

## HARDSHELL

1

ARTERIES OF LIGHT PULSED THROUGH THE BLACK SKY. IN THAT STROBOscopic blaze, millions of cold raindrops appeared to have halted in midfall. The glistening street reflected the celestial fire and seemed to be paved with broken mirrors. Then the lightning-scored sky went black again, and the rain resumed. The pavement was dark. Once more the flesh of the night pressed close on all sides.

Clenching his teeth, striving to ignore the pain in his right side, squinting in the gloom, Detective Frank Shaw gripped the Smith & Wesson .38 Chief's Special in both hands. He assumed a shooter's stance and squeezed off two rounds.

Ahead of Frank, Karl Skagg sprinted around the corner of the nearest warehouse just in time to save himself. The first slug bored a hole in the empty air behind him, and the second clipped the corner of the building.

The relentless roar of the rain on metal warehouse roofs and on the pavement, combined with rumbling thunder, effectively muffled the shots. Even if private security guards were at work in the immediate area, they probably had not heard anything, so Frank could not expect assistance.

He would have welcomed assistance. Skagg was big, powerful, a serial killer who had committed at least twenty-two murders. The guy was incredibly dangerous even in his best moments, and right now he was about as approachable as a whirling buzzsaw. This was definitely not a job for one cop.

Frank considered returning to his car and putting in a call for backup, but he knew that Skagg would slip away before the area could be cordoned off. No cop would call off a chase merely out of concern for his own welfare - especially not Frank Shaw.

Splashing across the puddled serviceway between two of the huge warehouses, Frank took the corner wide, in case Skagg was waiting for him just around the bend. But Skagg was gone.

Unlike the front of the warehouse, where concrete loading ramps sloped to the enormous roll-up garage doors, this side was mostly blank. Two hundred feet away, below a dimly glowing bulb in a wire security cage, was a man-size metal door. It was half open but falling shut.

Wincing at the pain in his side, Frank hurried to the entrance. He was surprised to see that the handle was torn off and that the lock was shattered, as if Skagg had used a crowbar or sledgehammer. Had he found a tool leaning against the warehouse wall, and had he used it to batter his way inside? He had been out of sight for mere seconds, no more than half a minute, which surely wasn't enough time to break through a steel door.

Why hadn't the burglar alarm sounded? Surely the warehouse was protected by a security system. And clearly Skagg had not entered with sufficient finesse to circumvent an alarm.

Thoroughly soaked, Frank shivered involuntarily when he put his back to the cold wall beside the door. He gritted his teeth, willed himself to stop shaking, and listened intently.

He heard only the hollow drumming of rain on metal roofs and walls. The sizzle of rain dancing on the wet pavement. The gurgle and slurp and chuckle of rain in gutters and downspouts.

Wind bleating. Wind hissing.

Frank broke the cylinder out of his revolver, tipped the two unused cartridges into his hand, dropped them in a pocket, and used a speedloader to put him back in business, fully stocked.

His right side throbbed. Minutes ago Skagg had taken him by surprise, stepping out of shadows with a length of rebar picked up at a construction site, swinging it as Mick ey Mantle might have swung a baseball bat. Frank felt as if chunks of broken glass were working against one another in his deep muscles and bones; the pain sharpened slightly each time he drew a breath. Maybe he had a broken rib or two. Probably not ... but maybe. He was wet, cold, and weary.

He was also having fun.

2

TO OTHER HOMICIDE DETECTIVES, FRANK WAS KNOWN AS HARDSHELL Shaw. That was also what his buddies had called him during Marine Corps basic training more than twenty-five years ago, for he was stoical, tough, and could not be cracked. The name had followed him when he left the service and joined the Los Angeles Police Department. He never encouraged anyone to use the sobriquet, but they used it anyway because it was apt.

Frank was tall, wide in the shoulders, narrow in the waist and hips, with a rock-solid body. His enormous hands, when curled into fists, were so formidable that he usually needed only to brandish them to assure an adversary's cooperation. His broad face appeared to have been carved out of granite - and with some difficulty, with much breaking of chisels and snapping of hammers.

His colleagues in the homicide division of the LAPD sometimes claimed that Frank had only two basic expressions: mean and meaner.

His pale-blue eyes, clear as rainwater, regarded the world with icy suspicion. When thinking, he frequently sat or stood perfectly still for long periods during which the quickness and alertness of his blue eyes, contrasted with his immobility, gave the impression that he was peering out from within a shell.

He had a damn hard shell, so his friends claimed. But that was only half of what they said about him.

Now, finished reloading his revolver, he stepped in front of the damaged door to the warehouse. He kicked it open. Crouched, head down, holding the .38 in front of him, he went in fast, looking left and right, expecting Skagg to rush at him with a crowbar, hammer, or whatever tool the scumbag had used to get into the building.

To Frank's left was a twenty-foot-high wall of metal shelving filled with thousands of small boxes. To his right were large wooden crates stacked in rows, towering thirty feet overhead, extending half the length of the building, alternating with avenues wide enough to admit forklifts.

The banks of overhead fluorescents suspended from the fifty-foot-high warehouse ceiling were switched off. Only a few security lamps in conical tin shades shed a wan glow over the stored goods below, leaving most of the place sheathed in shadows.

Frank moved cautiously and silently. His soggy shoes squished, but that sound was barely audible over the pounding rain on the roof. With water dripping off his brow, his jawline, and the barrel of his gun, he eased from one row of crates to another, peering into each passageway.

Skagg was at the far end of the third aisle, about a hundred and fifty feet away, half in shadow, half in milk-pale light, waiting to see if Frank had followed him. He could have kept out of the light, could have crouched entirely in the gloom against the crates, where he might not have been visible; by waiting in plain sight, he seemed to be taunting Frank. Skagg hesitated as if to be sure that he had been spotted, and then he disappeared around the corner.

For five minutes they played hide-and-seek, moving stealthily through the maze of cartons and crates. Three times, Skagg allowed himself to be seen, although he never let Frank get close.

He's having fun too, Frank thought.

That made him angry.

High on the walls, under the cobweb-festooned eaves, were slit windows that helped illuminate the cavernous building during the day. Now, only the flicker of lightning revealed the existence of those narrow panes. Although that inconstant pulse did not brighten the warehouse, it occasionally caused shadows to leap disconcertingly, and twice Frank nearly shot one of those harmless phantoms.

Easing along another avenue, scanning the gloom on both sides, Frank heard a noise, a hard scraping. He knew at once what it was: a crate sliding on a crate.

He looked up. In the grayness high above, a sofa-size box-visible only as a black silhouette - teetered on the edge of the crate beneath it. Then it tipped over and plummeted straight toward him.

Wile E. Coyote time.

Frank threw himself forward, hit the floor, and rolled just as the crate exploded against the concrete where he had been standing. He averted his face as wood disintegrated into hundreds of splintery shards of shrapnel. The box had contained plumbing fixtures; bright, chrome-plated faucets and shower heads bounced along the floor, and a couple thumped off Frank's back and thighs.

Hot tears of agony burned in his eyes, for the pain in his right side flared brighter. Further abused by all of this activity, his battered ribs now seemed not merely broken but pulverized.

Overhead, Skagg let out a sound that was one part a cry of rage, one part an animalistic ululation celebrating the thrill of the hunt, and one part insane laughter.

With some sixth sense, Frank was suddenly aware of a murderous, descending weight. He rolled to his right, flat up against the same wall of crates atop which Skagg stood. Behind him, a second huge box crashed to the warehouse floor.

"You alive?" Skagg called.

Frank did not respond.

"Yeah, you must be down there, because I didn't hear you scream. You're a quick bastard, aren't you?"

That laugh again. It was like atonal music played on an out-of-tune flute: a cold, metallic sound. Inhuman. Frank Shaw shivered.

Surprise was Frank's favorite strategy. During a pursuit, he tried to do what his prey would least expect. Now, taking advantage of the masking roar of the rain on the corrugated steel roof, he stood up in the darkness beside the wall of crates, holstered his revolver, blinked tears of pain out of his eyes, and began to climb.

"Don't cower in the shadows like a rat," Skagg shouted. "Come out and try to take a shot at me. You've got a gun. I don't. It'll be your bullets against whatever I can throw at you. What better odds do you want, you chickenshit cop?"

Twenty feet up the thirty-foot-high wall of wooden boxes, with his chilled fingers hooked into meager niches, with the toes of his shoes pressed hard against narrow ledges, Frank paused. The pain in his right side tightened as if it were a lasso, and it threatened to pull him backward into the aisle almost two stories below. He clung to his precarious position and squeezed his eyes tightly shut, willing the pain to go away.

"Hey, asshole," Skagg shouted.

Yeah?

"You know who I am?"

Big man on the psycho circuit, aren't you?

"I'm the one the newspapers call the Night Slasher."

Yeah, I know, I know, you drooling degenerate.

"This whole damn city lays awake at night, worrying about me, wondering where I am," Skagg shouted.

Not the whole city, man. Personally, I haven't lost any sleep over you.

Gradually the hot, grinding pain in his ribs subsided. It did not disappear altogether, but now it was a dull throb.

Among friends in the marines and on the police force, Frank had a reputation for persevering and triumphing in spite of wounds that would have incapacitated anyone else. In Nam he had taken two bullets from a Vietcong machine gun, one in the left shoulder and one through his left side directly above the kidney, but he had kept on going and had wasted the gunner with a grenade. Bleeding profusely, he had nevertheless used his good arm to drag his badly wounded buddy three hundred yards to a place of concealment, where they were safe from enemy snipers while the medevac chopper had sought and found them. As the medics loaded him into the helicopter, he had said, "War is hell, all right, but it's also sure exhilarating!"

His friends said he was iron hard, nail tough. But that was only part of what they said about him.

Overhead, Karl Skagg hurried along the tops of the boxes. Frank was close enough to hear the heavy footsteps above the ceaseless rumble of the rain.

Even if he had heard nothing, he would have known that Skagg was on the move. The two-crate-thick wall trembled with the killer's passage - though not violently enough to shake Frank off his perch.

He started to climb again, feeling cautiously for handholds in the darkness, inching along the pile of plumbing supplies. He got a few splinters in his fingers, but it was easy to screen out those small, stabbing pains.

From his new position atop the wall, Skagg shouted into another shadowy section of the warehouse to which he apparently thought Frank had moved, "Hey, chickenshit!"

You called?

"I have something for you, chickenshit."

I didn't know we were exchanging gifts.

"I got something sharp for you."

I'd prefer a TV set.

"I got the same thing for you that I used on all the others."

Forget the TV. I'll settle for a nice bottle of cologne.

"Come and get your guts ripped out, you chickenshit!"

I'm coming, I'm coming.

Frank reached the top, raised his head above the edge of the wall, looked left, then right, and saw Skagg about thirty feet away. The killer had his back to Frank and was peering intently down into another aisle.

"Hey, cop, look at me, standing right up here in the light. You can hit me with no trouble. All you have to do is step out and line up a shot. What's the matter? Don't you even have the nerve for that, you yellow bastard?"

Frank waited for a peal of thunder. When it came, he levered himself over the edge, on top of the stack of crates, where he rose to a crouch. The pounding rain was even louder up here, and combined with the thunder it was enough to cover any noise he made.

"Hey, down there! You know who I am, cop?"

You're repeating yourself. Boring, boring.

"I'm a real prize, the kind of trophy a cop dreams of!"

Yeah, your head would look good on my den wall.

"Big career boost if you brought me down, promotions and medals, you chickenshit."

The ceiling lights were only ten feet above their heads, and at such short range even the dim bulbs in the

security lamps cast enough of a glow to illuminate half the crates on which they stood. Skagg was in the brightest spot, posturing for the one-man audience that he believed was below him.

Drawing his .38, Frank stepped forward, out of a shadowy area into a fall of amber light.

Skagg shouted, "If you won't come for me, you chickenshit, I'll come for you."

"Who're you calling chickenshit?" Frank asked.

Startled, Skagg spun toward him and, for an instant, teetered on the edge of the boxes. He windmilled his arms to keep from falling backward into the aisle below.

Holding his revolver in both hands, Frank said, "Spread your arms, drop to your knees, then lay flat on your belly."

Karl Skagg had none of that heavy-browed, slab-jawed, cement-faced look that most people associated with homicidal maniacs. He was handsome. Movie-star handsome. His was a broad, well-sculpted face with masculine yet sensitive features. His eyes were not like the eyes of a snake or a lizard or some other wild thing; they were brown, clear, and appealing.

"Flat on your belly," Frank repeated.

Skagg did not move. But he grinned. The grin ruined his moviestar looks because it had no charm. It was the humorless leer of a crocodile.

The guy was big, even bigger than Frank. He was six five, maybe even six and a half feet. Judging by the solid look of him, he was a dedicated, lifelong weight lifter. In spite of the chilly November night, he wore only running shoes, jeans, and a blue cotton shirt. Damp with rain and sweat, the shirt molded to his muscular chest and arms.

He said, "So how're you going to get me down from here, cop? Do you think I'll let you cuff me and then just lay up here while you go for backup? No way, pig face."

"Listen and believe me: I'll blow you away without the slightest hesitation."

"Yeah? Well, I'll take that gun off you quicker than you think. Then I'll rip your head off and shove it up your ass."

With unconcealed distaste, Frank said, "Is it really necessary to be so vulgar?"

Grinning more broadly, Skagg moved toward him.

Frank shot him pointblank in the chest.

The hard report echoed off the metal walls, and Skagg was thrown backward. Screaming, he pitched off the crates and plummeted into the aisle below. He landed with a thunk that cut off his scream.

Skagg's violent departure caused the crates to rock, and for a moment the unmortared wall of boxes swayed dangerously, creaking and grinding. Frank fell to his hands and knees.

Waiting for the stacks to steady under him, he thought about all the paperwork involved in a shooting,

the many forms required to appease the bleeding hearts who were always certain that every victim of police gunfire was as innocent as Mother Teresa. He wished that Skagg had not forced the issue so soon. He wished that the killer had been more clever, had managed a more involved game of cat and mouse before the climactic scene. Thus far the chase had not provided half enough fun to compensate for the mountain of paperwork ahead.

The crates quickly steadied, and Frank got to his feet. He moved to the edge of the wall, to the place where Skagg had been flung into empty space by the impact of the slug. He looked down into the aisle. The concrete floor was silvery in the glow of the security lamp.

Skagg was not there.

Storm light flickered at the windows in the warehouse eaves. At his side, Frank's shadow leaped, shrank back, leaped, and shrank again, as though it belonged to Alice in one of her potion-swilling fits beyond the looking glass.

Thunder pummeled the night sky, and an even harder fall of rain dissolved against the roof.

Frank shook his head, squinted into the aisle below, and blinked in disbelief.

Skagg was still not there.

3

HAVING DESCENDED THE CRATES WITH CAUTION, FRANK SHAW LOOKED left and right along the deserted aisle. He studied the shadows intently, then crouched beside the spots and smears of blood where Karl Skagg had hit the floor. At least a liter of blood marked the point of impact, so fresh that a portion had still not soaked into the porous concrete but glistened in small, red, shallow puddles.

No man could take a .38 hollow-point in the chest at pointblank range, get up immediately, and walk away. No man could fall three stories onto concrete and spring straight to his feet.

Yet that seemed to be what Skagg had done.

A trail of gore indicated the man's route. With his .38 tightly in hand, Frank traced the psycho to an intersection, turned left into a new aisle, and moved stealthily through alternating pools of shadow and light for a hundred and fifty feet. There, he came to the end of the blood trail, which simply stopped in the middle of the passage.

Frank peered up at the piled crates on both sides, but Skagg was not clinging to either partition. No offshoot passageways between the boxes and no convenient niches provided a good hiding place.

Although badly hurt and hurrying to get out of his pursuer's reach, Skagg appeared to have carefully bound his grievous wounds to control the bleeding, had literally bound them on the run. But with what? Had he torn his shirt into strips to make tourniquets, bandages?

Damn it, Skagg had a mortal chest wound. Frank had seen the terrible impact of bullet in flesh, had seen Skagg hurled backward, had seen blood. The man's breastbone was shattered, splinters driven inward

through vital organs. Arteries and veins were severed. The slug itself surely passed through Skagg's heart. Neither tourniquets nor bandages could stanch that flow or induce mangled cardiac muscles to resume rhythmic contractions.

Frank listened to the night.

Rain, wind, thunder. Otherwise silence.

Dead men don't bleed, Frank thought.

Maybe that was why the blood trail ended where it did - because Skagg died after going that far. But if he had died, death had not stopped him. He had kept right on going.

And now what am I chasing? A dead man who won't give up?

Most cops would have laughed off such a thought, embarrassed by it. Not Frank. Being tough, hard, and unbreakable did not mean that he had to be inflexible as well. He had the utmost respect for the mysterious complexity of the universe.

A walking dead man? Unlikely. But if that was the case, then the situation was certainly interesting. Fascinating. Suddenly Frank was more thoroughly involved in his work than he had been in weeks.

4

THE WAREHOUSE WAS VAST BUT, OF COURSE, FINITE. AS FRANK EXPLORED the gloom-filled place, however, the chilly interior seemed to be larger than the space enclosed by its walls, as if portions of the building extended into another dimension, or as if the actual size of the structure changed magically and constantly to conform to his exaggerated perception of its immensity.

He searched for Skagg in aisles formed by crates and along other aisles between towering metal shelves filled with cardboard cartons. He stopped repeatedly to test the lids of crates, suspecting that Skagg had hidden in an empty one, but he found no makeshift coffin belonging to the walking dead man.

Twice he briefly suspended the search to take time to stay in touch with the throbbing pain in his side. Intrigued by the mystery of Skagg's disappearance, he had forgotten that he'd been hammered with a length of steel rebar. His extraordinary ability to block pain contributed to his hardboiled reputation. A good buddy in the department once said that Hardshell Shaw's pain threshold was between that of a rhinoceros and a wooden fence post. But there were times when experiencing pain to the fullest was desirable. For one thing, pain sharpened his senses and kept him alert. Pain was humbling as well; it encouraged a man to keep his perspective, helped him to remember that life was precious. He was no masochist, but he knew that pain was a vital part of the human condition.

Fifteen minutes after having shot Skagg, Frank still hadn't found him. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that the killer was in the warehouse, dead or alive, and had not fled into the rainy night. His conviction was based on more than a hunch; he possessed the reliable intuition that distinguished great cops from good cops.

A moment later, when his intuition proved unnervingly accurate, Frank was exploring a corner of the building where twenty forklifts of various sizes were parked beside a dozen electric carts. Because of



their knobby hydraulic joints and blunt tines, the lifts resembled enormous insects, and in the smoky yellow glow of the overhead lamp, they cast praying-mantis silhouettes across other machinery.

Frank was moving quietly through those spiky shadows when Karl Skagg spoke behind him:

“You looking for me?”

Frank turned, bringing up his gun.

Skagg was about twelve feet away.

“See me?” the killer asked.

His chest was intact, unwounded.

“See me?”

His three-story fall had resulted in no shattered bones, no crushed flesh. His blue cotton shirt was stained with blood, but the source of those stains was not visible.

“See me?”

“I see you,” Frank said.

Skagg grinned. “You know what you’re seeing?”

“A piece of shit.”

“Can your small mind possibly conceive of my true nature,

“Sure. You’re a dog turd.”

“You can’t offend me,” Skagg said.

“I can try.”

“Your petty opinions are of no interest or concern to me.”

“God forbid that I should bore you.”

“You’re getting tiresome.”

“And you’re nuts.”

Skagg cracked a humorless smile of the sort that earlier had reminded Frank of a crocodile’s grin. “I’m so far superior to you and to all of your kind that you’re incapable of judging me.”

“Oh, then forgive me for my presumption, great lord.”

Skagg’s grin faded into a vicious grimace, and his eyes widened. They no longer seemed like ordinary brown eyes. In their dark depths was a hungry, chilling reptilian watchfulness that made Frank feel as if

he were but a fieldmouse staring into the mesmeric eyes of a blacksnake.

Skagg took one step forward.

Frank took one step backward.

“Your kind have only one use - you’re interesting prey.”

Frank said, “Well, I’m glad to hear we’re interesting.”

Skagg took another step forward, and a mantis shadow rippled across his face.

Frank stepped backward.

“Your kind are born to die.”

Always interested in the workings of a criminally insane mind, just as a surgeon is always interested in the nature of the cancers that he excises from his patients’ bodies, Frank said, “My kind, huh? What kind is that exactly?”

“Humankind.”

“Ah.”

“Humankind,” Skagg repeated, speaking the word as if it were the vilest epithet.

“You’re not human? Is that it?”

“That’s it,” Skagg agreed.

“What are you then?”

Skagg’s insane laughter was as affecting as hard arctic wind.

Feeling as if bits of ice had begun to form in his bloodstream, Frank shivered. “All right, enough of this. Drop to your knees, then flat on your face.”

“You’re so slow-witted,” Skagg said.

“Now you’re boring me. Lie down and spread your arms and legs, you son of a bitch.”

Skagg reached out with his right hand in such a way that for one disconcerting moment it seemed to Frank that the killer was going to change tactics and begin pleading for his life.

Then the hand began to change. The palm grew longer, broader. The fingers lengthened by two inches. The knuckles became thicker, gnarled. The hand darkened until it was singularly unhealthy, mottled brown-black-yellow. Coarse hairs sprouted from the skin. The fingernails extended into wickedly sharp claws.

“So tough you were. Imitation Clint Eastwood. But you’re afraid now, aren’t you, little man? Afraid at last, aren’t you?”

Only the hand changed. No alterations occurred in Skagg's face or body or even in his other hand. He obviously had complete control of his metamorphosis.

"Werewolf," Frank said in astonishment.

With another peal of lunatic laughter that rebounded tinnily from the warehouse walls, Skagg worked his new hand, curling and extending and recurling his monstrous fingers.

"No. Not a werewolf," he whispered fiercely. "Something far more adaptable. Something infinitely stranger and more interesting. Are you afraid now? Have you wet your pants yet, you chickenshit cop?"

Skagg's hand began to change again. Coarse hairs receded into the flesh that had sprouted them. The mottled skin grew darker still, the many colors blending into green-black, and scales appeared. The fingertips thickened and grew broader, and suction pads formed on them. Webs spun into existence between fingers. The claws subtly changed shape, but they were no shorter or less sharp than the lupine claws had been.

Skagg peered at Frank through those hideous spread fingers and over the half-moon curves of the opaque webs. Then he lowered his hand slightly and grinned. His mouth had also changed. His lips were thin, black, and pebbled. He revealed pointed teeth and two hooked fangs. A thin, glistening, fork-tipped tongue flickered across those teeth, licked the pebbled lips.

At the sight of Frank's horrified astonishment, Skagg laughed. His mouth once more assumed the appearance of a human mouth.

But the hand underwent yet another metamorphosis. The scales were transformed into a hard-looking, smooth, purple-black, chitinous substance, and the fingers, as if wax brought before a flame, melted together until Skagg's wrist terminated in a serrated, razor-sharp pincer.

"You see? No need of a knife for this Night Slasher," whispered Skagg. "Within my hands are an infinite variety of blades."

Frank kept his .38 revolver pointed at his adversary, though by now he knew that even a .357 Magnum loaded with magnum cartridges with Teflon tips would provide him with no protection.

Outside, the sky was split by an ax of lightning. The flash of the electric blade sliced through the narrow windows high above the warehouse floor. A flurry of rafter shadows fell upon Frank and Skagg.

As thunder crashed across the night, Frank said, "What the hell are you?"

Skagg did not answer right away. He stared at Frank for a long moment and seemed perplexed. When he spoke, his voice had a double-honed edge: curiosity and anger. "Your species is soft. Your kind has no nerve, no guts. Faced with the unknown, your kind react as sheep react to the scent of a wolf. I despise your weakling breed. The strongest men break after what I've revealed. They scream like children, flee in panic, or stand paralyzed and speechless with fear. But not you. What makes you different? What makes you so brave? Are you simply thickheaded? Don't you realize you're a dead man? Are you foolish enough to think you'll get out of this place alive? Look at you - your gun hand isn't even trembling."

"I've had more frightening experiences than this," Frank said tightly. "I've been through two tax audits."

Skagg did not laugh. He clearly needed a terrified reaction from an intended victim. Murder was not sufficiently satisfying; evidently he also required the complete humiliation and abasement of his prey.

Well, you bastard, you're not going to get what you need from me, Frank thought.

He repeated, "What the hell are you?"

Clacking the halves of his deadly pincers, slowly taking a step forward, Karl Skagg said, "Maybe I'm the spawn of Hell. Do you think that could be the explanation? HmMMM?"

"Stay back," Frank warned.

Skagg took another step toward him. "Am I a demon perhaps, risen from some sulfurous pit? Do you feel a certain coldness in your soul; do you sense the nearness of something satanic?"

Frank bumped against one of the forklifts, stepped around the obstruction, and continued to retreat.

Advancing, Skagg said, "Or am I something from another world, a creature alien to this one, conceived under a different moon, born under another sun?"

As he spoke, his right eye receded into his skull, dwindled, vanished. The socket closed up as the surface of a pond would close around the hole made by a pebble; only smooth skin lay where the eye had been.

"Alien? Is that something of which you could conceive?" Skagg pressed. "Have you sufficient wit to accept that I came to this world across an immense sea of space, carried on galactic tides?"

Frank no longer wondered how Skagg had battered open the door of the warehouse; he would have made hornlike hammers of his hands - or ironlike pry bars. No doubt he had also slipped incredibly thin extensions of his fingertips into the alarm switch, deactivating it.

The skin of Skagg's left cheek dimpled, and a hole formed in it. The lost right eye flowered into existence within the hole, directly under his left eye. In two winks both eyes re-formed: They were no longer human but insectoid, bulging and multifaceted.

As if changes were taking place in his throat too, Skagg's voice lowered and became gravelly. "Demon, alien ... or maybe I'm the result of some genetic experiment gone terribly wrong. HmMMM? What do you think?"

That laugh again. Frank hated that laugh.

"What do you think?" Skagg insisted as he approached.

Retreating, Frank said, "You're probably none of those things. Like you said ... you're stranger and more interesting than that."

Both of Skagg's hands had become pincers now. The metamorphosis continued up his muscular arms as his human form gave way to a more crustacean anatomy. The seams of his shirt sleeves split; then the shoulder seams also tore as the transformation continued into his upper body. Chitinous accretions altered the size and shape of his chest, and his shirt buttons popped loose.

Though Frank knew he was wasting ammunition, he fired three shots as rapidly as he could squeeze the trigger. One round took Skagg in the stomach, one in the chest, one in the throat. Flesh tore, bones cracked, blood flew. The shapechanger staggered backward but did not go down.

Frank saw the bullet holes and knew that a man would die instantly of those wounds. Skagg merely swayed. Even as he regained his balance, his flesh began to knit up again. In half a minute the wounds had vanished.

With a wet cracking noise, Skagg's skull swelled to twice its previous size, though the change had nothing to do with the revolver fire that the shapechanger had absorbed. His face seemed to implode, all the features collapsing inward, but almost at once a mass of tissue bulged outward and began to form queer insectoid features.

Frank did not wait to see the grotesque details of Skagg's new countenance. He fired two more rounds at the alarmingly plastic face, then ran, leaped over an electric cart, dodged around a big forklift, sprinted into an aisle between tall metal shelves, and tried not to feel pain in his side as he ran back through the long warehouse.

When that morning had begun, dreary and rain-swept, with traffic moving through the city's puddled streets at a crawl, with the palm trees dripping, with the buildings somber in the gray storm light, Frank had thought that the spirit of the day was going to be as soggy and grim as the weather - uneventful, boring, perhaps even depressing. Surprise. Instead the day had turned out to be exciting, interesting, even exhilarating. He just never knew what fate had in store for him next, which was what made life fun and worth living.

Frank's friends said that in spite of his hard shell, he had an appetite for life and fun. But that was only part of what they said about him.

Skagg let out a bleat of rage that sounded utterly inhuman. In whatever shape he had settled upon, he was coming after Frank, and he was coming fast.

5

FRANK CLIMBED SWIFTLY AND UNHESITATINGLY IN SPITE OF THE PAIN IN his ribs. He heaved himself onto the top of another three-story-high wall of crates - machine tools, transmission gears, ball bearings - and rose to his feet.

Six other crates, which were not part of the wall itself, were stacked at random points along the otherwise flat top of those wooden palisades. He pushed one box to the edge. According to the printing on the side, it was filled with twenty-four portable compact-disc players, the kind that was carried by antisocial young men who used the volume of their favorite unlistenable music as a weapon with which to assault innocent passersby on the street. He had no idea what the damn things were doing among the stacks of machine tools and bearings; but the box weighed only about two hundred pounds, and he was able to slide it.

In the aisle below, something issued a shrill, piercing cry that was part rage, part challenge.

Frank leaned out past the box that he had brought to the brink, squinted down, and saw that Karl Skagg

had now assumed a repulsive insectoid form that was not quite that of a two-hundred-fifty-pound cockroach and not quite a praying mantis but something between.

Suddenly the thing's chitin-capped head swiveled. Its antennae quivered. Multifaceted, luminous amber eyes gazed up at Frank.

He shoved the box over the edge. Unbalanced, he nearly plummeted with it. Wrenching himself back from the brink, he tottered and fell on his butt.

The carton of portable compact-disc players met the floor with thunderous impact. Twenty-four arrogant punks with bad taste in music but with a strong desire for high-tech fidelity would be disappointed this Christmas.

Frank crawled quickly to the edge on his hands and knees, looked down, and saw Skagg's squirming insectoid form struggling free of the burst carton that had briefly pinned him to the floor. Getting to his feet, Frank began to shift his weight rapidly back and forth, rocking the heavy crate under him. Soon half the wall was rocking too, and the column of boxes beneath Frank swayed dangerously. He put more effort into his frantic dance of destruction, then jumped off the toppling column just as it began to tilt out of the wall. He landed on an adjacent crate that was also wobbling but more stable, and he fell to his hands and knees; several formidable splinters gouged deep into his palms, but at the same time he heard at least half a dozen heavy crates crashing into the aisle behind him, so his cry was one of triumph rather than pain.

He turned and, flat on his belly this time, eased to the brink.

On the floor below, Skagg could not be seen beneath the ton of debris. However, the shapechanger was not dead; his inhuman screams of rage attested to his survival. The wreckage was moving as Skagg pushed and clawed his way out of it.

Satisfied that he had at least gained more time, Frank got up, ran the length of the wall of boxes, and descended at the end. He hurried into another part of the warehouse.

Along his randomly chosen route, he passed the half-broken door by which he and Skagg had entered the building. Skagg had closed it and stacked several apparently heavy crates against it to prevent Frank from making an easy, silent exit. No doubt the shapechanger also had damaged the controls for the electric garage doors at the front of the warehouse and had taken measures to block other exits.

You needn't have bothered, Frank thought.

He was not going to cut and run. As a police officer, he was duty-bound to deal with Karl Skagg, for Skagg was an extreme threat to the peace and safety of the community. Frank believed strongly in duty and responsibility. And he was an ex-marine. And ... well, though he would never have admitted as much, he enjoyed being called Hardshell, and he took pleasure in the reputation that went with the nickname; he would never fail to live up to that reputation.

Besides, though he was beginning to tire of the game, he was still having fun.

IRON STEPS ALONG THE SOUTH WALL LED UP TO A HIGH BALCONY WITH A metal-grid floor. Off the balcony were four offices in which the warehouse's managerial, secretarial, and clerical staffs worked.

Large, sliding glass doors connected each office with the balcony, and through the doors Frank could see the darkish forms of desks, chairs, and business equipment. No lamps were on in any of the rooms, but each had outside windows that admitted the yellow glow of nearby streetlamps and the occasional flash of lightning.

The sound of rain was loud, for the curved ceiling was only ten feet above. When thunder rolled through the night, it reverberated in that corrugated metal.

At the midpoint of the balcony, Frank stood at the iron railing and looked across the immense storage room below. He could see into some aisles but by no means into all or even a majority. He saw the shadowy ranks of forklifts and electric carts among which he had encountered Skagg and where he had first discovered his adversary's tremendous recuperative powers and talent for changing shape. He also could see part of the collapsed wall of crates where he had buried Skagg under machine tools, transmission gears, and CD players.

Nothing moved.

He drew his revolver and reloaded. Even if he fired six rounds pointblank into Skagg's chest, he would succeed only in delaying the shapechanger's attack for a minute or less while the bastard healed. A minute. Just about long enough to reload. He had more cartridges, although not an endless supply. The gun was useless, but he intended to play the game as long as possible, and the gun was definitely part of the game.

He no longer allowed himself to feel the pain in his side. The showdown was approaching, and he could not afford the luxury of pain. He had to live up to his reputation and become Hardshell Shaw, had to blank out everything that might distract him from dealing with Skagg.

He scanned the warehouse again.

Nothing moved, but all the shadows in the enormous room, wall to wall, seemed to shimmer darkly with pent-up energy, as if they were alive and, though unmoving now, were prepared to spring at him if he turned his back on them.

Lightning cast its nervous, dazzling reflection into the office behind Frank, and a bright reflection of the reflection flickered through the sliding glass doors onto the balcony. He realized that he was revealed by the sputtering, third-hand electric glow, but he did not move away from the railing to a less conspicuous position. He was not trying to hide from Karl Skagg. After all, the warehouse was their Samarra, and their appointment was drawing near.

However, Frank thought confidently, Skagg is sure going to be surprised to discover that the role of Death in this Samarra belongs not to him but to me.

Again lightning flashed, its image entering the warehouse not only by way of the offices behind Frank but through the narrow panes high in the eaves. Ghostly flurries of storm light fluttered across the curve of the metal ceiling, which was usually dark above the shaded security lamps. In those pulses of queer luminosity, Skagg was disclosed at the highest point of the ceiling, creeping along upside down, as if he were a spider with no need to be concerned about the law of gravity. Although Skagg was visible only

briefly and not in much detail, he currently seemed to have cloaked himself in a form that was actually less like a spider than like a lizard.

Holding his .38 in both hands, Frank waited for the storm's next bright performance. During the dark intermission between acts, he estimated the distance Skagg would have traveled, slowly tracking the unseen enemy with his revolver. When again the eave windows glowed like lamps and the spectral light glimmered across the ceiling, his gunsights were aimed straight at the shapechanger. He fired three times and was certain that at least two rounds hit the target.

Jolted by the shots, Skagg shrieked, lost his grip, and fell off the ceiling. But he did not drop stone-swift to the warehouse floor. Instead, healing and undergoing metamorphosis even as he fell, he relinquished his spider-lizard form, reverted to his human shape, but sprouted batlike wings that carried him, with a cold leathery flapping sound, through the air, across the railing, and onto the metal-grid balcony only twenty feet from Frank. His clothes - even his shoes - having split at the seams during one change or another, had fallen away from him, and he was naked.

Now the wings transformed into arms, one of which Skagg raised to point at Frank. "You can't escape me."

"I know, I know," Frank said. "You're like a cocktail-party bore descended from a leech."

The fingers of Skagg's right hand abruptly telescoped out to a length of ten inches and hardened from flesh into solid bone. They tapered into knifelike points with edges as sharp as razor blades. At the base of each murderous fingertip was a barbed spur, the better to rip and tear.

Frank squeezed off the last three shots in the revolver.

Hit, Karl Skagg stumbled and fell backward on the balcony floor.

Frank reloaded. Even as he snapped shut the cylinder, he saw that Skagg already had risen.

With an ugly burst of maniacal laughter, Karl Skagg came forward. Both hands now terminated in long, bony, barbed claws. Apparently for the sheer pleasure of frightening his prey, Skagg exhibited the startling control he possessed over the form and function of his flesh. Five eyes opened at random points on his chest, and all fixed unblinking on Frank. A gaping mouth full of rapier teeth cracked open in Skagg's belly, and a disgusting yellowish fluid dripped from the points of the upper fangs.

Frank fired four shots that knocked Skagg down again, then fired the two remaining rounds into him as he lay on the balcony floor.

While Frank reloaded with his last cartridges, Skagg rose again and approached.

"Are you ready? Are you ready to die, you chickenshit cop?"

"Not really. I only have one more car payment to make, and for once I'd sure like to know what it's like to really own one of the damn things."

"In the end you'll bleed like all the others."

"Will I?"



“You’ll scream like all the others.”

“If it’s always the same, don’t you get tired of it? Wouldn’t you like me to bleed and scream differently, just for some variety?”

Skagg scuttled forward.

Frank emptied the gun into him.

Skagg went down, got up, and spewed forth a noxious stream of shrill laughter.

Frank threw aside the empty revolver.

The eyes and mouth vanished from the shapechanger’s chest and belly. In their place he sprouted four small, segmented, crablike arms with fingers that ended in pincers.

Retreating along the metal-grid balcony, past glass office doors that flared with reflected lightning, Frank said, “You know what your trouble is, Skagg? You’re too flamboyant. You might be a lot more frightening if you were more subtle. All these changes, this frenzied discarding of one form after another - it’s just too dazzling. The mind has difficulty comprehending, so the result is more awesome than terrifying. Know what I mean?”

If Skagg understood, he either disagreed or did not care, for he caused curved, bony spikes to burst forth from his chest, and he said, “I’ll pull you close and impale you, then suck the eyes out of your skull.” To fulfill the second half of his threat, he rearranged his face yet again, creating a protruding tubular orifice where his mouth had been; fine, sharp teeth rimmed the edge of it, and it made a disgustingly wet, vacuuming sound.

“That’s exactly what I mean by flamboyant,” Frank said as he backed up against the railing at the end of the balcony.

Skagg was only ten feet away now.

Regretting that the game was over, Frank released his body from the human pattern that he had imposed upon it. His bones dissolved. Fingernails, hair, internal organs, fat, muscle, and all other forms of tissue became as one, undifferentiated. His body was entirely amorphous. The darksome, jellied, throbbing mass flowed out of his suit through the bottoms of his sleeves.

With a rustle, his clothes collapsed in a soft heap on the metal-grid floor of the balcony.

Beside his empty suit, Frank reassumed his human form, standing naked before his would-be assailant. “That is the way to transform yourself without destroying your clothes in the process. Considering your impetuosity, I’m surprised you have any wardrobe left at all.”

Shocked, Skagg abandoned his monstrous appearance and put on his human cloak. “You’re one of my kind!”

“No,” Frank said. “One of your species, but certainly not one of your demented kind. I live in peace with ordinary men, as most of our people have for thousands of years. You, on the other hand, are a repulsive degenerate, mad with your own power, driven by the insane need to dominate.”

“Live in peace with them?” Skagg said scornfully. “But they’re born to die, and we’re immortal. They’re weak, we’re strong. They’ve no purpose but to provide us with pleasure of one kind or another, to titillate us with their death agonies.”

“On the contrary,” Frank said, “they’re valuable because their lives are a continuing reminder to us that existence without self-control is only chaos. I spend nearly all of my time locked within this human form, and with but rare exception I force myself to suffer human pain, to endure both the anguish and joy of human existence.”

“You’re the one who’s mad.”

Frank shook his head. “Through police work I serve humankind, and therefore my existence has meaning. They so terribly need us to help them along, you see.”

“Need us?”

As a roar of thunder was followed by a downpour more vigorous than at any previous moment of the storm, Frank searched for the words that might evoke understanding even in Skagg’s diseased mind. “The human condition is unspeakably sad. Think of it: Their bodies are fragile; their lives are brief, each like the sputtering decline of a short candle; measured against the age of the earth itself, their deepest relationships with friends and family are of the most transitory nature, mere incandescent flashes of love and kindness that do nothing to light the great, endless, dark, flowing river of time. Yet they seldom surrender to the cruelty of their condition, seldom lose faith in themselves. Their hopes are rarely fulfilled, but they go on anyway, struggling against the darkness. Their determined striving in the face of their mortality is the very definition of courage, the essence of nobility.”

Skagg stared at him in silence for a long moment, then let loose another peal of insane laughter. “They’re prey, you fool. Toys for us to play with. Nothing more. What nonsense is this about our lives requiring purpose, struggle, self-control? Chaos isn’t to be feared or disparaged. Chaos is to be embraced. Chaos, beautiful chaos, is the base condition of the universe, where the titanic forces of stars and galaxies clash without purpose or meaning.”

“Chaos can’t coexist with love,” Frank said. “Love is a force for stability and order.”

“Then what need is there for love?” Skagg asked, and he spoke the final word of that sentence in a particularly scornful tone.

Frank sighed. “Well, I have an appreciation of the need for love. I’ve been enlightened by my contact with the human species.”

“Enlightened? ‘Corrupted’ is the better word.”

Nodding, Frank said, “Of course, you would see it that way. The sad thing is that for love, in the defense of love, I’ll have to kill you.”

Skagg was darkly amused. “Kill me? What sort of joke is this? You can’t kill me any more than I can kill you. We’re both immortal, you and I.”

“You’re young,” Frank said. “Even by human standards, you’re only a young man, and by our standards you’re an infant. I’d say I’m at least three hundred years older than you.”

“So?”

“So there are talents we acquire only with great age.”

“What talents?”

“Tonight I’ve watched you flaunt your genetic plasticity. I’ve seen you assume many fantastic forms. But I haven’t seen you achieve the ultimate in cellular control.”

“Which is?”

“The complete breakdown into an amorphous mass that in spite of utter shapelessness remains a coherent being. The feat I performed when I shucked off my clothes. It requires iron control, because it takes you to the brink of chaos, where you must retain your identity while on the trembling edge of dissolution. You haven’t acquired that degree of control, for if total amorphousness had been in your power, you’d have tried to terrify me with an exhibition of it. But your shapechanging is so energetic that it’s frenzied. You transform yourself at a whim, assuming whatever shape momentarily seizes your fancy, with a childish lack of discipline.”

“So what?” Skagg remained unafraid, blissfully sure of himself, arrogant. “Your greater skill in no way changes the fact that I’m immortal, invincible. For me, all wounds heal regardless of how bad they may be. Poisons flush from my system without effect. No degree of heat, no arctic cold, no explosion less violent than a nuclear blast, no acid can shorten my life by so much as one second.”

“But you’re a living creature with a metabolic system,” Frank said, “and by one means or another - by lungs in your human form, by other organs when in other forms - you must respire. You must have oxygen to maintain life.”

Skagg stared at him, not comprehending the threat.

In an instant Frank surrendered human form, assumed a totally amorphous state, spread himself as if he were a giant manta ray in the depths of the sea, and flew forward, wrapping himself tightly around Skagg. His flesh conformed to every fold and crease, every concavity and convexity, of Skagg’s body. He enveloped his startled adversary, sheathing every millimeter of Skagg, stoppering his nose and ears, coating every hair, denying him access to oxygen.

Within that jellied cocoon, Skagg sprouted claws and horns and bony, barbed spikes from various portions of his anatomy, attempting to gouge and tear through the suffocating tissue that bound him. But Frank’s flesh couldn’t be torn or punctured; even as his cells parted before a razor claw, they flowed together and knitted instantly in the wake of that cutting edge.

Skagg formed half a dozen mouths at various places on his body. Some were filled with needle-tipped fangs and some with double rows of shark’s teeth, and all of them tore ravenously at his adversary’s flesh. But Frank’s amorphous tissue flowed into the orifices instead of retreating from them - This is my body; taste of it - clogging them to prevent biting and swallowing, coating the teeth and thus dulling the edges.

Skagg assumed a repulsive insectoid shape.

Frank conformed.

Skagg sprouted wings and sought escape in flight.

Frank conformed, weighed him down, and denied him the freedom of the air.

Outside, the night was ruled by the chaos of the storm. In the warehouse, where the aisles were neatly arranged, where the humidity and temperature of the air were controlled, order ruled everywhere except in the person of Karl Skagg. But Skagg's chaos was now firmly contained within the impenetrable envelope of Frank Shaw.

The inescapable embrace with which Frank enfolded Skagg was not merely that of an executioner but that of a brother and a priest; he was gently conveying Skagg out of this life, and he was doing so with some measure of the regret with which he watched ordinary men suffer and expire from accident and disease. Death was the unwelcome son of chaos in a universe woefully in need of order.

For the next hour, with diminishing energy, Skagg writhed and thrashed and struggled. A man could not have endured for so long without oxygen, but Skagg was not a man; he was both more and less than human.

Frank was patient. Hundreds of years of self-enforced adaptation to the limits of the human condition had taught him extreme patience. He held fast to Skagg a full half hour after the last detectable sign of life ebbed from the mad creature, and Skagg was as encapsulated as an object dipped in preserving bronze or eternally frozen in a cube of amber.

Then Frank returned to human form.

Karl Skagg's corpse was in human form as well, for that was the final metamorphosis that he had undergone in the last seconds of his agonizing suffocation. In death he looked as pathetic and fragile as any man.

When he had dressed, Frank carefully wrapped Skagg's body in a tarp that he found in a corner of the warehouse. This was one corpse that could not be permitted to fall into the hands of a pathologist, for the profound mysteries of its flesh would alert humankind to the existence of the secret race that lived among them. He carried the dead shapechanger outside, through the rainy night to his Chevy.

Gently he lowered Skagg into the car trunk and closed the lid.

Before dawn, in the dark scrub-covered hills along the perimeter of the Angeles National Forest, with the yellow-pink metropolitan glow of Los Angeles filling the lowlands south and west of him, Frank dug a deep hole and slipped Skagg's corpse into the ground. As he filled the grave, he wept.

From that wild burial ground he went directly home to his cozy five-room bungalow. Murphy, his Irish setter, was at the door to greet him with much sniffing and tail wagging. Seuss, his cat, held back at first with typical feline aloofness, but at last the Siamese rushed to him as well, purring noisily and wanting to be stroked.

Though the night had been filled with strenuous activity, Frank did not go to bed, for he never required sleep. Instead, he got out of his wet clothes, put on pajamas and a robe, made a large bowl of popcorn, opened a beer, and settled down on the sofa with Seuss and Murphy to watch an old Frank Capra movie that he had seen at least twenty times before but that he never failed to enjoy: Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

All of Frank Shaw's friends said that he had a hard shell, but that was only part of what they said. They also said that inside his hard shell beat a heart as soft as any.