

*Robert Young's latest story is a gripping tale of a deep-space battle between two gargantuan organic-metallic spaceships, as depicted in this month's striking Sternbach cover.*

# The Star Eel

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Deep in the belly of the space-whale, Starfinder awakes. The seis-miclike tremor that shook him out of sleep is not repeated, but the capsized carafe on the cabinet by his bunk testifies it was not a dream.

At first he is unable to make any sense out of the hieroglyphic message that the whale projects into his mind:

He breaks it down into its two components — and . is the hieroglyph the whale used whenever it wishes to indicate itself. Obviously, then, signifies a separate entity. An entity that has attached itself to the whale's back.

Abruptly he understands: the whale has been attacked by a star eel!

Horrified, Starfinder dons the clean captain's uniform the ward-robizer laid out for him while he slept. He buckles his Weikanzer .39 belt round his waist and checks to see whether the weapon is fully charged; then he leaves the cabin. As he pounds up the forward companionway to the bridge, he reviews the many tales he heard about star eels when he was a Jonah. All of them are unpleasant, and all of them emphasize an ineluctable fact of life — that when a star eel attaches itself to a whale and drains it of its 2-omicron-vii radiation, the whale is as dead as though a Jonah deganglioned it, and ready for the orbital shipyards on Altair IV.

The pale star-pulsing blur of Messier 31 is centered in the bridge screen. Although the whale conceivably could accomplish such a journey if it dived deep enough into the Sea of Time, it has no such intention. It merely happens to be drifting in that direction.

Starfinder turns his attention to the dorsal screens. They frame square close-ups of the eel's black underside. There is no way he can see the creature *in toto*. However, he does not need to see it to know what it looks like: he has seen photos of its fellows. And read about them as well. Thus he knows that this one, if it is typical of its kind, is considerably smaller than the whale and possesses sonic vision in the form of a long antennalike tail. He knows that despite the dissimilarity of size and habitat it has much in common with the lamphry of the fresh-water lakes of Earth. He knows that its "skin" consists of a hard organic-metallic substance that is analogous but not identical to the transsteel "skin" of the whale. He knows that its underside is magnetized and allows it to cling to its host during the length of time necessary — usually about twenty hours — for it to absorb its host's "lifeblood." He knows that it reproduces by fission. He knows that its corpse can be converted into a shapeship at half the cost it would take to build a ship of similar dimensions from scratch. And although he has never seen one, he knows there are such ships in existence.

There is a chance that the eel has not fed for a long time, that its magnetic grip can be broken. It is a chance worth taking. Starfinder holds onto a nearby stanchion and braces himself. "*Roll, whale,*" he says. "*Break free!*"

The whale rolls. Mightily. It is as though a cosmic storm rages in the Sea of Space. As though the star-flecked immensities are alternating between troughs and waves. Gradually the storm abates, and presently the double hieroglyph reappears in Starfinder's mind —.

The whale has failed.

Starfinder ponders the problem. It will do no good for the whale to dive — it will only take the star

eel into the past with it. And after the eel absorbs the last of the whale's 2-omicron-vii radiation, it will die; whereupon Time, intolerant of paradoxes, will regurgitate it back to the present, the eel with it.

There simply is no way that the whale can dislodge this antagonistic symbiont that took it unawares. Unless Starfinder can accomplish the task, it is doomed.

Unfortunately there is a limit to his lore, and he does not know whether the star eel has a ganglion. But even if it does have, he has no way of getting to it. The beam his Weikanzer .39 discharges is of near-laser intensity, but it is incapable of burning through the eel's thick organic-metallic "skin." Probably the creature's tail is its most vulnerable part; but even if he can somehow sever it — perhaps by ramming it with the lifeboat — there is no guarantee that the eel's resultant blindness will cause it to release its prey.

There simply is no clear-cut course for him to follow. He will have to play it by ear. Leaving the bridge, he descends to Deck 3 and proceeds to the boat bay. There he climbs into one of the lifeboats, activates the locks and sails out into the Sea of Space.

When the whale and Starfinder made their covenant, the whale "said," indicating that (Starfinder) would be its master and that it would take him anywhere or when he wished to go in (space) and (time). Starfinder carried out his part of the pact by repairing the whale's unique second ganglion whose presence the Jonah who had destroyed the first hadn't suspected. Then the whale deorbited from the shipyards of Altair IV, and whale and man dived into the Sea of Time, that aspect of the continuum that is at once part of and at once discrete from the Sea of Space: the interreality that holds conventional reality together. Now whale and man have returned to the present—to one of the infinitesimal surfaces of the Sea of Space.

On Starfinder's right blazes the cold white bonfire of *a* Andromedae; "above" it, and countless parsecs beyond, the roseate anti-macassar of M-31 glows softly.

He retrofires before the boat breaks free from the gravitic pull of the whale-ship, then fires a gentle burst from the starboard jet and brings the craft around. Before him, ship and symbion are silhouetted massively against a vast scattering of stars. The hieroglyph is misleading. It corresponds to the whale's self-image—to the way it sees itself. In actuality, the whale is not nearly so stream-lined, not nearly so much like a spaceship. But its hull is burnished like a spaceship's, and its tiers of portholes glow like golden eyes.

Below them, along the star eel's nearer flank, glow similar tiers of "eyes."

Stunned, Starfinder stares.

The combined mass of the two gargantuan bodies pulls the boat inward. He employs just enough ventral thrust to put him on a plane with the eel. Gradually its "eyes" resolve into portholes like the whale's. Its nearer flank, which should be meteor-pocked and creviced, is burnished like the whale's. There is only one possible answer: the eel is an organic-metallic ship too.

But how can it be if it is still alive?

Granted, the whale is alive and it is a ship — or almost one. But it is like no other whale-ship in existence. Its fellow ships are all as dead as it itself would be if it hadn't possessed a second ganglion and if Starfinder hadn't repaired it.

There is a searchbeam in the lifeboat's prow. Starfinder turns it on and plays its dazzling light over the star eel's flank. In seconds he spots the telltale seam of a boat-bay lock. Just aft of it is a large porthole. A face is discernible beyond its thick, unbreakable glass. A thin face, with large round eyes —

The face of a frightened girl.

"I still don't think I should have let you in. If I'd known you weren't actually dying like you let on, I wouldn't have."

The star eel's boat bay is smaller than the whale's. It contains two lifeboats similar to his own. The girl is wearing an abbreviated khaki dress and thick-soled canvas sandals. Her light-brown hair is bobbed and banged; her blue eyes remind him of a wild-flower that grows in the idyllic hills south of Swerz, the capital city of Altair IV. The barest beginning of breasts lends her dress its only contour. He judges her to be about twelve.

It is clear she is all alone. Were she not, someone in authority would have shown up by this time. Fortunately, Anglo-American is numbered among the languages he is on familiar terms with. "I take it you're both the captain and the crew," he says.

She gives a nervous little nod. "And the only passenger."

"You're like me then."

"I thought Pasha's host was just a whale — till I saw you. I didn't know it was a ship too."

"Would it have made any difference if you had?"

"You mean, would I have stop-ped Pasha from attacking it? No. I told Pasha he could make his own decisions in such matters."

"Pasha being the star eel?"

"My star eel. They enslaved him, and I set him free."

"I thought star eels were killed before they were converted into ships."

"They are. But Pasha was an exception. The converters referred to him as a 'noble experiment.' But I don't think enslaving some-one is noble, do you?"

"When you freed him, why did you go with him?"

"I wanted to be free too."

He gazes into her earnest blue eyes, seeking some vestige of dis-simulation and finding not a trace. "You were enslaved too?" he asks.

She nods. "My father is a converter in the *a* Andromedae IX orbital shipyards. Their union is so rich and powerful that it controls the whole planet. Its members call themselves proletariats, but actual-ly they're the *haute bourgeoisie*. They decide what should be taught in school and what shouldn't be. Which books should be read and which shouldn't be. Which music should be played and which should-n't be. They have square brains and tin eardrums and carry ships of ignorance in their back pockets."

"Are you saying that the school-children of *a* Andromedae IX are *slaves*?"

"It amounts to that, doesn't it?"

He sighs. "I suppose so." Then, "What's your name?"

"Ciel Bleu. Ciely. I know why you wanted to come on board. You want me to call Pasha off. Well, I won't!"

*Easy does it*, he cautions him-self. Aloud, he says, "I missed breakfast this morning. Do you think you might spare a fellow spacetraveler a cup of coffee?"

"It's afternoon my time. But I can spare you one. What's *your* name?"

"Starfinder," Starfinder says.

The star eel's galley is small and compact. It has two magnet-lock doors, one opening into a well-stocked larder, the other into a large formal dining hall. The eel-ship was meant to carry passengers, perhaps as many as a thousand. At the moment it carries exactly two.

Seated across from Ciely at the tiny galley table, Starfinder says, "Pasha means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

Solemnly, "Pasha is my life." "The whale is *my* life."

"Don't you have a name for him?"

"No."

"You should think one up." "Why, if he's going to die?"

A silence. Then, "I — I forgot." Starfinder sips his coffee.

"What happens to me when he does, Ciely?"

"Don't worry about that. Pasha and I will set you down on the nearest inhabited planet. Do you always go around dressed up to beat the band, Starfinder?"

She is referring to his white captain's uniform with its gaudy golden epaulettes and its seven tiers of ornamental ribbons. "Most of the time. It's my way of setting an example for myself."

"What's that scar on your cheek?"

"It's from a two-oh-seven radia-tion burn. A whale that wasn't quite dead gave it to me when I first

went to space. I was blind for two years. That's why I became a Jonah."

"To get even."

"Yes. I deganglioned thirty-two of them. Blew up their brains. I got even."

"If you hate them so much, why should you care what happens to this one?"

"I don't hate them any more. When I looked at the thirty-second one, I saw a face in it — you know, the way people on Earth see a face in the moon. The face I saw was mine."

"And then you quit killing them."

Starfinder nods. "I got a job as a converter in the orbital shipyards of Altair IV. I discovered that this whale was still alive and that it could communicate. It had two ganglia before it was Jonahed, only one of which had been destroyed. I told it I would repair the other if it would enter into bondage. It agreed."

"That was cruel."

Starfinder shrugs. "Maybe. But I was a slave like you, sort of. And the whale meant freedom. More than that, it provided a means of visiting the past. A live whale is a time machine, Ciely. Call Pasha off and we'll climb aboard and pay a visit to King Arthur's Court. We'll drop in on Tolstoy at *Yasnaya Polyana*. We'll watch Armstrong take his first small step on the moon."

Sadly, Ciely shakes her head. "I can't, Starfinder. This is the first time he's fed since I set him free. It may be ages before he finds another host. He may never find one."

Undaunted, Starfinder marshals his forces and moves to a point opposite the enemy's left flank. "I can understand why you're so fond of him," he says slyly. "He's a most remarkable ship. What I don't understand is how he could have been converted without first having been deganglioned."

"I can see you don't know beans about star eels," Ciely says with comic exasperation. "How could they be deganglioned when they don't have ganglia? Ordinarily all the eelers do when their raise one is hem it in till it starves to death and then tow it into the yards. Pasha's case was different. The converters ordered a live eel so they could conduct their 'noble experiment,' and the eelers captured him with grapnels and towed him in alive. The converters burned their way inside him, got to his psychomotor nucleus, which is analogous to but by no means the same thing as a whale's ganglion, and attached 'extensors' to the major motor centers. The extensors were then run back to a control panel that had been installed in the meantime, and hooked up to a series of switches. Then anybody standing at the console could make Pasha do any-thing they wanted him to just by pressing the right buttons. After I stole him and we became fast friends, I pulled all the extensors out of the switch boxes. I just couldn't stand having him enslaved like that. Now he does anything I tell him to."

"But doesn't that amount to the same thing?"

"Of course it doesn't! Because now if he wants to disobey, he can. And I didn't bind him to any agreement either, the way you did with your whale!"

Starfinder grins. "Touche!" Suddenly an anguished projection appears in his mind —

The figure's inclination from the horizontal is the whale's way of saying that it is weakening fast. However, Starfinder is not alarmed. Thanks to Ciely, he now knows how the star eel can be dislodged.

He can tell from the look of wonderment on her face that the double hieroglyph registered in her mind too. "*Deactivate all nones-sential systems, whale*, he says-pro-jects, more for her benefit than for the whale's, "*and lower interior temperature to .five degrees Cel-sius.*" Then, so the whale will not think he intends to abandon it, he adds, "*Maintain regular atmo-sphere and standard one-G.*"

The look of wonderment lingers on Ciely's face after the projection fades. "Is that his way of talking to you, Starfinder?" she asks.

"Yes. How does Pasha talk to you?"

"He doesn't. He just does what-ever I tell him to."

"Then tell him, please, to re-lease the whale."

"No."

"Then I must *make* him release it, Ceily."

"You can't. He won't obey anyone but me."

Starfinder stands up. "But I can, Ciely. I know how now."

The blue eyes widen as she grasps the connotation of "now." Then, quickly, she puts her hand over her mouth as though to prevent words already spoken from getting out. He has already ascertained that the larder is a cul-de-sac. Swiftly he steps over to the door to the dining hall, lets himself out and closes and locks it behind him. His parting glimpse of Ciely shows her still sitting at the table with her hand over her mouth. He finds it odd that she should be so slow to react. She did not strike him as a dim-witted girl. Quite the contrary, he was struck by her intelligence.

In Starfinder's day, the men and women who choose ship-building as a trade are not renowned for their creativity. In the back of each of their minds there apparently is a universal blueprint showing how a spaceship, whether it is to be converted from a whale or an eel, or built from scratch, should be laid out. Thus, for Starfinder to find the control room of the eel is a relatively simple matter.

The console is an imposing affair, its banks of buttons, gauges, dials and meters extending all the way to the ceiling. Moreover, it is built into the forward bulkhead. But Starfinder is not dismayed, either by its seeming complexity or by its seeming inaccessibility from the rear. In all probability only a small fraction of the dazzling array is related to the extensors, and no console has ever been built without its builders providing a means for a repairman to get at it from behind.

Presently his practiced eye singles out a panel whose meters have blank faces and whose dials look like dummies. Its base is flush with the deck and there is a telltale scratch on its upper right-hand corner. In seconds he finds the camouflaged catch, and a moment later pulls the panel out and sets it to one side. Then he crawls through the square aperture and stands up. He is in a cubby hole hacked out of the fibrous interior-tissue of the eel and illuminated only by the eel's inner phosphorescence.

The phosphorescence is paler than that which emanates from the transsteel-like internal tissue of the whale, but it is bright enough for him to discern the extensors. There are five of them, and they emerge from an opening at the base of the bulkhead and lie sinuously on the deck. Insofar as he can see, they are perfectly ordinary split-end impulse-cables. One is blue, one yellow, one green, one red, and one black. The switch boxes they were pulled from are of corresponding colors.

Plugging Pasha back in should be a cinch.

Impulse-cables employ the molecular relay principle and are nonconductive, and so there is no real reason to suppose the extensors are hot. Bending down, he touches the red one tentatively. Not so much as a tingle. Boldly he picks it up. It is about one inch in diameter, surprisingly flexible, surprisingly warm and surprisingly smooth. So smooth, in fact, that it slips out of his fingers and drops back to the deck.

He picks it up again. It seems to writhe in his hand. He is about to drop it of his own accord when suddenly it coils itself tightly around his right wrist.

He essays the impossible task of drawing his Weikanzer .39 with his left hand. Before he even manages to touch the holster, another extensor — the green one — coils itself around his left wrist.

The blue one coils itself around his right ankle.

The yellow one around his left.

He knows now why Ciely put her hand over her mouth. It wasn't to hold back words that had already got out; it was to stifle her laughter.

When she pulled the extensors out, the eel, to ensure that it would never be enslaved again, somehow transformed them into prosthetic tentacles with which to defend itself. Starfinder knows this now. He should have guessed it before.

And Ciely knew it all along. Perhaps she found out by accident, or perhaps she deduced it. Either way, she knew — knows — and knowing, permitted Starfinder to set forth for Samarra without a word of warning.

No doubt she also knew — knows — any member of ways to get out of the galley without using the dining-room door. If she doesn't, she can probably get Pasha to open it for her.

She may even have informed him of Starfinder's intent. "Get him!" she probably said. "He's a typical no-good member of the *haute bourgeoisie!*"

One should never underestimate either the intelligence or the capacity for cruelty of innocent children.

The eel's black tentacle feels its way up Starfinder's right leg, up his abdomen, up his sternum, and coils itself around his neck.

This is not the first time he has been to Samarra. On his previous visits he has always been able to elude Death at the last minute by dodging down a dark alley or by blending with the crowd in the market place. But this time there is no dark alley available and the market place is empty.

The black tentacle coils itself more tightly around his neck. Red-ness gathers along the edges of his vision, moves inward like a curtain closing at the end of a play. The name of the play is *Starfinder and the Star Eel*; the roaring in his ears is the sound of applause. Now the house lights start going out, one by one. The audience departs till only one playgoer remains — a girl with bobbed banded hair and eyes the hue of a flower that grows in the idyllic hills south of Swerz. She is sitting white-faced in the front row, just beyond the dimming footlights.

*"Let him go, Pasha. Let him go!"*

The prosthetic tentacles relax, fall away. Starfinder sags to his knees. He feels warm fingers mas-saging his throat, a faint softness against his cheek. Something warm and wet and exceedingly small drops upon his forehead. He hears a distant voice: "Starfinder, Starfinder, I didn't mean for him to hurt you. Oh, Starfinder, I'm so glad you're all right!"

They sit down in the pale phosphorescence with their backs against the hacked-out bulkhead. "You could have warned me," Starfinder whispers. "You had time before I closed the door."

"I thought it was funny, your thinking you could plug Pasha back in. There's a hidden trap door in the larder; so I knew I could get out. I wanted to teach you a lesson. I never dreamed you'd find the console so soon."

The anguished double hiero-glyph that appeared in their minds before appears again, this time at a more acute angle—

*Yes, whale — I know.*

The look of wonderment has returned to Ciely's face. "What is the star for, Starfinder?"

"It represents his ganglion."

"Oh."

"The place where he dreams his dreams and thinks his thoughts. Whatever they may be. The most remarkable thing about him, Ceily, isn't his size, or even his ability to dive into the past, as you might think. It's his intelligence and sensitivity. He's ten times smarter than I am, and sometimes I think he's far more civilized."

"I caught a glimpse of him just before Pasha attached himself to his back. I — I almost wished Pasha hadn't. He seemed beautiful, in a way."

"He is beautiful, Ciely."

"Is he beautiful inside?"

"Very beautiful. Would you like to see?"

"... All right."

It is cold in the belly of the whale. They can see their breaths. The phosphorescence emanating from the bulkheads has paled to a pearly glow.

Hiding his impatience, Star-finder takes the girl on an official tour. It is time-consuming and seemingly malapropos, but it is the only way he knows to save the whale. He shows her the elegant dining hall, the immaculate galley, the speckless staterooms. He es-corts her past the empty echoing holds. Together they look in upon the blooming hydroponic gardens, gaze through the cobalt lens of the duodenal window, which Starfinder himself installed, into the fiery maw where ordinary matter is trans-formed into 2-omicron-vii. They linger for a while in the well-appointed lounge while Ceily drinks a can of cherry soda. They look in upon the storeroom where enough provisions are piled to last either of them half a lifetime. They descend to the lowest deck and inspect the whale's drive tissue. They visit the gray generator com-partment, the recycling station and the atmosphere-control room. Fin-ally they ascend the forward com-panionway to the bridge where M-31 still glows in the screen like a roseate antimacassar

on the black headrest of the star-encrusted throne of God.

"Yes," Ciely murmurs, "it is a beautiful ship indeed."

"Whale."

"Yes. Whale. Do you know," she says, "I sometimes make that same mistake with Pasha. I start thinking of him as a ship. And it makes me ashamed, because he's as much of a living being as I am."

"Sometimes I think of the whale that way too," Starfinder says.

"And do you feel ashamed?"

"Yes."

"It comes as quite a surprise to me that a member of the *haute bourgeoisie* should have such refined sensibilities."

"I'm not a member any more."

"Perhaps that explains it." She looks at him beseechingly. "If I call Pasha off, will you guarantee that the whale won't hurt him?"

"I'm positive he won't, Ceily."

She faces the bridge screen, gazes out across the immensities at the pale pink antimacassar of M-31. She seems so small, standing there; so thin, so fragile. So terribly alone. She whispers the command that she projects into the star eel's nucleus, and the whispered words dissolve the silence that shrouds the bridge —

*"Release him, Pasha. And wait for me."*

The silence resolidifies. It is like the black silence that shrouds the whale and its piggy-back rider. Girl and man are immobile. The bridge screen is a black canvas upon which a cosmic artist has painted an island universe.

Presently a tremor passes through the whale. It is similar to the one that shook Starfinder out of sleep, but not as violent. After it passes, a great dark shape hurtles into view on the bridge screen, occulting M-31. The star eel has leaped free from its prey and has hurried on ahead to await its mistress.

A crepitant roar fills the belly of the whale. Starfinder has heard the sound before. It is the roar of 2-omicron-vii surging into the whale's drive tissue: the prelude to a tremendous burst of speed. *"No, whale — NO!"* he screams.

The whale does not "hear." Primitive rage seethes in its gang-lion, flows through its bulkheads and its decks. It is no longer a ship nor even a whale; it is a space beast born of the far-flung fury of the primordial explosion; the haecceity of vindictiveness. Transmuting the last of its energy into savage thrust, it hurls itself toward its hereditary enemy.

The eel has turned broadside. Desperately it tries to get out of the path of the great black beast it presumed to prey upon. But the whale's momentum triples in the space of seconds. Pasha's nearer flank looms large in the bridge screen; larger still. Abruptly there is a hideous shriek of metallic tissue being ripped asunder; a vast virtiginous shuddering. Starfinder en-circles a stanchion with one arm, Ceily with the other, as before their eyes Pasha breaks in two. Two-omicron-vii radiation escapes into space, turning the screen blue; there is a white, a blinding light. Ceily screams. The white light flashes in the bridge portholes as the disintegrating halves of Pasha flicker past. The aft-scope briefly frames a flaming mass.

The whale discerns a distant meteor swarm. It homes in on it and begins to feed.

Ciely's eyes have not moved from the bridge screen. It is dap-pled with distant stars now —spatters from the cosmic artist's brush. "Pasha," she whispers. "My Pasha."

At last she turns away. She frees herself from Starfinder's encircling arm and looks uncomprehendingly up at his face. "You said — You said —"

"I never dreamed he's react like that, Ciely. He — he had begun to seem human to me. I forgot that humanity, at best, is a surface characteristic."

She begins to cry. Her shoulders do not shake, her body does not convulse; that is the most terrible part about it. She stands there immobile, tears flowing without end, as though her grief is a fountain that will never go dry. "Pasha was all I had."

A phase of her life has come to an abrupt close. She cannot pass unscathed into the next unless the precise psychological note is sound-ed. Starfinder knows this, but he is tone-deaf and has no notion of what the note should be. He says nothing.

"All I had."

Still Starfinder says nothing. He is a clothing-store dummy. He is a wooden Indian standing outside a tobacco store.

The whale has finished feeding. It rescinds the energy restrictions imposed by the man. Warmth creeps onto the bridge. There is a distant rumble as the recycling system comes back to life.

A silence ensues. A long one. At length a rebus takes shape in Starfinder's mind. In Ciely's —

Clearly the whale is contrite. It is trying to butter up to the man. Starfinder shakes his head. "*It won't work, whale.*"

A second rebus appears:

Ciely is gazing at Starfinder. Miraculously, the flow of tears has ceased. "What does it mean, Starfinder?"

"It means that you're his `friend.' He's trying to say he's sorry, Ceily."

A third:

Starfinder translates again. "It means that both of us are his `friends.' That he and you and I are three comrades."

The look of wonderment is back on Ceily's face. It does not eclipse the grief that resides in her blue-flower eyes, but it is a beginning. Someday she must be returned to *a* Andromedae IX and her *haute bourgeoisie* parents. But not yet. Not for a long while. She needs the therapy that only the whale can provide.'

The whale, which seems to know everything else, apparently knows this also.

it "says," and the three comrades sail forth into the Sea of (space) and (time).

"... and baby makes three, in our blue heaven ...."