon recognized as a smile.

“I want to talk to you,” Gon said hurriedly. “I have news for you—wonderful news. You haven’t been forgotten—”

“I must go. Will you come with me?” the stranger cut in. “Many will want to see you, to welcome you. We hoped you’d venture out to us in time.”

“You’ve been . . . watching me?”

“We’re curious folk. We welcome any diversion.”

Gon hesitated, remembering Brother Glad’s instructions: to deliver his speech, arrange a second meeting, then return. But it had been so long with no results. What if this creature swam off and never came back? He owed it to Brother Glad to cement relations now, while he had the chance . . . .

“Yes, I’d . . . I’d like to come.”

The Meried flashed her strange smile again, turned with the flexible grace of an eel and was gone into the murk. Gon paddled hurriedly after her. Half a minute later the Meried reappeared.

“You must learn to use your strength in the water,” she said. “Not to waste it in floundering.”

Swimming slightly ahead, she led the newcomer out across the edge of the continental shelf and down toward the lightless Deeps of the Continental Sea.

\* \* \*

Using the wet-jet strapped to his back, and following the beam of his

sea-light, O'Royle covered three miles in a quarter of an hour, alert for a signal from the locator on his wrist, set to resonate to a moving body of the mass of a man.

Twice he picked up traces that led him into detours; the first time a great mollusk scuttled away at his approach; the second, a wild sea-dog approached, fangs bared in its seal-like snout. He drove it off with a beam of sound from his 'caster. He could have killed it as easily, but the scent of mammalian blood would have attracted a pack of its fellows. The Terran transplants had thrived on native fare, multiplied hugely in their adopted home; but their taste for red meat clung in instinct, even after three hundred years of sea-life.

Now the offspring of strays and runaways had claimed huge volumes of the sea as their own, in competition with their former masters.

O'Royle pictured Gon, alone and helpless, surrounded by sea-carnivores with the smell of Terran blood in their nostrils. Grimly, he swam on.

It had been a long time since he had cruised here, in the purple-black waters of Meries. Not since Gon's birth, in fact, and the death of Onide, his mother.

And now—so close to the day when Gon would have been graduated, able to take a post with the University Foundation—a meddling fanatic had come along to destroy the whole careful structure built up over two decades of hard labor.

O'Royle switched trains of thought again, concentrated on his compass readings, heading outward toward the sea-city where he had met and wooed a sea-woman once, long ago.

\* \* \*

Close behind his guide, Gon threaded his way down, down, toward a faint, water-diffused glow spreading out below. Dark spires of rock swept past to left and right; the Meried woman turned and twisted, rounding craggy, weed-grown buttes, sailing under fragilely balanced arches, plunging downward at last into a near-vertical cavern mouth to emerge in an amphitheatre of terraced stone asparkle with pastel glows. Only then did Gon realize that he was in the ruins of one of the undersea cities built three centuries before for the sea colony.

Suddenly, Meried faces were all about. A cacophony of alien voices called greeting, asked questions, made observations.

“Back so soon, Seryl? And who's this with you?”

“Mama—why is he a funny color?”

“Hello, young one. What’s that across your mouth?”

“Does he really sleep on the rocks?”

A large, scar-faced sea-man with a tattered crest was before Gon, looking at him with eyes that seemed covered with a grayish film. “Who are you?” he demanded plaintively. “*What* are you?”

“I’m Gon O’Royle,” he said, and once again his prepared speech deserted him. “I want to be your friend,” he stammered.

“I remember,” the old man said. “Onide. She bore a son to the dry-man. He took the infant away.”

“Yes—you must be the son of Onide!” a woman said. “How like her he is—and yet how strange he is.”

“So, so. Strange things happen as the world grows old.” The aged Meried drifted away. Gon looked around bewildered at the slim, swift shapes gliding in and out of the rounded doorways—or were they windows?—that reminded him of the toy castles in fishbowls—and of sunken ships, drowned sailors. Abruptly, the sea seemed to close in on him. He sucked air frantically through the mouthpiece, feeling terror rise in him. He struck out in what he thought was the direction of the passage through which he had entered, but found only a slimy barrier of volcanic stone. Seryl called, but he pushed frantically on, hearing a shrilling in his head, the thud of his heart, banging his head, bruising his hands as he scraped and fumbled, forcing his way through narrow passages that opened only into other pockets, ending in a dark cul de sac. He tried to orient himself, but the infallible sense that had always before told him in which direction to move seemed numbed, amputated. Even the phosphorescence was gone from the water. For an instant he thought that he was blind; then he caught the infinitely faint glow of his own skin.

“Seryl!” he shouted, and almost lost the breather, choking as a jet of water sprayed past the mouthpiece. He doubled up in a paroxysm of coughing. He recovered—weak, trembling, with a pounding pain in his head—to find himself in total darkness and total silence—alone and utterly lost.

## 5

Inside O’Royle’s scuba suit the pressure and the cold were as oppressive as a filled grave. He wasn’t as young as he had been when he had first swum here—not by a lifetime. He realized quite suddenly that he

might fail, might not find Gon, might not even find the sea-city of the Merieds.

But he had to find it. He knew its location; his compass would lead him there. And there he'd find his old friends and tell them what had happened, enlist their help . . .

He swam on, tiring, but driven by the mental image of Gon, alone and in danger, needing him. He was taken by surprise by the trio of sea-men that were suddenly around him.

"Benoroyle!" a familiar voice came scratchily through his helmet. "Is it you indeed?"

"Dreen—thank God you're here! It's my son—the half-man you told me about. I've got to find him!"

The sea-men conferred. "The lad visited City," another Meried said. "But we sensed he was discomfited. So we left him alone, until he should feel more at ease. He soon departed, perhaps to meditate in solitude."

"Departed? Where did he go?"

"Who knows, Benoroyle? No one was so discourteous as to follow him."

"You damned fool! Gon's no Meried! He'll drown! Why the devil didn't you help him?" O'Royle cut off his outburst with an effort. "I'm sorry, Dreen. Will you help me find the boy?"

"As you wish, Benoroyle—but the sea is wide, and filled with perils—"

"Don't treat me to any of your Meried philosophy now! Just find Gon before it's too late!"

\* \* \*

Alone in the labyrinth, Gon felt a sudden swirl of deeper coldness around him. Something was moving nearby. He backed water, retreating into a niche in the rock. Then a familiar twittering voice spoke:

"Gon—where are you?"

"Seryl!" The stab of relief that went through the boy was as sharp as physical pain. "Seryl! Get me out of here, back to the surface!"

"Gon, you've hurt yourself! I sense blood in the water!"

He felt her touch on his arm; seeing her face hovering before him, her immense eyes wide, he wondered how he had ever thought her ugly.

"Please—help me . . . !" He fought down the rising panic. The air in his throat seemed hot, stale. He was choking, drowning. He had to get out. He caught at Seryl's arm, but it slipped away.

"Come—this way!" she called.

"I can't see you!" He choked on the words, struck out blindly,

smashing face-first into sharp-edged stone. Then her hand gripped his, tugging gently.

“Poor half-man. You’re blind; I didn’t know. Come now, I’ll lead you.”

It seemed to Gon that for an endless time they wormed their way through a serpentine route, up, down, twisting, turning, at times forcing their way along passages barely wide enough to pass, then swimming a few strokes until the way narrowed again. Attempting to squeeze through a vertical crevice, he stuck fast. The girl tugged at his hands, uselessly.

“No good. I’ll have to go back.” He tried to retreat, found that he was wedged equally tightly against withdrawal. He attempted to turn his body, succeeded only in cutting his hide on the sharp edges of volcanic rock.

“Gon—careful!” Now there was anxiety in the girl’s voice. “The sea-hunters roam here! If they scent blood . . . “

He fought silently then, in blind panic. He was only dimly aware of the girl’s voice calling to him, of her hands trying to hold his flailing arms.

“Gon—they’re here!” Her cry cut through his panic. He went slack then, hung, half in, half out of the fissure, watching a thing like an eight-foot otter or beaver, black and sinuous, armed with a tiger’s jaws. It cruised past at a distance of ten feet, stroking with broad, seal-like flukes, studying him with wide, dark-glistening eyes. Gon recognized it as a mutated dog, a remote descendant of a retriever or herder brought from Terra centuries before, now grown large, wild and fierce, the ancient subservience of its kind to man forgotten. With sudden decision, it started in, jaws gaping.

Seryl set the butt of her spear gun against her shoulder, followed the patrolling carnivore as it shot forward and fired. A plastic-feathered quarrel sprang out and sank to half its length in the side of the predator. Instantly, the creature whirled to bite at the shaft, fighting like a hooked tarpon; but as the smoky blood wafted from the wound in a widening veil, a second sea-dog closed; in a lightning snap it opened the dying animal’s throat. Through water abruptly opaque with an ink-black stain, Gon caught glimpses of swift-darting bodies that struck, and struck and struck . . .

\* \* \*

Time had passed. How long, Gon didn’t know. But his air was running out. Where was Seryl? How long had he been trapped here? How long since Brother Glad had bade him farewell on the shore?

A long time—too long. His air was gone.

Here he would die—

The flash of teeth brought him from his state of shocked reverie; a creature half again as large as the sea-dog Seryl had killed had swept past him close enough to buffet him where he lay, wedged in the rock—a porpoise, once a mild-mannered friend of man, here on Meries driven by the competition of competing mammals into the role of voracious killer, hungry for the flesh of warm-blooded sea-beasts.

The killer-porpoise turned, patrolling back past him. Beyond it Gon saw others of its kind, gliding like grim torpedoes in formation. In a moment one would turn on him; with one snap of those spike-studded jaws, it could take off his arm—or his head.

Better to drown than to be torn to pieces. He reached, found the quick-release latch, and slipped the tank harness. The mouthpiece was ripped away as, with a twist and a kick, he tore free from the harness, pushed away from the rock, and shot toward the surface a hundred and fifty feet above.

\* \* \*

The pain struck O’Royle without warning, like a blow in the chest with a spiked club. He gave a single gasping grunt and doubled over, tumbling as the powerful water jets drove him erratically on. He managed to switch off power and hung, afloat now in a sea of agony wider than the Continental Ocean.

Time passed—how long, he had no idea. Slowly, he became aware that he was drifting, head-down, in black water. Fire still burned in his chest, but it was a bed of embers now, not a roaring blaze. He moved, and pain lanced through his rib-cage. Slowly, awkwardly, like a crippled insect, he straightened his body, began to move slowly toward the mile-distant shore. Gon was still out there; but Dreen and the others would find him. He had done that much, anyway. Now the trick was to reach shore alive, to be there waiting when they brought the poor lad back.

Gon’s lungs were bursting. How far above was the surface? He stroked, stroked, eyes bulging, jaws locked, chest straining. It had to be close now; only a little farther. His vision was blurring, shot through with red; his lungs ached, his tissues screamed their torture. Hold on, hold on —

Without his conscious volition, against every conscious instinct for self-preservation, his mouth opened, his lungs heaved convulsively. He felt the icy pressure in his throat, the burning pain as the sea water flooded his straining lungs—and blackness flooded his mind.

O’Royle did not suspect his error until the rush of inch-long crustaceans swirled around him like a flock of startled birds. Then they were gone—and a vast gray-black body hurtled after them.

“Sea-bull,” O’Royle grunted. “Deep-sea critter. What’s it doing this close to shore?”

He glanced at his compass—and then he saw. He had been holding steadily on course—directly *away* from shore. By now he was five miles at sea, in the dreaded Deep, where the big hunters roamed, looking for red

## meat Chapter 6

Gon floated in a pink mist of pleasure, wafted from cloud to sunset cloud on a perfumed breeze. At his whim, he sailed effortlessly across the pillow-soft sky, drifted with the gentle tides of air, plunged downward in a dizzying swoop, soared upward again, faster than thought . . .

“It’s the dream again,” he thought. “The dream of flying. But this time it’s real. I *can* fly. I always knew I could, if I could just remember the trick . . . “

He flew on, savoring the total freedom of the spirit and body that expressed itself in soaring high above all mundane cares. Brother Glad, Cruthers, the others, seemed remote, unreal. There had been a thing he had worried about; what was it? It seemed so far away now, so unimportant. Something about a role he had to play in the Plan of the Infinite. Gon almost laughed aloud at the innocence of the conception: that the power that had evoked galaxies from nothingness should require the intervention of a boy to bring about its purposes . . .

Brother Glad had wanted him to go to Meries, the water-world where he had been born, where his mother had died in the birthing; to go down again to the sea, seek out his kin, begin a movement to bring them back to Terra.

Back to Terra! This time Gon laughed, surrendering himself to the inexpressible grotesquerie of the idea. Back to Terra—to live in goldfish bowls, and flatten their noses against the glass, begging the aquarium visitors for crumbs of fishfood? Or to waddle about the dry, dusty streets of the cities, wearing water-filled helmets? Or perhaps to swim glumly about the polluted Earthly seas, on the alert for the mile-wide pelagic harvesting craft. Once caught in their water-sweeps, they’d wind up as

organic fertilizer for hydroponic farms!

Gon blinked the tears of hilarity from his eyes—and as he did, he became aware suddenly of a coldness and a pressure against his ribs. He moved to relieve the discomfort and felt a sense of vertigo that made him flail out with both hands to bring himself upright. Smoky, gray-brown opacity swirled before him. He waved it away, and was looking out across a rolling expanse of dun-colored hills, densely grown with tall, willowy plants that waved in the light but irresistible wind—like images reflected in the surface of a pool. The light that shone from the green-black sky seemed to waver, rippling through minutely discernible changes of intensity. It was a weirdly alien landscape—and yet, in some indefinable way, a comfortable one. But—where was he?

He now remembered Brother Glad's invitation to accompany him, the preparations for the trip, the long, eventless weeks in space . . .

And the landing on the deserted shore . . . and the building of the camp . . .

The rolling, phosphorescent sea. Himself wading into the cold, alien surf, Brother Glad urging him on; his first swim, the let-down as no Meried came swarming to meet him, the discouragement, the suicidal thoughts. The one, last try that he had privately promised himself to make, after which—

After? What had happened? Had he been successful or . . . ?

He remembered a face, narrow-bluish-green, wide-eyed, purse-mouthed, sleek.

Seryl. He had met her, and—

With a convulsive movement, Gon fought to tear free of the remembered trap—and drifted effortlessly forward across the waving grass-plain beneath him.

*I'm flying*, the thought crashed into his mind. *But that was a dream.*

*But I'm not dreaming now; I'm awake—and I'm flying.* He moved his hands and at once his body responded, angling up and to the left, drifting as lightly as a gas-filled balloon.

Drifting. But not like a balloon; like a fish in water.

Not flying, swimming.

Not breathing air . . . but water.

Gon drew a deep breath, felt the healing coolness flow in, flow out again. He was breathing under the sea. He had lost his mask and mouth-piece, and he was still alive. Lost in the wonder of the miracle, he drifted with the swift current toward the deep sea.



Consciousness was a light powered by a failing battery. As his awareness flickered dimly alight again, O’Royle knew that it was hopeless, that he would never reach the distant shore. He throttled back the wet-jet with a motion that sent new pangs stabbing through his chest, and hung motionless, his body a broken vessel filled with pain.

Pressure waves beat against him; a thing vast as a whale loomed out of dimness, tossing him like a chip in its wake. O’Royle saw the great scarred flank slide past him at a distance of less than three yards, saw the strokes of the mighty flippers that could crush a man with a careless flick, unaware of his presence.

But this monster was aware, he realized as it turned and made a second pass at even closer range. This time he saw the coiled proboscis, the narwhale-like tusks, the spined ears, the great swell of the crested shoulders as the grampus—a mutated Indian elephant—swam straight at him. O’Royle half expected to see the jaws gape to snap him up, but at the last moment, the behemoth rolled, showing a flash of the shark-like teeth studding the wide mouth, modified for flesh eating, not by man, but by natural mutation, here in the adopted environment of Meries. The giant meat-eater was confused by the sterile scent of the protective suit, O’Royle knew; but in another moment, satisfied of his harmless-ness, its appetite would assert itself. The next pass would be the last.

He watched it move away, turn with a lazy flick of its modified limbs, hover, measuring him for the kill. He saw the trunk go up, the jaws open. As helpless as a newborn infant, he waited for the final charge.

## 7

When Seryl returned with a party of sea-men to the place where she had left Gon trapped, the sea-wolves were still patrolling there; but of the half-man there was no sign.

“They’ve taken him,” Dreen said. “We’re too late.”

“No—I smell no blood in the water—only a trace from his earlier wounds,” Seryl retorted. “He must have freed himself.”

“Look—his breathing apparatus,” another Meried called, retrieving the tank and attached mouthpiece from the sea floor a few yards below. “Without this, can he live?”

Seryl uttered a choked cry. “Poor half-man! He wished so much to

live . . . “

“We must find his body,” Dreen said.

“There’s a vicious current here; by now the corpse will be far away—if the carrion beasts have spared it,” a man said.

“Why venture into dangerous waters on a futile quest?” another questioned.

“You needn’t come; but I must try, for the sake of my friend, whom I failed.” Dreen swam away, Seryl beside him. The others hesitated, then followed.

\* \* \*

The sea-man hailed Gon from a distance, calling in the strange, penetrating under-sea voice of his kind:

“Sheer off! A hunting grampus near!”

Gon hesitated, confused by the warning and filled with an urgent desire to talk.

“No time to waste,” the stranger called. “It’s occupied for the moment with easier prey; a dryman, poor fool, weighted in his trappings like a mud-castler!”

“A dryman?” Gon queried; but the other was gone in the murk. A land-dweller, about to be killed by a sea-hunter? Could it be Brother Glad looking for him? But the missionary owned no scuba gear—and no one else in the party would have reason to come here.

Cautiously, Gon advanced. A pair of sea-men flashed past him at the edge of visibility. He went on and saw a group of Merieds hovering in the water ahead. As he swam up to them, one, a small, slender female, turned —

“Gon!” Seryl called sharply, coming toward him. Beyond her, Gon saw through an obscuring haze of roiled silt a shape as big as a twenty-man copter, gray-black, horny-hided, massive; flippers bigger than a man’s body stroked restlessly, holding its position.

“You’re alive—and—” Seryl broke off as Gon swept past her, his eyes on the man-shape drifting in the water ahead. A dryman, as the Meried had said, bulky in a vermilion-dyed dry-suit with a bubble helmet, through which the features of a square, lined face, white-haired, blue-eyed, were visible. The face of Captain Ben O’Royle.

“Father!” Gon shouted. At his cry, the Merieds whirled; the giant sea-thing gave an ill-tempered thrust of its flukes, turning ponderously to face the new disturbance. A big sea-man came toward Gon as if to intercept him, but he veered aside from the out-stretched hand, shot to O’Royle’s

side.

"Father! Run! Quick!" Gon grabbed at the older man's arm, only then saw that his face was slack, his eyes half-shut.

Gon whirled to the sea-men, ignoring the hovering mass of the sea-elephant, which had swung again to face him.

"Help me! He's sick!"

"Gon! Beware! He'll charge!" Seryl called. She darted forward, raised her tiny spear-thrower, fired from the hip, once, twice, three times full into the monster's face. Gon felt the tiny shocks, saw the darts leap to imbed themselves in the expanse of horny hide above the back-curved trunk as the sea-elephant, head lowered and tusks foremost, rushed at him.

\* \* \*

For a frozen instant, time seemed to stand still. Gon hung motionless, peripherally aware of the staring eyes of the helpless sea-men in the background, of the unconscious, suited man beside him, of the curious translucence of the water, of the thumping of his heart, watching the bulk of the leviathan grow as it hurtled straight at him. Then, at the last possible instant, he moved aside—not a wild leap for safety, but a calculated side-step, just sufficient to avoid the forward-lunging tusk of the monster. Instantly, Gon was in behind the spined ear, and with a powerful thrust of his legs, astride the horny back, grasping the umbrella-ribbed dorsal fin, flattening himself to the curve of the great beast's shoulders.

The grampus fought. It plunged, rolled, flailed backward with its trunk. The blows, impeded by the density of the medium, thudded across Gon's shoulders like strokes with a canvas hose. He pressed himself closer, digging his fingers into the tender membranes at the base of the back-flattened ears, his knees locked along the main rib of the fin.

Over and over the grampus rolled; once it slammed the mucky bottom, and for a moment Gon was immersed in murky ooze; but he held his breath, and a moment later his mighty mount was streaking forward at a speed that sent water sluicing back around the clinging rider like the backwash of a torpedo.

As the animal's course veered left, Gon twisted at the tender tissues of the left ear; the grampus angled back to the right. Gon hung on grimly, saw the color of the water changing, lightening. Abruptly, the sea-elephant broke water with a Niagara-like smash of surf; it crashed back then, splashing and hissing, to surge ahead another hundred yards. Then it was humping itself through the shallows like a monster walrus, spewing water

from its trunk and mouth. Air was like fire in Gon's lungs as he ejected the water from them. Coughing, he clung, waiting for the blow that would smash him flat; but panicked, the sea-elephant had forgotten the weapons of its trunk and its bulk. It could have plucked him free, trampled him, rolled on him. Instead, it floundered up on the beach, bellowing and snorting. Gon blinked away the film of water from his eyes and saw the survey camp a few hundred yards off to the left. He saw men running out and heard their shouts. Brother Glad appeared, rifle in hand. As Gon raised himself to shout a warning, the creature changed course abruptly, hurling itself toward the sounds. Gon's knees slipped from their grip; the grampus skidded to a halt, lowered its head, and tossed. Gon felt himself going up and over, then falling, to slam against the gravelly sand with a stunning impact. Above him the big bull lowered its head, lunged. The needle-tipped ivories gouged into the sand on either side of Gon; the horny hide of the immense head rasped him, bumping him as the beast strove to gore him, but was fended off by its own tusks.

There was a sharp *car-rong* as a heavy rifle fired nearby. The monster grunted and keeled forward; its weight came crushingly on Gon. The sky went dark, and far away voices shouted through the failing light.

## 8

Brother Glad sat smiling at him.

Beside him, his father, pale but recovered, smiled too.

"They told me what you did, Gon," he said. "You saved my life; but more than that, you taught them something."

"It was a stroke of genius to think of driving the beast on shore," Brother Glad said. "The Merieds never dreamed of such a thing."

"Too bad . . . you killed it," Gon gasped. There was pain in his chest, in his arms, in every bone of his body. "They . . . could be tamed . . . used . . ."

"It's not dead, just drugged," the missionary said. "Our fellows helped the sea-men to winch it back into the water. When it wakes it will be in harness." His smile widened. "They have great plans for capturing more in the same way."

"Gon, the doctor examined you," O'Royle said. "You have a few broken ribs, but you'll be all right. But the curious thing is—water respiration seems to have had the effect of metamorphosizing your metabolism.

Your reflex times, muscular tone—everything—has become almost double the Terran norm—or the Meried norm, for that matter.”

“It seems to be just what Captain O’Royle called it—a metamorphosis,” Brother Glad said.

“It seems that a Terran-Meried hybrid has to spend his infancy on dry land,” Gon’s father said. “But as an adult, he becomes a true amphibian, breathing water or air equally well.”

“Mr. Cruthers wants to offer you a job,” Brother Glad said. “As a liaison man with the Merieds. Your father and I, between us, have convinced him that the Meried trade is worth developing.”

“You’ll be more than a liaison man,” O’Royle put in. “You’re a hero to the sea-men—and to a sea-girl named Seryl. They want you as their official ambassador. They’ve offered to build you a palace, half on land, half under water, and to stock it with the rarest delicacies of the ocean—including a girl named Seryl.”

There was more; Gon listened, his thoughts afloat on a sea of pleasing fancy to rival the green ocean he had at last discovered.

“I came here as a man without a world,” he said when the others fell silent at last. “Now I have two.”

The End