

# Fleas

## DEAN ING

The quarry swam more for show than for efficiency because he knew that Maels was quietly watching. Down the "Y" pool, then back, seeming to ignore the bearded older man as Maels, in turn, seemed to ignore the young swimmer.

Maels reviewed each datum: brachycephalic; under thirty years old; body mass well over the forty kilo minimum; skin tone excellent; plenty of hair. And unless Maels was deceived—he rarely was—the quarry offered subtle homosexual nuances which might simplify his isolation.

Maels smiled to himself and delivered an enormous body-stretching yawn that advertised his formidable biceps, triceps, laterals. The quarry approached swimming; symbolically, thought Maels, a breast stroke. Great.

Maels made a pedal gesture. A joke, really, since the gay world had developed the language of the foot for venues more crowded than this. The quarry bared small even teeth in his innocent approval. Better.

"I could watch you all evening," Maels rumbled, and added the necessary lie: "You swim exquisitely."

"But I can't go on forever," the youth replied in tones that were, as Maels had expected, distinctly unbutchy. "I feel like relaxing." Treading water, he smiled a plea for precise communication. Perfect.

"You can with me," Maels said, and swept himself up with an ageless grace. He towered, masculine and commanding, above the suppliant swimmer. A strong grin split his beard as Maels turned toward the dressing room. He left the building quickly, then waited.

Invisible in a shop alcove, Maels enjoyed the quarry's anxious glances from the elevated platform of the "Y" steps. Maels strolled out then into the pale light of the streetlamp and the quarry, seeing him, danced down the steps toward his small destiny.

Later, kneeling beneath tree shadows as his fingers probed the dying throat-pulse, Maels thought: *All according to formula, to the old books*. Really no problem when you have the physical strength of a mature anaconda. Hell, it wasn't even much fun for an adult predator. At this introspection Maels chuckled. Adult for several normal lifespans, once he had discovered he was a feeder. With such long practice, self-assurance in the hunt took spice from the Kill. Still probing the carotid artery, Maels thought: *Uncertainty is the oregano of pursuit*. He might work that into a scholarly paper one day.

Then Maels fed.

It was a simple matter for Maels to feed in a context that police could classify as

psychosexual. Inaccurate, but—perhaps not wholly. Survival and sexuality: his gloved hands guiding scalpel and bone saw almost by rote, Maels composed the sort of trivia his sophomores would love.

Research confirms the grimoires'

Ancient sanity;

Predation brings unending lust—

An old causality.

The hypothalamus, behind armoring bone, was crucial. Maels took it all. Adrenal medulla, a strip of mucous membrane, smear of marrow. Chewing reflectively,

Maels thought: *Eye of newt, toe of frog. A long way from the real guts of immortality.*

He had known a feeder, an academic like himself, who read so much Huxley he tried to substitute carp viscera for the only true prescription. Silly bastard had nearly died before Maels, soft-hearted Karl Maels, brought him the bloody requisites in a baggie. At some personal sacrifice, too: the girl had been Mael's best graduate student in a century.

Sacrifice, he reflected, was one criterion largely ignored by the Darwinists. They prattled so easily of a species as though the single individual mattered little. But if you are one of a rare subspecies, feeders whose members were few and camouflaged? A back-burner question, he decided. He could let it simmer. With admirable economy of motion Maels further vandalized the kill to disguise his motive. Minutes later he was in his rented sedan, en route back to his small college town. Maels felt virile, coruscating, efficient. The seasonal special feeding, in its way, had been a thing of beauty.

Ninety-three days later, Maels drove his own coupe to another city and left it, before dusk, in a parking lot. He was overdue to feed but thought it prudent to avoid patterns. The city, the time of day, even the moon phase should be different. If the feeding itself no longer gave joy, at least he might savor its planning.

He adjusted his turtleneck and inspected the result in a storefront reflection. Maybe he would shave the beard soon. It was a damned nuisance anyhow when he fed.

Maels recalled a student's sly criticism the day before: when was a beard a symbiote, and when parasitic? Maels had turned the question to good classroom use, sparking a livery debate on the definitions of parasite and predator. Maels cited the German Brown trout, predator on its own land yet not a parasite. The flea was judged parasitic; for the hundredth time Maels was forced to smile through his irritation at misquotation of elegant Dean Swift:

So, naturalists observe, a flea Hath smaller fleas that on him prey. And these have smaller fleas to bite 'em, And so proceed, *ad infinitum*.

Which only prompted the class to define parasites in terms of size. Maels accepted their judgment; trout and feeder preyed on smaller fry, predators by spurious definition.

Comfortably chewing on the trout analogs, Maels cruised the singles bars through their happy hour. He nurtured his image carefully, a massive gentle bear of a man with graceful hands and self-deprecating wit. At the third spa he maneuvered, on his right, a pliable file clerk with adenoids and lovely skin. She pronounced herself simply thrilled to meet a real, self-admitted traveling salesman. Maels found her rather too plump for ideal quarry, but no matter: she would do. He felt pale stirrings of excitement and honed them, titillated them. Perhaps he would grant her a sexual encounter before he fed. Perhaps.

Then Karl Maels glanced into the mirror behind the bar, and the pliant clerk was instantly and brutally forgotten. He sipped bourbon and his mouth was drier than before as he focused on the girl who had captured the seat to his left.

It was not merely that she was lovely. By all criteria she was also flawless quarry. Maels fought down his excitement and smiled his best smile. "I kept your place," he said with just enough pretended gruffness.

"Am I all that predictable?" Her voice seemed to vibrate in his belly. He estimated her age at twenty-two but, sharing her frank gaze, elevated that estimate a bit.

Maels wisely denied her predictability, asked where she found earrings of beaten gold aspen leaves, and learned that she was from Pueblo, Colorado. To obtain a small commitment he presently said, "The body is a duty, and duty calls. Will you keep my place?"

The long natural lashes barely flickered, the chin rose and dropped a minute fraction. Maels made his needless roundtrip to the men's room, but hesitated on his return. He saw the girl speak a bit crossly to a tall young man who would otherwise have taken Maels' seat. Maels assessed her fine strong calves, the fashionable wedge heels cupping voluptuous high insteps. His palms were sweating.

Maels waited until the younger man had turned away, then reclaimed his seat. After two more drinks he had her name, Barbara, and her weakness, seafood; and knew that he could claim his quarry as well.

He did not need to feign his easy laugh in saying, "Well, now you've made me ravenous. I believe there's a legendary crab cocktail at a restaurant near the wharf. Feeling like exploring?"

She did. It was only a short walk, he explained, silently adding that a taxi was risky. Barbara happily took his arm. The subtle elbow pressures, her matching of his stride, the increasing frequency of hip contact were clear messages of desire. When Maels drew her toward the fortuitous schoolyard, Barbara purred in pleasure. Moments later, their coats on an improvised couch, they knelt in mutual exploration, then lay together in the silent mottled shadows.

He entered her cautiously, then profoundly, gazing down at his quarry with commingled lust and hunger. Smiling, she undid her blouse to reveal perfect breasts.

She moved against him gently and, with great deliberation, thrust his sweater up from the broad striated rib-cage. Then she pressed erect nipples against his body. Maels cried out once.

When European gentlemen still wore rapiers, Maels had taken a blade in the shoulder. The memory flickered past him as her nipples, hypodermic-sharp, incredibly elongated, pierced him on lances of agony.

Skewered above her, Maels could not move. Indeed, he did not lose his functional virility, as the creature completed her own pleasure and then, grasping his arms, rolled him over without uncoupling. He felt tendons snap in his forearms but oddly the pain was distant. He could think clearly at first. Maels thought: *How easily she rends me*. She manipulated him as one might handle a brittle doll.

Maels felt a warm softening in his guts with a growing anaesthesia. Maels thought: *The creature is consuming me as I watch*.

Maels thought: *A new subspecies?* He wondered how often her kind must feed. *A very old subspecies?* He saw her smile.

Maels thought: *Is it possible that she feeds only on feeders? Does she read my thoughts?*

"Of course," she whispered, almost lovingly.

Some yards away, a tiny animal scabbled in the leaves.

He thought at her: "... *and so on, ad infinitum. I wonder what feeds on you...*"