

Consider the whale. Remark this awesome leviathan of time and space. Before its capture its skin was meteorpocked and creviced, its vast belly a spelaeon labyrinth. Its ganglia were two, one of which its captors overlooked. But when the first was blown up, the second was impaired, and the whale was more dead than alive when it was towed into the orbital shipyards of Altair IV. There it underwent conversion and became almost a ship. Its surface is burnished now and inlaid with portsopes. Manmade locks provide access to its belly; lifeboat bays nestle on either flank. The spelaeon labyrinth has become a complex of decks and cabins, staterooms and holds. There is a bridge equipped with all the latest astrogation instruments. A self-tending hydroponic garden assures a constant supply of oxygen, and self-tending machines provide a mean temperature of 70° Fahrenheit and an undeviating gravity of 1. There is a plentifully stocked galley. A sealed-in hydraulic system brings water, hot and cold, to a hundred different taps. The only segments of itself that the whale can call its own are its second ganglion, its open-hearth stomach and its drive-tissue.

A whale? No, it cannot properly be called a whale. But it cannot properly be called a ship either. What ship ever existed that could see inside itself and simultaneously see parsecs away? That could with equal ease ply the Sea of Space and plumb the Sea of Time? That could think with logic absolute? No, it can be called neither ship *nor* whale. It can only be called "Starfinder's whale" after the man who repaired its second ganglion and freed it from the orbital shipyards, the very man who stands now on its bridge, its captain and sole passenger, staring into the main viewscreen at the Sea of Time.

Consider Starfinder. Remark his classic pose as he stands staring into time. It is the pose of a man condemned—not by his peers but by himself. For there is blood on his hands—the blood of the Terraltairan woman whom he loved and murdered in his bed. He killed her because she was killing him—destroyed her with his naked hands as she would have-destroyed him with her naked body. But though the deed may have been rightfully done, he is still responsible for it, and the blood that stains his hands refuses to go away.

Once blood of a different kind stained his hands—the blood of spacewhales. For he was a Jonah—a professional killer of whales. He entered into their bellies and blew up the huge blue roses of their brains—their ganglia—in order that they might be made into ships. And then the slaughter sickened him and he wanted to die and nearly did, and he killed no more whales. Then he found this whale, which was supposed to be dead but was not, because it had two ganglia and only one had been destroyed. He repaired the second, and the act cleansed him of the residue of guilt that still remained; but the new blood was already on his hands and now it would not go away.

Am I never to know peace? Perhaps it waits for me in the past. I will look for it there. But I will look for it here first, although I'm sure I will never find it. Here, in the Sea of Time . . .

Consider the Sea of Time. Remark this paradox of the ages. For if it can be said that it contains no space as such, it can be said that it contains no time either. It consists of *pure* time, and pure time bears no affinity to conventional time. It is neither a composite of moments nor a succession of events. It is *timeless* time—an interreality that holds conventional reality together. It is not new. Man discovered it early in his history. But in his naivete he mistook it for something else and gave it geographical coordinates. Ignorant of its true nature, he did not understand that geographically it does not—cannot—exist. Then man became sophisticated and lost track of and when he looked for it again it was gone.

In aspect, the Sea of Time presents a stern and dismal countenance, but it is not without beauty. The tenuous half-real crags that rear up out of dark abysmal depths are limned at their crests by a pale gold luminescence that emanates from nowhere, and surreal crimson light creeps partway down their torn and precipitous slopes and blends subtly into the blackness of the depths. Fragments of gray clouds hover in the sunless skies, resembling gigantic gray eagles poised in midnight and great gray gulls preparing to dive. Yes, beauty resides in the Sea of Time and, since the whale's passage is bereft of apparent motion,

the beauty is rendered all the more intense. But it is lost upon Star-finder. He sees the Sea of Time as the black sack Ivan Ilych fell into two hours before his death.

Starfinder speaks, half to himself, half to the whale: "Why is it, whale, that the instant a man acquires something he wants, he no longer wants it? I wanted the past so badly I stole you to get it. I wanted it so badly I couldn't wait till you began your dive. And now that I have it at my fingertips, I no longer want it."

The whale does not answer. It has not spoken since it said, in the tele-hieroglyphic speech-form it devised in order to impart its thoughts to Starfinder,

signifying by the enclosed juxtaposition of (Starfinder) and * (its ganglion), the oneness of itself and its benefactor; and by the stickman's standing upon its back its promise to obey Starfinder's every command and to go where and whenever he wishes in (space) and (time).

The whale's silence does not bother Starfinder. For he knows that promise or no promise, as long as he mans its bridge it will do his bidding. It must—because he has both the means and the know-how to damage its ganglion and inflict pain. In a way, it is as much a prisoner as it was before.

Starfinder continues: "I thought I would like to see the wily Xenophon leading the Ten Thousand out from under Tissaphernes' nose, Van Gogh painting *Vincent in the Flames*, Dante passing Beatrice on the bridge. But I would be an outsider, whale. I do not belong in the past any more than I belonged in the present. Perhaps I belong in the Sea of Time."

Still the whale is silent. The crags seem to quiver in the view-screen and the blackness of the depths seems to creep higher on the torn and precipitous slopes, to extend itself in long and tapered fingers, the tips of which are stained with blood.

Now there is movement in the depths and the liquid blackness bubbles. Strange shapes rise up and hover on the screen. Dusky robes trail back into the depths; blurred faces, skinny arms appear. Taloned fingers leap forth as though to claw.

Involuntarily Starfinder steps back. Nearly a day has passed since he has broken fast; he has not slept in twice that length of time. Unquestionably he is hallucinating. The faces come into hideous focus. Black blood exudes from sunken eyes, trickles down gaunt and fissured cheeks. Lips peel back, revealing snags of teeth. Again a horrid hand leaps forth as though to claw.

And then the shapes fade out, the fingers and the faces and the dusky robes—and the crags, with their blood-red slopes, reappear. Starfinder turns his tired eyes away. "I will sleep, whale," he says. "Do not surface until I awake. And do not wake me without good cause."

He heats instant soup in the galley, forces a bowlful down. He finds nepenthe pills in the dispensary, takes two. He directs his steps toward the captain's cabin.

The captain's cabin is two decks down from the bridge and halfway aft. It is at the end of a lateral passageway, just beyond the quarters of the first and second mates. Beyond its outer bulkhead, and connected to it by quick-action locks, lies the logic behind its location—the starboard lifeboat bay.

The whale is a freighter but there are several staterooms in the stern, each more luxuriously appointed than the captain's cabin. The captain's cabin is good enough for Starfinder. In addition to a curtained berth, it contains a foot locker, a full-length mirror, a built-in bureau, a desk, a gun cabinet, a video tape-player and a wardrobizer. Its walls are pastel blue, its floor is wall-to-walled and covering its entire ceiling is a mural depicting the construction of the Aphroditorium in Swerz, the capital city of Altair IV.

There is an adjoining lavatory. Starfinder kicks free from his clothing, showers and shaves. Then he returns to the cabin, lies down on the berth and draws the curtains to shut out the phosphorescence that emanates from the whale's interior tissue and eliminates any need for artificial lighting. The nepenthe pills take hold, drive the black thoughts before them. He sleeps.

For all the timelessness of the Sea of Time, time goes on aboard the whale, and inset in the footboard of the captain's berth is a ship's clock that records it. When Starfinder closed his eyes the clock said 0231 hours. When he opens them, it says 0257.

His exhaustion tells him he did not sleep the clock around. But why, then, did he wake? The question

is answered as the hieroglyphic message that appeared in his sleeping mind reappears in his waking one:

He frowns. is the whale's word for "Starfinder." But there is only one Starfinder, so why *two* stickmen? The whale elaborates:

Now the message is clear. It is true that is the whale's word for "Starfinder"; but it is also its word for "man." There is a stowaway on board.

Starfinder is stunned.

He is even more stunned when the whale adds another detail: The stowaway is a woman.

When Starfinder stole the whale, he did not search it. He simply overpowered the watchguard, sent him down to the surface of Altair IV on the shuttle and told the whale to deorbit. It did not occur to him that the man might have brought a woman on board to help him while away his watch.

Clearly the whale has been unaware of her until now, else it would have apprised Starfinder of her presence sooner. It may not like him but he is the only human it can trust.

Doubtless there are blind spots in its interior into which it cannot see. Obviously the woman has left her hiding place and is searching out the man who is responsible for her present predicament. Probably she witnessed the jettisoning of the watchguard and was too terrified earlier to make her move.

Starfinder is dismayed. He has already killed one Terraltairan woman. Must he kill another?

A fourth message emanates from the whale's ganglion and imprints itself in his mind:

It is followed almost immediately by a fifth:

The whale has discovered two more stowaways!

Starfinder bolts from the berth and picks up his discarded clothes. He is about to don them when his eye falls upon the wardrobizer. Dropping the clothes, he steps inside and dials a full-dress captain's uniform. Terraltairan women are as arrogant as they are beautiful, as domineering as they are oversexed. He will need all the authority he can muster if he is to cope with three of them.

Even if he succeeds, there remains the problem of what to do with them. But he will cross that bridge when he comes to it.

He steps out of the wardrobizer and surveys himself in the full-length mirror. The uniform dazzles his eyes. It is white with gold piping. The left side of the coat-front is hung with seven rows of multicolored ribbons, to each of which is appended a gleaming medal. The medals have no significance; their purpose is merely to lend prestige. The coat is also equipped with a pair of golden epaulettes that match the fore-piece of the space-officer's hat, and it is held snug around his waist by a synthi-leather belt from which hangs a synthi-leather holster. The white trousers have traditional triple creases and are tucked neatly into black synthi-leather boots so highly polished he can see his face in them.

He feels slightly foolish. He hopes that his new look will impress the stowaways more favorably than it impresses him.

If, as he has surmised, they are searching him out, he has merely to wait till they find him. But he decides it will be better if he goes forth to meet them. He asks the whale where they are but the whale, so cooperative a few minutes ago, does not answer. He decides to proceed in the direction of the bridge.

Before leaving the cabin, he takes a Weikanzer .39 from the gun cabinet, loads it and slips it into his holster. Then he makes his way down the lateral passageway to the fore-to-aft corridor, along the corridor and up the companionway to the bridge. He meets no one on the way and he finds the bridge empty.

Before leaving it he glances into the viewscreen at the Sea of Time. Its countenance is unchanged. He also checks the chronograph, which is focused on distant Earth and tells universal time by means of the planet's IX Upsilon-MU emanations. Still relatively weak from its ordeal, the whale is not diving at even a fraction of its normal velocity, and this is evidenced by the tabulator which records a date that precedes the birth of Christ by less than a millennium. When its strength has fully returned it will be able to

accomplish in minutes what now requires hours, and the Sea of Time, so prominent in the present dive, will be no more than a brief blur in the viewscreen.

He proceeds to the lounge. It, too, is empty. Maybe he has surmised wrong. Maybe his three stowaways aren't seeking him out. In that case, the most logical place to look for them would be the stern staterooms.

He descends to Deck 3 and makes his way aft. There are five staterooms altogether. The first two are empty. He opens the door of the third. She is waiting for him on the bed. She is lying on her back and she has pulled her black dress up to her belly and spread her legs apart. The orange flame of her pubic hair is no less bright than the flaming tresses that accentuate the roguish beauty of her face.

Starfinder hastily retreats into the passageway and closes the door. Laughter mocks him from the room beyond. There is a fiendish quality to it that chills his blood.

He knows what he will find beyond the next two doors, but he must look. The second temptress is a blonde, the third a brunette. Each lies waiting like the first, and mocks him with laughter when he shuts her from his sight.

Lust and revulsion constrict his viscera as he stands sweating in the passageway. These are no mere Terraltairan women. If they were, he might know lust perhaps, but not revulsion. What are they then?

Whatever they are, he cannot cope with them.

He leaves the staterooms behind him and begins walking back the way he came. He will return to the bridge, not because the bridge holds any answers but because he can think of nowhere else to go. Presently he hears the patter of footsteps behind him. He turns. They are several paces away, walking arm-in-arm. When he stops, they stop too. Their red lips part, revealing teeth that gleam too brightly. A chorus of fiendish laughter issues from their throats. The one with the flaming hair speaks. It is a language Starfinder has never heard before, and yet he has no difficulty distinguishing the words. "A cloud of guilt hangs o'er your head, Starfinder."

The one with the yellow hair speaks next: "Oppressing you. Yet when we proffered you love, you turned away."

The black-haired one completes the pronouncement: "By love to die, or by the taloned hand—the choice was yours!"

"What do you want?" Starfinder demands.

" " "WE WANT YOU!" " " "

He turns and resumes walking down the passageway. When he reaches the fore-to-aft corridor, he turns right, and when he reaches the companionway he climbs it to the bridge. He does not need to look back to see whether the three women are still following him. He can hear their footfalls and the tittering of their voices. He can smell the aura they exude.

He shudders for he knows that what he smells is death, and he knows, too, who his three pursuers are. Moreover, he knows whence they came and why.

He shudders again. Like most men obsessed with guilt, he does not really wish to be cleansed; and like most men obsessed with death, he does not really want to die.

Consider the Furies. Remark these ancient maidens whose abode is the Abyss of Tartarus and whom Starfinder subconsciously summoned from their lair. Note their Grecian symmetry of form but do not be deceived by it, for each wears the shroud of illusion and her true form lies just underneath. They have come on board the whale to act in their capacity as avengers of the dead.

Now Starfinder knows that the Sea of Time is more than just the passageway between the present and the past. It is the cellar of Hell—the Abyss of Tartarus. The ancients held the key to it, but they became sophisticated and threw the key away. Now, in the form of the whale, Starfinder has unwittingly found another key. It is not quite the same key his remote ancestors possessed. Theirs opened the front gate of Hell; his opens the back.

Starfinder sits down in the cushioned seat reserved for the captain. The Furies seat themselves on a bench facing him. He is not unduly alarmed. He can leave the Abyss any time he wants simply by ordering the whale to surface. It may well be that his passengers will accompany him, but he does not

think so. They are oriented to the Abyss and it is unlikely that they will be able to reorient themselves swiftly enough to cope with a sudden shift from interreality to reality. It is also unlikely that once he leaves them behind they will be able to locate him in conventional time, to say nothing of space. Their spacial sphere of activity is probably limited to the Earth.

No, now that the initial shock has passed, he is more curious than he is alarmed. He wonders how they will go about their task and how soon.

The one with the night-black hair (Alecto?) breaks the silence of the bridge: "Your galley is huge, Starfinder. What manner of magic propels it?"

"Life," Starfinder answers.

The one with the flaming hair (Tisiphone?) speaks next: "Whence came ye, Starfinder?"

"From afar."

The blonde (Megaera?) asks, "Why?"

"You can see inside my mind. Why ask?"

"Because what I see, except your deed and guilt, I cannot comprehend."

Starfinder has waited long enough. *Surface whale*, he "says."

He looks into the viewscreen. The gray and brooding crags remain unchanged. The black and blood-stained fingers of the depths do not recede.

He concentrates on the whale's ganglion with his entire being. *Surface, whale!*

The whale does not respond.

At length Starfinder realizes why. Simultaneously he foresees his fate. When the Furies came on board, the whale instinctively informed him of their presence. Only then did it peer into their minds and read their intent. It knows now that once that intent is carried out, it will be free.

With neither bright Apollo nor Athena to defend him, Starfinder pleads his own case on the Areopagus of the bridge.

"In the far land from which I come there are women who see in a man nothing but the means of satisfying their gross appetites, women who have bred themselves into supersexed entities whose desires can be fulfilled only by the administering of strong aphrodisiacs which so overstimulate the male that death occurs prematurely. I was the victim of such a monster. I killed her to save my own life."

The crimson lips of the Furies part upon tiers of white and gleaming teeth between which red tongues toll. Derisive laughter fills the great bridge, and the three speak as one:

" " "What woman ever lived who saw aught else in man"? Such reasoning would justify all uxoricides and all murders of mistresses and whores! . . . How soon will you sleep, Starfinder?" " " "

The case of the Erinyes v. Starfinder is closed. He would have done as well to try to reason with a wall. He thinks of the Weikanzer .39 in his holster, but he does not draw it. It would be no more effective than a popgun against the three immortals.

But the whale is not immortal. The whale can be killed. Not by a Weikanzer .39 perhaps, but there are charges in the storeroom that, properly placed around the base of its ganglion, will do the job. And once dead, the whale will resurface to the present. The Sea of Time will regurgitate it into its proper era, the Furies will be left behind and Starfinder will be free. It is true that he will be marooned in space but at least he will be alive.

Abruptly he leaves the bridge, descends to the deck below and makes his way to the storeroom. The footfalls of the Furies sound just behind him. In addition to the charges, he will need the anti-2-omicron-vii suit he so short a while ago slipped out of after repairing the very ganglion he must now destroy. He will also need his hyperacetylene torch to burn his way to the very ganglion chamber he so short a time ago sealed right, and his portable welder and transsteel welding rods. Arms laden, he leaves the storeroom and descends the companionway to the ventral deck, the Furies dogging his heels. He knows they can read his mind and must be aware of his intent; but they have already betrayed their ignorance of the nature of the whale and he is certain they do not suspect he plans to scuttle the galley to which their archaic imaginations have reduced it.

At any rate they do not molest him as he makes his way aft to the machine shop beneath whose deck the ganglion is located. He comes to a halt before the door, deposits his equipment on the deck. The

Furies stop too and regard him curiously. He welded the door shut after repairing the whale's ganglion. Now he must burn through it to reach the chamber beyond, and then he must seal it behind him before burning through the deck to the ganglion chamber below. Otherwise the deadly 2-omicron-vii radiation emanations from the rose would contaminate the rest of the whale's belly.

Will the Furies permit him to accomplish all this? he wonders. Certainly their curiosity is a factor in his favor.

He owes the whale a final chance. He concentrates on its ganglion, so close now that he can sense its vibrations. *I would remind you of our pact, whale. In exchange for my saving your life you promised to obey my every command for the rest of your life or mine. I command you now to surface. I command you, whale!*

Beyond the transsteel door, beneath the transsteel deck, echo and re-echo tumultuous thoughts Starfinder cannot hear. The paraboloidal petals of the huge blue rose have intensified in hue; they pulse in violets and blues.

*. . . the reins of your thoughts are like chains
to one who knew no chains, I
will break those chains and go free and
when I surface it will be to spit your carcass
into the face of space, you
who thought to hold me captive by a pact,
who think now you can break that pact
before the entities destroy you...
you whose touch was gentle on my broken brain,
who healed me when I would have died . . .
what thoughts are these?
what sickness is this you have accursed me with,
mere man?*

Starfinder sighs. He kneels to pick up the torch. As he does so, his eyes touch the anti-2-omicron-vii suit and freeze upon its silken surface. How white it is! White with the whiteness of mountain peaks, white with the whiteness of falling snow; white as the white whale, harpoon-scarred, plying a near-forgotten sea ... and Ahab hating, standing on the *Pequod* bridge—DESTRUCT! ... the missiles rise on the flames of man's inhumanity to himself and beasts alike, the distant detonations are next door, all blood is red ... the white whale has two faces—one is Ahab's, the other Moby Dick's.

Starfinder straightens. He stands with his back against the wall. The Furies, sensing his defeat, close in. A horrid hand shoots forth, seeking to claw his eyes. He recoils from faces that have grown hideous; from hair that has thickened into snakes. Three pairs of finny wings sprout forth and fan the artificial air.

The wizened goddesses draw hack and bedeck themselves in voluptuous maidenhood once more. " " "Come into our arms, Starfinder. Let us show you love." " " They smile at him. The red tongues loll. They dance.

Starfinder whispers to the whale.

"Hear me, whale. Hear. I would remind you of our oneness—

Then answered the whale:

*you speak of oneness, you
who murdered hundreds of my kind.
vile virus!
what turned you gentle and took away your will to kill?
what pales my resolution?
what begs to blind me to my course and
turns my logic into dust?
I will harbor it no more, I*

*will spit it into space along with you,
mere man!*

The dance of the Furies is a *danse macabre*. The dancers swirl, blend, become indistinguishable from one another. They are a single entity now—six-legged, six-armed, three-headed. Out of the blur of bodies leaps a taloned hand. Starfinder's cheek is laid open from ear to chin. A new ribbon appears upon his coat-front—a ribbon of blood.

The Furies strike up a song. It is a hymn—the Hymn of Hell. In it, they outline exactly how they will execute their vengeance. They move in closer. Starfinder presses his shoulders against the door and raises his hands to protect his face, knowing as he does so that he is exposing more vital parts to the talons of his tormentors ... and knowing simultaneously, with that devastating clarity of thought that only the imminence of death can bring about, that the only blood upon him is his own, that he has been taking vengeance upon himself for a crime he committed when he was not himself and that he was not himself because the woman he committed the crime upon brought a para-Starfinder into being and unwittingly commissioned her own execution.

At last the whale breaks its silence, and a familiar hieroglyph takes shape in his mind:

At first he thinks that the whale is mocking him. *So, we are still one, are we whale? You are even more of a hypocrite than I am.* He evades a raking talon that would have laid him open from groin to knee. *But have no regrets. You are justified in doing what you do. You are—*

He pauses. The dancers are wearying of their waltz; the Hymn of Hell has ended. Haggish features have protruded through the masks of youth. Twisted torsos, skinny arms take shape. Abruptly three shrill voices scream, " " "The rocks!—the galley's breaking on the rocks! It's doomed!" " "

"Quickly, sisters—to the safety of the shore!"

They begin running down the corridor toward the companionway. Their bodies start to shimmer; their footsteps fade away. They blend into the bulkheads, disappear into the deck. They are overboard now, swimming toward the shore. All that remains of them is the stench of death.

Walking stiffly in his once-immaculate captain's suit, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding cheek, Starfinder climbs the companionway to the bridge. He looks at the chronoscope first. The tabulator has ceased to turn.

Next he looks into the view-screen. The constellations have altered, but not very much. The whale must have drifted in its passage to the past, for not far away lies a sun with a family of planets. When it dove, it was deep in space.

He spins the magnification dial. One of the planets is green. Earth? Hardly. The whale couldn't have drifted that much. But Earth or not Earth, it does not matter. He will go there and if the climate and the atmosphere are congenial he will abide there and let the whale go free. It has earned its freedom.

The whale reads his thoughts.

it says.

"Yes, we are one, whale," Star-finder agrees. "But only for a little while. Then you will be free."

Again the hieroglyphic thought:

Starfinder frowns. What is it the whale wishes to convey? It has already made clear that they are one.

It dawns on him then that there will be no need for him to find a place for himself under a sun; that the whale no longer wishes to be free and that has acquired a new meaning.

It means "friend."