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Prologue

The Man in the Moon

The spacewhale was sighted at 0616 hours; at 0619 hours the *Greenlight's* ventral locks divided and spacewhaleboat #21 dropped upon the ebony lap of space. At the controls sat John Starfinder, spacewhaler 1st class, known in the jargon of the trade as a "Jonah." Next to him in the three-person cockpit sat the other two members of the spacewhaleboat crew, whose names, along with his, had appeared that morning on the *Greenlight's* roster screen: Naishi No-Kue, spacewhaler 2nd class, known as a "Jonahess," and Trey Kesselman, copilot and harpooner's mate 1st class.

A word about the *Greenlight*: Like most modern space vessels of its class, it had once been a living spacewhale, although its relatively symmetrical lines, its smooth hull and its tiers of portsopes seemingly belied the fact. Now, of course, it was dead—killed long ago by a Jonah, or Jonahs, and towed into the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar**** (Ghaul), where the OrbShipCo converters, whose expertise was equaled only by that of their EelConCo counterparts in the orbital star-eel shipyards of Maarken's Star***** (Renaissance), effected the marvelous metamorphosis.

The spacewhale in the 21's viewscreen had yet to undergo such a metamorphosis. At its present distance it looked far more like an asteroid than a spaceship, and its surface features brought to mind those of a small moon. But it was neither an asteroid nor a moon. It was an organic-metallic life form that propelled itself by means of interior "drive tissue" analogous to the flukes of a marine whale.

Its habitat—space-time—was analogous (at least in spacewhalers' minds) to a sea. A sea whose "surface" represented the present, and whose "depths," the past. . . .

The Space-Time Sea ...

It had been taken unawares, this whale had, this whale that, like its fellows, had never harmed a hair on mankind's head. It had been caught "napping," although spacewhales did not nap in the accepted sense of the word. Now, cognizant of the approaching spacewhaleboat, it began accelerating.

Instantly, Starfinder doubled the 21's energy-drive ratio. Beside him, Naishi No-Kue said shrilly, "That's not good enough. We've got to overtake it before it dives!"

He doubled the e-d ratio again. As he did so, he felt the girl's gaze touch his right cheek where the star-shaped 2-omicron-vii scar was. This was the first time their names had appeared simultaneously on the roster, and they knew each other only by sight. Like most neo-Japanese women, she was big-breasted, narrow of waist and wide of hips. Her blue-black hair was coiffed like a waterfall that fell on either side of her round, full face and down to her elaborate eyebrows. She was wearing a nape-to-knee shift and black kensi boots.

Kesselman, whose name had also appeared with Starfinder's for the first time, said, "Get the hell in there before it's too late. Give me one good shot at least!"

Starfinder upped the e-d ratio just enough to bring the spacewhaleboat within harpoon range, then synched the craft's acceleration with the whale's. It was up to Kesselman now to harpoon it before it dived. If he failed, they would lose it, because, although its "dive time" would equal the time that would pass in the present, "lateral drift" alone would cause it to resurface far from its "dive point," the distance depending on the velocity and depth of the dive. If it chose, it could abet the lateral drift by diving "diagonally," and resurface light-years away.

It loomed now in the 21's viewscreen like an awesome gray cliff, its innumerable meteoroid scars resembling the huge pockmarks of some dread disease. Starlight rained upon it from a thousand sides. From vagabond stars traveling all alone. From a Camelot-shaped constellation seemingly mere parsecs away. From a stockinglike trail of stars affixed like a pennant to one of "Camelot's" towers. From a tremendous "tree of space" upon one of whose bright "branches" the *Greenlight*, with its towlined catch of dead whales stretching behind it, seemed to hang like a bizarre samara.

Kesselman's fingers played a soundless arpeggio on the harpoon console, and the 21 shuddered from the bow cannon's response. The harpoon, trailing its silvery de-energizing cable, arced from the spacewhaleboat's prow and embedded itself in the whale's right flank, sinking its superalloy roots deep into the transsteel tissue beneath the pockmarked "skin." The whale had already begun fading from view. Quickly Starfinder deactuated the 21's drive, and an instant later the whale dived, pulling the spacewhaleboat after it.

The true nature of the force that enabled spacewhales to travel into the past was unknown. Astrophysicists had labeled it "2-omicron-vii," and knew that it was somehow created in a whale's open-hearthlike stomach out of the various elements scattered thinly throughout space and present in the small asteroids such creatures also fed on. But the force itself, beyond the fact that it represented a new form of energy, was unknown. Whatever it was, it did not enable a spacewhale to travel into the future. In this respect, the cosmos had apparently put its foot down. When a spacewhale resurfaced, it resurfaced at a point in time that equaled its dive point plus the time consumed by its dive, or series of dives. Whatever amount of time it may have spent in a past age, or ages, did not count. And if it dived "diagonally"—i.e., through both time and space—the same law held true, regardless of the spatial distance between its dive and resurfacing points. With respect to future travel, at least, spacewhales were as impotent as their hunters were.

Kesselman leaned forward and activated the de-energizer, sending a flow of theta/41/ mu particles through the cable, the harpoon and the harpoon's roots into the whale's subtissue. Then he leaned back comfortably in his cushioned seat and rested his hand on Naishi No-Kue's knee. "Time to relax, and all that sort of thing," he said.

She pushed his hand away. "I am relaxed."

She was looking at Starfinder. Starfinder was looking at the stars. They had begun to change, to shift position. Some were fading, others growing brighter. One of "Camelot's" fortress walls was crumbling, another was awry. The pennant was no more; the "tree of space" boasted fewer "branches." The *Greenlight* was gone.

The effect would have been different—or so the theory went—if the whale had been diving at a slower rate of speed. Inching into the past, instead of plunging into it. But harpooned whales dived both fast and deep. Some whalers said that this was because they panicked: others said that they were merely trying to dislodge the harpoon. But no one really knew, and no one really cared.

Certainly Starfinder didn't.

He saw that his hands had begun to tremble. He was not surprised. The trembling was in no way related to physical fear. He would have been grateful if it had been. It was part of a familiar syndrome. Bitterly he thrust his hands into the pockets of his whaler's jacket so they wouldn't betray him. He'd hoped the most recent series of brain blasts he'd undergone at the company clinic would have had a more

lasting effect.

Naishi No-Kue said, "This is only your third or fourth time out from the *Greenlight*, isn't it."

He nodded. "All false sightings." (This was not unusual: sighting sensors could not detect sentience, and Jonahs spent half their time pursuing asteroids.)

"You were transferred from the *Meritorious*, weren't you."

He did not bother to nod this time. She was making statements of fact, not asking questions. "A month ago." To himself, he added, *By way of the clinic*. "My personal history seems to be up for grabs."

"There aren't any secrets on board a whaler—you must know that, Starfinder."

He knew it well enough. Nevertheless, there was one on board the *Greenlight*. Why he'd been transferred. Only the ship's surgeon knew the answer to that. And himself, of course.

Again, he felt the girl's gaze on his right cheek. Annoyed, he said, "You find my scar interesting?"

"You've got to admit it's an unusual one."

"It's from a two-oh-seven burn. I was a cabin boy on an ore whaleship that hadn't been properly deganglioned." He didn't want to talk about himself, but the words came rushing out of their own accord. "The ship was still one-tenth alive. The ganglion cavity had been converted into the crew's quarters, and one night it began to irradiate. Eighteen crew members were killed outright, a dozen others died later on. I lost my sight. I was blind for two years. And do you know what I did during those two years? I listened to tapes of classical literature. Tapes of all the books I'd never read when I could see. I wanted to get even with my eyes for forsaking me. But all the while I 'read' I knew it wasn't really my eyes I wanted to get even with but the diabolical species that had seared their retinas, and when I regained my sight I became a Jonah."

He felt Kesselman's gaze upon his cheek now, and he was furious with himself for his atypical outburst, even though he knew it resulted from an impulsive urge to divert his thoughts from the trembling of his hands.

Kesselman said, "I've never seen it fail. All you guys think you're something special because you kill whales, and if you don't have a romantic past you invent one."

Starfinder looked at him. "You kill them too."

"The hell I do! I harpoon them."

"What's the difference between harpooning them and blowing up their brains?"

Kesselman opened his mouth to reply, then closed it, for at that moment the spacewhale came out of its dive and surfaced.

In space, there is little difference between today and yesterday. The stars move through the millennia, but the immensities are such that nothing ever seems basically altered. On the surface, perhaps, but not underneath. "Camelot" now resembled macrocosmic Dutchman's breeches, and the "tree of space" no longer grew. Completing the new panorama were a "boar," a "sword" and a "steepled church."

"What does the chronograph say?" Starfinder asked Kesselman.

The chronograph was a compact, self-programming Velachian IX computer that threw out far-reaching sensor beams and translated their data into Earth-orbit years, employing the ancient B.C.-A.D. division mankind had yet to abandon. Kesselman peered sullenly at the readout screen located just to the right of the harpoon console. "B.C. 1,001, 162."

In Starfinder's mind a hirsute brute crawled out of a noisome cave, dragging a cudgel. This before Naishi NoKue, who had total recall and who, as part of her training, had scanned the whole of recorded and extrapolated history, recited, "Ice sheets cover most of Europe and North America. Diverse plants and animals have come into being. Farther south, Australopithecus has appeared on the scene.' "

"We're parsecs from Earth and not one of us has ever set foot on the damned planet!" Kesselman exploded. "What in hell do we care what's happening there?"

"For one thing," Naishi No-Kue said, "it's the only touchstone we've got at this particular moment. For another, it's the official galactic clock, and all chronographs, including this one, are attuned to it. And for still another, I happen to have set foot on it." She turned toward Starfinder. "How about you,

Starfinder? Have you set foot on it?"

"No," Starfinder said.

"That's odd. I'd have gone so far as to say you were born there."

"I was born on Dirt."

"That would be Milton with two asterisks. Munich 14050 Two, in the old catalog. Well anyway, I was close."

"Where were you born, Naishi No-Kue?" Kesselman asked.

"Rakuen. I should think that would have been obvious."

"Ancient Japan's attempt at Utopia," Kesselman murmured. "Is it as paradisiacal as they pretend, Naishi No-Kue?"

"It stinks." Naishi No-Kue again turned toward Starfinder. "How about Dirt? Does that stink too?"

"To high heaven."

In his mind the brute with the cudgel had stood erect, shouldered the weapon and begun descending a rock-strewn slope. An icy wind raised gooseflesh on his naked arms and legs, but he paid no heed. At length he reached the foot of the slope and set forth across a broad valley. In the distance, trees showed, and beyond the trees, an expanse of dolomite cliffs. There were caves in the cliffs, he knew, and in the caves, perhaps women—

"I'm from Plenty," Kesselman said to Naishi No-Kue. "Goldfire, with sixteen asterisks."

"Sixteen? Imagine that!"

She got up and went into the rear compartment to fix sandwiches. Kesselman lapsed into a resentful silence. The brute in Starfinder's mind was now halfway across the valley and the dolomite cliffs were acquiring greater detail. Through them Starfinder stared into the viewscreen. The spacewhale dominated it, the de-energizing cable trailing from its great gray body like a silver umbilical cord. Proximity gave the impression that the meteoroid pocks were festering sores, and the beauty that starlight and distance sometimes lent such creatures was totally absent.

The hatred he felt for all spacewhales lay like a lead ingot in his stomach. This one, he knew—although as yet there was no visible evidence of the fact—was dying before his eyes. The theta/41/mu particles were already filtering down through the transsteel subtissue and infiltrating the nerve-ends of the huge open-hearthlike stomach. Soon the particles would reach the stomach itself and paralyze the thermostatic organic-metallic muscles that controlled the interior temperature, and not long afterward, as the temperature rose, volcanic fissures would open up on the whale's flanks. Then deganglioning could be begun.

The scene in Starfinder's mind had altered radically. The valley was now a city street and the line of cliffs had come together and shot sharply upward into an incredibly narrow, incredibly tall building. The brute with the cudgel was now Starfinder. Starfinder dressed in summer suit-slax and wearing a radio hat with a featherlike aerial. Starfinder crossing a busy street and entering a narrow doorway at the building's base. Starfinder stepping into a cylindrical lift ...

The lift leaped aloft, bearing him to the 300th floor. He started walking down a long, featureless hall. At the end of the hall was a solitary door. His mind held back, but his body went right on moving relentlessly down the hall. He had seen the door before, but he could not remember when. Or where. Nor could he remember what lay behind it.

When he reached it, his fingers of their own volition sought and found the ice-cold knob and tried to turn it. It would not turn. The door was locked.

Relief and frustration flooded him, but the frustration was by far the stronger, and he tried to turn the knob again. Failing, he stepped back, turned sideways and crashed his right shoulder against the panels. They did not give. He began pounding on them. But the door refused to budge. . . .

The door behind the cockpit opened and Naishi No-Kue emerged, bearing sandwiches and tea. The trio ate in silence, watching the whale. Starfinder was sweating, and the trembling of his hands had grown worse. He ate his sandwich quickly so the others would not notice. He did not dare touch his tea. Kesselman kept glancing sideways at Naishi NoKue; Naishi No-Kue kept glancing sideways at Starfinder. Starfinder had eyes only for the whale.

The whale rolled, throwing the 21 into a giddy spiral, but the craft's gyrostabilizer quickly canceled the effect, and the cockpit reacquired its normal keel. Abruptly the whale dived again. . . .

And stars and blacknesses and the dawntime-daytime-dusktime-nighttime oneness of past-present-future. The years, the centuries, the millennia—the cosmic ball of yarn woven into the black sweater of space-time, star-sequined around the collar, star-sequined at the cuffs, star-spangled front and back. The sweater spacewhales wear when they plumb the deeps of death. . . .

"A .D. 1875," Kesselman announced.

"It's reversed its dive," Starfinder said. "It's trying to dislodge the harpoon."

"Fat chance."

"How many whales would you say there are, Starfinder?" Naishi No-Kue asked.

"I don't know. No one does."

"I read somewhere that there's between ten and twenty thousand."

"That's as good a guess as any."

Her gaze again rested on his 2-omicron-vii scar. "How many of them have you killed?"

"Thirty-one to date."

"He's a real old timer," Kesselman said. "Compared to him, you and I are just kids, Naishi No-Kue."

"I've helped kill ten," Naishi No-Kue said. "Does killing them ever bother you, Starfinder?"

"The only whale I ever killed is the one that blinded me."

"I just go along for the ride," Kesselman said. "But I sleep well nights. Do you, Starfinder?"

"Yes," Starfinder lied.

"So do I," Naishi No-Kue said. She touched Starfinder's wrist. "We should sleep together sometime."

Starfinder was silent. He felt her fingers moving lightly up his forearm. At length she said, "Wouldn't you like to sleep with me, Starfinder?"

"No."

He felt her fingers pause, then pull away. He heard the sudden silence of the cockpit. His answer had been a simple statement of fact, in no way meant to hurt her, certainly not meant to humiliate her. But he knew that he had erred, that he now had two enemies on board instead of only one.

The silence did not last. "What about good old A .D. 1875, Naishi No-Kue?" Kesselman asked gleefully. "What are people doing on our quaint little clock in this day and age? Fornicating, fighting and freeloading, no doubt."

For a while she made no answer. Then, closing her eyes, she recited, "Whaling a most profitable industry. Principal product: oil. This industry, as is quite often the case with industries involving slaughter of animals on a massive scale, produced in addition to its principal product innumerable monsters of human hue."

"The whales she's referring to ultimately proved to be highly intelligent," Kesselman pointed out triumphantly. "What few of them were left."

Starfinder didn't say anything. It was Naishi No-Kue's turn to level her guns. She did so: "Scuttlebutt has it that before you were transferred from the *Meritorious* you were transferred from the *Starward Ho*, and before that you were transferred from the *Nantucket*. Were you, Starfinder?"

"If Scuttlebutt says so."

She aimed and fired. "Nobody gets transferred that many times unless he's a queer."

A pulse had begun to throb in Starfinder's temple, but the throbbing was in no way related to the girl's words. He was watching the whale in the viewscreen, his practiced eye ferreting out the telltale signs of enervation: the sluggish rollings, the slight paling of the gray flanks, the vertical crevices that were beginning to appear. At length he said, as though from far away, "Or a whore like you."

The painted-on rosiness of her cheeks acquired deeper tones, and anger dulled the darkness of her eyes. But before she could strike back, Kesselman shouted, "The whale! It's going to dive again!"

They watched it gird itself for the plunge. . . .

Kesselman: "A.D. 1975."

Naishi No-Kue: " 'An era notorious for the political and intellectual hypocrisy of one of its major powers, and marked by a penchant on the part of that power's masses for televised burial rites.' "

Kesselman: "B.C. 251."

Naishi No-Kue: " 'The time of the First Punic War. The Carthaginians will be defeated and will cede part of Sicily to the Romans.' "

Kesselman: "B.C. 24,112."

Naishi No-Kue: " 'Cro-Magnon man appears upon the face of the Earth, seemingly from nowhere. He will leave his mark in cave paintings and in the mass slaughtering of wild horses.' "

In Starfinder's mind a sinewy blond savage carrying a heavy spear walked alertly along the bank of a brisk river. On either side of the river grassy plains rolled away to a cumulus-cloud-banked horizon. Presently the savage came to a shallows and forded the stream. At its deepest, the water came no higher than the crude horsehide belt encircling his waist.

He climbed the opposite bank and set forth across the grassy plain. In the distance a grove of trees grew like an island in a green sea; near the grove a number of skin tents were clustered. He made his way rapidly toward the primitive encampment, his spear gripped tightly in his right hand. As he neared the grove the scene shifted subtly. The grass became disciplined greensward: the trees and the tents came together and blended into building blocks; the blocks piled up into an incredibly narrow, incredibly tall structure, and the tall blond savage became Starfinder—Starfinder wearing summer suit-slax and a radio hat with a featherlike aerial.

When he reached the building he entered its narrow doorway and stepped into the cylindrical lift. Arriving on the 300th floor, he once again found himself walking down the long featureless hall toward the fascinating, frightening door. When he came to it he tried to turn the knob and when it would not turn he crashed his shoulder against the panels. Again and again and again. But the door refused to give, and he began pounding on the panels with his fists, and as he pounded he sat sweating in the cockpit of the 21, trying to calm the pulse that beat ever more furiously in his temple, trying to still the trembling of his hands. *This time it will be different*, he told himself desperately, not quite certain of what he meant. *This time it must be different. This time I cannot afford to lose control. . . .*

The time of Starfinder was a time of taking. The galaxy had become man's orchard and he had plucked the big ripe planets one by one. He had gorged himself on the viands thereof and he had drunk the wine of the stars. Long ago his god said, "Take," and he took. First it was only the fishes of the sea and the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. But as his horizons expanded so too did the meaning of the word "take." Now "take" meant everything he could get his hands on.

"I think we can take it now," Starfinder said.

The whale had surfaced B.C. 95,221,875. The swift succession of dives, combined with the final deep one, had depleted the last of its energy, and it hung immobile against a black backdrop pinpricked with nameless stars. Its flanks were raw with fissures, some of which glowed an angry crimson. It hung now like a great dark derelict adrift in an indifferent sea, never to be reborn, as was its birthright, through fission; doomed, when dead, to be regurgitated back to the present in a single cosmic belch by a universe already outraged by its unorthodox wanderings; doomed to become a passenger liner or a freighter or a whaler, its drive tissue supplanted by an engine men could understand, its "skin" machined away and its subcutaneous transsteel tissue planed into a semblance of symmetry and burnished till it reflected the farthest star; its ability to travel into the past sacrificed upon the altar of necessity and lost forever, because only dead whales could be commanded by men, and dead whales told no tales.

" 'This is the time of the dying of the dinosaurs,' " Naishi No-Kue was intoning. " *'Tyrannosaurus*

rex has adapted himself to death, and the little mammals that once hid from his hideous tread multiply upon the face of the Earth.' "

Starfinder had got to his feet. Naishi No-Kue followed suit. "There's no need for you to come along," he said quickly. "I'm used to working alone."

"Company regulations stipulate unequivocally that there must be two Jonahs on a deganglioneing raft!"

"It's a paper regulation. The only reason the whaling industry made it was to get the union off their backs."

"Paper or not, it still applies."

"I don't *want* you to come along!"

"You just try and stop me!"

He sighed. "You don't understand."

He himself did not truly understand.

If only he could remember. . . .

He pressurized the raft and stepped over to the deck lock, Naishi No-Kue one step behind him. Before opening the lock he said to Kesselman, "Bring the boat in as close as you can and as far forward on the flank as the harpoon line will permit."

Kesselman nodded, all business now. Starfinder opened the lock and dropped lightly into the raft. Naishi No-Kue followed, reached up and closed the lock behind her. The raft was a 10' x 10' x 10' cube attached magnetically to the bottom of the 21. Its six surfaces were transparent and it was as though the Jonah and the Jonahess and their equipment were suspended in space. Jutting from the raft's forward wall was a narrow metal apron upon which sat a metal chest. Above the chest were a pair of steel "hands" attached to two articulated steel arms. The manipulation panel was located on the inside wall. Starfinder positioned himself before it. Beside him, Naishi No-Kue seated herself in front of the raft's control console.

Centered high on the back wall was what at first glance appeared to be a framed holograph of a sullen young man. Actually it was a two-way viewscreen with Kesselman's face in it.

Numerous "new" constellations patterned the heavens. A "cradle," a "cross," a "diadem" and a "javelin." A "roe," a "necklace," a "swan" and a "boot." Starfinder had no eyes for any of them; he had eyes only for the whale. It consumed both the heavens and his retinas as Kesselman eased the 21 in closer. More fissures had appeared. Molten lava oozed from them like blood. Starfinder's hatred grew as the intervening distance continued to shrink. His head ached with hatred. His fingers trembled with it. The flank of the whale became a lofty cliff, the fissures, narrow caves. Beyond the mouths of those that had cooled, pearly phosphorescence could be seen.

The "picture on the wall" spoke. "I'm as far in and as far forward as the slack will allow. Better seal and detach."

Naishi No-Kue's fingers struck a pair of chords. Absently Starfinder noticed that her knuckles had dimples in them.

"Done," she said.

The raft drifted away from the 21 and hung like a cubiform bubble just off the whale's starboard flank. Naishi No-Kue's fingers continued to chord, and Starfinder recognized the soundless composition: Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*. The raft, responding, edged closer to the flank, turning till they faced it. Starfinder pointed to a fissure wider than the others. "That one."

She eased the raft between the lips, into the whale. The lips had cooled to a pale pink, but the walls beyond them were a dull red. Once the transsteel subtissue lay behind them, the redness disappeared. Now the transsteel walls threw forth the lovely phosphorescence that the interior of spacewhales—and spacewhaleships as well—were famous for. The "undying light" that no one, including the female technicians who staffed the orbiting *astrocetacea* laboratories of Ghaul, could account for.

The walls grew farther apart, and the raft, still responding to the "*Prelude*," moved into a large cavity. It was now possible to tell up from down, for the cavities, or chambers, of a spacewhale were invariably concave of ceiling and flat of deck—almost as though the species had anticipated its fate and prepared for it in advance. This particular cavity was typical. It gave into another like it, and that one into

a third. Spacewhales, while aptly likened to the marine whale, in many respects resembled the chambered nautilus far more.

"They tell me," Naishi No-Kue said out of a clear blue sky, "that on Dirt, people have a thing about sex. That they bring up their children to hate it. The way the ancient Puritans did."

Startled, Starfinder stopped pounding on the door in his mind and stepped back into reality. Or was it reality? For a terrifying instant he wasn't sure.

The cavity the raft had just entered had two exits. "Take the one on the right," he ordered. A quantity of his disorientation left him. Once inside a whale he could find the ganglion in half the time ordinary Jonahs required. He was good at what he did. Had he not been, the company wouldn't have gone to such great lengths to keep him on the active list.

Now the raft entered an exquisite passage that would someday be a ship's corridor. It led to another sequence of cavities. "Is what they say true, Starfinder?" Naishi NoKue asked. "Is that why you hate sex?"

He knew that she was trying to provoke him less from a need to get even than from a need to hide her nervousness, but the knowledge meant nothing to him. She meant nothing to him. Nothing meant anything to him. Except the door ...

He saw that the phosphorescence was taking on a bluish cast. Naishi No-Kue noticed too. "We're getting close," she said.

There was fear in her voice. With him, fear had never been a factor. Or if it had been, he could not remember.

He no longer needed to give Naishi No-Kue directions. The deepening blueness pointed the way. The blueness was 2-omicron-vii emanating from the ganglion. A whale's ganglion, so long as its store of 2-omicron-vii remained intact, went right on living after the rest of the leviathan was dead. Even after the whale lost awareness and to all intents and purposes *was* dead. To be put completely out of commission, the ganglion had to be destroyed.

The blue radiation through which the raft was passing was lethal, and direct exposure to it would have killed the man and the girl instantly. But the raft was designed to hold Death at bay. Despite Death's proximity—possibly because of it—Naishi No-Kue continued to condemn Starfinder's virility. "With a dozen Jonahs to choose from," she said, "the computer had to go and team me with a self-righteous Puritan from Dirt! I should have stayed on Rakuen!"

Starfinder barely heard her. There was a roaring in his mind now, a roaring comprised of the pounding in his tern-pies and the pounding of his fists upon the door. Then the raft rounded a turn in the passage and emerged in a cavity larger than those it had passed through till now, and a blueness of an intensity that paled the blueness of the passage burst around them. Its source—the ganglion—loomed before them.

It was true that Dirt society's attitude toward sex was marked by extreme austerity, but that austerity did not stem from the ancient Puritan ethos. The early settlers of Dirt comprised a cult known as the Neo-Essenian Church, and their descendants had neither modified nor deviated from the asceticism on which the Church was grounded. Christ was seen as an Essenian Monk who loathed sex, and while the inhabitants of Dirt could not properly be called Essenes, they lived like them (to the extent at least that two different sexes could), copulating only grudgingly and for no other reason (they maintained) than to perpetuate the order and to provide labor for the commune. Children were considered communal property, and the communal schools they attended from the age of three to the age of fifteen were strictly segregated as to sex and functioned as home, church and classroom. Education excluded more than it included, concentrating on the past at the expense of the present and avoiding, whenever possible, those branches of knowledge that conflicted with Neo-Essenian socioreligious beliefs. If simplified courses in such relatively modern subjects as anthropology and Jungian psychology were part of the curriculum it was only because the order wanted its future torch bearers to be reasonably well acquainted with those aspects of scientific thought they would be required most to disbelieve. After completing their education, the male children were put to work in the communal fields and the female children in the communal

kitchens. Males reached legal adulthood at age eighteen, females at age seventeen. Marriage was then permitted, but the two partners were allowed to live together only when the population figures of a given commune justified adding new members, and then only till those members had been added. All marriages were terminated at ages forty and thirty-eight respectively, and the two former partners were then accorded the privilege of serving their commune in a religious capacity, the males acquiring the title of Monk and the females the title of Monkess. Monks and Monkesses lived on nuts and berries, prayed thrice in the morning, thrice in the afternoon and thrice in the evening, washed themselves in cold water four times each day, and went about barefoot with forbidding expressions on their faces, clad in gray, ankle-length cowls.

At the age of seventeen Starfinder had taken a good hard look at the field of corn he was hoeing, had thrown down his hoe and cut off cross-country to the nearest spaceport. He'd hitched a ride on a shuttleship and stowed away on a freighter just before it set photic sail for Thule**.

He'd been as unaware of the stowaway in his mind as the captain of the freighter had been of the stowaway in his ship.

The ganglion was like an enormous rose.

A blue rose.

It filled half the chamber, its petals nearly touching the walls. It was as though the chamber were a garden and the rose had grown out of its rich soil during a long and lovely spring filled with warm and enriching rains.

It was here that the whale's memories were stored; it was here that it made its decisions; it was here that it controlled its massive body; it was here that its ears and eyes were located—the omni-audio-vision that encompassed an area with a radius measurable in parsecs.

The controls of the manipulation panel resembled a pair of flexible metal gloves. Starfinder slipped his trembling hands into them. As always, he was struck by the beauty of the "rose"; but the beauty did not dim the memory of his blindness, the time of darkness when, ironically, he "read" all the books he'd never got around to reading when he could see.

"The stem," he said to Naishi No-Kue. "Get as close to it as you can."

She lowered the raft to within inches of the chamber floor, then eased it forward beneath the overhanging petals. Her face was blue in the radiance of the "rose." Starfinder lowered his exterior hands to the metal chest on the apron, disengaged the catch that held the lid in place and raised the lid. By the time Naishi No-Kue had the raft in position he had withdrawn the first charge. *Neo-plastique*. He affixed it to the stem.

Slowly, deliberately, he affixed three more charges. "That's enough!" Naishi No-Kue said shrilly. "Most Jonahs only use two!"

"This Jonah always makes sure." He affixed a fifth charge.

"You fool! You'll blow us up along with its brains!"

"She's right, Starfinder!" Kesselman, who had maintained a discreet silence up till now, shouted from the viewscreen. "Get the raft the hell out of there, Naishi No-Kue!"

She was already backing it from beneath the petals. Now she turned it around and propelled it out of the chamber and into the passage from which they had entered. Starfinder did not demur. He had removed his hands from the "gloves" and stood there dully, staring through the transparent wall at the fading blueness, listening to the roaring in his mind.

When the blueness was gone from around them and the phosphorescence emanating from the walls again held sway, he said, "That's far enough. We'll kill it from here."

They were in a cavity not far from the fissure by which they had entered. Naishi No-Kue, calmer now, stopped the raft and turned it till they faced the way they had come. "You're certain we're safe?"

"I'm certain," Starfinder said.

His hands were bleeding from pounding on the metal door, but he ignored the blood and brought his right forefinger to bear upon a tiny scarlet switch to the right of the manipulation panel. He pushed it a quarter of the way down, then a half, then all the way. Finally he brought it back to its original position.

Then they waited.

There could be no sound, of course.

Gradually the phosphorescence lost its steady glow and began to vacillate. Then it began to flicker, alternating between intense brightness and near darkness, like a strobe. Some spacewhalers said that this was the way spacewhales screamed.

Blue shards began bombarding the raft. It trembled with every impact. "You overkilled!" Naishi No-Kue screamed. "You wanted us to die too!"

The "picture on the wall" came to life again. "He's insane, Naishi No-Kue! Get back on board the second the whale resurfaces!"

Starfinder, oblivious to both their words, was staring through the wall of the raft at the wall of the chamber. But the wall of the chamber was as invisible to him as the wall of the raft, and he was seeing nothing but the door—the fascinating frightening door that he somehow had to open, now, while the whale was dying. His hands tore wildly at the knob till the flesh fell from his fingers. He crashed his shoulder against the panels. Again and again and again.

He had to get inside. He *had* to.

Subtly his awareness expanded to take in the girl beside him.

Perhaps she could help.

He faced her in the psychedelic phosphorescence. When she saw his eyes she began to scream.

Why yes—she was the answer. Why didn't it dawn on him before? She was the room. The room beyond the door. And she was the door too.

It was so simple, really. He couldn't understand why it had taken so long for him to perceive the truth.

He took a step toward her. She got to her feet, began backing away. "Keep away from her, Starfinder!" Kesselman screamed. "If you harm her, I'll kill you!"

Starfinder did not hear. He heard nothing but the screams of the girl. She continued to back away from him till she came up against the raft's starboard wall. She slid along it, only to trap herself in a corner. He could hear the screams of the whale now, as well as hers. When she fought him, he backhanded her across the face and she went down, Starfinder on top of her. He tore off her knee-to-nape shift. He ripped away her underthings. Her screams became one with the whale's. He found the knob at last and turned it. The door opened and he entered. The room was filled with thick blackness, interspersed with multicolored lights. They whirled wildly, obscuring his vision. But not for long. At length he saw the room's sole occupant. "Greetings," Death said. "We meet again."

At that moment the whale was regurgitated to the surface of the Space-Time Sea, the 21 along with it.

Kesselman shot Starfinder seconds after the raft redocked with the 21. He used a 436 Wenz and Arbinger. Starfinder welcomed the wound, but Kesselman was a poor shot, and the wound was only a minor one.

The ship's surgeon visited Starfinder in sick bay shortly after the *Greenlight* set course for the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar****. Except for Starfinder, sick bay was empty.

The ship's surgeon redressed the wound. "How do you feel?" he asked.

". . . All right."

The ship's surgeon had read *War and Peace*, and every time he looked into Starfinder's eyes he thought of Prince Andrey coming back from death and yet not quite back from it. *My God!* he thought, *what are we doing to this man?* Aloud, he said, "I can have a holo-cube brought in, if you want. Strictly ship's programs, but not the worst brainfare in the galaxy."

"I'd prefer to do without one."

We know he's sick, the ship's surgeon's mind went on, *and we know that his sickness is only partially the result of his deganglionic whales. And yet we ignore the basic cause and go on blasting his brain between seizures so that he can go on helping to fill the company's coffers, and I stand here knowing this, and by my silence condoning it.*

"Is the girl all right?" Starfinder asked.

"She'll live. Right now, she's living it up. In the ship's bar. The captain's already paid her off—in behalf of the company, of course."

Starfinder frowned. "There were others. I know there were. But I can't seem to remember."

Condoning it and going right on playing the game ...

"There were three of them. The fate you accorded them wouldn't be classified as worse than death either, so I wouldn't worry about them. Ask, and you shall receive—in one way or another."

"And Kesselman?"

"He's back on duty—with strict orders to stay away from you. I wouldn't advise you to bring charges against him."

"I'm not going to."

"There won't be any repercussions. The incident was kept out of the log."

Starfinder fell silent. His limbs were heavy; so was his whole body. A great weariness, a terrible despair, lay upon him like the weight of a whale. He forgot momentarily that the ship's surgeon was in the bay. Then, remembering, he asked, "Are there others like me?"

The ship's surgeon shook his head. "No. You're unique—both in your expertise and your psychosis. Why don't you quit, Starfinder?"

"I can't."

"For God's sake, quit, go back to wherever you came from and see a good mind man!"

"No."

The ship's surgeon sighed. Well anyway, he'd tried. "Then it looks like you're in for another series of brain blasts."

"So be it."

The ship's surgeon looked once more into Starfinder's eyes. He looked quickly away. "I'll drop by to see you tomorrow," he said, and left the bay.

Alone, Starfinder lay for a long while without moving. The problem now was not how to open the door but how to close it.

At length he got up and moved painfully over to the sick-bay portscope. He wanted to see the whale. His whale. He wanted to gloat over it.

There was no need to adjust the portscope. The *Greenlight* was still in the initial stage of acceleration, and the towlined catch of dead whales trailed back in a great semicircle, those last in line traveling parallel to—and in the opposite direction from—the ship. Starfinder's whale was directly opposite the scope, perhaps three miles away.

He watched it as it passed. Starlight rained down upon it from "Camelot," from the tremendous "tree of space" ... and the fissures now were no more than faint vertical lines, the meteoroid pocks dimples of light and shadow. And as he watched the whale pass he saw a face in it in much the same way his remote ancestors saw a face in their terrestrial moon. But this was different. This face was not a universal face, not a conventional "man in the moon" . . . And suddenly he heard the door slam shut and felt the lead ingot in his stomach deliquesce and the heaviness vanish from his limbs and the weight vanish from his shoulders, and he knew that from that moment on he would kill no more whales. For the face in the whale was his own.

And lo! A new door opened. On hills and meadows green with spring's sweet breath, on skies scoured free of winter's grime, on distant, shining cities. On life and love and laughter. He stepped across the threshold—alone, he thought. But he was wrong. The stowaway from Dirt went with him.

The Orbital Shipyards of Farstar**** are both a source of beauty and a source of prosperity to the planet's inhabitants. The beauty derives from the reflective quality of the orbiting spacewhales being converted into spaceships, the prosperity from the employment afforded by the conversion process and from its perennial need of supplies.

Although the number of these huge, asteroidlike creatures varies, there are seldom fewer than twelve of them in orbit at any given time, for generally as soon as one of them becomes a full-fledged ship and is de-orbited, another arrives to take its place. The night skies of Farstar**** are the richer for their presence. Like bright Venuses they rise at uneven intervals in the east, climb rapidly to zenith, then slide down the dark slope of the heavens and set in the west. The interested observer can watch the passage of these lovely moonstars the whole night through, and speculate, if he is so inclined, on how far into the past they have traveled. The present, as any spacewhaler will tell you, is nothing more than the surface of the Space-Time Sea. A living spacewhale can dive beneath the surface whenever it wishes and sojourn *in tempus perdu*, can plunge, in fact, all the way to the bottom of the Sea.

The shipyards are sometimes referred to as the Spacewhale Graveyard, but in the connotative sense of the term this is a misnomer. Spacewhales do not come here of their own accord, or because they wish to die. They are brought here by the whalers who have pursued them and by the Jonahs who have deganglioned them. They do not die in the Shipyards. They are dead upon arrival.

At least they are presumed to be.

The curtain rises upon a man who once upon a time was a Jonah himself. *Name:* John Starfinder. *Age:* 33. *Birthplace:* Dirt. *Race:* Naturalized Ghaulian. *Occupation:* Drive Tissueman.

The scene is the belly of one of the orbiting spacewhales. It is not one of the whales Starfinder killed, for he ceased killing them long ago. No, the "crime" of killing this whale lies on another Jonah's doorstep.

The scene is a pleasant one because conversion is close to completion. The whale is almost a full-fledged ship. Its honeycombed interior has been converted into compartments, holds, corridors and companionways. Additionally, its fissured and meteoroid-pocked "skin" has been machined down to its transsteel subtissue. The volcanic crevices in its sides have been sealed and its entire exterior has been burnished to the smoothness of a woman's thigh. The hyperacetylene torches of the converters have given the asteroidlike body a semblance of symmetry, and tiers of portsopes embellish the once-barren flanks. There is a starboard boat bay that already boasts a multipurpose life raft—a Staranger IV, no less. Artificial gravity, a hydroponically enriched atmosphere and a 70° Fahrenheit temperature now supplant the near weightlessness, the vacuum and the absolute zero that originally prevailed.

An odd image has appeared in Starfinder's mind and caused him to pause in the phosphorescence-illuminated corridor along which he was walking. The corridor runs the entire length of the fourth and lowest deck, and gives access to the forward hold, the gray generator compartment, the machine shop, the recycling station, the atmosphere-control chamber, the hydroponic garden and miscellaneous storage areas. It also gives access to the drive-tissue chamber where Starfinder has been working all day preparing the whale's "flukes" for final linkage to the huge Einstein-Rosen engine scheduled to be installed one week hence.

The image that appeared in his mind can be indicated thus:

((*))

Starfinder is nonplused. He was thinking of the angel Gloria Wish when the image came into being, and he can see no connection between ((*)) and his thoughts.

Presently ((*)) fades from his mind, and he resumes walking down the corridor toward the midship companionway. The twelve-hour workday is done, and like the Biblical Jonah he is eager to be regurgitated from the belly of the whale. Eager to see the angel Gloria Wish and ride down with her on a starbeam to the port city of Swerz, which he has come to call home.

Perhaps this is why the image appeared in his mind. Because he is tired from too much work and from too much Gloria Wish. Perhaps this is why it appears again, this time in duplicate:

((*))

Again Starfinder comes to a halt. He is abreast of the machine-shop door; the base of the companionway is just ahead and to his right. He knows fear now, as well as mystification. He had good reason once before to doubt his sanity; now he doubts it again.

The double ((*)) does not linger, but no sooner does it fade than it is replaced by another. This one is slightly different:

Moreover, words accompany it; but the words come from Starfinder's mind:

*Morning a thousand Roses brings, you say;
Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday?
And this first Summer month that brings the
Rose Shall take Jamshyd and Kaikobád away.*

The first image, then, denotes a rose; the second, two roses; and the third, a dead rose and a living one. Starfinder's subconscious knows what the hieroglyphs stand for, if Starfinder does not.

His subconscious supplies another clue:

Roses are blue.

He is staring at the machine-shop door now. The machine shop formerly constituted the whale's ganglion chamber. Here in its ganglion the whale kept its memories; here the whale thought its thoughts; here the whale made its decisions; here the whale dreamed its dreams. And the ganglion, like all such ganglia, was shaped like an enormous rose. . . . A *blue* rose.

It makes sense now. Roses *are* blue.

Breaking free from his inertia, Starfinder covers the remaining distance to the companionway and starts up the steps. By the time he arrives in the boat bay the hieroglyphs have faded completely from his mind. None come to take their place; nevertheless, he is still shaken as he joins the other converters, all clad in gray coveralls like his own. One of them is the shift leader. He stands nearest the locks, awaiting with the others the arrival of the angel Gloria Wish. Starfinder does not like him. The shift leader is aggressive, domineering, insensitive and sycophantic. A clod. He did not get to be a shift leader for nothing.

The arrival of the angel Gloria Wish is greeted with cheers, although she appears every evening at this hour to post the watchguard and to take the converters home. She is not really an angel, but the converters regard her as one. Starfinder has slept with her; so have most of the other workers whom she ferries to and from their whales. But with Starfinder it is different, because it is he whom she has chosen to be made 1 with. Her silvery skintight coveralls enhance the fullness of her breasts, the paps of which protrude through little peepholes made especially for the purpose. She has wide but wiry hips and long slim legs. Her ageless face is of classic cut; beauty radiates from its smooth clear skin, iridescens in her green eyes. Her hair is coiffed to form a sunbright halo around her head.

Not only does she own the shuttle service, she is a major stockholder in OrbShipCo. In addition, she is one of the Seven Sisters—the ruling body of Ghaul. Like all female Ghaulian adults, she is virtually immortal, thanks to a cryogenic capsule surgically implanted in the left auricle of her heart when she reached adolescence. Such capsules are attuned to the heartbeat, and when, in any given case, the beat ceases, the capsule permeates the entire body with Rho-Xi particles, effecting almost instant cryogenization. Simultaneously it beams a signal to one of the strategically located decryogenization

laboratories, and the body is located at once and transported to the nearest one. All such labs are subterranean, and for obvious reasons have come to be known as "crypts." In each of them there is a cryogenic technician on duty at all times. Incoming bodies are stored in cryogenic lockers until they can be repaired and decryogenized, the waiting time contingent upon the status of the decryogenee. Since Ghaulian surgical techniques and curative measures border on the miraculous, there is little that can go wrong with the human body that cannot be fixed or remedied; thus, there is virtually no limit to the number of times a Ghaulian woman can die and be brought back to life. Only when the cryogenization capsule is damaged at the time of death does decryogenization become impossible. This unfortunate eventuality is probably responsible for the saying among Ghaulian males that "the only way to get rid of an unwanted woman is to drive a stake through her heart."

It should not be inferred, however, that Ghaulian males are bitter about having been denied immortality. Ghaulian women climbed the evolutionary ladder faster than they did, and for some reason this resulted in a sharp falling off of the female birthrate. As a result, the male population of Farstar**** is far greater than the female, and this imbalance is rendered all the more disproportionate by the recruiting of male labor from other worlds. No, the men of Ghaul are quite realistic as regards their mortality. They already have to share the pie with too many of their fellows—why should they want to share it with more? For the same reason they are not bitter about the pie being warmed over. Who wants a cold piece of pie when he can have a warm one fresh out of the rejuvenation oven?

The inevitable shortage of pie is compensated for by Ghaulian womankind's generosity. Promiscuity endures right up to one week before 1-ness begins and resumes one week after 1-ness ends. Nevertheless, few men on Farstar**** ever have the good fortune to be able to call a woman exclusively their own, as Starfinder shortly will be able to do. In a little more than a week one of his ribs will be removed by the Sun Surgeon, chemically treated so as to be both pliable and decay-resistant, and fashioned into a circlet for Gloria Wish's neck as a symbol of his and her 1-ness.

The converters file through the boat-bay lock into the shuttleship and the watchguard takes over the whale. The angel sends the trim ship dropping dizzily toward the blue-greenness of Ghaul: on all sides pulse the stars, and up above the whale turns into an ovoid moon: down, down, down falls the ship out of heaven, and the cities of the plain—Swertz, Dhoun, Gehnen, Llurid—can be seen shining beyond Ghaul's twilight belt, and now the belt advances to meet the plummeting ship, and there, advancing also, is Starfinder's city, Swertz, but he has no eyes for it: he is looking up through the overhead window at the dead whales in the sky and at the stars beyond them blooming in the space-time night. In the vast distances forget-me-nots grow, while parsecs to their right grow daffodils: over there are bluebells, lilies of the valley . . . *Someday I will go a-Maying in the heavens—touch a bluebell, breathe the fragrance of a lily,*

*pluck a ((*)) . . .*

The angel Gloria Wish sees him home, as she does every night, in her imported hovercar. She has offered to buy him a hovercar of his own, but he has refused. He is still new to the ways of Ghaul: particles of Dirt still cling to him. But he has vowed to shake those particles loose.

He wonders what his answer would be were she to offer to buy him immortality. But such speculation is academic, since immortality is not for sale. The women of Ghaul hold the immortalization process as closely to their breasts as they do their money. They consider it exclusively their own, and perhaps rightly so since it was they and they alone who perfected the process. Eventually it will be perfected on the other terrestrialized worlds, and all of mankind will become godkind; but until such time godkind will be limited to the women of Farstar****.

Starfinder is inclined to think his answer would be no.

Gloria Wish bids him goodbye at the entrance of the tall bright building where he lives, and tells him she will drop in on him later on. As a businesswoman she has numerous odds and ends to take care of before she can call it a day. He waves goodbye to her as she whisks out of sight, but he does not enter the building. Instead, he walks down the avenue and turns right into a narrow, dimly lit side street and walks

its length to the small cafe he has come to call his hang-out. There, he orders a Magellanic Cloud, a concoction that despite its celestial appellation is ninety-nine percent cheap gin and one percent diluted stesth (a depressant that when drunk straight paralyzes the neocortex). He sits at a corner table, sipping his drink. Several of the other patrons nod to him and he nods back. They are men he has seen here before. This is his hangout, but he has never tried to strike up a conversation with anyone, and the conversations others have tried to strike up with him have got nowhere. He is not a gregarious man.

After two Magellanic Clouds he leaves. The narrow thoroughfare is more of an alley than a street, and it is so filled with shadows that he fails to see the woman, who suddenly rushes toward him out of a dark doorway, in time to avoid her. Before he can stop her, she flings her arms around his neck and kisses him squarely on the mouth. The kiss is moist and her arms are wound so tightly around his neck that he cannot turn his head. He starts to push her away, but the effort proves unnecessary, for she suddenly releases him, steps back and fades into the shadows whence she emerged. A pale blur of a face, a body shrouded in dark, indeterminate apparel, then nothing. An outworld whore, probably, tentatively tempting a potential customer, realizing almost at once that her wares were not wanted, and desisting. Ghaulian Immigration goes to fantastic lengths to screen out such "*filles d'espace*," but a few of them manage to slip through anyway. Ghaul, for obvious reasons, attracts them like a magnet.

The kiss has left a bitter-sweet taste on Starfinder's lips, and he wipes them repeatedly with his handkerchief, but the taste does not go away until he reaches his tenth-floor apartment and washes out his mouth with an antiseptic solution, and even then it does not wholly go away. Traces of it linger, or perhaps it is only his imagination, since he hates whores, at least outright ones, with an intensity such as only a man brought up on Dirt can.

His apartment comprises three rooms, but they share a single ceiling, as the partitions are only waist-high. Like all the other ceilings in the tall bright building, it is a holo-screen that depicts the sky as seen by a holographic camera on the building's roof. Centered in the ceiling-sky is the faint yellow pinpoint of the Earth Mother. The matrix world Earth cannot, of course, be seen, but she can be sensed. Even Starfinder, who has never laid eyes on her, senses her presence. An umbilical cord light-years long stretches from his navel to her storied shores; like all his contemporaries on Farstar**** and the other terrestrialized worlds he is as much of Earth as he would be had he been born there: they and he are the children of Earth—the inheritors of her ethos.

He undresses, showers, shaves, dons a lounge-around. He orders his evening meal on the servomat. The built-in holosole came on the minute he walked in the door, and as he dines he glances at the cube every now and then. A play subtly extolling the virtues of Ghaulian womankind is in progress. He hardly sees the actors. Instead, he sees the rose:

((*))

"So, whale," he says, "you are not dead after all."

Then he frowns as a question poses itself in his mind: *Am I mad?* Terror touches him, but only for an instant. He is certain he is sane.

After finishing his meal he lies down on the bed and stares up into the hologrammed heavens. A whale has risen in the east and is climbing toward zenith. It transits the Earth Mother and begins its downward journey. But it is not his whale. It is a different leviathan.

He thinks of the last message he received from the whale. He pictures the pair of hieroglyphs in his mind:

The message is clear enough. Unknown to the Jonah who deganglioned it, the whale had grown a second ganglion. Preparatory, perhaps, to fissioning. But the Jonah, unaware that there were two, had destroyed only one.

Obviously the other was damaged in the process. Otherwise the whale would have dived long ago

and resurfaced elsewhere. Just as obviously, the second ganglion must be located in a different cavity—a cavity that has gone undiscovered by the converters. The chances are that it is located near the machine shop, though not necessarily. The Jonah's charges could have damaged it by shock waves alone, regardless of its location.

Starfinder has never heard of a whale trying to communicate with a human. It is an established fact that they can and do communicate with each other over vast distances. But communicate with a human? It is unthinkable.

Still, this whale has had a long time to mull things over. Maybe it has decided there are worse ignominies than asking one of its persecutors to repair its ganglion. Death, for instance.

Abruptly Starfinder grins. "What'll you give me, whale, if I fix it for you?"

And then he realizes what the whale *can* give him, and a tightness afflicts his throat and he lies immobile on the bed, staring starward. But he does not see the stars; they are occulted by a leviathan vessel that is part spacewhale and part spaceship; he sees himself standing on the bridge of the great whale vessel and he hears himself say, "Dive, whale, dive! . . ." and the whale plunges beneath the surface of the Space-Time Sea and plummets into the past: the stars move backward on the viewscreen and the portsopes and the constellations subtly change. . . . Down, down, down into the mists of mankind's yesterdays the whale travels, and then, as abruptly as it began, the dive ends and the whale surfaces light-years away and eons ago, and nearby in the black vastness the golden Earth Mother glows, her brood not far away. He sees the blue Earth wearing her filmy negligee of clouds: he glimpses the naked moon; he says, "Go in closer, whale. I want to see the clods who called themselves kings, the ancient empires; I want to see the armored elephants of Carthage, Hadrian at work on his wall, I want to see the dwarf Attila riding over a hill, his hideous horde behind him. . . . I want to see all the things I read about when I was blind—when *you* blinded me, whale—no, not you, your brother. And I want, oh I want, above all I want to descend to the bottom of the Space-Time Sea and witness the Beginning, and ferret, if I can, from the inchoate chaos the meaning, the purpose of creation, the meaning, the purpose of life. . . ."

Sweat shines on Starfinder's forehead; there is an unendurable ache in his chest. "If you could give me *that*, whale . . ."

Chimes sound, and a holo-cube by the bed lights up. In it is the radiant face of the angel Gloria Wish. "Let me in, my love. I've brought you a basket of kisses."

She is wearing skintight gossamer lace through which her paps peek like a pair of roses. With goddess mien she sweeps across the room, putting the appointments to shame. She deactivates her single garment and it slips from her to the floor. She is like a table spread before him, and he is a traveler from a far land, eager to taste again the viands with which he gorged himself the night before.

She extinguishes the lights and takes him in her arms; the stars look coldly down upon their lovemaking. As coldly when, her lover spent, she takes one of the ampuls she carries in her purse and injects his bloodstream with its priapic contents. . . . Insatiably she climbs upon him, goddess-beast, angel fallen from heaven, this is the day of Starfinder; thus womankind has become.

Surfeited, yet strangely empty, Starfinder sinks into an uncomfortable sleep. He dreams a dream he has dreamed with increasing frequency of late. He is in what seems to be a well. Its floor and walls are of cold stone, and the only light comes from a narrow crevice just above his head. The crevice is formed by the improper junction of a trapdoor with a stone floor. As in all his previous dreams he is beating on the door with his fists, trying to break the lock that holds it in place, but, like the door to the room where Death dwelled, it will not give. It is not like that other door. It is a different door altogether. It is constructed of heavy timbers held in place by stout crosspieces. And he is not wearing summer suit-slax and a radio hat, but a heavy cowl that reeks of stale sweat and dried urine. No, this is a different dream altogether, a different subconscious fantasy. There is a jailer in the room above, whom he must overcome in order to go free, but first he must break out of his oubliette, and he pounds and pounds on the insensate door, sweat pouring from his pores and running down his arms and legs beneath the heavy cowl, light from the crevice shattering against his retinas, breaking into infinitesimal particles that pierce his

brain and drive him mad with pain, pain so intense that he opens his eyes to drive them away, yet still he sees them, scattered above him, but they cause no pain now; they are stars, stars in the celestial ceiling above his bed. . . .

Beside him, Gloria Wish softly sleeps. Above him pulse the stars.

He lets his gaze roam the body of the woman he will soon be made 1 with, and presently the last dregs of the dream dissolve. What masochistic quirk of his subconscious, he wonders, caused it to occur?

Gloria Wish's eyes have opened and she is smiling at him in the starlight. Suddenly he remembers the whale, and realizes he must tell her it is not completely dead. As a major stockholder in OrbShipCo and as one of the Seven Sisters she is responsible for the potential danger its second ganglion represents. Moreover, there should be no secrets between them since soon they will be 1.

But he does not tell her, lying there beside her in the starlight, nor does he tell her afterward as they loll before the holosole and chat. Tomorrow he will tell her. Yes, tomorrow. But first he must make certain that the whale really has a second ganglion.

Better yet, he will tell the shift leader. After he makes certain that his mind is not playing him false.

Back in the belly of the whale the next morning he descends the midship companionway to the bottom deck, just as he does each working day. He is tired, but no more so than usual. The only part of his appearance that betrays both his fatigue and his suppressed excitement is the slightly heightened color of the 2-omicron-vii scar on his right cheek.

He enters the machine shop warily, although there is no need for caution. The cavity containing the second ganglion must be well walled-off from the rest of the whale, otherwise he and the other converters would have been dead long ago.

He closes the machine-shop door behind him. He "listens." He "hears" nothing. Then he concentrates on the whale's first message, visualizing it in his mind:

((*))

For a long time he receives no answer. Then:

He concentrates again: *Where?*

This time there is no response.

He is not surprised. How can a mere word, transmitted without a visual counterpart, mean anything to a space-whale? So for the moment he abandons words and concentrates successively on the nearest hold, on the nearest compartment, and finally on the drive-tissue chamber, visualizing each with a ((*)) in it. Then he blanks his mind and waits.

He feels a shadow. It is pale, and cold as death, and vanishes a split second after he becomes aware of it. He has no difficulty interpreting it. It is fear. Desperation drove the whale into revealing the existence of its second ganglion, but desperation is not enough to overcome its distrust of man.

Strategy is called for. Starfinder must somehow trap the whale into revealing the location of the second ((*)).

So he visualizes the whale in the same manner as he visualized it last night, lying on his bed awaiting the arrival of Gloria Wish: fully converted, except for its drive-tissue, and with himself in full command. "Now dive," he says in his mind, cementing the words in the whale's awareness. "Damn you, whale, dive!" And in his mind the whale dives, bearing him, its sole passenger, into the past. "Resurface, whale!" he commands. "Return to when we were," and the whale does so, reemerging in the present.

Next, Starfinder visualizes the whale as the freighter it is destined to become in the imminent future. He pictures its holds brimful of raw materials, and he pictures a surly captain standing on its bridge, a beetle-browed mate pacing its main deck, an obese astrogator poring over charts in its chartroom, a

sullen chef cooking in its galley, and a slovenly crew scattered throughout its interior. Finally, to make certain the whale gets the message and understands that of the two alternatives the first is far preferable, Starfinder visualizes the drive-tissue chamber as it will look after the Einstein-Rosen engine has been installed and connected up—concrete evidence that man will have taken over and that the whale will be dead.

Then he waits.

As he waits, he realizes belatedly that he has made a bargain with the whale. He has implied that if it will reveal the location of its second ((*)) he, Starfinder, will repair whatever damage has been done to it and that in return the whale must become his personal property and obey his every command. In his eagerness to trap the whale he has trapped himself.

But this is ridiculous. A man cannot enter into a bargain with a sentient asteroid. And even if he could, how could the whale be trusted to carry out its side of the agreement? How could the man be trusted, for that matter? All of which is futile speculation, because no whale, regardless of how desperate it might be, would ever accept such bondage.

The hieroglyphic image that abruptly appears in Starfinder's mind can be indicated thus:

Starfinder is stunned,

The whale will enter into bondage.

Apparently death to a spacewhale is as dreadful a prospect as death is to a man.

The second ganglion is located just beneath the deck where the first had been, a natural chamber or cavity the converters overlooked, probably because of its proximity to the whale's ventral subtissue.

Now that he knows where it is, Starfinder must apprise the shift leader of its presence so that proper action can be taken. Since the machine shop is located not far above the whale's ventral subtissue, the deck separating the shop from the cavity cannot be very thick. Transsteel, which constitutes the subtissue, is a superhard organic-metallic two-phase material, but it yields readily to the hyperacetylene torches the Farstar**** Shipyards developed to cope with it. The deck itself consists of a less adamantine type of trans-steel; burning through it will take but a few minutes. Blasting the ((*)) into extinction will take but a few more. . . It is one thing to dream of commanding a spacewhaleship and holding the past in the palm of one's hand; it is quite another to make such a dream a reality when to do so would mean ostracizing oneself forever from one's adopted society and alienating oneself completely from the woman one presumably adores. Starfinder realizes that up until this moment he has been quite mad. Now, thankfully, sanity has returned.

He quits the machine shop and seals the door behind him. It is his intention to seek out the shift leader at once and tell him the whale is not dead. Why, then, does he turn right instead of left and continue down the corridor to the drive-tissue chamber? The reason is as simple as ABC: the second ganglion does not represent an imminent danger, and the shift leader can just as well be apprised of its presence during the lunch break as now.

Starfinder resumes work where he left off yesterday. Most of the minor alterations in the tissue have been accomplished. The major ones will require hyperacetylene surgery, the tanks and torch for which await his convenience in a far corner of the chamber.

As he works, he thinks of how the ancient Carthaginians converted elephants into war machines. How they attached armor to the beasts' flanks and forelegs, how they built towers atop the beasts' mountainous backs, how they taught the pachyderms to charge and trample the enemy.

For some reason he cannot get these Carthaginian war machines out of his mind, and he thinks of them all morning long. When the lunch-break bell sounds over the intercom, he leaves the drive-tissue chamber and walks down the corridor toward the midship companionway. He hurries past the machine-shop door, but not quite fast enough to avoid having a pair of roses burned into his brain, a living and a dead one.

The mess hall is on the second deck, directly above the galley. The huge larder is filled with

provisions for the ship-to-be's maiden voyage, but the working crew's fare is meager. However, Starfinder isn't hungry and hardly notices. There are elephants milling about in his mind, trampling his thoughts, and every now and then a rose incongruously appears among the huge ungainly beasts, and he knows he cannot go on like this, that he must either get rid of his burden or shoulder it in earnest, and since shouldering it means destroying the second ganglion himself, which he cannot do, he approaches the shift leader, who has finished eating and is sitting all alone at his private table, picking his teeth.

Starfinder has every intention of stopping at the table, and he very nearly does so. But at the last moment the shift leader glances up at him and Starfinder perceives the frustration beyond those bleached-blue eyes and knows that nothing would please the man more than to learn that the whale is not altogether dead and to be able to finish killing it himself.

But what difference does this make? Starfinder wants the second ganglion destroyed, doesn't he? Why should he care who does the job so long as he doesn't have to do it himself? Apparently it does make a difference and apparently he does care, for he walks right by the table without a word and descends the midship companionway to the third deck and gets an anti-2-omicron-vii suit out of the main supply room. Both the supply room and the third-deck corridor are deserted, and in moments he has reached the bottom deck and is heading for the drive-tissue chamber. He drops off the suit by the machine-shop door, picks up his hyperacetylene torch and tanks in the drive-tissue chamber, and returns. Then he is in the machine shop, the door sealed behind him.

He marks off the center of the shop, dons the anti-2omicron-vii suit and begins burning through the deck. The machine-shop door is six inches thick. Even radiation from a healthy ganglion would be unable to penetrate it. Once the second ganglion is exposed, its 2-omicron-vii will be safely confined.

Starfinder's mind wanders as he burns. . . . The towers the Carthaginians built atop their war beasts housed bowmen, and when the enemy was within range the bowmen unleashed their arrows from the safety of their portable forts, killing many of their foes and wounding others. Astride each elephant's neck sat a pilot armed with a sledgehammer to smash the animal's vertebrae should it panic and go berserk. The Carthaginians were master converters: they thought of everything.

Much later in his history, as he grew more civilized, man devised subtler means of converting animals. The dolphins were a classic example. While publicly making friends with a few of them and extolling their intelligence and sweet-talking them into doing tricks, man privately trained others to carry explosives to the hulls of enemy ships and to detonate both the explosives and themselves at exactly the right moment, the way the Japanese *kaikens* of World War II did. The technologists were master converters too.

Thoughts of the dolphin lead ineluctably to thoughts of the marine whale that once flourished in the seas of Earth. For a time Starfinder's thoughts center on *Moby Dick*, and he wonders whether Melville meant evil to be symbolized by the white whale, as so many scholars assumed, or by Captain Ahab.

What does *this* whale symbolize?

Freedom?

Death?

Both?

What do I, Starfinder, symbolize?

He recoils. His thoughts have carried him too far. *Burn*, he tells himself. *Burn, burn, burn! I did not create the elephant. I did not create the dolphin. I did not create the whale. I did not create this whale. Above all, I did not create man! Burn, burn, burn! And when you reach the rose, burn that too!*

But when he reaches the rose he does not burn it. Instead, after extinguishing the torch and lowering himself into the cavity, he examines it. It looms large in the phosphorescent light emanating from the cavity walls. Its petals are pale blue, and the blueness radiating from it is next to negligible. He kneels and examines the stem. It is cracked—the result, no doubt, of the shock waves that accompanied the destruction of the other ganglion. The 2-omicron-vii still remaining in the open-hearthlike stomach, which the converters have permanently sealed off, cannot reach the petals in sufficient quantity to enable the whale to shed its paralysis and regain command of itself.

But the damage is minor. Starfinder can perform the necessary repair work in a matter of minutes.

Both the stem and the rose consist of transsteel; all he needs for the job are a welder and a packet of transsteel welding rods, both of which are available in the supply room.

But he didn't come here to fix the rose. He came here to destroy it. Because he thought that killing a whale out of mercy would be different from killing one out of hate.

But if he came here to destroy the rose, why didn't he bring the Jonah charges that alone can do the job? There is a whole box of them in the supply room. They were brought on board when conversion first began, not because the existence of a second ganglion was suspected, but as a standard precautionary measure.

Slowly Starfinder straightens. As though to make his burden heavier yet, the whale transmits a new set of hieroglyphs:

At first Starfinder doesn't understand the meaning of the message. Then he realizes that the whale is referring to their bargain. represents the rose in its present damaged condition; the stickman represents Starfinder.

((*)) stands for the rose after Starfinder will have repaired it, and the resultant oneness of Starfinder and the whale. can mean only one thing: space-time, the three-sided figure signifying space, and , with its abrupt descent, time.

There is a long "silence." Then the whale, as though fearful that it has failed to make itself clear (and perhaps desperate because of the imminence of death), discards its remaining pride and spells out its acceptance of the bargain in a single hieroglyph Starfinder cannot fail to understand:

And Starfinder? He climbs out of the cavity, picks up his hyperacetylene torch and tanks, quits the machine shop and locks and seals the door behind him. Then he returns to the drive-tissue chamber, removes the anti-2-omicron-vii suit and goes back to work. Somehow he manages to get through the rest of the day.

Lying abed, hands clasped behind his head, Starfinder gazes up at the celestial ceiling of his apartment. His whale is the evening star.

It is distinguishable from the others because its surface is burnished, causing it to reflect the rays of Farstar**** more intensely than its dead brothers. It is the brightest object in the heavens.

Lying on his bed waiting for the angel Gloria Wish, he watches it rise and set, and he wonders how he will be able to live with himself after he tells her that the whale is still alive and that he has made a bargain with it that he cannot keep.

He does not need to wonder how she will react when he does tell her. He knows. She will say, "Starfinder, are you insane? You should have killed it at once! Get hold of the shift leader this minute and get up there and deganglion it!"

And Starfinder will say, "Very well, Gloria Wish, I will do as you command."

He will obey her without question because she is stronger than he. Nobler. Ghaulian women are not really goddesses, but they come very close. Periodic rejuvenation keeps them eternally young and repeatedly postpones the menopause. The cryogenization capsules in their auricles give them the equivalent of immortality. Perhaps Gloria Wish herself has already died and been reborn. Time and time again. A true goddess. She and her myriad sisters are the culmination of womankind. They are the glory of womankind incarnate. To look at one of them is to fall in love.

But seldom is that love returned in kind. It cannot be on a planet where there are so many men. Starfinder knows how lucky he is, and he is grateful. Perhaps she will even condescend to bear a child by him. It is true of course that she will outlive him, that she will become 1 with many lovers after he is dead, that she has undoubtedly become 1 with many lovers before him. But right now she is his. The appeasing

of her appetite is his responsibility alone.

But *can* he appease that appetite? Can he alone, even with the assistance of priapic stimulants, perform a task that ordinarily requires the energies of a dozen men?

There are a pair of sayings on Farstar**** that crop up regularly during barroom conversations and appear periodically on lavatory walls. The first one rises to poetic heights of a sort, and goes like this:

*With this rib I do thee wed:
In ten more years I shall be dead.*

The second is a simple statement of fact:

The only old men on Farstar Four are queers.

Lying on his bed waiting for Gloria Wish, Starfinder stares straight up into the black and infinite immensities where yesterday is the sparkle of a distant star and tomorrow the twinkle of another and today a drop of darkness: he sees the climbing into heaven of the dead whales, the sad promenade of the ((*))-less leviathans across the face of ; he sees the yellow mote of the Earth Mother and he visualizes the filmy-nightgowned Earth waiting with all her treasures—Earth Past, the great green orb with all her seas and the ships upon them, and the ancient armies marching over her lands, the pith of history, queens and kings, a pageant colorful and cruel. . . . *All this I hold in the palm of my hand; all this is mine for the taking. . . .*

Enter Gloria Wish, bearing a basket of kisses. "Starfinder, my Starfinder, why are you so pale?"

She divests herself of gossamer lace, puts out the lights and sits down on the edge of the bed. Her breasts are like twin pale hills looming above him, and beyond them hovers her face. Its beauty intensifies as he looks up at it, outshines the stars themselves. She is like a wind that has come up out of the south, and the wind is warm upon him as the pale hills descend upon his face. Famished, he feeds. And now the wind grows warmer, enveloping him and lifting him into the sky, and the stars shine brightly as they pinwheel in the night, and the wind lifts him higher yet, and now he is among the pinwheeling stars. One by one they nova around his head and fall like flowers past his face, down, down, down. . . . Dimly, from far away, he feels the faint prick of a priapic needle, wakes to a quickening of his blood: the wind, a hot and searing blast now, whips him aloft again, and the novas this time are supernovas, crashing upon his retinas, shattering into blinding shards that stab into his brain in agonizing contrast to the darkness of his dungeon as he beats his fists upon the unyielding door. Wildly he pounds upon those wooden timbers, unmindful of the splinters that pierce his hands, sweat rolling in waves down his cowl-clad body, his voice hoarse as he screams to be set free . . . and then, abruptly, the door yields as the lock plate pulls from its concrete moorings and he scrambles up out of the foul hole of the oubliette into the room above. The room is a vast bed upon which his jailer lies in obscene embrace with the whore of New Babylon. No, not his jailer but himself, himself with limbs interlocked with hers, both bodies quivering in the aftermath of a massive orgasm. . . . His fingers, embedded in her buttocks, creep up her sweating back and fix themselves around her neck, thumbs digging into her throat and aborting her first and last scream, digging ever deeper. . . . He realizes that his eyes are tightly shut, and opens them and sees before him the face of the angel Gloria Wish, yet even then his fingers do not fall away, although the cyanosis of her face is unmistakable and the coldness of her throat bears witness that the cryogenization capsule in her auricle has already blasted its particles throughout her dead body.

It is a long while before Starfinder can pry loose the fingers of the mad Monk from the throat of the dead woman and an even longer while before he can get the Monk back into his oubliette. Afterward, a horrified Starfinder stands alone in the room, the cryogenized body of Gloria Wish sprawled stiffly on the bed.

But it is a purposeful as well as a horrified Starfinder. He packs his few belongings and descends to street level where Gloria Wish's hovercar is parked in her special niche. The hovercar whisks him to the OrbShipCo port where the gate recognizes the craft at once and opens wide. Mere minutes later he is

sitting at the controls of the shuttleship and ascending into heaven.

He docks the shuttleship in the boat bay and enters the belly of the whale. He overpowers the watchguard, binds his wrists and ankles, carries him back to the bay and shoves him into the ship. He programs the automatic pilot to orbit the ship three times around Ghoul before taking it down to Swerz and closes the lock behind it. Reentering the belly of the whale, he procures a portable welder and a packet of transsteel welding rods from the supply room, then descends to Deck 4. There, after donning the anti-2-omicron-vii suit, he lowers himself into the cavity beneath the machine shop and repairs the rose.

He welds the section of the machine-shop deck back into place and empties the shop of its tools and shoves those of its machines that aren't too heavy for him to handle out into the corridor. Then he seals the door and welds the seams so that the door cannot accidentally be opened. The 2-omicron-vii radiating from the second ganglion was too weak for any of it to have reached the corridor. He divests himself of the suit and climbs the midship companionway to the top deck, makes his way forward and ascends the ladder to the bridge.

He waits till the rose has had time to absorb the residue of energy that remained in the open-hearthlike stomach, then "says," visualizing as he does so the meaning of the words, *De-orbit, whale. Break free!* And the whale disengages itself from the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar**** which are both a source of beauty and a source of prosperity to the planet's inhabitants, and parts company with its dead brothers.

Ravenous after months of inanition, it ramjet-feeds upon the hydrogen and nickel and iron molecules that constitute the major part of its diet, throwing out vast magnetic nets to left and right. Gradually its interior phosphorescence brightens: crepitations can be heard emanating from its still functional drive tissue. *Now*, Starfinder commands, and the whale gathers itself for the plunge. *Now, whale*, and the crepitations crescendo into a roar. *Now, whale, dive!* And the whale dives into the Sea, and and the go free—

2

Areopagus

Orestes: *Look, look, alas—
What Gorgon shapes throng up!*

Consider the whale. Remark this awesome leviathan of time and space. It possesses the dimensions of its brothers and all their powers, but it also possesses the properties of a spaceship. Its "skin" has been machined away, its transsteel subtissue burnished. Its flanks are Argus-eyed with portscopes. It boasts a boat bay in which is berthed one of the most versatile lifeboats man has ever devised. Its once-splaeanean interior has been transformed into a complex of decks and cabins, corridors and holds. Forward, there is a bridge that features a computerized control console and a huge viewscreen. Aft, a self-tending hydroponic garden assures a constant supply of oxygen. There is a built-in recycling system, a hydraulic complex that brings water, hot and cold, to a hundred different taps. There is an automatic heating system that maintains a comfortable temperature of 70° Fahrenheit. All this is part and parcel of the whale, now that its second ganglion has been repaired, now that it has been reborn, as much a part of it as its drive tissue and its open-hearthlike stomach are, as is the mysterious faculty that enables it to dive into the past.

A whale? No, this hybrid leviathan cannot properly be called a whale. Nor can it properly be called a ship. Ships are not sentient. Ships do not possess omni-audio-vision. Ships cannot see inside themselves and simultaneously see parsecs away. Ships cannot plumb the depths of the Space-Time Sea. No, this

unorthodox entity created by both God and man cannot properly be called either ship or whale, or even whaleship, although the limitations of language render all three appellations literarily legitimate. Properly, it can only be called "Starfinder's whale," after the man who freed it from the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar****, the man who stands now on its bridge, its captain and its crew, staring into the viewscreen at the Sea of Time .

Consider Starfinder. Remark his classic pose as he stands staring into time. It is the pose of a man condemned, both by his coevals and by himself. There is blood on his hands—the blood of the spacewhales that he killed and the blood of the woman whom he thought he loved and murdered in his bed. And in an oubliette in his mind there is a Monk—a mad Monk who loathes all that his jailer loves. Consider this man, this erstwhile denizen of Dirt, this once-respectable citizen of Ghaul turned murderer, thief and outlaw by forces both within and without himself, who murdered a woman in his bed and stole her whale and exiled himself from the century that gave him birth.

Am I never to know peace? Must I go on forever regretting that which I have done, forever dreading that which I may do? I sought to find peace in the past, in the depths of the Space-Time Sea. But this is not the Space-Time Sea . This, if it can be given a name, is the Sea of Time.

Consider the Sea of Time. Remark this anomaly of the ages. It bears no resemblance to the sea Starfinder knew when he was deganglioneing whales. That sea was characterized by the changing of the constellations, by the subtle shifting of the stars. This sea is the marriage of time and timelessness, of space and spacelessness. It is a non-Aristotelian interreality that holds conventional reality together. It is not new. Man discovered it early in his history. But in his naïveté he mistook it for something else and gave it geographical coordinates. Ignorant of its true nature, he did not understand that geographically it does not—*cannot*—exist. Then man became sophisticated and lost track of it, and when he looked for it again it was gone.

To the observer, the Sea of presents an austere and inimical countenance, but it is not without beauty. The tenuous half-real crags that rear up out of dark abysmal depths are limned at their crests by a pale gold luminescence that emanates from nowhere, and surreal crimson light creeps partway down their torn and precipitous slopes and blends subtly into the blackness of the depths. Fragments of gray clouds hover in the sunless skies, bringing to mind great gray gulls preparing to dive. Yes, beauty resides in the Sea of Time, and since the whale's passage is bereft of apparent motion, the beauty is rendered the more tangible. But it is lost upon Starfinder. He sees the Sea of Time as the black sack Ivan Ilych fell into two hours before his death.

Starfinder speaks, both aloud and to the whale. *"Why do you poke, whale? Why do you move with the speed of a tortoise when you are capable of moving with the speed of a hare? Is it because you wish to dismay me by exposing me to an aspect of reality I never knew existed and in the process undermine my resolve to visit the past? Is it because you chafe against the bonds you yourself imposed? Dive as you are capable of diving, whale. Wipe this hellish scene away!"*

The whale, which by now has picked the man's Anglo-American vocabulary from his brain, does not answer. It has not "spoken" since it "said" in the tele-hieroglyphic speech form it devised to impart its thoughts:

Nor does it obey the man's command. But Starfinder is not disturbed. He knows that sooner or later it will. That as long as he is in its belly it will do his bidding. It will do so because he has both the means and the know-how to damage its ganglion and inflict pain. To destroy it if he should take the notion. In a way, the whale is as much a prisoner as it was before.

Sulk if you like, whale. But you will come to time. And when you do I will watch the wily Xenophon leading the Ten Thousand out from under Tissaphernes's nose, watch Van Gogh painting "Vincent in the Flames," watch Dante passing Beatrice on the bridge, watch a "Modest Proposal" emerge from Swift's vitriolic pen.

The whale's "silence" endures. The crags in the view-screen seem to quiver, and the blackness of the depths seems to creep higher on the torn and precipitous slopes, extending itself in long and tapered fingers, the tips of which are stained with blood.

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

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

Then the shapes fade out, the fingers and the faces and the robes. The crags, with their blood-red slopes, reappear. Starfinder turns his tired eyes away. *I am going to try to sleep for a while, whale,* he "says." *Do not surface until I awake. And do not wake me without good cause.*

He heats instant soup in the galley, forces a bowlful down. He finds nepenthe pills in the dispensary, takes two. Then he heads for the captain's cabin.

The captain's cabin is on the second deck, below and slightly aft of the bridge and located off a lateral passageway that bisects the main corridor. Opposite it is what would be the first mate's cabin, were there a first mate present, and at the end of the lateral passageway lies the logic behind their location—the lock that leads to the boat bay.

The whale is primarily a freighter, but as is the case with most freighters, staterooms have been provided for a limited number of passengers. All of them are more elaborately appointed than the captain's cabin, which is relatively Spartan, but Starfinder is a man of simple tastes and finds it satisfactory. Moreover, as captain of the whaleship he belongs there.

In addition to a comfortable bunk the cabin contains a foot locker, a full-length holo-mirror, a built-in bureau, a wardrobizer, and a gun cabinet containing a Weikanzer .39 and two 4-H-20 raze rifles. There is one portscope. The phosphorescent walls are tinted blue and the deck is wall-towalled with aquamarine carpeting. Painted on the ceiling is a mural depicting the neo-Gothic Senate Building of the Seven Sisters. Next to the head of the bunk a sliding door gives access to a small lavatory.

Starfinder undresses, showers and shaves. Then he lies down on the bunk and lets his head sink into the pillow. The nepenthe pills take hold at once; he sleeps ...

But only to dream. . . .

He is on a starlit plain. His only garment is a primitive loincloth made of horsehide. At his feet lies a dead saber-toothed tiger.

A spear protrudes from the dead beast's chest. It is his. He jerks it free and wipes its stone tip on a handful of plain grass. Nearby is the copse whence the tiger sprang, hoping to ease its ravenous appetite, only to be pierced by the spear. It is a female tiger.

A cold breeze tiptoes across the plain and the grass bends beneath its airy footsteps. He debates on whether to cut a portion of flesh from the tiger's hindquarters, even though he has no appetite, but somehow he cannot bring himself to. He leaves the dead beast lying there and continues on across the plain. It is a wide plain, but it does not go on forever, and he knows that if he keeps walking in the direction he is headed he will eventually come to a forest. The breeze has awakened gooseflesh on his naked arms and legs and chest, and he shivers. He feels no elation over having killed the tiger, only a vague regret.

At length he sees the forest. It is far away, a thin, dark line that is scarcely distinguishable from the sky. Simultaneously he hears a rumbling in the distance behind him, as of thunder. Turning, he sees another dark line. It is similar to the dark line of the forest but differs in one respect. It is moving. Moving in the same direction he has been traveling.

He begins running toward the forest. As he runs he identifies the rumbling for what it is: the collective pounding of hundreds of hoofs. He knows then what the moving dark line is. It is the herd of wild horses

the tribe just last week drove over a cliff.

But it cannot be! The herd is dead. He heard it die. He heard the terrified whinnies of its members as they plunged down the face of the precipice to the jagged rocks below. He himself went through the broken bodies and clubbed to death the screaming beasts that survived the fall. He helped with the butchering and afterward joined in the Great Feast. How can a herd of dead, devoured horses be pounding toward him across the plain?

The rumbling has grown louder. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees that the dark line is much closer now. It is so close that he can hear the angry snorting of the stocky, shaggy-haired beasts as well as the pounding of their hoofs. He must reach the forest quickly or those hoofs will grind him into the ground. Once he gains the forest, he will be safe.

He pours more power into his legs. His strides lengthen to leaps that cover dozens of feet at a time. But still the rumbling continues to grow louder. As he runs, the rumbling crescendos to a degree where he fears he will be overwhelmed by the sound itself.

The forest is much closer now, but another glance over his shoulder tells him that he will never make the sanctuary of the trees, that he is destined to die beneath those hundreds of murderous hoofs. Screams rise in his throat, but terror has so constricted it that the screams cannot escape. Then, as the herd closes in, as the dust thrown up by the host of hoofs engulfs him, two stick figures appear in his sleeping mind, interposing themselves between him and the infuriated beasts:

and he sits up sweating on his bunk.

He concentrates on the realities of the room, trying to shake free from the dream. On the wardrobizer, on the gun cabinet, on the inbuilt bureau, on the ship's clock set into the footboard of the bunk. On the full-length mirror. His eyes return to the clock. Like all ship's clocks, it is synchronized to the twenty-four-hour rotational period of Earth. It registers 0257.

When he lay down on the bunk, it registered 0231. Did he sleep for over twenty-four hours or for only a little longer than twenty-four minutes?

The fatigue embedded in his bones provides the answer.

As he sits there wondering what awakened him, the message that appeared in his sleeping mind reappears in his waking one:

He frowns. is the whale's "word" for Starfinder.

But there is only one Starfinder, so why *two* stickmen? The whale elaborates:

Now the message is clear. It is true that is the whale's "word" for Starfinder. But the rebus also stands for "man." There is a stowaway on board!

Starfinder is stunned.

He is stunned a second time when the whale elaborates further:

The stowaway is a woman!

When Starfinder stole the whale he did not search it. He took it for granted that the watchguard was the only person on board. It did not occur to him that the man might have brought a woman along to help him while away the nighttime hours.

Obviously the whale was unaware of her up till now, or else it would have apprised Starfinder of her presence at once. The whale may not like him, but he is the only human it can trust.

Perhaps there are blind spots in its interior into which it cannot see. Assuming this to be the case, it follows that the woman has now left her hiding place and is searching for the man who is responsible for her present Medicament. Probably she witnessed the jettisoning of the watchguard and has been afraid to betray her presence. Now, apparently, desperation has overridden her fear.

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

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

The fourth message is followed almost immediately by a fifth:

The whale has discovered two more stowaways!

Starfinder bolts from the bunk and picks up his discarded slax and shirt-jacket. He is about to don them when his eyes fall upon the wardrobizer. He drops the garments, steps inside the machine and dials a standard full-dress whaleship captain's uniform. The stowaways are almost certain to be Ghaulian, and Ghaulian women are as arrogant as they are beautiful, as domineering as they are oversexed. The appearance of authority, even if it is only textile-deep, might help him to cope with them.

Even if he manages to cope, there will still be the problem of what to do with them. But he will cross that bridge when he comes to it.

He steps out of the wardrobizer and surveys himself in the full-length holo-mirror. The uniform smites his eyes. It is white, with gold piping. The left side of the coat front is hung with seven rows of multicolored ribbons to each of which is appended a gleaming medal. The medals have no significance; their purpose is merely to lend prestige. The coat also boasts a pair of golden epaulets that match in both design and color the filigree on the forepiece of the white, wide-crowned hat. Encircling the coat, just above the hips, is a wide syntheleather belt to which is attached a syntheleather holster. The white trousers have traditional triple creases and are tucked neatly into black syntheleather boots that reach all the way up to his knees and are so highly polished he can see his face in them.

He grimaces. He hopes his new look will impress the three stowaways more favorably than it impresses him.

If, as he has surmised, they are searching for him, all he has to do is wait till they find him. But it will be more fitting if he goes forth to meet them. He asks the whale where they are, but the whale, so cooperative a few minutes ago, does not answer. He decides to ascend to the bridge and start from there.

Before quitting the cabin he takes the Weikanzer .39 out of the gun cabinet, loads it and slips it into the holster on his belt. Then he walks down the lateral passageway to the main corridor and down the corridor to the forward companionway and ascends the companionway to the main deck and thence to the bridge. He meets no one on the way. The 'bridge is empty.

He looks into the viewscreen at the Sea of Time. Its countenance is unchanged. The whale is still poking, "dragging its feet," although there is a strong possibility that it has not yet regained all of its former strength and is unable to dive at normal velocity. Since the amount of lateral drift is in inverse proportion to temporal velocity, the drift in this case must be considerable.

But this makes no neverminds to Starfinder. Certainly not at the moment. He descends to Deck 3 and makes his way aft to the lounge. He encounters no one. The lounge is empty. He frowns. Maybe the three stowaways aren't seeking him out after all. Maybe they are waiting for him to seek them out. Maybe they don't care whether he seeks them out or not. This sort of arrogance would be in keeping with the character of Ghaulian females. The staterooms are also on Deck 3, far forward. He makes his way toward them.

The first two are empty. He opens the door of the third. She is waiting for him on the dais bed. She is lying on her back and she has pulled her black dress up to her belly and has spread her legs apart. The orange flame of her pubic hair is no less bright than the flaming tresses that fan out on the pillow and accentuate the roguish beauty of her face.

Starfinder steps back and closes the door. Laughter mocks him from the room beyond. It harbors a fiendish note that chills his blood.

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

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

Whatever they are, he cannot cope with them.

He leaves the staterooms behind him and begins walking back the way he came. He will return to the bridge, not because the bridge will provide him with a solution to his problem but because he can think of nowhere else to go. Presently he hears the patter of footsteps behind him. He turns. They are several paces in his wake, walking arm in arm. When he stops, they stop too. Their scarlet lips part, revealing teeth that are too sharp, that gleam too brightly. A chorus of fiendish laughter issues from their throats.

The one with the flaming hair addresses him. Her words are part of a language he has never heard, yet he has no difficulty distinguishing their meaning. "A cloud of guilt hangs o'er your head, Starfinder."

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

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

"What do you want?" Starfinder demands.

"We want you!"

Starfinder is abreast of the forward companionway. He turns and reascends it to the bridge. He does not need to look back to see whether the three women are following him. He can hear their footfalls and their tittering. He can *smell* them.

He shudders, for the smell they exude, the smell that forms an aura around them, is the smell of death.

He knows now who they are, and whence they came, and why.

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

Consider the Furies. Remark these ancient maidens whose abode is the Abyss of Tartarus, whom Starfinder subconsciously summoned from the depths. Note their perfection of physical form, but do not be deceived by it, for each wears a shroud of illusion and her true form lies just underneath.

At last Starfinder knows the true nature of the Sea of Time. It is more than the intermarriage of time and timelessness, of space and spacelessness. More than an interreality. It is the abode of the archetypes, the dwelling place of the immortals, an interface of life and death. It is the cellar of Hell—the Abyss of Tartarus. The ancients held the key to it, but they became sophisticated and threw the key away. Now, in the form of the whale, Starfinder has unwittingly found another key and fitted it to the lock. It is not quite the same key his remote ancestors employed. Theirs opened the front gate of Hell: his opens the back.

On the bridge Starfinder seats himself in the captain's chair. The Furies range themselves before him. He is dismayed, but not unduly so. He can depart the Abyss anytime he wishes simply by ordering the whale to resurface. It is possible that the Furies will accompany him, but he does not think so. They are oriented to the Abyss, an integral part of it. By their very nature they would be unable to cope with a sudden shift from interreality to reality. Either they would depart the whale of their own free will, or be jettisoned automatically.

No, he is not unduly dismayed. In fact, most of his initial horror has dissipated and curiosity has replaced it. He wonders how they will go about their ordained task, and how soon.

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

"Life," Starfinder answers.

"I see no oarsmen."

"There are none to see."

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

"From afar."

The blonde (Megaera?) asks, "Why came ye here?"

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

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

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

He looks into the viewscreen, straining his eyes for the first star. None appears. The gray and brooding crags remain unchanged. The black and blood-stained fingers of the depths do not recede.

He concentrates with all his might. *Surface, whale!*

The surreal scene endures.

The whale has ignored his command, and Starfinder thinks he knows why. It apprised him of the Furies' presence because it did not at first read their intent, perhaps because it was unable to. But now that it has read their intent in Starfinder's mind it has ceased to cooperate because it knows that once they have fulfilled their function it will be free.

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

"In the far land from which I came there are women who see in a man nothing but a means of appeasing their gross appetites, women who have bred themselves into super-sexed machines whose raging lust can only be assuaged by the administration of potent aphrodisiacs which when repeatedly applied over a long enough period of time inevitably result in premature death. I was the victim of such a machine. I killed it to save my own life."

It is a good argument, even though it is only partly true. He wonders whether the Furies can see the mad Monk in his mind.

Their scarlet lips have peeled back from tiers of white and gleaming teeth between which their red tongues loll. Their derisive laughter fills the Areopagus of the bridge. "What woman ever lived who saw aught else in a man? Such reasoning would justify all uxoricides, all murders of mistresses and whores!"

"There is a second extenuating circumstance," Starfinder continues. "The woman I killed had been preconditioned for the administration of post-mortem techniques that would enable her to live again. Therefore she did not truly die, and accordingly I did not truly kill her. She lives this very moment as surely as I sit here before you. How can I be found guilty of murder when the woman I killed is immortal?"

A second chorus of derisive laughter. "This is the abode of the immortals, Starfinder. There are none elsewhere. Your argument is a sieve, incapable of holding a drop of truth. You stand condemned!"

The case of the Furies versus Starfinder is closed.

Starfinder touches the butt of the Weikanzer .39, but he does not draw the weapon. It would be no more effective than a popgun against the three immortals ranged before him.

But the whale **is** not immortal. The whale can be killed. Not by a Weikanzer .39 or even by a 4-H-20 raze rifle, but there are Jonah charges in the supply room that will do the job. Once dead, the whale will be regurgitated to the surface of the Space-Time Sea. The Furies will be left behind and Starfinder will be free.

It is true that he will be marooned in space, probably for the rest of his life, but at least he will be alive.

He leaves the bridge, descends to the third deck and proceeds aft to the supply room. Behind him he

hears the patter of the Furies' feet. The Jonah-charges are in a wooden crate just to the right of the doorway: on a shelf above them, neatly stacked, are the detonators. He takes three of each, leaves the supply room and descends the midship companionway to the bottom deck, the Furies pattering behind him. He knows they can read his mind and realizes that they must be aware of his intent, but they have already betrayed their ignorance of the true nature of the whale and he is certain they do not suspect that his plan, if carried out, will result in the "scuttling" of the "galley" to which their archaic imaginations have reduced the whaleship.

In any case, they do not molest him as he walks aft to the machine shop. The anti-2-omicron-vii suit he discarded after welding the door in place lies amid the clutter of machines and tools he moved out of the shop. The hyperacetylene torch he used to burn through the deck is also there, as is the transsteel welder. Now he must undo everything he did, destroy the very ganglion he repaired. This will involve burning through the door, sealing it behind him so that the deadly 2-omicron-vii radiation cannot escape, then burning through the machine-shop deck to the cavity that houses the ganglion. Will the Furies stand idly by while he is doing all this, he wonders. They have halted and are regarding him curiously. Certainly their curiosity ought to be a factor in his favor.

He sets the charges and the detonators on the deck, then straightens. He owes the whale a final chance. He directs his thought-message at its ganglion, which is so close he can sense its pulsations. *I would remind you of our pact, whale. In exchange for my saving your life you agreed to obey my every command for the rest of your life, or mine. I command you now to surface. Do you read me, whale? Surface!*

Beyond the transsteel door, beneath the machine-shop deck, pulse tumultuous thoughts Starfinder cannot tune in on. The graceful petals of the huge blue rose have intensified in hue; they vary from pale violet to cobalt blue.

Your petty commands are chains
to one who knew no chains; I
will break those chains, go free, and
when I surface
it will be to spit your carcass
into the face of nothingness.
You thought to hold me captive by a pact;
you think now you can break that pact
before the three intruders destroy you ...
you, whose touch was gentle on
my broken brain,
you, who healed me when I would have died. . . .
What thoughts are these that undermine
my reason?
What sickness have you cursed me with,
mere man?

Starfinder sighs. He bends to pick up the anti-2-omicronvii suit that he must don. As he does so, his gaze freezes upon its silken surface. How white it is! White with the whiteness of mountain peaks, white with the whiteness of falling snow, white as the white whale, harpoon-scarred, plying a near-forgotten sea. . . . And Ahab hating, standing on the *Pequod's* bridge—*destruct!* . . . The missiles rise on the fiery flames of man's inhumanity to man and beast alike; the distant detonations are next door; all blood is red; the white whale has two faces—one is Ahab's and the other Moby Dick's.

Starfinder straightens. He stands with his back against the machine-shop door. His three tormentors, sensing his defeat, close in. A horrid hand shoots forth, seeking to claw out his eyes. He recoils from faces that have turned hideous, from hair that has thickened into snakes. Three pairs of finny wings sprout

from bony shoulders and fan the air.

The wizened goddesses draw back and bedeck themselves in voluptuous maidenhood again. "Come into our arms, Starfinder. Let us show you love." They smile at him. They laugh; the red tongues loll. They dance.

Starfinder whispers to the whale. "*Hear me, whale. I beseech you. I would remind you of our oneness—the oneness you yourself professed.*" He visualizes the word in hieroglyphic form:

In the ganglion chamber the petals pulse anew:

You have the gall to speak of oneness?
You, who killed so many of my kind?
Vile virus! ...
What stayed your murderous hand for once
and let you spar *my* life. . . .
What pales my resolution?
What begs to blind me to my course
and turn my logic into dust?
I will harbor it no more! I
will cast it out and
let these loathsome harpies have their way
with you!

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

The Furies lift their voices in song. The song is a hymn—the hymn of Hell. They describe in minute and horrid detail exactly how they will effect their vengeance. As they sing, they move in closer. Starfinder, his back still pressed against the machine-shop door, raises his hands to protect his face, knowing as he does so that he is exposing more vital parts to the talons of his tormentors—and knowing simultaneously, with that devastating clarity of thought that only the imminence of death can bring about, that although the crime he committed can be laid upon the doorstep of the mad Monk he brought with him from Dirt, the doorstep is his own, that although his victim has by now been born again he is still guilty of her death, but that even though he is guilty, he is not guilty, because Gloria Wish would have killed him, if in a different way, as ruthlessly as he killed her, that in the final analysis the defense he presented on the Areopagus of the bridge was valid.

ATHENA: *Behold, this man is free from guilt and
blood,
For half the votes condemn him, half set
free!*

He looks at his hands. Blood no longer stains them, not even the blood of whales.
It is as though by being found innocent of one crime he has been found innocent of another.
But although he is free from guilt and blood, he is far from free. . . .

At last the whale breaks its "silence":

His first thought is that the leviathan is mocking him. *So, we are still one, are we, whale?* He evades a raking talon that would have laid him open from groin to knee. *What a nice thought for me to carry with me into my grave. But have no regrets, whale. You are justified in what you do, or in what you have refused to do. I had no right to exact so high a price for your life. I . . .*

His thought-message trails away. The dancers have wearied of their waltz; the hymn of Hell has ended. Haggish features protrude through the masks of youth. Twisted torsos, skinny arms take form. Membranous wings reappear. Abruptly three shrill voices scream, "The rocks! The galley's breaking on the rocks! It's doomed!"

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

They turn and begin running down the corridor. Their bodies begin to shimmer; their footfalls fade away. Subtly the trio blends into the bulkheads, disappears into the deck. Now they are overboard, swimming toward the "shore." All that remains of their presence is the smell of death.

Walking stiffly in his once-immaculate captain's uniform, holding a handkerchief to his cheek, Starfinder walks along the corridor to the forward companionway and ascends it to the bridge. His eyes fix upon the master viewscreen. The Abyss has vanished; conventional space-time has taken its place.

The constellations are not those he knew on Farstar****. Nor is the sun with its family of planets in the foreground the system he left behind him. Apparently the snail's pace of the whale's "vertical" passage resulted in a "horizontal" drift that encompassed light years.

Starfinder consults the huge star-map inset in the starboard bulkhead. One of the stars is blinking like a cepheid variable. But it is not a cepheid variable. Its blinking is the map's way of indicating it is the star nearest to the whale. The map's index reveals it to be Sol.

Sol . . .

Then one of the planets is the matrix world. The Earth Mother. She who spawned the civilizations of Farstar****, Milton**, Loft*****, Maarken's Star***** and all the others.

Earth Past ...

What phase of civilization is in progress, Starfinder wonders. The whale is not equipped with a chronograph, so he cannot tell. But he is certain that man must long ago have climbed down from the trees, for the whale did not dive deep. Anyway, it does not matter. He will relinquish his dreams and go there in the Staranger and find a place for himself under the sun. He will let the whale go free.

The whale reads his thoughts.

it "says."

Yes, we are one, whale, Starfinder agrees. But only till I depart. Then you will be free.

Again the rebus:

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

The truth dawns on him then, and he knows that there will be no need for him to find a place for himself under this or any other sun, that the whale no longer wishes to be free from him, and that has acquired a new meaning.

It means "friend."

3

Flotsam

At first Starfinder is unable to relate the hieroglyph the whale has imprinted on his mind to anything he is familiar with. Only after he has sorted through the miscellaneous data stored in his memory is he able to identify the glyph as an ancient terrestrial spacecraft.

He suspends work on the task he is engaged in and concentrates his attention on the bridge viewscreen. The whale, after replenishing itself following its emergence from the Abyss, is resting in a region of space far "above" the plane of the ecliptic. Since his escape from the Furies Starfinder has been trying to establish an electromagnetic liaison between the ganglion and the computer so that the whale's omni-audio-vision, or o.a.v, can be made to function as a chronograph. Later on, if he is successful, he intends to establish a similar contact between the ganglion and the holosole in the lounge so that he can tune in past events and view the whole of history without budging from his view-chair.

Again, appears in his mind.

The whale is pointed toward the edge of the galactic lens, and the viewscreen, dependent at the moment on the nose camera, frames nothing but a scattering of remote stars. If the ancient spacecraft lies in that direction, it is either beyond the camera's normal range or outside its periphery.

Starfinder ups the screen's magnification to maximum. The stars grow perceptibly brighter, but the emptiness in the foreground remains unaltered.

Successively he shifts to the starboard-flank camera, the port-flank camera, the tail camera, the ventral camera and the dorsal camera. For his pains he receives magnified views of more stars, the galactic hub and the Solar System, but nowhere does he spot the ancient spacecraft.

Since the two-way port and starboard portsopes can tell him no more than he has learned already, he doesn't even bother to look into them. Instead he reattunes the view-screen to the nose camera and "says," *Face what you see, whale.*

The whale has no face as such, but its access to Starfinder's mind has made it by this time as familiar with the idiosyncrasies of Anglo-American and bastard French—the two languages that prevail on ninety percent of the terrestrialized worlds—as Starfinder himself is. It responds at once, and the aloof stars in the viewscreen are replaced by others. If anything, the replacements are even more aloof than their predecessors; only by chance does Starfinder spot the faint twinkle in the foreground.

Approach it, whale. Slowly.

There is a barely perceptible tremor as the whale gets underway. Faint crepitations echo up through the companionways from its actuated drive tissue. Gradually the twinkle in the screen becomes more distinct. Starfinder stares at it, wondering why he is wasting his time investigating so trivial an object when the past is packed with so much more important fare.

As the whale continues to move in and the spacecraft acquires form, the reason behind the twinkling effect becomes apparent. The little ship is tumbling along its trajectory instead of traveling on an even keel, and the feeble rays of distant Sol are reflecting first from one surface, then another. In configuration, the craft is almost exactly as the whale depicted it.

Look inside, whale. Tell me what you see.

There is a brief pause. Then:

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest . . . Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!"

Substitutue "three" for "fifteen," "in" for "on" and "a" for "the."

Substitute "ship" for "chest."

Strike the "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum."

Three men in a dead man's ship.

But enough of word games. Starfinder devotes his attention to the details of the spacecraft that distance, up till now, has obscured. Jutting from its base is a primitive rocket-propulsion engine which the

whale omitted from its hieroglyph. There is a boarding hatch on the conical hull and a combination escape and docking hatch in the nose. Probably the round apertures spaced at even intervals along the base are the mouths of lateral jets whose function was to maintain equilibrium.

As nearly as Starfinder can ascertain, the hull is constructed of an aluminum alloy. Painted upon its silvery surface in big black letters just below the hatch is the word *StarHawk*.

He is tempted to laugh, but he doesn't. *StarHawk* indeed! Such a flimsy craft should never have ventured beyond the orbit of the moon, to say nothing of leaving the plane of the ecliptic!

It even appears to have been mass-produced.

Why did it venture so far from Earth—assuming, that is, that it came from the matrix world; but where else could it have come from?

Whatever went haywire must have gone haywire early in its voyage. Which means, taking its velocity and its distance from Earth into consideration, that the three dead men inside it have been dead for centuries.

Starfinder reduces the screen's magnification to zero so that he can obtain some idea of how far away the spacecraft really is (establishing ganglion-computer liaison necessitated temporary deactivation of the computer). The little craft diminishes in size, then grows gradually larger again as the whale homes in on it.

Easy, whale. Don't get too close!

The whale doesn't need to be warned. It knows as well as the man the devastating effect its mass can have on objects smaller than itself. It "brakes" and turns broadside, and Starfinder spins the magnification dial to maximum. The little craft seems to leap toward him as it fills the screen. It is seemingly so close he can reach right out and touch it, but despite its optical proximity he can find no clue as to the cause of the malfunction that turned it into a derelict.

"Why the hell should I care anyway?" he says. "What difference does it make which cotter pin fell out or which part became unglued? What the hell are three dead men in a dead man's chest to me?"

He continues to berate himself as he suits up in the boat bay. *Do you know what, whale? I should have been a Boy Scout. Helping little old ladies across streets. Running errands for enceinte housewives. Shoveling sidewalks for arthritic shut-ins. Here I am, capable, once I harness your omni-audio-vision, of watching ten thousand Athenians and one thousand Plataeans charge across the Plain of Marathon and drive one hundred thousand Persians into the sea, of resolving the mystery of Mallory's disappearance on the slopes of Everest, of monitoring the "grassy knoll" during the assassination of President Kennedy, of determining the true nature of the fiery whirlwind Ezekiel beheld in the heavens, of hearing the shot heard round the world, of listening to Lincoln deliver his Gettysburg Address, of watching Schliemann excavate "Priam's Treasure," of seeing with my own eyes Priam's real treasure; and here I stand, concerning myself with what caused the death of three graduates from the kindergarten of the Space Age!*

Liberal applications of healsalve have closed the laceration in his left cheek put there by the Furies, but the area is still tender, and he slips his helmet over his head with care. Fully suited, he depressurizes the boat bay, boards the Staranger IV and disengages the lock with the console's electromagnetic "fingers." Then he sets forth into space and closes the lock behind him, heading straight toward the ancient spacecraft.

Rub-a-dub-dub,

Three men in a tub . . .

From his present coign of vantage the Solar System has the aspect of an atomic archipelago—an archipelago surrounded by parsec upon parsec of black and waterless wastes. Only two of the "electrons" are visible to the naked eye—Jupiter and Uranus. The others are too far away on their orbits or just plain too small.

The *StarHawk* grows larger in the Staranger's viewscreen as Starfinder zeroes in on it. In his mind it

takes on the aspect of a conical coffin, and he is nonplused by the fascination it holds for him. He knows it contains three dead men—the whale had no reason to lie. What will he gain by viewing them firsthand? What difference does it make what turned them and their ship into flotsam? What purpose will be served by finding out how they died? He cannot bring them back to life. Not even if their deaths resulted from abrupt reduction of body temperature. He is no cryogenic technician. This is not Ghoul.

For a moment he is tempted to abort his mission. But something—a perverse quirk in his nature, perhaps—urges him on.

To dock with the craft he must exactly match its revolutions, its velocity and its pitch and yaw. He leaves this complex task up to the Staranger's computer. Once the task has been accomplished, the *StarHawk* appears to be proceeding smoothly along an ordinary trajectory. Only the background of stars and the Staranger's instruments prove otherwise. The computer then brings the Staranger in head-on and adjusts its docking sphincter to the rigid fixture in the *StarHawk's* prow, and the two craft become a pair of fishes touching noses in the waterless Sea of .

Starfinder depressurizes the Staranger's cabin, actuates his helmet lamp and opens the forward lock. He crawls into the sphincter tube and releases the dogs of the *StarHawk's* lock. His sophisticated fingers have no trouble locating and disengaging the mechanism that frees the lock from the inside, and he crawls into the craft's docking tube. Lying on his belly, he gazes into the airless absolute-zero darkness of the star-borne sepulchre.

Successively, his helmet light, which is synchronized with his eye movements, illuminates three white-spacesuited figures. They are drifting—turning, somersaulting, twisting in response to the spacecraft's erratic movements, sometimes colliding gently with the hull or the deck or the ceiling and then bouncing away, rigid arms extended from rigid bodies posthumously trying to cushion contact with the unyielding walls of their tomb. Fragile figures adrift in the absolute-zero ambience, brittle, ready to break apart.

He joins them in their sad ballet, in their soundless dance of death. He peers through the faceplates of their helmets. Two of the faces are grotesque, eyes protruding from ruptured sockets, dark blood flecking frozen lips. One of them is bearded, but both are unquestionably the faces of young men. Boys. The third face is that of a girl (the whale, at this stage of its education attire-oriented as to sex, failed to make the distinction). Her suit, unlike those of her two companions, did not depressurize till after death, and her face is that of a girl who fell asleep. Her eyes are closed, and it is as though she is sleeping now, in death. But she cried before sleep came, for there are frozen tears on her cheeks. They glisten like dewdrops in the merciless glare of Starfinder's helmet lamp. He is shaken. There is a springtime sadness about her face; it is as though the first robin she saw that spring was dead. Her hair is dark-brown, black almost. Her eyebrows are the wings of blackbirds, blackbirds flying away. Away, away, away.

The sad saga of his life replays itself in his mind like the tape of an old movie. Yearnings surface in him that he did not know he had. The movie is in black and white, a monochrome. There is no love in it anywhere. This is why it is not in color. There is false love, yes—but not the love he might have known had he seen this dead girl walking down a springtime street, aflame with life. Looking at her face, his gaze gently touching the tears she shed before she died, he knows that nothing will be the same for him again. Ever.

At last he forces himself to turn away. He explores the craft's interior with his illuminated gaze in search of the cause of the tragedy. He finds it almost at once: the primitive jet-propulsion engine burned out. The story is written on the instrument panel in the language of gauges and dials and meters. And the fused circuitry behind the panel states unequivocally that when the engine went the craft's entire electrical system went with it.

Simple deduction informs him that a defective automatic pilot must have overreacted to an imminent meteoroid collision and in altering the craft's course demanded more of the engine than it was capable of giving. The meteoroid was successfully evaded, but at calamitous cost, and the *StarHawk*, true to its new trajectory, began tumbling toward an unknown destination it would not reach for millennia and might never reach at all.

So what? In the Sea of flotsam is no new thing under the suns. What difference does one more piece

of wreckage make?

Starfinder's illuminated gaze leaves the instrument panel and roves the rest of the interior of the spacecraft. The illumination bathes three acceleration couches so close together as to seem one, and resembling in their entirety an oversized bed. It lights up a port window and a starboard window. It successively spotlights two built-in cabinets, one with the word GOODIES written upon it, the other with the word BOOZE printed on it in big block letters. . . . This was no official voyage. This was a lark. A picnic in space. Three young people drinking, singing songs . . . and then the *beep-beep* of the alarm and the frenzied scrambling into spacesuits. The ensuing darkness and the drifting, the terror, the ineluctable in-creeping cold . . . In a way, though, the cold had been merciful. It had seen to it that one of them, at least, had not died in pain.

Something nudges Starfinder's shoulder. Turning, he sees the girl's extended arm. She has drifted close to him and nudged him with her gloved dead hand. It is as though she wishes to tell him something. What? He peers through the faceplate of her helmet at her face. It tells him nothing. Perhaps, if her eyes were open, there might be a message in their dead depths that he could decipher. But they are closed. The face is not a beautiful face. It is not quite 'oval, not quite heart-shaped. It is somewhere in between. The bridge of the nose is a mite too wide, the cheekbones a shade too high, the cheeks a bit too full. And there are other imperfections. Scars. Hairline scars along the temples, on the cheeks. No, it is not a beautiful face, but Starfinder finds it so. Perhaps youth and repose lend it a certain quality that he is susceptible to. Perhaps the poignancy provided by the frozen tears upon the cheeks carry it across the boundary that exists between attractiveness and beauty. . . . He realizes, with mild surprise, that he is holding her in his arms. She is the Lady of Shalott, "robed in snowy white," floating down the river to Camelot, and he is Launcelot gazing down upon her, not knowing who she is but somehow knowing that she loved him, knowing that he loves her, even though she is dead, knowing that he cannot allow her to go on floating down the river, that he must lift her from the boat, bear her to shore, find a pleasant hillside beneath a benign blue sky and lay her to rest.

He propels her rigid body to the docking tube, through it into the Staranger's sphincter tube and thence into the cabin. Back in the belly of the whale, he carries her swiftly down the forward companionway and into the forward hold. There, he stands her upright in one of the reefer cabinets and lowers the temperature to minus 150° F. Ice crystals form upon the glassite door and upon her spacesuit. A film of frost appears upon the faceplate of her helmet, lending an ethereal quality to her face. She stands there, arms outstretched to him as though beseeching him to bring her back to life.

If he *could* bring her back to life, perhaps his sickness would be no more.

Perhaps he *can*.

If he were to tell the whale to trace the *StarHawk's* trajectory back to a spatio-temporal point just prior to the wherewhen of the mishap, couldn't he avert it?

Possibly. If he could board the spacecraft and convince the three occupants that their a.p. was defective and that they should complete their voyage on manual.

There would be a glaring paradox involved, of course. The girl would exist in two places at once: alive in the spacecraft, and dead in the belly of the whale. But perhaps it would not matter, and anyway, once he obviated her death the dead version of herself would simply cease to be.

But if his mission should be successful, there would be no dead body, would there? No dead bodies, for that matter, and no derelict.

Is the presence of the spacecraft here and now proof that he tried and failed?

There is only one way to find out. He ascends to the bridge. There, he addresses the whale. *You've followed my thoughts, whale. You know pretty much what I want to do. We must retrace the spacecraft's spatio-temporal vector till we arrive at a point that antecedes its a.p.'s overreaction. This will entail a series of shallow dives, after each of which you must locate the craft and move in upon it, but not too close, before you dive again. And in each instance, before resurfacing, you must allow for drift. When you resurface at the point anteceding the overreaction, I will approach the craft in the Staranger and attempt to apprise its occupants, either by radio or by boarding it,*

of their danger. Hopefully they will believe me and complete their voyage on manual.

By this time the whale has learned that attire alone does not distinguish one human sex from another, and is aware that the figure Starfinder brought on board and placed in the forward-hold reefer cabinet is that of a woman. But while the man's mind is pretty much of an open book to it, certain of the pages are necessarily obscure.

it asks.

Starfinder is at a loss for an answer. Spacewhales reproduce by fission, and there is a strong possibility that this particular one is its own offspring. Consequently, although it is aware that Starfinder's species consists of two slightly different genders, it is at this stage of its education ignorant of the concept of love, and, as a result, totally incapable of comprehending the emotion a member of one sex can evoke in a member of the other. And even were it conversant in such matters, it still would have a hard time understanding how a living member of one sex could fall in love with a dead member of the other.

At length Starfinder, for want of a better answer, says, *The Lady of Shalott*. And then, quickly, *Dive, whale!*

There is a story, mercifully buried in the crumbling archives of the past, of a time traveler who traveled back to early nineteenth-century England to learn the identity of the visitor from Porlock who interrupted Coleridge while the poet was penning his opium-induced dream, *Kubla Khan*, only to discover that the "visitor from Porlock" was himself.

The whale executes a series of seven shallow dives, progressing smoothly back along the *StarHawk's* spatio-temporal trajectory. On the eighth dive it fails to allow sufficiently for drift and resurfaces less than a quarter of a mile from the little spacecraft. The *StarHawk's* automatic pilot goes wild, and the death voyage Starfinder sought to erase from the scroll begins.

The whale, perceiving its mistake, dives deep in a futile attempt to correct it. Earth, blue in the viewscreen, is swallowed by and Sol shrinks to a pinpoint of light.

The gods, from their dark aerie, look down and laugh, and a cosmic smirk appears briefly on the face of Time.

At length Starfinder stirs. He moves leadenly to the ladder he so short a time ago ascended, and descends it to the deck. He goes down the forward companionway to Deck 4. He enters the forward hold and walks over to the cabinet beyond whose frosted door the frozen girl, whose death he tried to obviate and caused instead, stands with outstretched arms.

Ice crystals have coated her white spacesuit and iridesce in the gentle phosphorescence of the hold.

*Thou art more lovely than a summer's night
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars . . .*

Tears start from his own eyes as he gazes at the frozen ones on her cheeks. A name for her forms upon his lips of its own volition: the Star Girl. . . . He leaves the hold and walks aft to where the hydroponic garden grows. There, among the verdant photosynthesizing plants, hundreds of blue flowers bloom. Sad-regrets. He picks a blue bouquet and carries it back and lays it at the base of the refrigerated cabinet that has become the Star Girl's bier. During his absence, the whale, aware of his thoughts, has wrought subtle changes in the hold. Its bulkheads seem to come together into a vaulted ceiling high above his head. The phosphorescence illuminating it is both brighter and softer. The phosphorescence is brightest where the Star Girl stands, seems to radiate from her upright bier. During his absence, the whale has transformed the hold into a shrine.

4

Beneath the Painted Ocean

The man addressing the huge, hushed crowd in the gray light of the November day is tall, thin, black-bearded. He has removed his grotesque top hat and stands bare-headed in the damp cold. The ambient acres of the battlefield are no longer red with the blood of brothers; peace and-quiet reign where, mere months ago, the sound of musketry mingled with the screams of the dying and the shouts of the soon-to-be-dead.

In printed form, the never-to-be-forgotten words the man is uttering are familiar to Starfinder. But now their message is aborted by sporadic gusts of wind that blow most of them away.

Like so many other historical moments Starfinder has tuned in on the time screen in the whale's lounge, the present one lacks the dramatic quality irresponsible historians and even more irresponsible writers have invested it with, and once again he is disenchanted.

Dive, whale, he says. He selects a place-time from a list lying on the arm of the viewchair he is reclining in: *Long Island, North America, A.D. September 22, 1776.*

By now, thanks to the liaison Starfinder established, the whale has absorbed all of the computer's data and can locate and home in on any place-time in the Sea the man wishes to view or visit. But the leviathan's o.a.v. covers a vast area, and the exact spatio-temporal coordinates of any given event must be tuned in manually, a process that usually involves painstaking adjustments of the tiny controls that flank the time screen.

Before tuning in the hanging of Nathan Hale, Starfinder goes over to the lounge bar and pours three fingers of artificially flavored medicinal alcohol into the glass he has just emptied, and fills the rest of the glass with carbonated water. Then he adds one drop of diluted stesth. He calls the concoction a "Supernova," and even though it is only midmorning, this will be his fourth one of the day. Times change, in whales as well as on worlds. Before the coming of the Star Girl, John Barleycorn would not have dared walk the decks of the whale. Now he walks them with an assurance that borders on arrogance.

During the next hour and a half Starfinder "attends" the hanging, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the May 29, 1765 meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses. In the first instance he listens in vain for Hale to avow, "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." In the second he listens with no more success for Colonel Prescott to shout, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!" And in the third he listens with the same lack of success for Patrick Henry to asseverate, "If this be treason, make the most of it!"

He is beginning to suspect that a great deal of recorded history is hype.

Even when it isn't hype it is frequently obfuscated by public paranoia in the form of imagined conspiracies. Take the two famous assassinations that took place during the pretwilight years of the disastrous "Democratic Experiment." In both cases, the assassin was apprehended, but in both cases, lack of hard evidence to the contrary, the assassin was believed to be part of a conspiracy. Only a whale's-eye view of history could have set matters straight, and none was available. Then. Well, one is available now, and Starfinder has made use of it. Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot and killed John F. Kennedy. James Earl Ray, acting alone, shot and killed Martin Luther King.

Cases closed.

Starfinder returns to the lounge bar for another Supernova. Ever since he patched the lounge holosole into the ganglion-computer and christened it the "time screen," he has toyed with the idea of descending to the bottom of the Space-Time Sea. It was one of the main reasons he restored the whale to life, one of the main reasons he stole it. But lying on one's bed dreaming of making such a descent was one thing; actually making it is another.

He has also toyed with another idea. One that involves less risk. No risk at all, in fact. Physical risk, that is.

Viewing the Nativity. The Ministry. The Crucifixion.

Proving in the process that, the Neo-Essenian Church to the contrary, Christ was never an Essenian Monk. That the "missing years" were filled with far different pursuits.

That he did not loathe sex.

Starfinder finishes his new Supernova, mixes another. He gives the whale the coordinates. Why not?

What has he got to lose?

He may even be able to exorcise the mad Monk.

The coordinates are of necessity inexact. Northwest Jordan, circa B.C. 6.

Returning to the time screen after the whale dives and resurfaces, he manages, after considerable trial and error, to tune in the little town of Bethlehem.

B.C. 6, although considered by most historians of the future to have been Christ's most probable birth date, amounts to little more than a wild guess. Only after the whale dives and resurfaces a dozen times does Starfinder find the "landmark" he is looking for: the syzygy of Jupiter and Saturn.

In effect, the time screen is an extension of the liaison he established between the whale's ganglion and the computer, a luxury made possible by his successful attempt to utilize the whale's o.a.v. as a chronograph.

The sensors of orthodox chronographs are popularly believed to be attuned to Earth and to derive their chronological data from the matrix world's meteorological changes. Such is not the case. They are calibrated in Earth years, months and days, which gives rise to this misconception, but they derive their data from the changes constantly taking place in Earth's sun, Sol. The invisible far-flung sensors of the whale's o.a.v. are much more sensitive than those of orthodox chronographs, and once Starfinder succeeded in establishing liaison between the computer and the ganglion he had merely to program the former with the then date and let the o.a.v. take over. Afterward, he patched in the lounge holosole—the time screen—and now, whenever the whale dives, the years it dives through not only flash across the bases of the readout screen and the viewscreen but along the base of the time screen as well. Whenever the whale resurfaces, the day, the month and the year extant on the nearer hemisphere of Earth appear along the bases of all three screens and remain constant, either until the whale dives again or until a new date needs to be recorded.

The Gregorian calendar incorporated in the computer lends an anachronistic aspect to the date that now appears across the bases of the three screens.

It is the first night of the syzygy. Of the "star" over Bethlehem. Starfinder begins searching for the stable.

He searches throughout that night and throughout the subsequent nights of the "star," but he does not find it. Oh, he finds stables all right—hundreds of them—but he does not find the one he wants. Or at least he finds none with a babe in any of its mangers.

He sees no sign of the Magi.

A fairy tale? So it would seem. Still, he cannot quite accept it as such.

Up through the years, then. He "visits" Nazareth, Galilee, Cana and Capernaum. He scans Egypt. He "revisits" Nazareth, Galilee, Cana and Capernaum repeatedly through the passing years. He scans the countryside for miles around. He listens to a hundred conversations, but, hopelessly handicapped by his ignorance of the languages they are carried on in, learns nothing. Once, scanning the countryside near Capernaum, he picks up a group of ragamuffins stumbling along a dusty road in the wake of a small emaciated man in a begrimed once-white robe. He holds, looks closer. No, it can't be, he decides, and "moves on."

To Jerusalem.

Jerusalem tells him nothing. He locates Golgotha and launches the whale on a series of shallow dives till at length three crosses appear upon the hilltop. He homes in on them and studies the faces of the three dying men who are nailed upon them. All of the faces are bearded, and masked with anguish, and he has difficulty distinguishing one from another. The hillside is empty. There is no sound except the moans of the three dying men. Night is falling. He shudders and turns away.

After refilling his glass he flashes back to the shores of the Dead Sea. He tunes in an Essenian commune and observes the goings and comings of its ascetics. All of them wear white robes. Half of their time is spent praying, or so it seems, and the other half in washing themselves. He tunes in other communes, learns no more than he has learned already. The whale is half a light-year from Earth. If he were to have it move within Staranger-range he could visit one of the settlements in the flesh. But even if he chose the right one—assuming there is a right one—he would have no way of knowing which of the

ascetics was the one he was looking for, besides which such a close-knit brotherhood would be unlikely to admit an outsider into their midst, and anyway what difference does it make whether Christ was an Essene or a carpenter-turned-preacher? Either way, Christ is not to blame for the mad Monk in Starfinder's mind, the NeoEssenian Church *is*. Whatever Christ was, he certainly didn't make much of a splash in his own time, and quite possibly he never existed at all. The three crucified men on the hilltop could have been anybody. They could have been the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker for all Starfinder or anyone else will ever know, and anyway it is time to visit the shrine of the Star Girl.

Starfinder visits the shrine every day and places fresh flowers at the Star Girl's feet. He does so now, staggering slightly as he enters the forward hold bearing a fresh-picked bouquet of sad-regrets. He kicks the old bouquet aside and replaces it with the new. Then he stands there staring through the glassite door of the cabinet and the frosted faceplate of her helmet at her face. "It was you all along," he whispers. "You were why I left Dirt. You were why I stole the whale. Time meant it to be this way. But why?"

He stumbles out of the hold and ascends the forward companionway to the bridge. There are nepenthe pills aplenty in the dispensary, but he knows they will help him no more than John Barleycorn has. On the bridge he collapses into the captain's chair and stares up into the viewscreen. Distant Sol is centered in it, a sickly yellow candle flame.

None of it makes any sense, whale. Here I sit, in love with a dead girl who, if it weren't for me, would be alive. A girl I never would have found if I hadn't stole the means of her destruction. A girl I could have brought back to life if, in stealing the means of her destruction, I hadn't irrevocably ostracized myself from the one world where rebirth is possible and in the process alienated the person who could most easily have pulled the necessary strings, in which case I wouldn't have stole the means—you, whale—and the girl I love would not be dead, I would not be here, you would not be here, she would not be here, none of us would be here, senselessly drifting in the Sea.

But maybe it's my perspective that's at fault. Maybe the whole ball of wax is a sort of cosmic book whose individual pages when taken out of context read like the ravings of a madman, but which, when read completely through, makes sense. There may even be a Grand Design.

If there is a Grand Design, what better place to find its roots than at the bottom of the Space-Time Sea?

He pictures the bottom of the Sea in his mind. For lack of a better reference, he pictures it as an ocean floor; more specifically as the deepest part of a sort of cosmic Pacific: a Mariana Trench or a Mindanao Deep. Oddly—perhaps because he has drunk too many Supernovas—the picture adds to his fascination.

The whale, to whom by now his mind is an open book, interposes a question:

I'm thinking of it, whale. Have you ever dived that deep? Has any spacewhale?

The bottom of the Sea, to this whale at least, is unknown territory.

Moreover, its conception of it is as simplistic as his own. As misleading.

Nevertheless, the whale knows as well as he does that

"000" is not an accurate representation. It may or may not know about the Big Bang theory, but it certainly must know that a dive such as the one Starfinder is contemplating is an invitation to possible incineration.

Would you dive that deep if I asked you to?

Apparently the whale prizes its present lot no more highly than the man prizes his, for its answer, a simple statement of their pact, comes at once:

Very well, whale, dive then! Dive to the bottom of the Mindanao Deep!

Starfinder leans back in the comfortable captain's chair and watches the years and the centuries flash past. A.D. 6 . . . B.C. 22 . . . B.C. 41 . . . B.C. 119 . . . B.C. 240 . . . B.C. 399 . . . Sporadically he raises his eyes to the protean scene in the viewscreen proper. Sol is fading from view. Distant stars are edging in closer.

The whale's momentum keeps increasing as it dives ever deeper. But there is no sense of motion, no indication of temporal retrogression other than the accelerating readout and the subtle shifting of the stars. The leviathan is like "a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Beneath a painted ocean ...

The seeming immobility combines with the Supernovas Starfinder has drunk and creates a soporific effect. He dozes, then sinks into a leaden sleep. He awakens from it with a start, certain that mere seconds have gone by. Then one of the dates flashing across the base of the viewscreen registers subliminally on his mind.

B.C. 4,201,549,631!

He is appalled. He must have slept for hours, not seconds.

He looks at the clock on the port bulkhead. It registers 1342. But the numerals tell him nothing since he has no idea when he fell asleep.

In the viewscreen, stars swarm like angry bees.

Cold sober now, he starts to his feet and steps close to the screen, staring at the multicolored maelstrom. To facilitate his thinking he visualizes the Space-Time Sea as a cosmic infundibulum. He knows of course that it is nothing of the sort, but he also knows that, assuming the Big Bang theory to be correct (as would seem to be the case), any object moving backward to the beginning must follow a trajectory analogous to the interior slant of a funnel. Absurd though the analogy may be, if the whale continues its dive and the Big Bang theory proves to be correct, the leviathan will become ashes long before it reaches the figurative bottom of Sea, and he will become ashes along with it.

And the Star Girl too.

Did he set forth on his mad journey because he was drunk or because he wished to join her in death?

Whichever, it was a fool's hegira.

He is about to command the whale to resurface when he notices that the swarming stars are thinning out. Lowering his gaze to the base of the screen, he notices something else: the rapid retrogression has ceased; the last date to be registered is B.C. 5,221,492,986.

The cessation admits of two possible answers, neither of which explains the thinning out of the stars: (1) the whale has resurfaced, or (2) it has dived past the moment the sun was born.

Have we resurfaced, whale?

The whale's response makes clear that they have not:

By this time the stars in the viewscreen have thinned out to hardly a handful and have receded into distant pinpoints of light.

As Starfinder stares into the growing blackness, one of them winks out.

Another.

The situation of a few minutes ago has altered radically. Should he command the whale to resurface? It cannot reverse its dive unless it does. Or should he let it proceed to the very bottom of the Sea? Theoretically, the Sea is 15,000,000,000 years deep.

Only a far-flung scattering of stars are visible in the screen now. As he stares at them they wink out one by one. Absolute blackness.

Well, what else? Did he expect to find light in the Mindanao Deep?

No. But the Mindanao Deep is a mere metaphor. What we are discussing here, ladies and gentlemen, is page one of the *Cosmic Book*, the opening paragraph that deals with the Big Bang, the primeval explosion whence sprang the Grand Design. . . .

Starfinder laughs. *The Big Bang, whale—they made it up! It has no more scientific merit than Shu, son of Amon-Ra, holding his sister Nut, the sky, above his brother, Keb, the Earth.*

As his laughter fades away there is a grinding jar, followed by a series of scraping sounds, then silence. It is as though the whale has finally come to rest on the bottom of the Sea. The viewscreen vanishes before Starfinder's eyes. The deck dissolves beneath him, the bulk-heads around him, the ceiling above him. He finds himself standing in a little room with a picture window that frames a view of grass and trees and distant, undulating hills.

The walls of the room are black. So is the ceiling. So is the floor. The dimensions suggest the interior of a cube.

There are two doors. One in the middle of the wall on his left, the other in the middle of the wall on his right. A gray desk with a matching swivel chair is positioned at right angles to the picture window. On the wall opposite is a fireplace.

Dazed, he stares through the picture window at the grass and trees and distant hills. The grass is deep green and appears to have been newly mowed. The trees are shade trees but they throw no shade. The distant hills are just that. Above them, a brief expanse of blue sky is visible.

The light he is seeing by is of uniform consistency and fills every square inch of the room. Its source cannot possibly be the picture window. It seems to be part of the very ambience. Indivisible from it.

He faces the fireplace, which up till now he has only glanced at. It does not qualify as a light source, since there is no fire in it, but fireplaces are among the most fundamental factors of human civilization, and he is in desperate need of a handhold on reality.

The fireplace is constructed of rectangular red bricks, boasts a pair of brass—or brasslike—andirons across which lies a small log. The fireplace is surmounted by a marble—or marblelike—mantel. Here, however, orthodoxy ends, for centered on the mantel is an object that at first glance appears to be a large ovoid lump of coal, its polished surface interrupted at even intervals by tiny apertures through which phosphorescence glows, but that at second glance turns out to be a scale model of the whale.

Model?

Starfinder leans forward, closes one eye and peers with the other through one of the apertures. He sees a tiny stateroom containing a tiny bed, a tiny vanity, a tiny bureau, a tiny chair and a tiny wardrobizer.

He peers through another aperture—no, not aperture, portscope—and sees a tiny compartment containing nothing but a built-in control console and a single chair.

The winch room. The nucleus for the loading and unloading of the holds.

Another portscope, chosen at random, provides him with a giant's-eye view of the gallery.

Through trial and error, he locates one of the portscopes of the bridge. He peers through it and sees himself standing in front of a tiny viewscreen, a homunculus less than a quarter of an inch tall.

The homunculus is leaning forward, staring into the screen.

Homunculus?

Starfinder straightens. He is sweating. *Where are you, whale?* he asks.

He does not expect an answer and is surprised when

appears in his mind.

Translation: "At rest, on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea."

Where am I?

Translation: "In my belly, on the bottom of the Space- Time Sea."

Starfinder wipes his forehead with his shirt-sleeve.

If both the whale and he are on the bottom of the Sea, how can the one be simultaneously on the mantel of a fireplace and the other be simultaneously in both bellies and also in the room that contains the fireplace?

All of this is a dream. It *must* be a dream. He is still sound asleep in the captain's chair. He merely dreamed that he awoke.

He tries to arouse himself, to bring himself out of sleep. But the ruse will not work. The reality of the room will not go away.

He finds himself staring at one of the two opposing doors. "Very well, room. If *you* won't leave, *I* will."

He goes over to the door, opens it and steps into another room. The door is a swinging door and swings swiftly and silently shut behind him. The room he has just entered is a facsimile of the room he just left. It is identically furnished and its picture window frames a familiar view of grass and trees and distant, undulating hills.

He walks across the room to the opposite door, opens it and steps into a third room. It is exactly like the other two.

*Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.*

The ancient quatrain erupted unsolicited from his subconscious. It is not quite apropos, but it provides him with a clue.

The door he came in by has swung to behind him. Slyly he crosses the floor, opens the opposite door and makes as though to enter the room beyond. Then, standing in the doorway, he darts a quick glance over his shoulder at the other door. Sure enough, it is open, and there is another Starfinder standing in *that* doorway darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at the "first" Starfinder, who, for all the "third" Starfinder knows, may be darting a quick glance over *his* shoulder at still another Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

He doesn't return to the "first" room. What would be the sense? There is only one. Instead, he goes over to the desk and sits down in the swivel chair.

For a while he gazes absently through the picture window at the green grass and the shadeless shade trees and the distant, undulating hills. He wonders wearily what lies beyond the hills. Probably more grass, more trees and more hills.

The window has no sash. It doesn't even appear to be set into the wall. It merely begins where the wall leaves off and ends where the wall resumes.

On an impulse he removes one of his boots and slams its heel against the glass. The glass, if glass it is, gives forth a dull, hollow sound, but it does not break or even crack,

He bangs the boot heel against the adjoining wall. He is rewarded with the same dull, hollow sound.

He puts the boot back on.

The desktop next engages his attention. It is bare, save for a ream of writing paper surmounted by a black paperweight, an inset inkwell from which a quill pen protrudes and a small black-and-white holo-photo in a metalloid frame.

Déjà vu touches him, and he picks the holo-photo up for a closer look. He nearly drops it. It is a

portrait of a girl in her early twenties. There is a sad expression on her face, as though the first robin she saw that spring were dead. Her dark hair is bobbed, and her eyebrows bring to mind blackbirds on the wing. . . . It is not a beautiful face. The bridge of the nose is a mite too wide, the cheekbones are a shade too high, the cheeks a bit too full. Written in white ink across the lower part of the photo are the words, *To Starfinder, with all my love.*

His hands are trembling badly, but he manages to set the photo back down on the desktop without dropping it. He sits there staring at it for a long time. It distresses him, even though he knows it cannot be real, any more than the desk can be, any more than the room can be, any more than the stereotyped scene framed by the window can be. Any more than the ream of writing paper lying on the desk can be.

He focuses his attention on the ream, forcing the photo from his mind. Noticing that the topmost sheet is covered with script, he pulls the ream toward him and removes the black paperweight. He riffles through the pages, finds that all of them are covered with the same handwriting.

Whose handwriting is it? God's?

He examines it closely. It is oddly familiar. At length he recognizes it. It is his own.

By this time he is beyond surprise, a stranger to consternation. Calmly he essays to read what he has apparently written, but the words blur and run together, and he cannot make out a single one.

Unperturbed, he returns the manuscript—for manuscript it must be—to its original place on the desktop. He is about to replace the paperweight when he notices that it is a perfect cube and that there are a pair of diminutive hinges affixed to two of its adjoining sides.

It is a box, not a paperweight. Or perhaps it is both a box and a paperweight.

Should he open it?

Why not?

He inserts a fingernail between the adjoining sides opposite the hinges. A modicum of pressure suffices, and the lid springs back with a *click* that the ceiling seems to amplify.

Even before he looks inside, Starfinder knows what he will see, and it is exactly what he does see: a tiny Starfinder sitting at a tiny desk in a tiny room looking down at something he is holding in his hands.

Looking down, no doubt, into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier box at an even tinier Starfinder sitting at an even tinier desk in an even tinier room looking down into the interior of an even tinier room at an even tinier Starfinder, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

As Starfinder sits there staring down at the back of his tiny neck he feels someone's gaze on the back of his own neck, and turning his head and glancing upward, he sees above the plane formerly occupied by the ceiling a massive head turned sideways at exactly the same angle his own is turned. He grins, and returns his gaze quickly to the tiny Starfinder in *his* box, but not in time, of course, to catch the tiny Starfinder returning his gaze to the even tinier Starfinder in *his* box.

Starfinder closes the little lid, and the resultant *click* is joined by a much louder *click* from above. He replaces the box on top of the manuscript. Glancing upward again, he sees that the "ceiling" is back in place.

By dint of much mental hammering and sawing, Starfinder reassembles a small block of the *Critique of Pure Reason* memorized when he was blind:

Space and Time are merely subjective conditions of all our intuitions, in relation to which all objects are therefore mere phenomena, and not things in themselves . . . in respect to the form of phenomena, much may be said a priori, while of the thing-in-itself, which may lie at the foundation of these phenomena, it is impossible to say anything.

Granted, Kant wasn't talking about the Sea; nevertheless, his conclusions are pertinent to Starfinder's predicament.

Given the existence of the bottom of the Sea, said bottom by its very nature would be bereft of both space and time.

But is he to believe that the infinite succession of rooms/boxes he appears to be inhabiting, when in actuality he is inhabiting only one—if indeed he is inhabiting any at all—constitutes the so-called thing-in-itself?

No. The rooms/boxes, plus their contents, plus the stereotyped scene framed by the "picture window," constitute his *interpretation* of the thing-in-itself.

The holo-photo of the Star Girl can be attributed to wishful thinking.

The whole package, in fact, probably bears little if any resemblance to the actual foundation, but it is as close to that foundation as his perceptions can get.

Past, present, future—apparently he is existing in all three. And just as apparently, all three are one and the same.

Maybe his perceptions are trying to tell him that there is neither an end nor a beginning, that man invests reality with both just as he invests it with space and time.

That the universe is simultaneously microcosmic and macrocosmic.

That each individual is the author of what he sees and experiences.

Whatever the case, it is painfully evident that the *Cosmic Book*, if such a book exists, contains no Grand Design.

At this point, his brown study is interrupted by a hieroglyph:

Annoyed, he asks, *And what does our pact have to do with the price of eggs, whale? And why is it that you see the bottom of the Sea as when I see it as an infinite series of rooms, all of which I'm in and can't get out of and in each of which you're reduced to an ornament on a mantel?*

The whale elaborates:

Starfinder frowns. Obviously the whale is seeing the bottom of the Sea through his eyes as well as its own and is trying to tell him what he should do, or rather, what both of them should do.

Build a house?

I don't get it, whale.

There is a "silence." Then the whale, apparently unable or unwilling to elaborate its meaning further, attacks the problem from a different angle and transmits a more appropriate answer:

The hieroglyph fails to explain why the whale should be perceiving the bottom of the Sea one way, and Starfinder another, but it does show the man the way out of his predicament.

He has merely to tell the whale to dive. "Upward."

The "open sesame" was there at his fingertips all along. He simply hadn't known enough to say it.

But the way out of his predicament fails to explain why the predicament exists for him and not for the whale. Perhaps, for all its intelligence, the whale lacks the sophistication necessary to interpret the thing-in-itself other than in simplistic form. Perhaps there is another reason. Who can explain the workings of its alien mind? Starfinder can't.

He gets up from the swivel chair, and walks over and stands before the fireplace. He takes another peek at himself in microcosmic form—at the little homunculus standing pompously on the bridge, staring raptly into the viewscreen, as alive as he is, because it is he.

He grins. *Dive, whale*, he says. *Dive back to the present. I've had enough, for a while at least, of the past.* And microcosm and macrocosm become one, and Starfinder and the whale rebound from the bottom of the Space-Time Sea:

5

Enter Ciely

The whale is ravenous when at last it breaks the surface of the Space-Time Sea. The deep dive depleted most of its 2-omicron-vii reserves. It ramjet-feeds, throwing out great magnetic fields to capture the thinly scattered elements that comprise its diet, and upping its velocity to near maximum. The fiery maw of its open-hearthlike stomach converts the elements into 2-omicron-vii as fast as they are fed into it, and in mere hours the reserves are built up again. Surfeited, the whale slows its momentum to a snail's pace and relaxes on the surface of the Sea. Dulled by fatigue, it fails to perceive the great dark shape its o.a.v. detects descending out of the immensities.

A seismiclike tremor jars Starfinder out of a leaden sleep. Hungover, he is unable at first to make any sense out of the frantic hieroglyph the whale projects into his mind:

Sitting up on his bunk, to which he retired after the whale's "upward dive" blotted out the thing-in-itself, he breaks the glyph down into its two components:

and . Since is the figure the whale uses when referring to itself, must represent a separate entity. One that has attached itself to the whale's back. Abruptly he understands. The whale has been attacked by a star eel!

Horrified, he dons the new captain's uniform the wardrobizer manufactured for him while he slept. He has known all along that John Barleycorn dislikes both neatness and cleanliness, and he has finally made up his mind to employ both weapons to keep John at bay. He even took a shower and shaved before he went to bed.

He buckles his Weikanzer .39 belt around his waist and makes certain that the holstered raze gun is fully charged; then he leaves the cabin. As he ascends the forward companionway to the bridge he reviews the tales he heard about star eels when he was a Jonah. All of them are unpleasant, and all emphasize an ineluctable fact of life, viz., that when a star eel attaches itself to a Wurm's star mollusk, its usual prey, or a spacewhale, and drains either of its "lifeblood," the victim is as dead as Earth's moon.

The pale, star-pulsing blur of Meta 3 (Messier 31 in the obsolete Messier catalog) is centered in the bridge view-screen. It is centered there solely because the whale happened to be pointed toward it when the star eel attacked. Starfinder shifts the screen to the dorsal camera. He is rewarded with a close-up of the eel's black underside. There is no way he can see the creature *in toto* unless he leaves the belly of the whale. However, he knows what it looks like without seeing it. He has seen numerous holo-photos of star eels and has read about them in Gride's *Astral Life*. 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 it is the astral counterpart of the terrestrial lamprey, and that although it is capable of utilizing 2-omicron-vii for its own energy needs, it is incapable of diving beneath the surface of the Sea. He knows that its "skin" is rough and meteoroid-scarred, that its subtissue consists of a hard organic-metallic substance that is analogous to the transsteel subtissue of a spacewhale. He knows that, like a spacewhale's, its interior consists of a spelaeon labyrinth of tunnels and cavities. He knows that its underside is magnetic and enables it to cling to a host long enough to absorb the host's lifeblood. He knows that it reproduces by fission. He knows that its corpse can be converted into a spaceship at half the cost it would take to build a ship of similar size from scratch. And although he has never seen one, he knows that there are many such ships in existence.

Since such eels do not as a rule attack spacewhales unless desperately in need of reenergization,

there is an excellent chance that this one may be in such an enervated state that its magnetic grip can be broken. Starfinder hugs a stanchion and braces himself. *Roll, whale, he says. Break free!*

The whale rolls. Mightily. It is as though a cosmic storm has sprung up in the Space-Time Sea. As though the star-flecked immensities are alternating between troughs and waves. Starfinder is nearly torn from the stanchion. Then the "storm" abates as abruptly as it broke, and the hieroglyph that apprised him of the eel's presence reappears in his 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 whale's final reserve of 2-omicron-vii the whale will be regurgitated back to the present, the eel along with it.

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

Unfortunately he doesn't know whether the star eel has a ganglion. But even if it does, there is no way he can get to it. He cannot burn through the eel's tough subtissue with a mere Weikanzer .39. Weikanzer .39s are manufactured with human tissue in mind. So are 4-H-20 raze rifles. For him to do the job with the hyperacetylene torch would take the better part of a day, and by then the whale would be dead. Probably the eel's tail is its most vulnerable part; but even if he can somehow sever it—perhaps by ramming it with the Staranger—there is little likelihood that the eel's resultant blindness will cause it to release its prey. There just isn't any clear-cut course for him to follow. He will have to play it by ear.

He descends the forward companionway to the second deck and enters the lateral passageway that leads past the captain's and the first and second mates' cabins to the boat bay. In the bay, he suits up; then he depressurizes the bay, boards the Staranger, actuates the lock and sails out upon the Sea.

On his right blazes the white bonfire of Maarken's Star; "above" it, the island universe of Meta 3 pulses palely in the metagalactic distance. He retro-fires before the Staranger breaks free from the gravitational pull of the whaleship, then fires a gentle burst from the starboard jet and brings the craft around. Before him, whaleship and parasite form a massive silhouette against a vast scattering of distant stars.

The portscopes ranged along the whale's burnished flank glow like nacreous eyes.

Above them, along the flank of the eel, glow similar tiers of eyes.

Starfinder stares.

The combined mass of the two gargantuan bodies pulls the Staranger inward. He employs just enough ventral thrust to put the craft on a plane with the eel. He watches its "eyes" resolve into portscopes like the whale's. He sees that its surface, like the whale's, has been machined down to its organic-metallic subtissue and that the subtissue has been burnished to a degree where the farthest star can see its face in it.

There is only one possible answer: the eel is a spaceship, like the whale.

But how can it be if it is still alive?

Granted, the whale is alive and it is a ship. But it is like no other whaleship in existence. Its fellow ships are all as dead as it itself would be if Starfinder hadn't brought it back to life.

There is a powerful searchbeam mounted on the Staranger's prow. Starfinder turns it on and plays its dazzling radiance over the star eel's flank. In seconds he spots the telltale seam of a boat-bay lock.

Just aft of it is a portscope. He sees a face beyond the lens. The face of a frightened girl.

"I still don't think I should have let you in. If I'd known you weren't really dying like you let on, I wouldn't have." The star eel's boat bay is smaller than the whale's. It boasts two berths in addition to the one in which he berthed the Staranger. One of them contains a lifeboat shaped like a miniature eel.

The girl is wearing an abbreviated khaki dress and thick-soled canvas sandals. Her brown hair is bobbed and banged. Her face is thin, almost to the point of emaciation. Her eyes remind him of the blue

wildflowers that grow in the idyllic hills south of Swerz. The barest beginning of breasts lends her dress its only contour.

Obviously she is alone in the ship. Were she not, someone in authority would have shown by this time. "I take it you're both the captain and the crew."

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

"You're like me then. How old are you?"

"I'm thirteen. Well no, not quite thirteen, but so close you could almost say I was. . . . I thought Pasha's host was just an ordinary spacewhale. He attacked so fast I only got a glimpse of it. I didn't have any idea it was a ship too."

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

"You mean would I have stopped Pasha from attacking? 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. The same as whales."

"They are. But Pasha was an exception. The converters referred to him as a 'noble experiment.' But I don't think enslaving someone 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 eyes, seeking some vestige of dissimulation. The search is fruitless, and serves only to remind him once again of the blue wildflowers of Farstar****.

"You were enslaved too?" he finally asks.

She nods. "My father is a converter in the Orbital Shipyards of Maarken's Star Six. That's Renascence, in case you didn't know. His labor union is so rich and powerful it practically controls the whole planet. Its members call themselves 'proletarians' and walk around with their chests stuck out, saying how proud they are to be common ordinary workingmen. But deep down in their hearts they think they're better than everybody else, and they despise everything that makes them seem otherwise. I call them the *haute bourgeoisie*."

"Middle-class snobs in workclothes," Starfinder says. "You find them all over the place."

"Maybe there are lots of others, but I'll bet none of them measure up to the ones on Renascence. The ones on Renascence have square brains and tin eardrums. And it's *they* who 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 shouldn't be. If it weren't for the underground libraries, all the kids on Renascence would grow up into carbon copies of their parents. The underground libraries are run by teachers the *haute bourgeoisie* fired because they wouldn't toe the line. They hold secret classes for kids like me as well as lend them forbidden books to read. Mostly, they teach literature, because that's what the *haute bourgeoisie* hate most. Before I stole Pasha I was studying the Victorian poets. They're my favorites, especially Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But there aren't very many kids like me. Most of them *like* being carbon copies of their parents. Being slaves. Before I stole Pasha I was a slave too, even though I wasn't a carbon copy. But I wasn't about to grow up into someone whose idea of culture is a case of beer, a holovision program and the *Brotherhood of Orbital Converters Gazette*. So I stole Pasha and freed both of us."

Starfinder sighs. His first impression of the girl was that a strong gust of wind would blow her away. It is his opinion now that nothing short of a cyclone could even budge her. "What's your name?" he asks.

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

It is as he feared. Damn his luck, anyway! The Fates really have it in for him today. The star eel by itself would have been enough for him to cope with in his hungover state without throwing in a stubborn twelve-year-old girl!

Easy does it, he cautions himself. 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 eelship'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 eelship 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, a plastic cup of coffee before him, Starfinder says, "Pasha means a lot to you, doesn't he."

Solemnly, "Pasha is my life."

"The whale is mine."

"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 takes a sip of his coffee. It is black and bitter, but perhaps it will alleviate his hangover.

"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. . . . Why are you dressed up to beat the band, Starfinder?"

She is referring to his white captain's uniform. She has hardly taken her eyes away from it since he removed his spacesuit. "I'm trying to set a good example for myself."

"Why are your hands trembling like that?"

"Wouldn't your hands tremble if Pasha were in mortal peril?"

"Yes, I guess they would. . . . What's that scar on your cheek?"

"It's sort of a souvenir. From a two-oh-seven burn."

He is reminded, despite the dissimilarity of the two, of Naishi No-Kue and the words that came rushing from his lips when she kept staring at the scar. An identical impulse seizes him now. Like the Ancient Mariner, he feels compelled periodically to someone his "tale to teach." "A whale that wasn't quite dead gave it to me when I first went into space. The two-oh-seven irradiation also blinded me. I was blind for two years; then I heard of an ophthalmic surgeon on Renova One who could implant artificial retinas, and I went to him. After I regained my sight I became a Jonah."

"To get even."

"Yes. I deganglioned thirty-two whales. 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 anymore. When I looked at the thirty-second one I saw a face in it—you know, the way people on Earth sometimes see a face in the moon. The face I saw in this 'moon' was mine."

"And then you quit killing them."

Starfinder nods. "I got a job as a converter in the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar Four. I was working on this whale, which was nearly converted and which everybody naturally assumed was dead, when it established contact with me. It turned out to have had two ganglions before it was Jonahed, only one of which the Jonah knew about. I'm not sure, but I think it was on the verge of fissioning when it was harpooned, and that the destruction of the original ganglion aborted reproduction. Sort of caused it to become its own offspring. I've never asked it and I never will, because it's as aware of my thoughts as I am and would've volunteered the information if it had considered it to be any of my business. Anyway, to get back to when I first made the discovery, I told it I'd repair the second ganglion, which had been damaged when the first was blown up, if it would indenture itself to me for life. It agreed. It didn't have much choice."

"That was selfish," Ciely says. "I never heard of anything so selfish."

"But I didn't *force it* to indenture itself."

"Not much, you didn't. You should have offered to become partners with it, not made it your slave. And then the two of you should have set forth to protect all the other whales from the machinations of

mankind. That's what Pasha and I are going to do for the star eels."

"Granted, that's what heroes and heroines do in romantic literature," Starfinder says. "But in real life, it doesn't work. Fighting for lost causes is an exercise in futility. The whale knows that as well as I do."

"You're cynical," Ciely says. "Why?"

"It's a disease of old age."

"But you're not that old. Why, I'll bet you're not even fifty."

"I'm only thirty-three!"

Ciely giggles. "Got you on that one."

Starfinder grins. "Touché." Then, "When I was working in the Farstar Four Shipyards I was a slave like you, sort of. But when the whale offered to enter into a pact with me I saw more than just a chance to attain my freedom. The whale is more than just a spaceship—it's a time machine too. Call Pasha off and we'll climb on board and pay a visit to King Arthur's Court. We'll drop in on Charles Dodgson when he was writing *Through the Looking Glass*. We'll watch Armstrong take his first small step on the moon."

Sadly Ciely shakes her head. "I know spacewhales are marvelous creatures, Starfinder. I've read about them. But I can't call Pasha off. This is the first time he's replenished his energy since I set him free. It may be ages before he finds one of his regular hosts, and he's got to stay alive until he does."

Undaunted, Starfinder regroups 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."

"Humph!" Ciely says. "I can see you don't know beans about star eels. How could they be deganglioned when they don't have ganglia? Ordinarily, all the eelers do when they 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. After he was towed into the yards the converters burned their way inside him, got to his psychomotor nucleus, which corresponds to a whale's ganglion but isn't quite the same, 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 anything 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. Before, he couldn't. And I didn't bind him to any agreement either, the way you did with your whale!"

Suddenly an anguished projection appears in Starfinder's mind:

The figure's inclination from the horizontal, if interpreted literally, would indicate that the whale is diving into the past and taking the star eel along with it. But Starfinder knows that the inclination, in this instance, is meant to indicate that it is weakening fast.

But he isn't alarmed. He now knows how the star eel can be dislodged and the whale's life saved. And yes, the Star Girl's too. For in the back of his mind the Star Girl isn't dead, but sleeping—waiting for a kiss to bring her back to life. And if in the front of his mind he knows better, he also knows that as long as he keeps her at his side there exists a chance, however tenuous, that someday, some way, he can bring about her resurrection on Farstar****.

And put to rout the guilt that plagues him day and night, and oust John Barleycorn from the belly of the whale.

He can tell from the look of wonderment on Ciely's face that the whale projected

into her mind as well as his. As much for her benefit as for the leviathan's, he says, "*Deactivate all nonessential systems, whale. Lower average interior temperature to twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit.*" Then, so the whale will not conclude that he intends to abandon it, "*Maintain standard interior gravity and normal interior atmospheric pressure. And,*" he adds quickly, "*maintain present reefer temperature in forward hold.*"

The look of wonderment has yet to depart from Ciely's face. "Is that how he talks to you, Starfinder? With pictures?"

"Yes. How does Pasha talk to you?"

"He doesn't. He just does whatever I tell him to."

"Then tell him to release the whale."

"No."

"Then I'll have to *make* him release it."

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

Starfinder gets to his feet. "Oh yes 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 dimwitted girl. Quite the contrary, he was struck by her intelligence.

In Starfinder's time, which is to say the time of taking, the men and women who build spaceships, either from scratch or through the conversion of spacewhales and star eels, are not renowned for their creativity. Apparently in the back of each of their minds there is a universal blueprint showing exactly how a ship should be laid out. Thus, Starfinder's locating the control room of the eel is but a little more difficult than rolling off a log.

The control panel is an imposing affair, its banks of buttons, dials, gauges, meters and multicolored lights extending from the deck to the ceiling; moreover, it is built into the forward bulkhead so ingeniously as to seem indivisible from it. But Starfinder is not discouraged either by the panel's seeming complexity or by its seeming inaccessibility from the rear. In all probability only a handful of its instruments are directly related to the extensors, and no control panel was ever built without its builders providing a means for a repairman to get at it from behind.

Presently his practiced eye singles out a panel section 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 section out and sets it to one side. Then he crawls through the square aperture and stands up. He finds himself in a cubbyhole hacked out of the fibrous interior tissue of the eel and illumined only by the eel's inner phosphorescence.

The phosphorescence is paler than that which emanates from the internal tissue of the whale, but it is bright enough to see by. He spots the extensors at once. 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 tell, they are perfectly ordinary split-end impulse-cables. One is blue, one yellow, one green, one red and one black. The switch boxes Ciely pulled them out of are of corresponding colors.

Plugging Pasha back in should be a lead-pipe cinch. Impulse-cables employ the Atchison-Rhea principle, so it is unlikely that these particular ones are hot. But the possibility exists. He will have to take a chance. Bending down, he touches the red one. Not so much as a tingle. He picks it up. It is about one inch in diameter, surprisingly flexible, surprisingly soft and surprisingly smooth. So smooth, in fact, that it slips out of his hand 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—crawls up his left leg and coils itself around his left wrist.

The blue one coils himself 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; it was to hold back laughter.

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

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

No doubt she also knew—knows—any number of ways to get out of the galley without using the dining-room door. Possibly Pasha is capable of opening it for her. Possibly he has already done so.

She may even have apprised 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 a child's intelligence or his or her capacity for cruelty.

The black prosthetic tentacle wriggles up Starfinder's right leg, across his abdomen and over his sternum, and coils itself around his neck.

On his previous visits to Samarra he managed to elude Death at the last minute by dodging into a dark alley or by blending into the crowd at the marketplace. But this time there is no dark alley available, and the marketplace is empty.

The black tentacle coils itself more tightly around his neck. Redness 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 banged hair and eyes the hue of the wildflowers that grow 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 tentacles relax, fall away. Starfinder sags to his knees. He feels gentle fingers massaging his throat, an unidentifiable 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 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. And I guess I wanted to teach you a lesson. I knew I could get out of the galley—Pasha can open any door in the ship. I—I never dreamed you'd find the control room so fast."

The anguished rebus that appeared in their minds before appears in them 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."

There is a silence. Then, "He's telling you he's dying, isn't he."

"Yes."

Another silence. Then, "Is he smart, Starfinder?"

"He's more than merely smart. He's almost human. You wouldn't think a whale could have human qualities, but he does."

"Even—even though I only caught a glimpse of him before Pasha attacked he seemed beautiful in a way."

"He *is* beautiful."

"... Inside too?"

"Yes. Would you like to see?"

"... All right."

It is cold in the belly of the whale—so cold they can see their breaths. The phosphorescence emanating from the ceilings and the walls has paled to a wan glow.

Hiding his impatience, Starfinder takes his guest on a grand tour. It is time-consuming, but it is the only way he knows of to save the whale. He shows her the elegant dining room, the immaculate galley, the speckless staterooms. He escorts her through the hydroponic garden. They inspect the whale's drive-tissue. He points out the location of its open-hearthlike stomach, whose thick walls saved it from the converter's torch. When she asks where the whale's mouth is, he explains that it has none, that it swallows its "food" by means of a process that resembles osmosis. They linger for a while in the lounge, where Ciely drinks a can of cherry pop, stealing curious glances at the time screen. They visit the grav generator compartment, the recycling station and the atmosphere-control room. He lets her look into each of the holds, save one. Finally they ascend the forward companionway to the bridge, where Meta 3 is still centered in the screen.

"It's a beautiful ship indeed," says Ciely Bleu.

"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 I'm always 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. I never was."

"That explains it." She looks suddenly into his eyes. "If I call Pasha off will you guarantee that the whale won't harm him?"

"I'm certain he won't, Ciely. Especially if I tell him not to."

She faces the viewscreen, gazes through the immensities at the pale blur of Meta 3. 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. Let him go."

The silence resolidifies. It is like the black silence that shrouds the whale and its piggyback rider. Girl and man are immobile. The viewscreen 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 screen, occulting Meta 3. Pasha has detached himself from his victim and hurried on ahead to await his mistress.

Now a crepitant roar fills the belly of the whale. It is the roar of 2-omicron-vii surging into the leviathan's drive-tissue at double the normal absorption rate—the prelude to a tremendous burst of speed.

The whale's intention is all too clear. "*No, whale!*" Starfinder screams. "No!"

The whale does not "hear." Primitive rage seethes in its ganglion, flows through its bulkheads and its decks. It is no longer a whaleship: it is a reincarnation of its remote ancestors, a space beast pulsing with

primordial hate: a haecceity of vindictiveness. Transmuting the last of its energy into one final savage thrust, it hurls itself toward its foe.

The eel has turned broadside. Desperately it tries to get out of the path of the great black Juggernaut it presumed to prey upon. The whale's momentum triples in a space of seconds. Pasha's nearer flank looms large in the viewscreen: larger still. Abruptly there is the shriek of metallic tissue being ripped asunder. It is followed by a vast, vertiginous shuddering. Starfinder encircles a stanchion with one arm, Ciely with the other, as before their eyes Pasha breaks apart. 2-Omicron-vii escapes into space, turning the screen briefly blue: there is a white blinding light. Ciely screams. The white light flashes in the bridge portsopes as the disintegrating halves of Pasha flicker past. The aftscopes briefly frame 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 viewscreen. It is dappled with distant stars now—spatters from the cosmic artist's brush. "Pasha," she whispers. She whispers the name again: "Pasha . . ."

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

"I never dreamed he'd react that way, Ciely. He'd begun to seem human to me. But maybe that's the answer. He not only seems human, he *is* human. And being human, he succumbed to an atavistic urge."

She begins to cry. Her shoulders do not shake: her body does not convulse. That is the most terrible part about her tears. She stands there immobile, the terrible tears flowing without end, as though her grief is an inexhaustible fountain. "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 sounded. Starfinder knows this, but he is tone deaf and cannot sound the note.

"All I had."

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

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.

Then there is a silence. A long one. Finally a rebus takes form in Starfinder's mind and 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 takes form:

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

"He means that you're his 'friend.' He's trying to say he's sorry for what he did."

A third rebus appears:

Starfinder translates again. "He's saying now that both of us are his 'friends.' That he and you and I are three comrades."

The look of wonderment is back on Ciely'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 Maarken's Star***** and her "haute *bourgeoisie*" parents. But not yet. Not for a long while. She needs the therapy that only the whale can provide ...

And the understanding that only a cold-sober companion is capable of.

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

it "says," and the three comrades sail forth into the Sea of and .

Simultaneously a door slams somewhere. No, not a door—the boat-bay lock. It is the sound of John Barleycorn departing from the belly of the whale.

6

The Haute Bourgeoisie

"It seems to me, Starfinder," Ciely Bleu declares one evening, her blue-flower eyes fixed on the time screen in the whaleship's lounge, "that a disproportionate amount of Earth's history consists of people crossing things. Moses crossing the Red Sea, Alexander the Great crossing the Hellespont, Hannibal crossing the Alps, Julius Ceasar crossing the Rubicon, Columbus crossing the Atlantic, Balboa crossing the Isthmus of Panama and now Dr. Samuel Johnson crossing Inner Temple Lane."

"You're a fine one to be complaining," Starfinder tells her. "What other twelve-year-old girl from the populated worlds has ever been treated to a spacewhale's-eye view of history before?"

"I wasn't complaining. I was merely giving verbal vent to a perspicacious observation." Then, "Look! Dr. Johnson almost fell!"

"He'll be all right," Starfinder reassures her. "He's only got a few more steps to go to reach his doorway."

"He's counting them, I'll bet."

"I wouldn't doubt it."

The whale, its attitude colored no doubt by Starfinder's recent association with John Barleycorn, is somewhat contemptuous of Dr. Johnson's alcoholic propensities, to judge from the stick figure that suddenly appears in both Ciely's and Starfinder's minds:

"I don't think that was a very nice thing to 'say,' Charles," Ciely says. "Charles" is the name she gave the whale after they became acquainted. "After all, Dr. Johnson *did* compile the first English lexicon, and without so much as a smidgin of help from that snooty Lord Chesterfield either! He earned the right to at least a little leeway in his social activities, *I* think."

"Well anyway, he made it home," says Starfinder, as the door of No. 1 Inner Temple Lane closes behind the subject of their conversation. "In a few more minutes he'll be safe in bed. And speaking of bed . . ."

Sadness shadows Ciely's thin face, darkening her blue-flower eyes. "Couldn't we tune in one more place-time first, Starfinder? This *is* my final night on board the whale, you know."

"You promised Inner Temple Lane would be the last."

"I know. But people are prone to promise almost anything when they're on the verge of desperation. Anyway, what difference does it make what time I get up tomorrow morning? You said yourself you're going to have Charles resurface off *Renascence* just three weeks after I stole—just three weeks after I disappeared. So no matter how long he remains in the past the same amount of future time will have gone by, plus an itsy bitsy amount of dive time."

"Maybe so. But the longer you remain on board the whale the harder it's going to be for you to go back. Besides, your parents must be worried sick about you."

"But they won't be worried any sicker no matter how long I stay in the past. Assuming they really *are* worried sick."

Starfinder sighs. He knows when he has been outmaneuvered. "One more then. What would you like to see?"

"Not what—whom. I want to see Elizabeth Barrett when she was still living at No. 50 Wimpole Street. Before she married Robert Browning. When she was composing her *Sonnets*."

"And when was that?"

"A.D. 1845," Ciely answers promptly. "In the spring, I should imagine. Our teacher in underground class told us all about her and Robert."

Starfinder sighs again. "It'll be a tough one to tune in, but I'll try." He addresses the whale. *Same city, spring, A.D. 1845, whale.*

Ciely Blue leans forward in her viewchair as a later London comes into focus. Inner Temple Lane still fills the screen. If anything, it is even grimmer than it was eighty-two years ago. The trick is to get from it to Wimpole Street—a task that of necessity rests on Starfinder's shoulders, since the complexity of the new controls is such that only he is capable of coping with them.

Kneeling beside the screen, he sets to work. He hasn't the foggiest notion where Wimpole Street is. Inner Temple Lane gives way to Whitechapel—the territory-to-be of Jack the Ripper. Buckingham Palace appears. Baker Street (*Baker Street?*), Bunhill Row . . . Only through sheer chance does he finally find Wimpole Street, after which it is a cinch to tune in No. 50.

Ciely is still leaning forward in her chair. It is late afternoon or early morning—probably the former, to judge from the number of carriages in evidence. Starfinder continues to work the controls. Presently a kitchen appears (mere walls, of course, are no obstacle to the whale's o.a.v.). In it, a dowdy servant-woman is standing over a grotesque cast-iron stove on which the contents of a large cast-iron pot are bubbling (the whale's olfactory range is limited, which in the present instance is probably a good thing). Starfinder next tunes in a study in which an austere elderly man is sitting at a desk, poring over a pile of papers, then a large living-room in which two young men are lolling. And then, suddenly, a bed-sitting room appears in which an attractive woman in her late thirties is reclining in an armchair, her legs covered with a lap robe.

"It's her, Starfinder!" Ciely cries. "It's 'Ba!' You've found her, Starfinder. You've found her!"

Starfinder returns to his viewchair and sits back down.

Ciely is leaning even farther forward in hers. Presently, "But she's not writing anything, Starfinder. She's just sitting there, doing nothing. Why isn't she composing the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*?"

Starfinder is tempted to point out that, were they to look in on any woman of moderate or above-moderate means in any given age, they would probably find her sitting, doing nothing, but he refrains. For one thing, Elizabeth Barrett is an invalid; for another, it will serve no practical purpose for him to taint his starry-eyed ward with his own cynicism.

Elizabeth Barrett's eyes, it presently becomes apparent, are closed. Moreover, her breast is rising and falling with telltale evenness. Lying face-down at her feet in a puddle of afternoon sunshine is a book that has apparently slipped from her lap.

"Do you know what?" Starfinder says. "I think she's sleeping."

"She is *not*! Do you think for one minute she'd fall asleep over a volume of Robert's poems?"

"But we don't know that the book she was reading *is* a volume of his poems."

"What *else* would she be reading with their marriage only a year away?"

The whale is of the same mind as Starfinder.

it observes.

"Oh, *you!*" Ciely says.

"Well whether she's asleep or not," says Starfinder, "I know a certain someone who should be."

Slowly Ciely gets to her feet. She gives him a long reproachful look and makes as though to turn her back on him without a word and march out of the lounge. Then, abruptly, she darts over and kisses him, whispers "Good night" into his ear, and heads for her cabin. It is the cabin directly across the passageway

from his—the one the converters designated as the first mate's—and she has come to refer to it as "my room." Sometimes, jokingly, she refers to herself as the "First Mate."

Long after she has gone Starfinder can feel the moist coolness of her kiss upon his cheek, but he is totally unaffected by it. He cannot afford to be affected by moist kisses bestowed by innocent young maidens overflowing with love and affection, because the problem that confronts him requires a cold objectivity of thought that cannot be attained if he is to allow himself to be sidetracked by silly sentimentality.

The problem, simply stated, is how to get Ciely off the hook for stealing a star eelship worth somewhere in the neighborhood of ten million dollars and inadvertently bringing about its destruction.

Never mind that the whale accomplished the actual destruction. No court of law is going to try a spacewhale, and Starfinder would not allow this particular spacewhale to go on trial in any case.

Anyway Ciely, having done the stealing, is responsible in the eyes of Renascence law (which, unless it differs radically from the law that prevails on all the other terrestrialized planets, has its roots firmly embedded in ancient Rome) for what came after. Extenuating circumstances or no extenuating circumstances.

The actual workings of Renascence justice are a mystery to Starfinder, but he does not think she will be prosecuted for grand larceny. After all, she is only twelve years old.

Nevertheless, someone is going to have to reimburse the star eel company, EelConCo.

Starfinder is as poor as a churchmouse. He doesn't even own his own whaleship—at least not legally.

No doubt Ciely's parents are moderately well-to-do and have money in the bank in the city of Kirth, which is the New Bedford of the star eel industry and the headquarters of EelConCo. But how are they going to raise ten million dollars? How, for that matter, if Ciely does have to go on trial, are they going to raise enough money to cover the astronomical fee a criminal lawyer sufficiently adept at courtroom chicanery to provide her with a ghost of a chance will charge?

Problem? This is no problem. This is a brick wall. A four-dimensional brick wall that slams against you just as hard when you try to climb over it or to go around it or to burrow under it as it does when you try to barge right through it.

But Starfinder has at his disposal a four-dimensional sledgehammer in the form of a spacewhale.

He turns off the time screen, retires to his cabin and programs the wardrobizer to outfit him in a nondescript ensemble that will pass uncommented upon where and when he is going. From a drawer of the built-in bureau he removes a pair of telekinetic dice that one of the converters lost and that he found in a corner of the lounge. From the same drawer he takes a platinum bracelet that he bought to give Gloria Wish after they became 1. After pocketing both the dice and the bracelet he steps across the passageway and looks in at Ciely. She is fast asleep. The whale has muted the phosphorescence emanating from the walls of "her room," as it does every night, so that her slumber will not come prematurely to a close. The whale watches over her day and night like a doting nanny. It goes into a tizzy if she even stubs her toe, and once, when she had a bad dream, it woke Starfinder out of a sound sleep and ordered him—*ordered* him—to go sit beside her bunk and reassure her.

He closes the door softly behind him, makes his way to the forward companionway and ascends it to the bridge. Because the success of his plan involves exact timing, he has decided to use the computer. It is no more efficient than the whale, but the whale is capable of emotion and therefore, in the long run, less reliable. Before he begins, he outlines his plan to the whale. Then, after receiving its hieroglyphic seal of approval

he programs it via the computer to dive and resurface off the shores of Kirth, well beyond the circling star eels, conversion docks and space stations that comprise the EelConCo Spaceyards, at a temporal level when Kirth was a small town and the star eel industry was still in its embryo stage. He postprograms it to dive the moment he departs in the Staranger and to resurface one Renascence month later at a

corresponding point in space.

He is now ready to depart. Why, then, when he descends the forward companionway, does he descend all the way to the lowest deck? Why does he pause, now, outside the access door of the forward hold?

He has kept the door locked since Ciely came on board. It is a combination lock. He dials the correct combination, pushes the door open and steps inside. . . . The blue bouquet lying at her feet is withered. Some of the star-shaped petals of the sad-regrets have fallen to the deck. He picks the bouquet up, carries it outside and drops it into a disposal tube. Then he walks aft and picks a new bouquet in the hydroponic garden. Returning, he lays it at her feet. He looks into her face, stares for a long time at the frozen tears on her cheeks. John Barleycorn may have departed from the whale, never to return, but the guilt he pretended to ameliorate remains—the guilt, and the love that walks hand in hand with it. *Why did you cry, my darling? Why did you cry, my dear?...*

This will never do. The man who stole the whale gathers himself together. He leaves the hold and closes and locks the door behind him. He proceeds directly to the boat bay and boards the Staranger. He has a busy "night" before him.

"You look bushed, Starfinder," Ciely says over her cereal. "Didn't you sleep well last night?"

Starfinder fortifies himself with a second plasticup of coffee and dials an order of toast and scrambled synthe-eggs. In the galley viewscreen Maarken's Star hangs like a dazzling Christmas-tree ornament from the black branches of the fir of space. In the foreground Renaissance turns imperceptibly on its axis, its dayside green-gold and tinged with blue. The EelConCo Shipyards, visible only on the nightside, bring to mind a moving semicircle of twinkling trinkets.

"Where did those little crow's feet at the corners of your eyes come from?" Ciely asks when Starfinder makes no reply. "They weren't there last night."

"I didn't know there were any crow's feet at the corners of my eyes."

"Well there are."

Starfinder tackles his order of toast and scrambled synthe-eggs. He is wearing a brand-new captain's uniform. The "scrambled eggs" on the forepiece of the hat, which lies at his elbow on the breakfast counter, bear a strong resemblance to those he is eating.

When he finishes he dials a third plasticup of coffee. Ciely is staring at the viewscreen. The wardrobizers of whaleships cannot be programmed to manufacture children's clothing and she is wearing the same khaki dress she came on board in. It is faded from many washings, but its tightness is not the result of shrinkage but of the weight she has gained. "Are you going to come and see me after they put me in jail, Starfinder?"

"Nobody's going to put you in jail, Ciely. Everything's been taken care of."

She doesn't seem to hear him. "I'll get life at least. And my mother and father will gloat. 'Steal a ten-million-dollar star eel, will you?' my father will say. 'Well, you're getting your just deserts!' "

"Ciely, you're not going to jail!"

"The *haute bourgeoisie* are like that, you know. They don't care about their children. All they care about is time-and-a-half on Saturdays and double-time on Sundays."

"Ciely, listen—"

"My father is so hungry he wouldn't take a day off if his life depended on it. He's a big brownnoser, too. Every Christmas he gives his shift leader a case of Scotch."

"My mother is just like him. She goes around the neighborhood bragging about how big his paychecks are. And as though they weren't big enough, she works part-time in a sleazy restaurant waiting on tables. And do you know what their staff of life is, Starfinder? Not bread, as you'd naturally think, but beer!"

"Ciely, I don't have any choice. I *have* to take you home."

"I know. My debt to society must be paid."

"It has nothing to do with your debt to society. Anyway, there's no longer any such debt. But I still have to take you home. You belong with your parents, with young people your own age. You can't grow

up in a spacewhale with no one to keep you company but a space bum like me."

She begins to cry. The handle of her spoon protrudes forlornly from her forgotten bowl of cereal. Her glass of synthemilk stands untouched beside the synthesugar bowl.

Starfinder is a great hand with children in distress. He sits there woodenly in his dazzling captain's uniform like a bemedalled bump on a log. Oh, he is a great hand with them, all right.

It is up to the whale to save the day. With its usual *savoir-faire*, it does so:

it "says."

"I know, Charles," Ciely whispers. "I know we'll always be comrades no matter how much space and time lies between us." She dries her eyes with her napkin and stands up. "I'm ready," she says to Starfinder. To the whale: *I love you, Charles. Goodbye.*

The Staranger comes to rest in a big backyard with an in-ground swimming pool. It is night, and there is the smell of new-mown grass.

"Where are we, Starfinder? Whose house is that?"

"Mine," Starfinder says.

She stares at it. It is three-storied, cupolaed, multiwindowed. Behind it is a big double-garage. A driveway winds around the house and down a grassy slope and joins hands with a highway. There are no other buildings for miles around—only fields and trees. In the distance, the lights of the city of Kirth are visible.

Starfinder opens one of the garage doors, pushes the Staranger inside next to a big black limousine. Ciely helps him. "I suppose you're going to tell me that's your car too."

"One of them. I loaned the other one to my lawyer."

"You're putting me on, Starfinder. How can you own a house in the country and two limousines when you just this minute set foot on Renascence for the first time!"

"How do you know it's the first time?"

She gasps. "You pastbacked!"

Starfinder nods. "Pastback" is a word they thought up between them to describe physically visiting a past time as opposed to viewing one on the time screen. "And not just once, either. I wanted to tell you at breakfast, but I couldn't get through to you. Come on, let's go inside."

The downstairs lights wink on as they approach the house. A tall, spare man clad in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers meets them at the back door, and they step into a large, brightly lit kitchen. "This is Arthur, my carekeeper," Starfinder says. "Arthur, this is my niece, Ciely Bleu."

Arthur nods. He yawns. "I heard the grodge door open and figured it was prob'ly you. It's an awful hour to wake a man up, if you ast me. Employers ought to have more consid'ration for their employees." He yawns again. "I'm goin' back t'bed."

"Since when have I been your niece?" Ciely asks after Arthur leaves the room.

"Since two weeks ago, when I adopted your family."

She stares at him. Then she shakes her head. "Starfinder, you take the cake!"

"Speaking of cake, I had Arthur order one for the occasion." He glances at the digital kitchen clock, which registers 4:57 A.M. "But I forgot that whale time and Renascence time are birds of a different feather and that we'd be arriving before breakfast."

"What does our arriving before breakfast have to do with cake?"

"Well, people don't usually eat cake before breakfast and—"

"But I already had breakfast."

Starfinder sighs. It will serve no useful purpose for him to point out that although in one sense she had breakfast it is nevertheless too early in the day for her to be eating cake, so he doesn't. He finds the cake in one of the built-in cupboards and sets it on the kitchen table. He takes a container of milk out of the refrigerator and gets together a plate, a glass and a knife and fork. He and Ciely sit down across from

each other at the table. The cake is a chocolate one with white icing.

She cuts a big piece and puts it on her plate. "Aren't you going to have any, Starfinder?"

"No."

He gazes thoughtfully through the big picture window that the table adjoins. Dawn has daubed the eastern horizon with pastel pink. Against the pinkness the city of Kirth shows as a serrated silhouette. He stares at it for some time, then he returns his gaze to Ciely, who has finished her cake and is regarding him raptly, all eyes and ears.

"First of all, Ciely, from here on in you must call me 'Uncle John.' As you probably know, on Renascence there is a unique provision in the law that allows a man of sufficient means and with no family of his own to adopt a family, if that family has no objections, and assume an avuncular status. The provision dates back to frontier days when there were more men than there were women, but it still applies. Anyway, two weeks ago, via my lawyer, I adopted yours—the Bleus. Subsequently my lawyer informed your mother and father that I owned the eel you'd stolen, and that in pursuing you in my whaleship I accidentally rammed the eelship and destroyed it, imperiling your life in the process. I had to put in the last part, because my imperiling your life makes my adoption of your family seem like an act of contrition, and therefore more believable. By the same token, it's understandable why I'm not bringing charges against you for the theft, even though the EelConCo insurance underwriters probably won't pay off. My lawyer also informed your parents that you're safe and sound, and that I'm bringing you home. Ostensibly I made all these arrangements while still in space traveling at less than C velocities: actually, of course, I made them during my most recent pastback."

"You *owned* Pasha?"

Starfinder nods. "But I didn't know it, of course, till 'last night.' "

"But how could you possibly have bought a star eel worth millions of dollars?"

"I started out with a pair of telekinetic dice way back when, and a bracelet that I sold to stake myself. I invested my winnings in Space Industries, Incorporated—that's what EelConCo called itself originally when it was still in knee pants—and arranged for the dividends to be paid into a trust fund for my 'son.' I was able to do this because there's no 'in-being' law in the commonwealth of Kirth. I then returned twenty-some years later *as* my 'son,' invested the dividend earnings in more Space Industries stock and set up a second trust fund for a second 'son,' and so on, till Space Industries, Incorporated became EelConCo and I became rich. All very sneaky and below board, but there are times when the end justifies the means. In the beginning, to explain my periodic absences, I passed myself off as a space sailor. Lately I've assumed the role of a whaleship captain. My name, incidentally, is no longer merely 'John Starfinder.' It's 'John Starfinder VI.' This house has been in the 'Starfinder family' for 'generations.' Arthur is the most recent of a long line of carekeepers. I hired him when I hired Ralph."

"Ralph?"

"He's my chauffeur. It would look funny, don't you think, to own two limousines and not have a chauffeur?"

"Yes, I guess it would." Ciely takes a deep breath. "Starfinder—"

" 'Uncle John.' "

"Uncle John, you did all those things, you went to such fantastic lengths, just to keep me from going to jail?"

"I don't think you'd have gone to jail."

"But just the same, you did them because you thought there was a chance that I might." "

"Well, there was also the matter of keeping your parents out of hock."

"But if you could do all that, Starfinder—"

" 'Uncle John.' "

"But if you could do all that, Uncle John, why couldn't you have fixed things so that I *didn't* steal Pasha? So that he'd still be alive?"

For a long while Starfinder doesn't answer. He is back in the belly of the whale standing in the shrine of the Star Girl, gazing at the tears she shed so long ago. His own tears are invisible. *If only I could have fixed things for her. If only I could have fixed them so that she'd be alive, instead of fixing them so*

that she was irrevocably dead. . . .

"Time is a miser, Ciely—a miser that pinches the pennies of the past. You can add more pennies to its hoard, but you can't steal so much as a single one. If you try, you burn your fingers. The best I could do was what I did do—gain control of EelConCo, acquire exclusive rights to Pasha and adopt your family."

He looks through the window at the nascent day. The pinkness along the eastern horizon has paled, and spread high into the sky. A band of saffron yellow light has come into being just beneath it. The serrated silhouette of Kirth is more distinct now, and somehow sinister.

He contacts the whale, which is in synchronous orbit. *Is all well, whale?*

The answer materializes in both his and Ciely's minds:

Yes, all is well.

"Come on, Ciely, I'll show you the rest of the house. Then, as soon as your breakfast's had a chance to digest, we'll take a morning dip in the pool. I bought you a swell bathing suit. I also bought you some swell outfits. After our dip you can put one of them on and pack the rest. When Ralph shows up I'll have him bring the car around to the front and we'll get an early start."

The big black limousine noses through suburban traffic, makes a right turn, then a left. Then another right. To a large extent, Renaissance society is an atavism—a throwback to midtwentieth-century North America. Cultural and technological throwbacks of this kind are fairly common among the terrestrialized worlds and are generally the result of a similarity of ages and beginnings. It is true that on Renaissance there were no Indians to contend with, but there were indigenes of like nature that had to be—and of course were—subdued.

Ralph makes another right turn. "Are you sure you gave him the right address, Ciely?" Starfinder asks. "We seem to be traveling in a circle."

Ciely is wearing an azure dress, a little white tam with a blue pompon and white platform sandals. On her lap rests a small white handbag. "I'm positive, Uncle John. How could I have forgotten where I live in only a little more than three weeks' time, however much I'd have liked to?" Then, peering over Ralph's shoulder, "There it is—just up ahead. That sort of squarish house."

The adjective is of next to no help, for all the houses on the block are sort of squarish. But Ralph has no trouble finding the right driveway, and pulls into it and parks behind a cinnamon-colored runabout with a red roof. If any question exists in Starfinder's mind that it is the right driveway, a cast-aluminum shingle placed conspicuously on the front lawn, reading THE BLEUS, puts the question to rout.

A little concrete walk leads up from the sidewalk, past a large flowerbed, to the front porch. Standing on the porch are a man and a woman who have just come out of the house. Both are about Starfinder's age. The man is short and heavyset and has a faint stubble of beard. He is wearing work clothes. The woman is svelte, and, at first glance, has eyes that are twins of Ciely's. She is wearing an abbreviated housedress with little pots and pans printed all over it.

Ciely, who up until a moment ago had not spoken since they left Starfinder's house in the country, gives a little gasp, jumps out of the car and runs across the lawn. The man and woman come running to meet her, and the three of them embrace.

Starfinder experiences a twinge of envy, but it is only a very faint one. After an appropriate interval he gets out of the limousine and, carrying Ciely's suitcase, skirts the flowerbed, which has a little wire fence around it, and walks over to where the trio are standing and introduces himself. His first close-up impression of Mr. and Mrs. Bleu is that they have remarkably protuberant eyes. Then he remembers that he is wearing his captain's uniform and realizes that they have probably never seen such a dazzling get-up before.

All up and down the street people are standing on their front porches, gawking. On two or three front lawns small children are playing; the older children, apparently, are in school.

Mrs. Bleu kisses him on the cheek. Mr. Bleu shakes hands with him. "We sure appreciate you adopting us and bringing our dotter back safe and sound," Mr. Bleu says solemnly.

"From the bottoms of our hearts," says Mrs. Bleu.

"I just got off work," Mr. Bleu announces. "I'm on the night shift this week. After I get off work, I always have a couple of beers, no matter what time it is. Last night, that suckhole Skeechy Crowell squawked about me getting so much overtime and the shift leader told me to take tonight off, so this morning I'm going to have more than a couple. How about joining me, Uncle John?"

"Sure, I'll have a beer with you," Starfinder says. "Milderd, open two tall cold ones."

"I'll do better than that," Mrs. Bleu giggles, heading for the house. "I'll open three."

Starfinder and Mr. Bleu follow, and Ciely, left alone on the lawn, hurries after them. As Starfinder is about to ascend the porch steps, someone taps him on the shoulder. Turning, he beholds Ralph the chauffeur.

"Yes, Ralph?"

"You forgot to invite me, sir."

"Invite *you*? Invite you where?"

"Along."

"What he means is," Mr. Bleu explains, "is that according to the rules and regulations of the Personnel Carriers Union, whenever a carrier is going to be kept waiting more than five minutes he's automatically supposed to be treated as a social equal by his employer."

"But *I* can't invite him into *your* house," Starfinder objects.

"What d'you mean, you can't? He's a union man, isn't he? You can invite him *anywhere*. Where've you been living all these years, Uncle John?"

Starfinder realizes he has stubbed his toe. The emergence of the workingman onto the Renaissance world scene is a relatively recent development and he has not spent enough time in the present to become fully acquainted with all the ramifications of that emergence. Arthur's insolence has given him pause once or twice, but each time he wrote it off as irascibility arising perhaps from incipient cirrhosis or bad teeth.

Ciely saves the day. "Star—Uncle John spends most of his time in space. He *is* a whaleship captain, you know. As such, he can hardly be expected to keep up-to-date on employee privileges, especially when they're not applicable in space."

"No, I suppose not," Mr. Bleu concedes.

"Will you join us for a beer, Ralph?" Starfinder asks.

"Don't mind if I do."

"Milderd!" Mr. Bleu bellows. "Open up another tall cold one for our friend Ralph."

The three men sit down in the Bleus' living-room, Mr. Bleu in a commodious armchair, Starfinder on a settee and Ralph on a ten-foot-long sofa. The room is a pleasant one, with lace curtains frilling the windows and a staircase showing in the background. In addition to the aforementioned articles of furniture, there is a long low coffee table, two end tables, a knickknack cabinet, two floor lamps, two table lamps and a hassock. A huge holosole occupies almost an entire wall. Above the mantel of an electric fireplace hangs a romanticized painting of Armstrong taking his first small step on the moon. For some reason it reminds Starfinder of an antique painting he once saw entitled Washington Crossing the Delaware.

Mrs. Bleu enters from stage right, bearing four plastibottles of beer. She hands one to Ralph, one to Starfinder and one to Mr. Bleu; then, retaining the fourth one for herself, she sits down on the sofa next to Ralph. All this while Ciely has been standing off to one side. She looks first at her father, then at her mother, then back at her father, then back at her mother, but neither seems to be aware of her presence. At length she picks up her suitcase, which Starfinder has set down beside the settee next to his captain's hat, and disappears upstairs.

Starfinder is about to ask Mrs. Bleu for a glass when he sees that she, her husband and Ralph are drinking directly out of their bottles. Remembering his faux pas of a few minutes ago, he hastily follows suit. Ever since he sat down, he has been waiting for someone to remark on the

2-omicron-vii scar on his right cheek. Finally Mr. Bleu does so.

MR. BLEU: That's a nasty-looking scar you got there, Uncle John. Knife wound?

STARFINDER: It's from a two-oh-seven burn. I got it on a whaleship that turned out to be still alive.

MR. BLEU: You can't trust those damned whaleships, I always say.

RALPH: How come you're captain of a whaleship instead of an eelship?

STARFINDER: Originally I'm from Farstar Four, where spacewhales are converted.

Ralph has chug-a-lugged his beer. Now he taps the empty bottle on the coffee table and Mrs. Bleu jumps up, dashes into the kitchen and returns with four full ones. Meanwhile, Ciely has come back downstairs.

MR. BLEU: I know it's prob'ly none of my business, Uncle John, but that eelship of yours you accidentally rammed with your whaleship when you went after that feather-brained dotter of mine must have set you back quite a bundle. Just how big a bundle, if I may be so bold as to ask?

STARFINDER: Around ten million dollars.

MRS. BLEU (*leaning forward on the sofa*): Is the insurance company going to pay off?

STARFINDER: I'm afraid not. Generally, beyond the Thousand Mile Limit space insurance is limited to meteoroid damage. But I'll get by.

RALPH: Dirty capitalist pig! (*Finishes his second bottle.*) Get me another beer, Milderd.

STARFINDER (*calling after her as she again heads for the kitchen*): Skip me this time, ma'am. I've still got two full ones.

RALPH: Too good to drink with us common ordinary working-class people, is that it, Uncle John?

CIELY: He's certainly too good to drink with a freeloading klutz like you!

MRS. BLEU (*returning from the kitchen with three more plastibottles of beer*): Apologize to our guest this minute, you bitchy little brat!

CIELY: He's your guest—not mine. (*Runs outside.*)

MRS. BLEU (*distributing the bottles*): It's those awful books she reads that make her like that.

STARFINDER: What books?

MR. BLEU: The ones that the Brotherhood banned. She borrows them from an underground liberry and reads them on the sly.

MRS. BLEU: If *I* ever catch her reading one it'll be the last one she reads for a while!

RALPH: Show me a kid that reads books and I'll show you a kid that's no good. Every time!

STARFINDER: I think I'll get some air.

Outside in the bright morning sunlight he wipes his forehead with the regulation handkerchief that came with the uniform and puts his captain's hat back on. He takes a deep breath. In another minute he'd have ...

Best to forget about it.

He looks up and down the block. Ciely is nowhere in sight. Some distance down the street there is an eruption of verdure that indicates a park. Perhaps she is there. He finds her sitting on a green bench that girds a large shade tree. She has a small branch in her hand and is tracing evanescent patterns on the grass. In her azure dress she looks like a piece of the sky that has broken off and drifted down to the ground.

He crunches along a pebbled path and seats himself beside her. He sits there silently, not knowing what to say. For a long while Ciely doesn't say anything either. Then, not looking at him, she asks, "What did you think of my devoted parents, Starfinder?"

"Cynicism doesn't become you, Ciely."

"I know it doesn't. But it's the only thing I have left to wear."

He tries a scholarly approach. "The major components of any given culture have a tendency to think alike and to behave alike and to glorify their ignorance. Just the same, such people form the foundation of all stable societies. Without them, there wouldn't be civilizations."

"So who wants civilizations like this one?"

"Maybe it's not a utopia, but it's not a dystopia either. You're being unfair."

"You don't understand, Starfinder. You made all that money while almost everybody else was trudging along the highway toward economic security, and you still don't understand." She is looking at him now. Earnestly. "If the *haute bourgeoisie* were just the foundation, it might not be so bad. But they're the walls and the floor and the roof, too. It's like serfs taking over a fiefdom and remaining serfs; like muzhiks taking over a landowner's estate and remaining muzhiks; like sailors taking over a ship and remaining sailors."

"If they didn't remain sailors, the ship might sink."

"It would be better if it did."

Starfinder sighs. "I don't think we're getting anywhere, Ciely."

"I know. We're talking about tomatoes when the subject is really potatoes."

"I've deeded my house in the country to your parents, with the proviso that they bequeath it to you. In addition, I've liquidated my holdings and established a trust fund for you with' no strings attached, so that when you come of age you can do anything you want, '*haute bourgeoisie*' or no '*haute bourgeoisie*.' You can even write poetry, if that happens to be your bent. My lawyer has instructions to sell both my limousines and to deposit the money, less his commission, in a bank account in your name."

She has resumed tracing patterns in the grass. He waits for her to say something, but the silence is broken only by the shrill voice of a mother sitting on a nearby bench, reprimanding one of her offspring.

There is a gnawing ache at the base of his sternum that has all the earmarks of a duodenal ulcer, but which is nothing of the sort. Once again he assumes a scholarly air. "Given a democracy, Ciely, sooner or later there's bound to be an establishment, and inevitably its values are going to flavor the societal soup. Renaissance's establishment happens to be comprised of workingmen, but believe me, if it were comprised of businessmen it wouldn't be any better, and if it were comprised of intellectuals it would probably be worse." His words sound empty even to himself.

"You're still talking about tomatoes, Uncle John." Ciely throws away her branch and gets to her feet. "I think it will be best if we go back now. My mother and father are probably worried about where I am. As you probably noticed, they think the sun rises and sets in me."

They leave the park and walk up the street of squarish houses, side by side but parsecs apart. They come to a halt by the little walk that leads up to the Bleus' front porch. In Maarken's Star's morning light the flowerbed in the front yard is a multicolored glory to behold. There is one exactly like it next door. There are others exactly like it in every front yard on the block.

"Are you coming in, Uncle John?"

Starfinder shakes his head. "Say goodbye to your folks for me and tell Ralph I'm ready to leave."

"Very well."

She stands staunchly before him, looking at last into his eyes. Despite the weight she gained in the belly of the whale, there is a frailty about her, and she seems to sway slightly in the morning breeze.

"Goodbye, Uncle John. Tell Charles I'll say goodbye to him later."

"He knows you will."

And then, without warning, she is in his arms sobbing. "Oh, Starfinder, I've been so mean, and I didn't want to be. I know you had to bring me home, I know you can't afford to saddle yourself with a twelve-year-old misfit, and I don't blame you in the least. I know all you did for me and I know I can never repay you in a thousand years, I know, I know, I know, and oh, Starfinder, I love you, you and Charles, and please, when I'm grown up, come back for me!"

She turns, runs quickly up the walk, climbs the porch steps and disappears into the house. Starfinder's "duodenal ulcer" takes a turn for the worse. It nearly doubles him over. Along the periphery of his vision he sees fields and trees, and little hills clad with green and growing grass; and then, subtly, the fields fade away, and the hills and the trees, and the grass pales and vanishes, and all that is left is bleak and barren earth.

Ralph comes out of the house, descends the porch steps, staggers a little as he crosses the lawn and starts to climb behind the wheel of the limousine. Starfinder walks over and taps him on the shoulder.

"You're too drunk to drive, Ralph," he says. Ralph turns around, regards him blearily.

"Nobody gets drunk on beer. Beer ish the moderage of beveration."

"I don't like drunks," Starfinder says. "I used to be one myself, and that makes me dislike them all the more. I particularly don't like beer drunks. They're hypocrites, slobs and loudmouths."

"Dirty capitalist pig!" Ralph shouts, and makes a wild swing in Starfinder's general direction. Starfinder turns him around, propels him across the lawn, boots him in the buttocks and sends him sprawling face-down in the Bleus' flowerbed. Then Starfinder returns to the limousine, gets behind the wheel, backs out of the driveway and heads for his house in the country, where he will spend the rest of the day winding up his affairs.

He feels a little better, but not much.

De-orbit, whale, dive back into the past.

The whale does not respond.

Starfinder, standing on the bridge eager to be gone, repeats the telepathic command. *Dive back into the past!*

The whale does not budge.

The man is about to repeat the command again when a hieroglyphic question appears in his mind:

You know perfectly well where she is, whale. She's on Renascence. Now stop giving me a hard time and de-orbit.

That's all behind us now, whale. Now, it's just you and me. Two comrades instead of three. De-orbit!

Starfinder is stunned. *You can't mean that, whale. We're friends—remember? And then, too, there's the matter of our pact!*

Damn it, whale! Do you want me to kidnap her?

Silence.

Even if I dared to, she needs more than just a father. She needs a mother too.

Starfinder throws his captain's hat on the deck. Not only is he furious, his "duodenal ulcer" is killing him. *All right, whale, this is the end! It so happens that I own a house in the country down below and that I'm as rich as a Rockefeller and—and . . .* And then he remembers that he deeded his house in the country to the Bleus, that it required the better part of his riches to obtain exclusive rights to the star eel, that he put the rest of them in a trust fund for Ciely and that he is as poor as he was before he went pastbacking—to wit, as a churchmouse.

Moreover, without the whale's cooperation he cannot amass another fortune.

Would he if he could?

Would he, if he could, buy another house in the country and settle down for the rest of his life among the *"haute bourgeoisie?"*

He would sooner settle down among the Great Apes of Colossus*****.

Ciely has no choice. At least not until she comes of age. By then it may be too late. By then she may very well have become a Great Ape herself.

It is true that her parents aren't really Great Apes, but they come disconcertingly close to being.

Why did he refuse to face up to the inexorable fact that they do not give a damn about her, never have and never will?

Because the alternative was kidnapping her?

Hardly. Not when kidnapping her was tantamount to rescuing her.

Because living in the whale, in space and time, would deprive her of a proper education?

Hardly. Not with the entire past, with its wealth of art and science and philosophy, at her very fingertips. Not when she could alternate between the whale and virtually any educational facility she chose.

He could even bring a whole girls' school on board the whale if her proper upbringing demanded it. All he would need would be money, and with the whale's cooperation he could amass another fortune anytime, anywhen.

A panorama of what he and the whale can do for her spreads out before his eyes, dazzling him. It has been there all along, but up till this minute he has refused to look at it.

Why?

Why did he pretend it wasn't there? That in marooning Ciely on a single island in the vast archipelago of time and space he was acting in her best interests?

Why?

Why did he get rid of the only person who has ever really loved him in his whole miserable life?

Was it because he was afraid he might harm her?

No. Assuming he could have harmed her, the Star Girl would have prevented him from doing so. She is his protector, and she was Ciely's too.

Nevertheless, she is the real reason he got rid of Ciely, is she not?

At last he confronts the truth: he got rid of a living girl so he could be alone with a dead one.

His feeling toward the dead girl has nothing to do with necrophilia. It is true that when he looks at her he sees a dead woman. But it is not her dead body that he loves but the vibrant living creature she must have been before he came along and killed her.

Nevertheless, she *is* dead, and he is putting her interests above Ciely's, which is not only absurd but insane.

He sighs. *I guess the time has come for me to cross my Rubicon, whale. My Hellespont, my Alps and my Red Sea.*

He lands the Staranger in the Bleus' front yard, knocking down the pretentious cast-aluminum shingle and demolishing the rest of the flowerbed. He pounds on the front door and when a half-awake Mrs. Bleu opens it he brushes past her into the living room and climbs the stairs. He finds Ciely's room without difficulty. She is fast asleep in her narrow bed, her pillow wet with tears. He picks her up, grabs her still unopened suitcase and carries her in her nightclothes back down the stairs and through the living room and out onto the porch and down the steps and across the ruined flowerbed to the Staranger. Behind him, a just-awakened Mr. Bleu bellows, "Bring back my dotter, you spacebum you!"

"Kidnapper!" screams Mrs. Bleu.

"Don't press your luck," Starfinder shouts back at them. "You own a house in the country now, and there's a trust fund that'll revert back to you, not to mention a fat savings account I opened in your daughter's name!" Neither utters another word.

Starfinder lofts the Staranger. His "duodenal ulcer" has undergone a miraculous cure. Ciely doesn't come fully awake till they are halfway to heaven. "Starfinder, you came back!" Presently the whale shows above them, a gigantic silhouette against the stars. Starfinder docks the Staranger and they make their way to the bridge. Now *will you de-orbit, whale? Now will you dive?*

Familiar crepitations sound from below as 2-omicron vii permeates the drive tissue. Bulkheads creak as the whale girds itself for the de-orbital thrust. A familiar glyph appears in both their minds:

The whale breaks free. A moment later, it dives.

"I think," says Starfinder, *pere et mere*, leading the way to the lounge, "that we might have a glass of orange pop before we turn in. And maybe look in on 'Ba' and see how she's doing with her *Sonnets* these fine days."

"observes" the whale.

"Oh, *you!*" says Ciely Bleu.

7

The Rose

In the weeks that follow—"whale weeks," that is, since real time does not go by except when the whale dives—Ciely and Starfinder spend most of their waking hours in front of the time screen. There is not much else to do. They watch Pizarro defeat Atahualpa; they watch Xenophon effect a safe passage for the Ten Thousand across the river Centrites; they watch Ben Franklin fly his kite; they watch Deganawida set forth in his White Canoe to found the League of Five Nations; they watch Samuel Johnson pen the Chesterfield letter; they watch Buffalo Bill kill a buffalo; they watch John Hancock sign the Declaration of Independence; they listen firsthand to the eighteen missing minutes of the Nixon tapes; they discover that Sir Walter Raleigh had a lisp; they find out that the real reason Emily Dickinson became a recluse was that she was suffering from alopecia.

Comes the time when Starfinder realizes that for all the odds and ends of historical data Ciely is picking up, her sitting hour after hour before the time screen is tantamount to her sitting hour after hour before a holovision cube. It is true that her vicarious existence is based on real people and real events, but it is still vicarious and not at all the sort of life a healthy young girl should be leading. Ciely needs to be physically as well as mentally involved in life, and the time has come for him either to move a girls' school on board the whale or send her to one for a few months.

But such is not to be.

The hieroglyph that appears in his sleeping mind one night is reminiscent of one of the ones the whale devised when it was dying in the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar****:

He struggles up the steep slope of sleep. The glyph does not fade till the dark valley of his dreams lies far below him. Even after it fades it lingers in his mind like an afterimage on a retina.

Its meaning is unmistakable: something is wrong with the whale's ganglion.

He sits up on his bunk and swings his feet to the deck. The steady emanation of phosphorescence from the walls and ceiling reassures him, even though he knows that this isn't a reliable index of the state of the whale's health, that although vacillation sometimes occurs when a whale is dying, the interiors of dead whales phosphoresce as evenly as those of healthy living ones.

What gives, whale?

The answer he receives confounds him:

The whale wants him and Ciely to abandon ship! *Why, whale? Why?*
The next glyph brings him to his feet:

Quickly he slips into slacks and shirt and slippers and steps across the passageway. He doubts very much that the whale is going to blow up, and doubts even more that it would know about it ahead of time even if it were going to. But he also knows that it wouldn't have told him to abandon ship with Ciely if something weren't radically wrong.

The door to the first mate's cabin is ajar. The "First Mate" is snuggled under a blanket, fast asleep in the pale light to which the whale reduced the cabin's phosphorescence. She and Starfinder sat up till two in the morning watching the Democratic National Convention of 1996 and she is dead to the world. He doesn't awaken her, but gathers her up, blanket and all, grabs the dress she took off before going to bed, and heads for the boat bay. She does not fully awaken till they are well on their way in the Staranger.

"Where're we going, Starfinder? Is something wrong?" She is sitting beside him in her nightie, rubbing remnants of sleep out of her eyes. Her question would have told him, if her being fast asleep when he entered the first mate's cabin hadn't already done so, that the hieroglyph that the whale awakened him with and the two that followed were transmitted to his mind alone. Clearly, the whale didn't want to alarm her.

Starfinder doesn't want to alarm her either. "There's something wrong with Charles's ganglion, Ciely. Nothing serious, I'm sure. But he thinks we might be in danger and wants us to stay away from him for a while."

She doesn't buy it. "When someone's sick, you don't desert him. You stay at his side."

"But this is different. We don't know enough about spacewhales to know what might happen in a case like this."

"You're talking about two-oh-seven—is that it?"

"There might be some seepage—yes."

"I don't believe it. Besides, I'm not afraid."

"I know you're not. But Charles is afraid for you." To the whale, he "says," *I'm going to find a safe place for her on Earth, whale. Then I'm coming back.*

The whale makes no comment.

Whale?

No answer.

He tries twice more to contact it. Without success. Is it possible the whale is dying?

Is it already dead?

No, he will not even think such thoughts! He will proceed on the assumption that whatever is wrong with the whale's ganglion can be fixed. By him. Any other line of thinking will bring him ineluctably to the bleak prospect of life without the whale—life, moreover, lived on a planet whose inhabitants are undergoing moral evolution in reverse.

Earth's western hemisphere, bisected by the dawn belt, fills the Staranger's viewscreen. The whale retained its synchronous orbit after Ciely and Starfinder went to bed. "Ciely, I'm going to have to leave you on Earth for a while."

Instantly she is up in arms. "If you're going back, I'm going back too!"

"He'll be upset if you do, and that may make whatever's wrong with him worse. Besides, there's only one anti-two-oh-seven suit." "

A silence. When it continues to drag on, he moves his eyes from Earth to the thirteen-year-old girl beside him (her de facto birthday was yesterday: the automatic chef baked her a chocolate cake and Starfinder put thirteen candles on it). She is crying. The way she cried when the eel died. "He doesn't answer, does he, Starfinder?"

"No."

"I asked him if it would be all right if I came back on board and he didn't say a word. . . . Do you

think he's dead?"

"No. But we have to consider the possibility."

Another silence. (When she blew out the candles on the cake one stayed lit and she didn't get her wish.) Then, "How long will I have to stay on Earth?"

"Until I fix the ganglion. Regardless of how long that takes, I'll have the whale dive back to just a few hours after I left you. So you won't be there long. I'd make it even sooner if it weren't for the chance we might coincide with ourselves."

"But if that happened, we'd already know it, wouldn't we?"

"I suppose we would. But I still might coincide with myself on the way back to the whale."

"You might, but the odds against it are a zillion to one. You'd have to coincide with yourself *exactly*, or it wouldn't make any difference. It might not make any difference anyway. You might just pass through yourself."

"Maybe so, but it'll be best if I give the possibility a wide berth. . . . You're not afraid to stay on Earth for just a little while, are you?"

"Of course I'm not. I'm thirteen years old!"

The Staranger is passing through what for lack of a better term, Starfinder calls the "Artificial Satellite Belt." The number of orbiting vehicles and just plain junk is considerable, but the amount of space involved is such that the passage poses no problem. The countergrav has already actuated itself and North America fills the viewscreen. The Great Lakes lie below like a sapphire necklace. He brings the Staranger down just south of the southernmost one, a few miles behind the dawn belt, and lands it in a small clearing in a woods. The nearest human settlement—a hamlet comprising half a dozen buildings situated along a two-lane highway—is a good half a mile distant, so it is unlikely anyone will molest her.

Before they disembark he appries the Staranger's guideback of the date and the hour; then they step outside. Although the month is August the predawn darkness is cold, and although Ciely has slipped her dress on over her nightie she is shivering. He wraps the blanket around her, mentally berating himself for having forgot to bring a pair of her sandals. The stars are out, but in the clearing the darkness is next to absolute, and he can see nothing but the faintly darker background of the encompassing trees. But he does not deem it wise to turn on the Staranger's searchbeam.

In the yellow light emanating from the open lock he bends and kisses Ciely on the cheek. "I'll be back in no time at all," he tells her. "If you should hear anybody coming before I get here, hide in the woods."

"I'll be all right, Starfinder. Don't worry about me. Just fix whatever's -wrong with Charles's ganglion. He's what counts."

"He'll be okay, Ciely. Everything'll be fine."

But the misgivings he relegated to the back of his mind return to haunt him when he lifts off in the Staranger. They are joined by another: suppose, assuming the whale's ganglion can be repaired, he is unequal to the task?

He is relieved when the whale appears in the viewscreen. Its presence is proof that it is still alive. Had it died during Starfinder's absence, it would have been regurgitated to the present. The first place he heads for after reboarding it is the supply room. There, he dons the anti-2-omicron-vii suit he replaced after his bout with the Furies. He dons it ahead of time as a precautionary measure. He doesn't really believe, contrary to what he told Ciely, that the whale's sickness, whatever it is, can cause 2-omicron-vii seepage, but he doesn't *know* that it can't. And anyway, he can just as easily wear the suit down to Deck 4 as carry it.

But he doesn't proceed directly to Deck 4. Instead, he ascends the midship companionway to the main deck and walks forward to the bridge. After climbing the bridge stairs, he approaches the computer. Perhaps he can contact the whale electromagnetically. It is worth a try.

To approach the computer is to approach the main view-screen. To approach the main viewscreen is to accord it at least a single glance. The glance Starfinder accords it turns into a stare. For it no longer frames the familiar face of Earth. It frames instead a succession of tenuous crags—crags that rise up out of black and bottomless depths, crags whose crests are bathed with pale gold light that comes from

nowhere, crags whose crimson slopes seem stained with blood. Above them in a sky that is not a sky but a pale travesty of one, hover clouds like great gray gulls.

He has seen this surreal scene before: he hoped never to see it again. It is the cellar of Hell, to whose back gate he unwittingly found the key when the whale first bore him back in time. It is the abode of the archetypes, the dwelling place of the immortals. The interface of life and death.

It is the Abyss of Tartarus.

Somehow, perhaps because the whale is dying, he has found the key again.

But he refuses to believe that it *is* dying, even though it has apparently lost the temporal stability that holds non-Aristotelian reality at bay. He tries desperately to contact its ganglion via the computer. He tries in vain.

Undaunted, he returns to the supply room and takes down the portable hyperacetylene torch and tanks that he also stored away after his bout with the Furies. *Will the three finny maidens come back on board?* he wonders. He does not think so. Their "narrow escape" when the "galley broke ' up on the rocks" will surely deter them.

But the other denizens of the Abyss will not be similarly deterred.

In addition to the hyperacetylene torch and tanks he will need the transsteel welder and a packet of transsteel rods. The welder is stored on the next shelf down. Stacked beside it are a dozen packets of rods. But he is already overladen with the hyperacetylene torch and tanks. He will have to come back for the welder and the rods.

He descends to Deck 4, pauses at the base of the midship companionway. It has been days since he has entered the shrine of the Star Girl. The last bouquet of sad-regrets he brought her should be replaced. Should he replace it now? Added to his love for her is his gratitude for her having watched over the mad Monk all the while Ciely has been on board. In all that while the mad Monk has not stirred.

The phosphorescence flickers. It steadies at once, but Starfinder knows he cannot replace the bouquet now. He must tend to the whale first. The thought of Ciely waiting for him in the chill Earth dawn propels him aft, where he confronts the machine-shop door.

It is as bleak as the corridor walls on either side of it, distinguishable from them only by the bead made by the welder when he sealed it before stealing the whale. Its bleakness accentuates the monumental task lying before him and points up the hard, cold fact that unless the trouble with the ganglion is both obvious and uncomplicated he will not be able to correct it.

Nevertheless, he must make the attempt. His life is on the line now as well as the whale's. And so is Ciely's. The archetypes of the Abyss of Tartarus aren't likely to remain unaware of his presence for long, nor the savages of the 1990s hers.

He begins burning through the door.

He burns out a section just large enough for him to get through with his equipment. Then he returns to the supply room for the transsteel welder and a packet of transsteel rods. Once inside the machine shop with the torch, tanks, welder and rods, he welds the door section back into place. Then he begins burning through the machine-shop deck, following the bead left by his previous weld.

The wan blueness that confronts him when he slides the circular section of the deck to one side leaves no doubt as to the nature of the whale's illness but gives no clue as to the cause. Its ganglion is not receiving sufficient 2-omicron-vii, for it to function, a fact that the whale's initial glyph —— should have made clear, and would have, had not the leviathan, concerned with Ciely's safety, subsequently indicated the ganglion was in imminent danger of exploding, in order to stampede him into abandoning ship with her.

Starfinder lowers his equipment through the opening and drops down after it. Once again he finds himself in the presence of the rose.

*Morning a thousand Roses brings, you say;
Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday?*

*And this first Summer month that brings the
Rose Shall take the whale and Starfinder away.*

His subconscious, so cooperative when the whale first "spoke" to him, has stooped to parody.
No matter. He looks at the ganglion/rose.

It is not large as ganglions go. This is because the whale's original ganglion was blown up before its second had fully matured. But although it did not fully mature physically, it was still able to absorb all that the original ganglion held, and more besides. The ganglion power of a whale, like the brain power of a man, is not necessarily commensurate to size.

Even though the blueness of this ganglion has waned, beauty is still present. The great petals stretch outward in graceful arcs, as though to catch the light of a nonexistent sun. Exquisite in every detail, it more than compensates for the exterior asymmetry that the whale knew before it was towed into the Orbital Shipyards of Farstar****, and which the OrbShipCo converters could not wholly eliminate. The stem—the conduit for the 2-omicron-vii created in the open-hearthlike stomach—is no less graceful than the petals, and emerges as naturally from the transsteel tissue of the chamber floor as the vine of a real rose might emerge from earth.

But the stem is black, not blue.

Starfinder steps forward, kneels. As he does so, the phosphorescence flickers again. This time, it does not steady. He activates the anti-2-omicron-vii suit's helmet lamp and examines the stem in its cold, clear light.

After locating the bead of the old weld, he peers at it closely. There is no visible sign of a crack. He traces the bead with his gloved forefinger. There is no palpable sign of one either.

The blackness of the stem is not absolute: vertical blue streaks indicate that some 2-omicron-vii at least is reaching the rose. Nevertheless, the stem, to all intents and purposes, *is* dead. And Starfinder knows why.

The star eel ...

The stem of a rose—the conduit of a ganglion—is more than a mere conductor of 2-omicron-vii; it regulates a ganglion's 2-omicron-vii supply by upping or lowering its conductivity. When the star eel depleted this whale's 2-omicron-vii reserves, its ganglion conduit was forced to up its conductivity to maximum and to hold it at maximum for a long period of time. Too long a period of time. Result: burned-out tissue. Afterward, when the whale replenished its 2omicron-vii supply, the conduit managed to perform normally by employing the healthy tissue that still remained—till the tissue became overworked to a point where it, too, burned out, delegating to a few exterior "capillaries" that were as yet unaffected the monumental task of keeping the ganglion—and by extension the whale—alive. When this occurred, the whale, unaware up till then that anything was wrong, knew that it was dying, and, fearful that the 2omicron-vii its ganglion was no longer receiving would permeate its entire interior, stampeded Starfinder into abandoning ship with Ciely.

Its fear was unfounded. The backed-up 2-omicron-vii is not permeating its interior; it is escaping, apparently, into space. But the end result of the stem's dysfunction is the same. The star eel has reached back after death to exact its vengeance.

Starfinder stares at the stem.

He can no more fix it than he can perform a prefrontal lobotomy.

He is a witch doctor in an anti-2-omicron-vii suit.

Shall he dance a ritualistic dance around the rose uttering exorcistic incantations?

Overwhelmed by his helplessness, he backs away from the stem and sinks down in a far corner of the chamber. Ciely, at least, will survive. Survival will not be easy, but her intelligence will see her through the terrestrial years to come, will enable her to outwit the savages she is stranded among and find a Lebensraum.

He himself will perish with the whale.

He deactivates his helmet lamp. The flickering phosphorescence will suffice to illuminate his tomb.

It needn't be his tomb. He can easily burn his way out the way he came and spend whatever time there is left to him elsewhere in the whale. Moreover, his own demise needn't immediately follow the whale's. He can live for years in its belly. The fact that shortly after he stole it it took control of the complex environmental system installed by the converters means nothing. The system will not shut down for lack of an outside monitor. It will simply resume monitoring itself. Perhaps it has already done so.

He can live for years in the whale's belly—yes, but nowhere else. For when the whale dies it will be regurgitated to the present, and there is little chance of its resurfacing within Staranger-range of a livable planet. It is true that the whale will not die in the Aristotelian sense of the word, but it is unlikely the cosmos will make the distinction. No, the whale is destined to become a deep-space derelict and he is destined to live in its belly for the rest of his days, just as Ciely would have been if he hadn't put her down on Earth. Perhaps this was the real reason the whale stampeded him into abandoning ship with her.

For a moment he is perversely pleased at the prospect of living for the rest of his days in the belly of a dead whale with no one to talk to but a dead woman. He will bring her a fresh bouquet of sad-regrets every morning and in the evenings he will have long "conversations" with her. He will blow her a kiss each night as he leaves her shrine, and retire to sweet dreams of her. Then sanity returns and he knows he wants no part of such an existence. He will remain where he is, and when the whale dies he will die too. Of inanition or asphyxiation—whichever comes first.

Suddenly he becomes aware that he is no longer alone in his "tomb."

He watches her emerge from the blueness, and he cannot move.

She is wearing the white spacesuit she died in. Her arms, once so rigidly outstretched, now hang relaxed at her sides.

As he watches her walk slowly toward the rose his mind, numbed momentarily by her appearance, resumes functioning, and he understands how it was possible for her to rise from the dead.

In the Abyss the thin line that divides life and death does not exist. Life overlaps death, and death overlaps life.

But why did she rise? And why has she entered his "tomb?"

The blueness blurs her face, and he cannot see her eyes. But he is certain they are open. If she sees him, she gives no sign as she continues walking toward the rose.

Still he cannot move.

When she reaches the rose she kneels and places her hand on the blackened stem, and the death that is not life and the life that is not death flow into the dead tissue and overwhelm the conventional life-death cycle that caused it to die . . . and the stem turns blue, and the blueness rushes up into the petals of the rose. The petals brighten, and a deeper blueness fills the chamber.

She straightens then, and turns.

She walks back the way she came.

He wants to cry out, to beg her not to return to her bier. But his lips lock, and he cannot make a sound. The phosphorescence steadies. The blueness intensifies, becomes a curtain that hides her from view. His paralysis leaves him and he cries out, "Come back!" and plunges through the blue curtain that fell between them. But there is no one there.

He finds her long afterward—after he has resealed the chamber and the machine shop and reestablished contact with the whale; after it has resurfaced from the Abyss—finds her in her shrine. Her eyes are closed beyond the rimmed faceplate of her helmet; the frozen tears still glisten on her cheeks. The ice that transformed her spacesuit into starry armor shows no sign of having been disturbed. It is as though she never left her cabinet-coffin, as in an Aristotelian sense she never did.

He sighs. *At least I saw her walk. Not down a springtime street, her hair dancing in an April wind. But at least I saw her for a little while the way she may have been. Before I came along and killed her.*

He goes aft and picks a new bouquet and returns and lays it at her feet.

8

Spacewhale, Space-Time

It is typical of the whale that its first concern upon regaining full awareness should be for Ciely:

Starfinder sits brooding on the bridge. *Why don't you ask me how it happens you're alive and well, whale, when according to all the rule books you should be dead?* The whale ignores the question.

it asks again.

Apparently it has not yet regained all its faculties or it would have updated itself by exploring the man's mind. Starfinder fills it in on everything that happened since it lost consciousness. It is agreed between them that at least two hours should be allowed to elapse before Starfinder returns for Ciely. The fact that he *didn't* coincide with himself on the way back to the whale, or see any sign of himself, means merely that their decision was—will be—implemented. It is also agreed between them that the whale should resurface well beyond its original position, although this decision, too, is academic.

Lateral drift has taken the whale a considerable distance into deep space. Sol, in fact, has shrunk to a second magnitude star. Starfinder centers it in the viewscreen and watches it grow as the whale, rapidly recuperating, moves swiftly inward, ramjet-feeding on the way; watches till Sol becomes so big and bright his artificial retinas rebel, then he exchanges its fiery face for the filmy face of Earth. Meanwhile the whale's o.a.v. feeds solar data into the computer, and when the return journey is completed and the whale has halted far enough off the blue shores to preclude potential coincidence with itself, the day dawning over the western hemisphere is duly recorded along the base of the view-screen:

A.D. November 14, 1996

The readout indicates that three months and four days have passed since the whale slipped into the Abyss.

At first Starfinder is puzzled. It was his impression that entry into the Abyss hinged upon the degree of an object's or a body's temporal regression. Certainly when the whale entered the Abyss the first time it was regressing. But in the present instance, entry has apparently resulted from progression.

Clearly the key that unlocks the back gate of Hell is unrelated to temporal direction and is dependent only on the degree of a body's or an object's temporal momentum.

But why did the whale's loss of temporal stability cause it to slip forward rather than backward in time?

Answer: it didn't. It had nothing to do with the slippage. The whale, more dead than alive, was drawn forward in time by an impatient cosmos in anticipation of the moment when it would be "regurgitated." The degree of its forward momentum coincided with the tempo required to turn the key. *Voilà*—the Abyss.

Down below, the dawn belt has moved beyond the western coastline of the United States. Its location indicates that in addition to the three months and four days that have passed since he left Ciely some three hours have also passed. He is about to order the whale to dive back exactly three months and four days and to backtrack a corresponding distance along the planet's orbital path when Earth vanishes from the screen and reappears a splitsecond later subtended by a different date:

A.D. August 10, 1996

The whale was one step ahead of him. However, it misjudged its dive. The dawn belt is now well out to sea, and closer to four hours than three have passed since he left Ciely.

No matter. *Dive back one hour, whale.*

The dawn belt recedes to a point well within the coastline. *Another hour, whale.*

The dawn belt recedes to the Rocky Mountains. *Do you see any sign of yourself, whale?*

The answer is negative:

Earth and the moon, and space and stars.

Whale One has slipped into the Abyss. And Starfinder One with it.

I'm going down now, whale. Stand by.

At first when he sees no sign of Ciely he thinks he has landed in the wrong clearing. A glance at the Staranger's guideback informs him he has not.

He is already unnerved from a near-collision with a fragment of spacejunk during passage through the Artificial Satellite Belt. The odds against such a near-collision, as calculated by the ganglion-computer, are something like a million to one.

He opens the hatch and steps down to the ground. He remembers the clearing as a shallow, silent well of darkness. Now the darkness has absconded and the walls of the well have turned into hickories and oaks and maples. The silence, too, has taken to its heels, and birdsong is everywhere. What appear to be flowers of various hues dapple the ground at the feet of the trees and add splashes of color throughout the clearing. Then he sees that the "flowers" are empty beer cans.

"Ciely," he calls guardedly. "Where are you?"

No answer.

He does not dare to call too loud, for the nearest buildings are closer to the woods than he originally estimated them to be, and there are more of them than he thought. Also, as he came in low over the treetops with the anti-photon field on he glimpsed natives already at work in the nearby fields and saw numerous vehicles on the highway. It is true that his remote ancestors aren't savages in the sense that headhunters and cannibals would be, since these ancestors neither hunt heads nor cook their enemies in iron cauldrons. They are sophisticated savages, and this renders them really dangerous. Moreover, they are self-righteous savages, and this renders them more dangerous yet.

"Ciely," he calls again, "I've come back for you." Birdsong. A *vrrrrmm-vrrrrmm-vrrrrmm* from the highway.

She can't have gone very far—he is not worried on that score. What worries him is *why* she went. Why she took off, barefoot and alone, instead of waiting for him.

Did she take the blanket with her?

She must have; it is nowhere to be seen.

But even though she can't have gone far he has no idea which way she went and it may take hours to find her. Unless he goes looking for her in the Staranger—an inadvisable course of action at best. The craft's anti-photon field is ninety percent effective at night, but only fifty percent in broad daylight. Sooner or later someone would spot him, and then someone else, and finding Ciely would become all the more difficult.

Fortunately there is no need for him to use the Staranger—no need for him even to leave the clearing. He contacts the whale. There is also no need for him to tell it that Ciely is missing; it already knows.

Locate her, whale. Let me know where she is the second you find her. Probably there was no need for him to tell the whale that, either. Probably it has been looking for her ever since he discovered she was no longer in the clearing. Maybe even before that.

She should be showing up in its o.a.v. any moment.

All he has to do is wait.

So he leans back against the Staranger, folds his arms across his chest and begins waiting.

As yet no doubts, other than the one stemming from the why of her departure, have assailed him. But as he continues to stand there leaning against the Staranger and no hieroglyphic message appears in his mind, doubts gather like gray vultures in the blue sky above his head and come down to rest on his shoulders.

Panic, which has been hiding like Pan in the woods, peers round the bole of an ancient oak and leers at him.

For God's sake! Where is she, whale? You should have spotted her by this time!

The whale's response dismays him:

Other than himself and the local indigenes there is no one else in the area!

Then look for her farther afield, whale! Cover the whole damned planet if you have to. Find her!

This is not as formidable a task as it seems. The whale's o.a.v. can cover a hundred places at a time, and in the present instance the whale has another factor working for it: its rapport with the object of its search. The billions of minds on Earth constitute unknown territory and are therefore inscrutable. Ciely's alone is familiar, and her thought pattern will shine forth like a beacon.

Anyway, she can't possibly have strayed beyond a radius of thirty or forty miles, and she can't even have strayed that far unless she obtained transportation of some kind immediately after leaving the clearing.

Unless that transportation happened to be aerial.

Such a possibility is so remote as to be unworthy of consideration.

But she could have obtained ground transportation. The nearby highway is obviously a secondary one, but there is plenty of travel on it, and she could easily have made her way to it and obtained a ride.

But *why*? And why should she have wanted to leave the clearing in the first place?

Never mind why she left, Starfinder tells himself. The important thing now is where she went.

The morning wears on. The sun climb laboriously toward meridian. Long before it gets there, Starfinder retires to the coolness of the Staranger's cockpit and tunes in the clearing on the periscope screen. The scope makes a complete revolution every thirty seconds, making it next to impossible for anyone to enter the clearing without his knowledge.

The sun, a pale pomegranate in the tinted ceiling-viewer, begins the second half of its diurnal journey. Still no word from the whale.

Starfinder is beside himself. Even given optimum opportunity, how far could a barefoot little girl have got in so short a space of time? The whale should have found her long ago!

Get with it, whale! Before some psychopath gets his hands on her. If one already hasn't!

Three more hours drag by. They seem like thirty. Finally a new glyph appears in his mind:

The extrapolated skyline of a city. *What city, whale?*

At first he takes the stick figure to represent a horse. Then, remembering where on Earth he is and reviewing his scant knowledge of ancient terrestrial geography, he realizes that the "horse" is a buffalo.

Consulting the Staranger's computer, he learns that the city of Buffalo is forty-one miles northeast of the clearing. As the crow flies.

Obviously Ciely made her way through the woods shortly after he left her, and managed to obtain a ride as soon as she reached the secondary highway.

Again he shoves the why aside. *Have you contacted her, whale?*

Affirmative.

Is she all right?

The fifty-odd years that have piled up on Starfinder's shoulders during the past seven hours go tumbling to the ground. *But why didn't she wait in the clearing?*

No answer. Either the whale doesn't know or it isn't saying.

All right, whale, I'll find out soon enough.

But not right away. To try to pick her up in broad daylight would be impracticable. He must wait till after darkness falls and the Staranger becomes virtually invisible. He can, of course, return to the whale and have it dive the necessary "distance" ahead; but going and coming will consume almost as much time as waiting will. So he decides to stay put.

A growling in his stomach reminds him that he hasn't eaten for . . . for . . . He can't even remember for how long. The Staranger is stocked with emergency rations, and he opens a container of protein spread and breaks open a vac-pac of bread and makes a halfhearted sandwich. After three bites he remembers he didn't think to leave Ciely anything to eat, and he loses what little appetite he had and tosses the rest of the sandwich into the desynthesizer.

The lethargic August sun at last edges below the tops of the trees, bringing dusk prematurely to the clearing. Shortly afterward the Staranger's audio-receptor emits the sound of twigs breaking and leaves rustling, and simultaneously a hieroglyph from the whale announces the approach of visitors:

A moment later six adolescents, three females and three males, appear on the periscope screen. One of the males is carrying a cardboard carton and each of the females is carrying a blanket. All of them, females and males alike, are wearing patched blue overalls, tattered blue shirts and red kerchiefs. The sight of the Staranger brings them to a startled stop.

Starfinder sets the periscope at hold and studies their consternation. What they are seeing is less a spacecraft than a ghost of one, and this, probably, renders the experience all the more unnerving. The boy carrying the carton drops it. Its contents can be easily deduced from the empty beer cans already littering the clearing, while a minor mental effort is more than enough to spell the purpose of the blankets. In his dark oubliette the mad Monk stirs in his fitful sleep, but does not wake. It would do him little good if he did: the trap door of his prison has been fitted with a new and stronger lock.

The sextet converse rapidly back and forth, every now and then pointing to the subject of their discussion; then, after caching the carton and the blankets in a clump of bushes, they reenter the woods and go crashing back the way they came.

But the damage has been done. They will not keep their sensational discovery secret, not even at the expense of revealing their Dionysian refuge. An investigation will be made; grown-ups will soon come tramping through the woods. However, it is unlikely they will pose a serious threat. Starfinder, rather than risk making more waves yet by lofting the Staranger in broad daylight, decides to wait and see.

Dregs of daylight still linger in the clearing when new rustlings and crepitations issue from the woods. Now, a new glyph takes shape in Starfinder's mind:

A moment later eight males emerge one by one from the woods. One of them is the boy who carried the carton. He points excitedly at the Staranger, which in the diminished light probably seems even less substantial than it seemed before.

Substantial or not, it is still plainly discernible, to judge from the reaction of the—the—the posse? All of them are armed, and now six of them bring their weapons—long, primitive rifles—to their shoulders. The leader draws a pistol from a holster at his side and steps forward, shoving the boy to the rear. He stands facing the Staranger, the hand holding the pistol hanging loosely at his side. He is wearing a tan sombrero, tan shirt and puttees and highly polished black boots. The ensemble reminds Starfinder of his captain's uniform. He estimates the leader's age to be about forty. Now the man is shouting something. It sounds like, "All right, you little green bastards you, come out or we'll blow you and your saucer to smithereens!" but Starfinder is certain he misunderstood the words because they don't make sense. At this juncture a horrendous racket reaches his ears via the audio receptor and there is a great fluttering accompanying it that shakes the Staranger and seemingly the whole Earth. Looking up into the ceiling viewer he sees a huge metal machine, with gigantic whirring rotors and two natives in its transparent bloated belly, that he recognizes from ancient photos he has seen as a "copter," or "chopper." Truly, the natives are out in force, and it is time for him to depart, daylight or no daylight.

Actually, there is but a modicum of daylight left. He remarks this as he lifts out of the clearing. The sun is well below the horizon, and the western sky is a study in pink and lavender and pastel green. No doubt it is an extraordinarily beautiful sunset, but he has no time to admire it, for no sooner is he airborne than the chopper is on his tail. He grins; then he throws in full vertical-ascent acceleration and the woods below shrink into a green freckle and the chopper turns into a tiny bewildered hawk, fluttering this way and that in search of the sparrow that a split second ago was at its talon tips.

Starfinder is not a vindictive man. But he was, after all, minding his own business when the six adolescents arrived in the clearing, and he was still minding it when the posse and the chopper came around, for no other apparent reason than to oust him from the Staranger and (1) take him prisoner or (2) destroy him. He grins again, swoops down upon the tin hawk, grazes it and retreats back into the heavens. The hawk pitches and yaws, then angles down into a nearby field and lands and tips over. Satisfied, he builds enough altitude to put the Staranger out of sight and contacts the whale. *It's dark enough now, whale. It's time to go and get her. Do you know exactly where she is?*

The hieroglyph he receives in reply—

—isn't of much help, but it nothing else it apprises him that Ciely is waiting for him. And so long as the whale knows where she is waiting, that is all that matters.

All right, whale, take over.

At once, telekinetic impulses begin chording the console. Starfinder sits back to enjoy the ride.

It is not a long ride. The whale maintains the Staranger at the same altitude and maintains the same silence it has maintained—discounting the two times it warned him that someone was coming—ever since apprising him it had located Ciely. Is there something it does not want him to know, Starfinder wonders.

Also, the whale seems depressed. The rapport that exists between them is so strong that he can *feel* its depression. Feel, but not understand. The logical answer is that it is undergoing a delayed reaction to its sojourn in Samarra: logical answers, however, aren't always satisfying, and Starfinder is anything but satisfied with this one.

The accession of night is a *fait accompli* when Buffalo comes into view in the floorscreen. Starfinder stares down in disbelief. The city is both figuratively and literally aflame. To the west, its major arteries converge into a conflagration of bright lights. Scattered to the north and south and east are other conflagrations—minor ones, but real.

The city is like a prosperous businessman whose clothes are on fire and either doesn't know it or is unable to grasp its implications.

Is Buffalo typical of its day and age? Starfinder doesn't know. He only knows that the sooner he picks up Ciely, the better.

In response to the whale's telekinetic impulses, the Staranger begins to descend. The conflagration of bright lights expands in the floorscreen. Starfinder is alarmed. Is it the whale's intention to land the craft in the middle of a busy street? The anti-photon field is now ninety percent effective, but ninety percent will not be enough to avoid detection in a crowded place. Moreover, there will be traffic to contend with.

He points out these considerations to the whale. The glyph he receives in reply is self-explanatory:

Why can't she meet me on the roof, whale? That way, we'd save time.

The whale doesn't answer. Starfinder is about to repeat the question when he again senses the leviathan's depression. Only this time he identifies the emotion for what it really is. Sadness.

He is puzzled. The whale should be elated, not sad. It has found Ciely, hasn't it?

He lays the enigma aside for the time being. He will come back to it later. Or perhaps it will resolve itself. *All right, whale, we'll do the job the hard way.*

The building is not within the major "conflagration area" but on its outskirts. It stands shoulder-to-shoulder with and face-to-face to taller structures on a well-traveled street. The taller structures appear to be office buildings. Most of their windows are dark.

When the Staranger comes to rest, Starfinder steps out onto the roof. Instantly he is enveloped by city smells and sounds. Stale garbage, exhaust fumes, wood smoke. The squealing of tires, the throbbing of engines, the wailing of sirens.

Well, at least they are fighting the fires.

There is one several blocks away. Light from its flames flickers on the rooftop. It is about all the light he has to see by, but it is enough. He makes his way to the roof door, finds it unlocked, opens it and steps into an illuminated stairwell. He starts down the stairs. The door leading off the second landing is closed. So is the door leading off the first. When he is halfway down the first-floor stairway an unsolicited hieroglyph appears in his mind:

He pauses. What is the whale trying to say? That there are three Cielys?

Again he senses the leviathan's sadness. What can be wrong? Realizing it will do no good to ask it, he continues on down the stairs. They debouch into a small lobby illumined by fluorescent tubes set into a suspended ceiling. On his left, a pair of glass doors give egress to the street. To his right stands a small desk with an empty chair behind it. Directly across the room is another door. It is open, and just to the right of it is a large cardboard sign mounted on a wooden frame. He is unable to read it from where he stands, and he crosses the room for a closer look.

The Serendipity House is proud to present a representative sampling of the work of Ms. Michelle D'etoiles, one of the most promising young artists on the Buffalo scene. Her highly imaginative and deeply disturbing paintings can be seen in our famous Round Room throughout the month of August. Hours: 12:00-5:00 P.M. Mon. through Sat., 1:00-6:00 P.M. Sun.

Starfinder shifts his gaze to the open door. Assuming Ciely is still in the building, and there is no reason to assume otherwise, she must be waiting for him in the "Round Room."

Why in the world should she be waiting for him there? Why isn't she waiting in the lobby instead? Why, for that matter, didn't she climb the stairs to meet him?

And what is she doing in the building in the first place? Annoyed, and becoming more so by the second, he steps through the doorway.

The Round Room is just that. Round.

Every other tile in the suspended ceiling has a pair of fluorescent tubes behind it. All of them are on, but the translucence of the tiles is such that the light reaching the floor and bathing the circular wall is softly luminous rather than harshly bright.

The wall is hung with paintings, some small, some large, some square, some rectangular. They encircle the room with but one interruption. The interruption is a door opposite the one he came in by. Probably it leads to an office, or possibly a rest room. Whichever, it is closed.

Except for himself, the room is empty.

All right, whale, let's stop playing Hide and Seek. Where is she?

The whale does not answer.

It does not need to. There is only one place she can be. Unless he has been duped and she isn't in the building at all. In the room beyond the door.

He starts for the door, then stops when one of the paintings on his left snares his attention. It is too far away for him to make it out in detail: nevertheless, for a giddy moment he is afflicted with *déjà vu*.

He walks slowly toward it, watching it resolve into a distant city silhouetted against a pink and saffron sunrise. A city and a sunrise framed by a large window.

He stops, stands staring at the city's serrated silhouette, at the subtle shadings of the sky. Only after a long time does his gaze drop to the title:

Sunrise Seen from a Certain House in the Country

Shaken, he moves clockwise along the line of paintings, pausing before each one. The first one depicts blackness and stars. Just that. But the blackness suggests depths undreamed of, and the stars are so vivid he feels that if he were to extend his arm and touch one, its cold and piercing light would pervade his very genes.

He has seen such blackness, such stars before. In the viewscreen on the whale's bridge. For a moment, in his eyes, painting and viewscreen become one.

The next two paintings are letdowns. They are portraits—full-length ones—of two young men. Both are spacesuited from the neck down and both hold space helmets in the crooks of their arms. One has brown hair that falls in glossy waves to his shoulders; the other's hair is blond and has been coiffed in conjunction with his beard into a ringleted frame round his face. Both paintings bear the same title: *Astroboy*. But in parenthesis after the first is the name "Ted," and in parenthesis after the second the name "Tod."

Starfinder moves on.

The next painting knocks his feet from under him.

It has been executed on a large canvas—by far the largest in the room. It depicts what at first appears to be an elongated asteroid. But it cannot be, for tiers of portsopes run its entire length, and phosphorescent light can be seen glowing beyond them. Moreover, its surface is not rough and cratered like an ordinary asteroid's. It is burnished.

Stars are visible in the background. Some of them form a large constellation—a constellation unlike any ever seen from Earth or from any other world:

Title: *Spacewhale, Space-Time*.

Starfinder feels himself falling through nothingness. He reaches out desperately for handholds with which to break his fall. At last he finds one, and then another, and then a dozen more. They are in the form of thoughts, some of them his own, the majority of them transmitted by the whale. He cannot tell which are which, but there is no need to. They combine of their own accord and lead ineluctably to an

inescapable conclusion.

They begin and end with the chronograph—the chronograph he himself devised. The electromagnetic rapport he established between the whale's ganglion—and by extension its o.a.v.—and the computer. Once he programmed the computer with the then date, it had merely to gauge the solar data continuously fed into it by the whale's o.a.v. to obtain subsequent dates.

But when the whale's ganglion ceased to function, when the whale slipped into the Abyss, the flow of solar data dried up. When the whale regained consciousness and emerged from the Abyss and the data flow resumed, the computer, uninformed of the true time lapse, used the last input as a basis for its next temporal computation. Since it was programmed to "think" in terrestrial years, the apparent passage of time came out as three months and four days.

The whale had emerged farther from the sun than such a short length of time warranted, which meant it had drifted far more than it should have, but neither it nor Starfinder had noticed.

How much time *really* went by?

The thought, this time, is unquestionably the whale's: eight years, three months and four days. *Eight years ...*

Starfinder has moved on without realizing it to the next painting. It, too, is a portrait. A portrait of a man in his thirties. Of austere yet strangely gentle countenance. With ice-blue eyes that seem about to deliquesce. With a star-shaped scar transfiguring his right cheek. Title: *Le Trouveur d'Etoiles*.

When he hears a light footstep behind him he is afraid at first to turn. What will she be like, this Ciely Bleu of twenty-one years, this erstwhile little girl whose eight-year absence has caused such disproportionate sadness to descend upon the whale, this once-barefoot girl who, seemingly abandoned by the only two beings in all the cosmos who had ever shown her love, managed somehow to survive among the savages and to rise above the ugliness of a decaying world and find the means to express the beauty and the love she once had known, this staunch disciple of all that is anathema to "*haute bourgeoisie*" everywhere, who abandoned her blue-sky name and took another—one that she thought, perhaps, would be more suitable to her calling. . . . What will she be like, this new Ciely Bleu?

Another footstep, as soft almost as a falling leaf. He turns, then, and beholds first of all the tears of welcome in the blue-flower eyes, and then the familiar oval heart-shaped face—the face of the dead girl he found adrift in space and enshrined in the forward hold of the belly of the whale. He beholds in all her vibrant living loveliness the Star Girl as she was before she died. The Star Girl, overflowing with love. For him.

9 In the Crypt

The mist preceding the dawn belt lies heavily over the city of Llurid. It is a shroud shutting out the heavens, obscuring both the moonstars of the OrbShipCo Yards and the stars themselves. It blurs the approaching roof guard, adding to her dimensions, magnifying the incandescer in her right hand. The dim-lit receiving bay from which she has just emerged glows wanly through the mist behind her.

Her voice is hoarse. It is as though the dampness has penetrated her larynx. "The roof is restricted to authorized personnel."

"I have an emergency delivery."

"I don't believe you! If such a delivery were due, I'd have received advance word. Lift off at once!"

Starfinder steps the rest of the way out of the Staranger and fells the guard with a shock beam from his Weikanzer .39. He is wearing coveralls the same shade of blue as the phony paneling that lends the Staranger the likeness of an airvan. He returns the Weikanzer to the right-hand pocket of the coveralls, slips the guard's incandescer into the left, then drags her deeper into the mist and binds her wrists and ankles and tapes her mouth. Then he gets an anti-photon tarp out of the Staranger and covers her. Reentering the Staranger, he shoulders his "delivery," carries it outside and seals the Staranger's lock

behind him. At once, the whale lifts the little craft out of sight into the heavens.

The "delivery" is contained in a cryogenic transfer chest. "Cryogenic transfer chest" is a euphemism for refrigerated coffin. He stole this one last night from a Llurid warehouse while the whale "stood guard."

He carries it into the receiving bay and sets it gently down. *Update me, whale.*

The whale is again "standing guard," and presently a cross section of the medical-supply building, whose roof receiving-bay he has just entered, appears in his mind:

Except for the absence of the female roof guard and Starfinder's presence in the receiving bay, the cross section is substantially the same as the one the whale transmitted during Starfinder's descent. The situation has not altered since he last looked into the building via the whale's o.a.v. Under less trying circumstances he would find the whale's stick representations amusing. The weapon in the hand of the stickwoman at the street door is intended to indicate she is a guard, while the brooms in the hands of the stickmen on the first, third, fifth and sixth floors are meant to designate them as janitors. One might deduce from this that the broom in the hand of the stickwoman in the crypt itself is intended to designate her as a charwoman. But he knows, of course, that she is a cryogenic technician. Ghaulian males refer to cryogenic technicians as "witches," and the whale must have found the epithet in Starfinder's mind and discovered in the process that he associates brooms with witches, just as he associates brooms with janitors. Thus, although the janitors are operating sophisticated equipment and the technician is empty-handed—or was when Starfinder last viewed her in the time screen—all five parties ended up with brooms in their hands.

Although he has never been in the receiving room before, he is familiar with its every nook and cranny. It serves as a shipping room also, and ostensibly its sole function is to handle the incoming and outgoing medical supplies for which the building serves as a wholesale outlet. No special equipment is needed to handle the "emergency deliveries" that also pass through its portals, and there is nothing to betray its ulterior function. The building proper presents a bland countenance to the world, and no one could deduce from appearance alone that there is a decryogenization lab, or crypt, beneath it. Even though the city of Llurid probably contains a dozen such crypts, all of them are so cleverly camouflaged that Starfinder had to "search" a thousand buildings to find the one he found.

It is not that the existence of such crypts is intended to be kept secret. It is merely that those eligible to take advantage of them—i.e., Ghaulian females—see no purpose in pointing them out to those who aren't—i.e., Ghaulian or any other kind of males. Why wave a red flag before the eyes of a bull that is contentedly grazing? The bull probably wouldn't charge anyway, but why remind it unnecessarily of its mortality?

For the same reason, only ordinary security measures are employed: one guard on the roof, one in the street.

The receiving room contains several self-propelled dollies and a number of two-wheeled handtrucks. Starfinder places his burden on one of the latter and wheels it over to the elevator at the rear of the room. The indicator above the door shows the elevator to be on the fourth floor, a fact already conveyed by the whale's last glyph. He speaks the word "Roof" into the actuator mike and settles back to wait. The elevator takes its time responding. Probably it needs overhauling. In some instances Ghaulian equipment resembles Ghaulian womankind. On the surface it is pleasing to the eye: underneath it is ancient and ugly. In large part this is due to technology's absorption with the spacewhale industry. Where your treasure is, there shall your innovators be also.

When the door opens, Starfinder wheels his burden inside and says "One" in response to the elevator's metallic "State level desired." "Crypt" or "Decryogenization Lab" might have triggered a silent alarm. He has no way of knowing. So he will proceed to Level One first, and take it from there.

The elevator closes its door and begins the descent. At his request, the whale provides him with another cross section:

Still substantially the same.

He finds it hard to believe that he is back on Farstar****. Perhaps because this walk of Ghaulian life is so different from the path he walked before. Or perhaps because his anguish has altered his perspective.

He also finds it hard to believe that less than a week has passed since he strangled Gloria Wish and stole the whale. But it is true. The time he spent in the past proper does not count. Only those hours consumed during dives, plus the day he spent on contemporary Renaissance, have been entered into the cosmic ledger.

His eyes come to rest on the dolly, which he has leaned against the elevator's rear wall. Come to rest on its burden. *His* burden.

His gaze passes through the coffin's sealed lid, comes to rest on the reason for his return. On the frozen body of Michelle D'etoiles, nee Ciely Bleu. On the Star Girl.

He stole the whale so he could have access to the golden treasure chest of the past, only to find that the chest was made of brass and that the doubloons it contained were worthless. The armored elephants of Carthage, Attila riding over a hill, Xenophon leading the Ten Thousand out from under Tissaphernes's nose, Lincoln delivering his Gettysburg address—all were minted of the same alloy as the chest. And the bottom of the chest was the lid. There was only one coin of any value, but the conditions attached to spending it rendered it as worthless as the others. To know beforehand that tomorrow something you don't want to happen is going to happen is a blessing only if you can stop it from happening. If you cannot stop it from happening—if your very efforts to stop it are doomed to *cause* it to happen—then your foreknowledge is a curse.

A curse as terrible as the madness your efforts inadvertently freed you from.

Once again he hears the falling leaf of her footstep. Once again he turns from the portrait on the Round Room's wall. The portrait titled *Le Trouveur d'Etoiles*.

She is wearing a white blouse with ruffled three-quarter-length sleeves. A pleated azure skirt. White pumps that make her almost as tall as he.

Her hair is dark brown, almost black. Her eyebrows are the wings of blackbirds. Blackbirds flying away ... Her eyes are a flower blue.

Yes, it is the face of the Star Girl. But deep down it is the face of Ciely Bleu.

She stands before him, fated to die, her blue-flower eyes glistening with morning dew. "Charles told me you'd be here."

He cannot speak.

"I was afraid. I was waiting for you at the door. I wanted you to see my paintings. At the last minute I ran into the rest room to hide."

At last his lips unlock. "Afraid?"

"Afraid of the years. Of the dark distance between us."

"Ciely—"

She is in his arms, sobbing. "I left notes in the clearing. For months. The wind blew them away."

"How long did you wait there?"

"A week."

A week. A week without food. Barefoot and alone. Forsaken ...

She leans back and looks into his eyes. "Starfinder?"

"Yes?"

"I've missed you so. I've missed you every hour. You and Charles. All these years."

There are stirrings within him. It is Ciely in his arms, but it is the Star Girl too. Michelle D'etoiles. The dead girl whom he idealized and fell in love with, the dead girl who is no longer dead, but who, paradoxically, is soon to die. By his own hand.

His curse is still upon him.

"I thought at first you'd abandoned me. You and Charles. But I knew in my heart that you hadn't. Then I began to think that both of you were dead. But I wouldn't believe it. I refused to. . . . When Charles contacted me this afternoon I broke down. I sent everyone away. The people looking at my paintings. My friends. Everyone. All I could think of was you."

Soon to die ...

He shakes a mental fist at Time. *No, Time, I'll heat you somehow! You've had your way too long!*

His eyes have touched the hairline scars along her temples, on her cheeks. She feels his gaze. "Anaplasty," she explains. "After I left the clearing I walked all day, and that night I sneaked into a barn to sleep. The barn caught fire."

He is horrified. "How bad were you burned?"

"Not bad. But bad enough. Fortunately there are some good anaplastic surgeons numbered among the so-called savages.

"So-called?"

"They aren't so bad, once you get to know them. After all, they *are* our ancestors."

"Yes, I guess they are at that."

He looks at her. He can see Ciely now. He would have been able to have seen her long ago, seen her in those blue-flower eyes; but the Star Girl's eyes had been closed.

"Starfinder?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you think it's time you kissed me?" She has stepped back and is standing there before him gazing earnestly into his eyes. It is as though she doesn't realize that she is no longer a thirteen-year-old girl, that eight years have passed since he last kissed her, that her thin child's body is now a garden even Solomon couldn't have found appropriate metaphors for. How can he explain to her that he cannot kiss her now the way he kissed her before, that a complicated set of emotions have replaced simple affection? And then he discovers that he doesn't need to explain, for the lips that meet his own are warm and wise, and the body that presses against him is as aware as his own is that it is no longer that of a thirteen-year-old girl. And as though this were not revelatory enough, she says, after they have drawn apart, "I know how you feel, Starfinder. I feel the same way. I want it to be this way with us. My love for you has grown up."

Her frankness and forthrightness disconcert him. Ciely would never talk like that. Neither would the Star Girl. Suddenly he finds it difficult to identify the woman standing before him with either. She is a different person altogether. A stranger.

"Don't you want it to be this way too, Starfinder?" she asks.

"Yes," he says, for he cannot deny that he desires her. But he has *killed* her. To cover the confusion created by the melange of diverse emotions swirling within him, he asks, "Why did you change your name?"

"Because I wanted a name like yours. I changed it when I was in Paris studying art."

"But why 'Michelle'?"

"I thought 'Michelle' sounded more worldly. More grown up than 'Ciely' did."

He is silent. He came down to Earth to pick up a little girl and take her back with him to the whale. But the little girl is gone forever, and the woman who has replaced her must have a life of her own, with the inevitable ties attached. Is it in her best interests to exchange that life for life in the belly of a spacewhale? To sever those ties? To run away with a man who has never satisfactorily sorted out his own life, a man who was brought up on Dirt, a man who was once mad and who isn't altogether certain he isn't still mad?

Surely, the least he can do is sound a note of warning. "Ciely—Michelle—before you decide what you're going to do, you should know a little more about me. I spent the first part of my life on a planet named Dirt. Maybe you've heard of it, but you can't have heard what it's really like. The people there worship an Essenian travesty of Christ; love between a man and a woman is virtually forbidden and happiness is considered a sin. I left there when I was seventeen, but it left its mark on me. It couldn't help

but have. So you see, I'm not quite the way I may seem."

"Are you trying to tell me you have a thing about sex?" Michelle/Ciely asks. "Pooh! I don't believe it! Besides, I've already decided what I'm going to do. Where's the Staranger? I want to take some of my paintings with me."

He sighs. "It's on the roof."

"First, though, I want to pick up some things in my apartment and say goodbye to some friends. We'll go in my car and Charles can bring the Staranger around and pick us up there and then bring us back." She pauses, an afterthought clouding her blue-flower eyes. "Maybe I'm taking too much for granted. Maybe you no longer want me on board the whale."

"Why else would I be here?"

"But you expected a *little* girl."

He affects a levity he doesn't feel. 'I'll settle for a big one."

The mock expression his remark evokes is Ciely's through and through. "Oh, you!" she says, and it is the way it used to be. Almost.

More doubts beset him as they leave the building and climb into her car. Should he have allowed events to take their natural course? In offering so little resistance, hasn't he, in effect, turned the helm over to Time?

But what *is* the natural course of events? If he had walked away and left her, wouldn't that have been part of the natural course? Will not his every action or nonaction be part of that course? Has not the moving finger already written, and has not everything he does or doesn't do already been inscribed? Will not every decision he makes be the one Time wants him to make?

Are not his very thoughts part and parcel of a role in which he has been cast?

Perhaps. But he has an ace up his sleeve. In ordinary real-life dramas none of the participants know beforehand what is going to happen. But in this drama, one of them does. Himself. True, he doesn't know the details of the plot, but he knows that if it is allowed to develop exactly as written, Michelle D'etoiles, nee Ciely Bleu, will embark upon a spaceflight from which she will never return.

Surely, if one of the characters in a play knows how it is going to end, he ought to be able to step out of his role long enough to bring about a different ending.

But perhaps he isn't one of the characters. Or, at best, perhaps he is only a minor one. A spear bearer without so much as a line to speak. He can only wait and see.

Michelle's/Ciely's car is an electricar. She drives with her window down, the night wind fingering her hair. He feels uncomfortable sitting beside her. The last time he sat beside her she was in her nightie and all of thirteen years old.

She says, "After I was released from the hospital I was captured by the Department of Social Services. They farmed me out with the best of intentions to foster parents who were clever enough to drink up most of the money they got for my care without once betraying their alcoholism to the worker who periodically came around to check up on them. In school, I already knew most of what the teachers presumed to teach me, and a lot more besides. Not that I learned much in school on Renascence—I didn't. The schools on Renascence look a lot like the schools on Earth—great big boxes surrounded by a lot of little boxes. The big box is the gymnasium and the little boxes are the classrooms. The *haute bourgeoisie* dote on athletics almost as much as the people on Earth do. I should say 'will dote' and 'did,' shouldn't I, since Renascence is way in Earth's future and Earth is way in Renascence's past. But jumping back and forth in time like we did gets you all mixed up, and in lots of ways the civilization I grew partway up in is like the civilization I'm a part of now.

"Anyway, I didn't learn much in Renascence school and if it weren't for the underground libraries there I'd have had to plod through Earth school the way most of the other kids do. But the underground libraries had what the outcast teachers called 'teach machines,' and one of them could teach you more in an hour than a Renascence or an Earth schoolteacher could teach you in a week. So for me Earth school was like rolling off a log. I breezed right through, won a scholarship and graduated at sixteen. Another scholarship got me to Paris. When I got back and my paintings began to sell I settled here in Buffalo. My

face wasn't all that disfigured from the fire, but it wasn't, helping me at receptions, so last year I had plastic surgery done. I've only a smidgin of talent. Being from a different world and from a different time gives me a unique perspective, and that's what sells my paintings. Much of what I paint I paint from memory, which is probably why critics call my stuff brooding and highly imaginative. It's neither. It's simply an expression of nostalgia. . . . There, I've talked your arm off, Starfinder—it's your turn to talk mine off."

He tells her about the Abyss. About the interruption of incoming solar data that caused the computer to skip eight years. About how the whale nearly died. But he leaves out the part about the Star Girl and lets her infer that the whale somehow healed itself. It would never do for him to tell her about the Star Girl. Never.

Despite himself, he reviews the moment in his mind. Once again he sees her materialize out of the blueness and approach the rose. Once again he watches her place her hand upon the stem, watches her turn and walk back into the deepening blueness and disappear. . . . And as she disappears the full import of the moment gets through to him and he knows that his very presence at the living girl's side is proof positive that she is destined to die, to die in space in a tiny spaceship: that he is destined to take her dead body on board the whale where, when the time comes, it will rise and heal the rose and make his presence at the living girl's side possible. That regardless of what he does or doesn't do now, her death is a future *fait accompli*.

Undoubtedly the whale has known this ever since it discovered whom Ciely had become. Undoubtedly it could not bring itself to tell him. Just as it couldn't bring itself to do more than hint, until the last minute, that years instead of months had passed, and that the little girl they left in the clearing had grown up.

But surely, Starfinder reasons, surely a universe without a beginning and without an end must be infinite. And being infinite, it must be infinite in an infinite number of ways. There can be no such thing as a single outcome to any given course of events. All possible outcomes must be accommodated, even if accommodating them means creating all possible universes. So if he succeeds in aborting the fatal spaceflight and obviating Michelle's/Ciely's death, no paradox will be involved. An alternate universe will simply come into being—one in which there is no Star Girl, one in which the whale was healed by other means and one which will be identical in all other respects to this one.

Michelle has turned into a street lined on both sides with tall, multibalconied apartment buildings. At first glance they appear to be facsimiles of one another, but closer scrutiny reveals differentiating nuances of design and decor. She pulls up before one of them and turns off the motor. "You must come in and meet Tod and Ted."

Tod and Ted . . . A premonitory chill runs the length of Starfinder's spine. "Who are they?"

"The astroboys. You must have seen their portraits at my Exhibit. . . . They're going to be terribly upset when I tell them I can't go with them. That I'm going away. But it can't be helped."

With them . . . "With them where?"

"On a space picnic. They're quite the thing these days. Ours was all set for tomorrow. We've planned it for weeks. We were to leave tonight. The astroboys are rich as Midas—or rather, their parents are—and own their own bird. The *StarHawk*. They've already been twice around the moon."

The night, so warm a moment ago, has turned cold. Time has finally tipped its hand; the plot is taking form. He must reshape it somehow while it is still malleable. He must outwit Time. Time, the Juggernaut, rolling inexorably onward. But first he must determine the exact direction the plotline is taking.

"Aren't you coming in?"

Michelle has got out of the electricar and walked around to the curb. She stands there waiting, the night wind still fingering her hair. He joins her and they walk up a concrete walk to the entrance. A uniformed doorman nods pleasantly to Michelle, glances askance at Starfinder and opens a pair of glass doors. Starfinder, suddenly cognizant of the unorthodoxy of his attire (blue blouse and slax, red cummerbund and black spaceboots), follows Michelle across a small, pleasantly appointed lobby to the lift. The lift lofts them to the ninth and topmost floor, and they step out into a carpeted corridor. The corridor is deserted, and the thick carpet assimilates the sound of their footsteps as she leads the way

past several widely spaced doors to one bearing the numerals 909. It is ajar, but before they can step inside, two tall young men burst into the corridor. Their garish attire makes Starfinder's seem conventional. "Mike, we're all set to go," one of them says. "It's high time you got here." The other one appraises Starfinder. "Is *he* why you told us to go home, Mike?"

"This is Tod; this is Ted. This is Starfinder."

Starfinder's hand is shaken cordially, and he realizes that what he instinctively took to be animosity on the part of Tod was curiosity. Tod is the one with the beard; Ted, the one with the long brown hair. They usher Starfinder into the room beyond, and Michelle follows. The room is a combination studio and living area. An archway provides access to a compact kitchen in which three chairs are drawn up against a small table. In addition to the one he came in by, two doors open off the living room—studio, one on his right, the other on his left. The one on his right is ajar and the footboard of a huge bed is visible. The one on his left is closed.

Presently he finds himself seated on a resilient sofa without quite knowing how he got there. A drink appears on the coffee table before him. He drinks part of it without tasting it, sets the glass back down. His eyes return to the closed door, which is now on the wall opposite him. Does it, like its open counterpart, also lead to a bedroom?

Michelle's?

Tod and Ted are standing in the middle of the room, each with a drink in his hand. Michelle is standing before them. A discussion is in progress. "But you can't break off just like that, Mike!" (Ted.) "We've been together too long."

"At least come on the picnic with us and then decide afterward." (Tod.)

"And leave Starfinder here, I suppose!"

"Bring him along." (Ted.) "There's room enough. I've no objection to a foursome. You, Tod?"

"Not if it'll keep the family together."

Starfinder senses Time, the Juggernaut, behind him. He stands up. "I think," he says to Michelle, "that it'll be best if we leave at once."

"I'll pack my things."

"Hey," Tod says.

"Hey," echoes Ted.

She walks over to the closed door and opens it. It does not lead to the bedroom of a chaste young maiden who lives platonically with two young men. It leads to a closet.

In Starfinder's mind, the mad Monk stirs in his sleep.

The Juggernaut moves forward an inexorable inch.

Michelle takes down a suitcase from an overhead shelf, sets it on a nearby chair and opens it. She begins packing some of the dresses and skirts that share the closet space with loud blazers and garish slacks. Tod and Ted join her. They begin opportuning her sotto voce, but Starfinder has sharp ears.

"Mike, you've gone bananas. Wait a few days at least." (Ted.)

"You crazy, Mike?" (Tod.) "This clown you're running off with's old enough to be your father!"

"He is not! And I'm not running off with him. I'm *going* with him. Back to where I belong."

"And where is that?" (Tod.)

"It doesn't matter. The two of you can have my car. You can sell it if you want to. I'll sign the title before I leave."

Tod seizes her shoulders and kisses her. "You can't take off like this, Mike! Threesomes like ours don't happen every day!"

Michelle frees herself from him. She folds a green dress, places it in the suitcase with the others. Her movements are both economical and deliberate. She doesn't seem in the least upset. Starfinder stares at her. On Dirt, her head would be shaved and she would be pilloried in the public square. Even on Ghaul, her lifestyle would be frowned upon. Yet she stands there like a saint, radiating innocence.

The mad Monk, fully awake now, begins pounding on the door of his oubliette.

Ted says, "You like it our way too much, Mike. You can never make do without us."

"Maybe not, but I'm going to try."

The lock snaps like a twig, and the Monk bursts out of his oubliette and shoulders his jailer aside. Ugly words explode in Starfinder's mind; obscene scenes take form. He finds himself striding across the room. Ted and Tod step back when they see his face. Michelle stares at him but does not recoil.

His voice is hoarse. "Is this your *family*?"

"We call threesomes families sometimes, Starfinder. Maybe I should have explained before I brought you here. Such arrangements are so common I took it for granted you knew all about them. I—I guess I forgot you were from Ghaul."

"Not Ghaul. Dirt!"

She recoils then, not from the words themselves but from the vehemence with which he uttered them. "Don't shout at me, Starfinder."

"You're not the girl I came down to Earth for. You're a stranger! Living flagrantly with two men! And without shame!"

"Why should I be ashamed? This is the Age of Sexual Enlightenment. The Dark Ages of Sex are behind us."

"Enlightenment! Is it enlightenment to copulate in a filthy pile of bodies?"

"Please don't say such things, Starfinder."

Mercilessly, his hoarse voice strides on. "You and your damned 'Ba'! How do *they* love thee, your darling Ted and Tod? In how many perverted ways? And how do *you* love *them*?"

Her face is as white as the cretaceous cliffs of Dawnworld, but she stands her ground. "We live in complete sexual freedom here on Earth. It's not like it is on Renascence. It's not like it is on, on—" Abruptly understanding comes into her eyes. "On Dirt. Starfinder, you're sick. I understand now what you meant. You *do* have a thing about sex. Please let me help you. I'll come with you and—"

"No!" The mad Monk is rampant now. "I don't want you with me, you slut! You whore!" His hand rises, seemingly of its own accord, and crashes against her cheek.

She staggers back and nearly falls. But her eyes do not leave his face. They are wide, their depths dark blue with shock and sorrow. As he stands there staring into them they film with tears.

Tod has stepped forward and seized his wrist. Starfinder rips the wrist free and backhands the astroboy across the throat. Tod stumbles against the chair holding the suitcase and the chair tips over, spilling gay-colored dresses, skirts and blouses onto the floor.

"You're possessed, Starfinder," Michelle whispers. "Possessed! How terrible it must be!"

A faraway shouting reaches Starfinder's ears. It is the replay of a hoarse voice—the voice of a madman. He recognizes it as his own.

Michelle and Tod and Ted are walking toward the door. "Wait," someone says hoarsely. Again, Starfinder identifies the voice as his own. When they do not seem to hear, he demands, "Where're you going?"

Michelle turns and looks back at him. The tears that filmed her eyes have multiplied and are zigzagging down her cheeks. "On a picnic," she says. "I—I don't think you'd better come."

"Wait," Starfinder says again, but she runs from the room. The astroboys follow, laughing. Left alone, Starfinder hears other laughter. Mocking laughter. It is Time, exulting in its victory.

He stands all alone among the gay-colored garments she will never wear again. *So you won, Time, after all.*

But he knows that it was not Time that defeated him. It was himself.

He walks leadenly to the door and out into the corridor. He walks down the corridor to the balcony at its end. He arrives just in time to see Michelle and the astroboys emerge from the entrance far below and climb into her electricar. He watches the electricar pull out from the curb and take off down the street, Michelle at the wheel. He watches it till the intervening trees hide it from view.

Perhaps all is not lost. Perhaps he can still abort his role as Executioner.

But the whale does not agree, as the hieroglyph it presently transmits makes clear:

It wants him to rejoin it in space, because it knows—just as he does in his heart—that any further attempt on his part to avert the forthcoming spaceflight will merely serve to expedite it.

No doubt it has known ever since it found Ciely and recognized her as the dead girl in its hold that she was doomed. It allowed Starfinder to go through the motions of trying to save her because it knew it could not stop him, but now it has called a halt.

So be it, whale. Bring the Staranger to me. I'll board it here.

The street below is deserted save for an occasional passing car. . . . As he stands there on the balcony waiting for the Staranger he has the sensation of standing on the street looking up at himself. The only light reaching him on the balcony is the light from the corridor behind him and the dim light of a streetlight half a block away, yet from below he can see himself with devastating clarity. He can see himself for what he is.

"Behold," he says, looking up at himself. "Behold this man from Dirt.

"Behold this man who climbed the ladder to the stars with particles of his native world still clinging to his shoes. Who found a dead girl in space and enshrined her and brought her a blue bouquet each day. Who heaped upon her lovely head attributes he had no right to expect she had possessed. Who, when she came back to life, excoriated her for being no better than the ordinary mortals he had stranded her among. Behold!"

The Starfinder on the balcony staggers. In his mind the mad Monk looks wildly around for reassurance. Finding none, he lowers himself back into his oubliette.

The Starfinder in the street knows no mercy. "This man who deceived himself into believing he needed to defeat Time when all the while it was himself he needed to defeat. This man who cannot free his shoes of Dirt. Behold this wretched Hamlet whose sea of troubles is the Sea of Space and Time. Behold!"

The Starfinder on the balcony cannot meet his own eyes. He lifts his gaze to the ravaged sky where the conflagration raging in the city is reflected in hellish red. It is like the conflagration raging in his soul.

In the oubliette in his mind the mad Monk lies down and falls back to sleep, but it is a sleep from which, sooner or later, he will awake. There is only one way to lay him permanently to rest. The Starfinder on the balcony has known this all along, but not until now has he been able to face the truth.

"Yes," says the Starfinder in the street. "To destroy the Monk, you must destroy yourself. But not yet."

No, not yet. First there is something he must do.

The arrival of the Staranger brings the bilocation to a close. Starfinder climbs on board the almost invisible craft. He does not tell the whale where he wants to go. There is no need to, for the whale knows. His return to Farstar**** was implicit in his departure.

The anachronistic elevator jerks to a stop, aligns itself at ground-floor level and opens its door. A large lobby is revealed. At its far side a janitor is seated in a lounge chair supervising a self-operating buffer. He is facing away from the elevator. Through the glassite doors of the lobby the main-entrance guard is visible. She, too, is facing in the opposite direction.

The whine of the buffer drowned out the sound of the opening door and the janitor is unaware of the elevator's presence. So is the main-entrance guard. Quickly Starfinder closes the door manually. He must now risk sounding an alarm—he has no other choice. But he is almost to his destination, and even should he trigger an alarm he may still be able to accomplish his mission. Whether he succeeds or not, it is unlikely he will ever leave Farstar**** alive, but his own future does not concern him. All that concerns him is the resurrection of the girl he reviled and drove to her death.

He speaks into the tiny mike beside the door. "Decryogenization Lab."

The elevator doesn't budge. Instead, it says, "Unauthorized persons are not permitted below Level One. You are an unauthorized person. Therefore you are not permitted below Level One."

Damn! He should have known. The question now is whether his image has been piped into a central

computer and an alarm sounded. But it does not matter, really. He stands committed to do what he came to do, regardless of both the short-range and long-range consequences.

He burns the control box free with a thin beam from his Weikanzer, locates the contact switch and closes it manually. At once, the big room resumes its downward journey. He is about to request another cross section when the whale, anticipating him, supplies one:

He frowns. The cryogenic technician has moved across the crypt and is now positioned close to the elevator shaft. Is her change in position the result of her having been alerted or was it occasioned by her duties?

He asks the whale.

???

The whale doesn't know.

Pick her brains, whale. Find out.

There is a pause. The elevator continues to inch downward. Then:

???

Starfinder is not surprised. The whale can read his mind because of their rapport. Naturally no such relation exists between it and the technician.

Perhaps she moved to her present position because she was curious as to the identity of her early-morning visitor. She cannot have failed to hear the descending elevator. Unarmed, she poses no real threat, in any case. But it would have been better if he could have taken her by surprise. He cannot risk injuring her, because her skills are essential to the success of his mission.

As yet he has given no thought to what he will do after Michelle/Ciely has been decryogenized. The scenario beyond that point is blank. If he can get her back on board the whale, fine. If not, and he is captured, well that will be all right, too. He still will have succeeded in what he came to do—he will have given Michelle/Ciely back the years Time, with his assistance, stole from her. For once she has been brought back to life she will be home free. She will be guilty of no crime, and the very Ghaulian authorities who would have gone to any lengths to prevent her from being brought back to life will have no choice but to allow her to live and to depart Ghaul any time she chooses.

Starfinder, if he is apprehended, will be tried for the murder of Gloria Wish (with the "angel" as the principal witness) and will be sentenced to death by jettisoning.

It might seem that he would have done better to make his move during a time period that anteceded his crime. Certainly it would have been no problem to have the whale resurface off Ghaul before he stole it. But such reasoning presupposes a will on his part to live, and the will no longer exists. Starfinder wants to die.

The elevator shudders to a stop and adjusts its level to the crypt's. This time Starfinder holds the door in place. Is the technician standing directly before him, he wonders, and, if not, is she standing to the right or to the left? He asks the whale, *Where is she, whale?*

To the right.

He releases the door and steps into the crypt.

The term "crypt" may be poetically apt, but in actuality it is a misnomer. The subterranean room is an ultramodern laboratory, despite the fact that the decryogenization vats lining the walls bear a weird

resemblance to cauldrons.

He reconnoitered the room via the whale's o.a.v. Nevertheless, it disconcerts him. He did not expect it to be so cold. He did not foresee the feeling of nakedness its brilliant blue ceiling lights would lend to a person standing beneath them. He failed to anticipate the repugnance the cauldronlike vats would evoke.

But his reaction to the room is of split-second duration. The witch is standing where the whale depicted her. It surprises him when he sees that she is really carrying a broom. No, not a broom—a long gleaming rod with tiny tubes like silvery straws protruding from one end. A decryogenization rod. He saw it and others like it during his o.a.v. reconnaissance, but he did not connect them with brooms. Nor did the whale. But when he saw this one in his mind, in conjunction with the figurative brooms with which the whale supplied the stickmen to designate their occupation, he failed to make the distinction. He read the hieroglyph wrong, and the whale failed to notice the misinterpretation.

Now the whale, having deduced from Starfinder's failure to draw his Weikanzer before leaving the elevator that something is amiss, transmits a warning hieroglyph—

—but what it depicts is going to happen is already happening, and the decryogenization particles from the witch's leveled "broom" are already penetrating Starfinder's brain. The instrument was designed to treat frozen tissue; it cannot but have an adverse effect on normal. Microcosmic novae appear on Starfinder's retinas, and as he collapses to the floor the brightness bows out to black. His final despairing thought is of the body of the Star Girl lying in its refrigerated coffin at the mercy of monsters who hate youth because they have left their own so far behind.

10 Jetsam

On Farstar****, male prisons are called Correctional Complexes. They are monuments, it is generally agreed, to woman's humanity to man.

Perhaps the most outstanding among them is the one located in the Green Belt just north of Swerz. Many-windowed, it is constructed of the snow-white granite Ghaul is almost as famous for as she is for her Orbital Shipyards. The weary wayworn wanderer would, upon first glimpsing this immaculate and gleaming multi structure from afar, fancy himself gazing upon Nirvana. And indeed, he would not be far from wrong. Force fields are employed both without and within and the serenity of the grounds is uninterrupted by either fences or walls, while the Grecian grace of the interior knows naught of bars. Each inmate, regardless of the nature of his crime, has an apartment of his own equipped and furnished with all of the conveniences and comforts of home. There is a large centrally located recreation area that boasts all manner of electronic games, while in the basement of the main building there is a quaint little store where the inmates can purchase those little extras, such as candy, chewing gum and soda pop, so cherished by convicts everywhere. Indeed, a visitor receives the overall impression not of a prison, but of a posh rest home dedicated to the care, feeding and entertainment of those unfortunate members of the male gender who have strayed from the beaten path. Nevertheless, there is an indefinable quality about the individual apartments that, despite their luxurious appointments and homey atmosphere, brings to mind medieval dungeons carved out of solid rock. This is particularly true of the apartments that constitute the Prejettisoning Sector, or, to use the facetious term coined by the convicts, the Sun Porch. Take Starfinder's apartment. It boasts wall-to-wall carpeting, a comfortable sofa, a deep armchair, a matching desk and chair, a huge holosole, a chest of drawers, a night stand and a big dais bed with a musical mattress. A blended-in door opens into a compact lavatory that contains a marble wash basin, a bath and shower combined, and a functional period-piece commode. The bed, the night stand and the chest of drawers are partially partitioned off, while a second partition screens a refrigerator stocked with

the makings for snacks with which to supplement the appetizing meals that are shoved thrice daily through a little trap door at the base of the stainless steel portal that, in conjunction with an invisible force field, discreetly bars the way to freedom. Yet despite all these niceties the impression of a dungeon remains. Perhaps it arises from the color scheme that is incorporated not only in the walls and ceiling, but in the furnishings as well, and that ranges from the charcoal gray of the carpet to the battleship gray of the ceiling. And unquestionably the apartment's only window is a contributing factor. It is small and exceedingly narrow, and located just high enough on the outside wall to force Starfinder to stand on tiptoe when he looks out of it. True, he doesn't look out of it often, since there is nothing to see but an expanse of kunailike grass stretching all the way to the horizon; nevertheless, every time he does so lines from Byron's *Prisoner* run through his mind:

*There are seven pillars of Gothic mould,
In Chillon's dungeons deep and old.
There are seven columns, massy and gray,
Dim with a dull imprison'd ray ...*

As a convicted murderer awaiting execution (if there is a kidnapping charge against him on Renaissance, news of it has not yet reached Ghaul), he is of course confined to his apartment. For ten days now he has looked at the same walls, the same ceiling, the same floor, the same furniture and the same holosole programs. And oh yes, the same painting. It hangs on the wall above the sofa and depicts a Ghaulian wedding. A bored priestess is in the process of encircling the bride's neck with the fifth rib of the bridegroom as a trio of blasé bridesmaids look on. Every time Starfinder looks at the painting, he shudders.

He will not have to look at it many more times, nor languish much longer in his Chillon, for his execution scheduled for tomorrow morning.

He will welcome it with open arms.

Not that he considers himself guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. The murder of Gloria Wish. Gloria Wish is as alive as he is. No, he does not consider himself guilty of that crime. He was found not guilty of that crime on the Areopagus of the whaleship's bridge.

But he considers himself guilty of another crime. The murder of Michelle D'etoiles.

He cannot convince himself that her death was a *fait accompli* "before" his ugly words launched her on a fatal spaceflight she had already decided not to go on, that he said what he said because in one sense he had already said it, that cause must precede consequence whether or not the consequence is in one's personal past or in one's personal future. And even if he could convince himself he could never forgive himself for saying what he said. Time did not put the ugly words into his mouth. The mad Monk did. And the mad Monk is himself.

During his trial for the murder of Gloria Wish he did not utter one word in his own defense, because in the courtroom of his heart he was being tried for the murder of Michelle D'etoiles. And when he was found guilty of the one crime he rejoiced in having been found guilty of the other.

It can be argued that if he considers himself responsible for the death of Michelle D'etoiles, he must also be responsible for the death of the astroboys. Perhaps he is, but their death means nothing to him, and it would be hypocrisy on his part to pretend otherwise. No, it was Michelle D'etoiles alone that he killed, and her death alone that he rejoices in being found guilty of.

But his victory is flawed. He killed Michelle D'etoiles twice, and he can only die once.

But in one sense—in the sense of the madman in his mind—once will be enough.

The whale, which has remained faithfully "at his side" all these weeks, discounting periodic foragings into deep space for food, informs him that he is about to have visitors:

One of them, apparently, is a giant. The other is a woman. The giant turns out to be a cyborg. The woman proves to be Gloria Wish.

Starfinder is dumbfounded. For weeks now he has expected her to contact him regarding the whale, but he expected the contact to be made through a third party. He never dreamed she would condescend to visit him in the flesh.

This is far from the first time he has seen her since his return. He saw her every day during his trial. While she was on the witness stand testifying to her own murder, her eyes never once left his face, and afterward he felt her freezing gaze continuously on the back of his neck.

Her eyes are fixed upon his face now. Despite his familiarity with decryogenization he still finds it disconcerting to be in the presence of a woman whom, but a little more than a month ago, he killed with his bare hands. "Please sit down," he says.

She shakes her head. Tall and coldly beautiful, she is wearing green. Green bodice, through which her paps peek. Green translucent cling-skirt that adheres like green skin to her lithe legs. Green slippers, turned up at the toes. Green headband, an emerald glowing in its center. Her hair, freshly coiffed into an elaborate filamentary pile, is like a sheaf of yellow wheat from the wheat fields of the south.

Her eyes are as cold as the lakes of Frigidia. They remain fixed upon his face. Beside her looms the cyborg, who has entered the apartment with her. He is a decommissioned combat cyborg turned bodyguard. His teeth are high-carbon steel that can bite through ordinary metals. His eyes are macro-microcosmic lenses that record everything he sees.

His arms are plastiflesh-covered articulated girders that can batter down buildings. The fingers of his left hand are retractable double-edged knives. His right hand is a self-loading Weikanzer .50. His plastiflesh-covered articulated steel legs are powered by built-in energy pacs that enable him to reach speeds up to 60 mph. His brain contains a miniscule radio receiver attuned to his client's voice pattern.

"It's almost worth the inconvenience of dying," Gloria Wish says presently, "to be able to stand face to face afterward with one's own murderer."

"You're your own murderer."

"Am I? I thought it was you who did the deed, although I've never been able to figure out why. Or why you stole a spacewhale."

"I killed you because you were killing me."

"Really? But I was doing it in such a nice way. . . . Why, though, did you steal a spacewhale? I'd have given you one if you'd asked. And why did you steal that particular one? Why didn't you steal one that had been completely converted?"

He is silent. She did not know before and she does not know now that the whale he stole was and is alive. She would have given him a dead whale, yes. But not one that was still alive. She would have had it killed first and then given it to him. In her eyes, as in the eyes of all Ghaulians, the only good whales are dead whales. Dead, they can be converted into spaceships, which in turn can be converted into money. Thus, if he were to tell her that he stole this particular whale because it was still alive, his theft would make no sense to her. And if he were to tell her that he stole it because it had made a pact with him, she would laugh at him. Communication between a human being and a spacewhale is not only unheard of, it is unthinkable.

"I never brought charges against you. Even *in absentia*. And it would be futile for me to do so now. But I want you to give the whale back."

"I daresay you do." Then, half-jokingly, "In exchange for my life?"

"No. In exchange for the life of the girl you tried to have decryogenized. The one whose life you begged the prison authorities to restore when you were first brought here."

He is stunned. "But it's too late. You've jettisoned her body by this time."

"No. I arranged for it to be stored in one of the cryogenic lockers."

"Why?"

"Because I needed a bargaining point."

"But you could simply have the whale impounded."

"I could—if I knew where it was."

He falls silent again. It is true: she has no idea where the whale is. And even if it were dead, as she thinks, locating it would require weeks, perhaps months, and cost a fortune.

Nevertheless, her offer still makes no sense.

Doesn't it?

He studies it from a different angle. Hers. She wants him dead, but, equally as important, she wants to *see* him die. She wants to see him recoil, to the extent that his chains will permit, from the deadly ampul in the executioner's hand. She wants to see the fear of death in his eyes. . . .

Suddenly everything is clear. She is using the whale as a decoy—a decoy intended to deflect his attention from her real motive. She wants the whale back, yes. It represents money, and on Ghaul Money sits next to Aphrodite in the Hall of the Gods. But in this case it is a secondary consideration. What Gloria Wish truly wants is to provide Starfinder with a reason to want to live. She knows he risked his life in an unsuccessful attempt to resurrect the dead girl she subsequently had placed in one of the crypt's lockers. She knows that he pleaded with the authorities to have that dead girl decryogenized, the while asking nothing for himself. Therefore, he must love the dead girl so deeply that as long as she is dead he does not want to live. And Gloria Wish *wants* him to want to live. Otherwise, there will be relief in his eyes, not fear, when the executioner approaches, gratitude, not regret, when the needle is plunged into his arm.

But unknowingly this nympho-nabob, this angel in the eyes of the clods on the Shipyards' payroll, this cosmeticized, rejuvenated hag, has named a horrendous price for the decryogenization of Michelle D'etoiles. For when Starfinder reveals the whale's location, as he must, and the whale is discovered to be still alive, it will summarily be deganglioned.

But will the whale consent to its own sacrifice? No force-field fence restrains it—none could. It can abscond at a moment's notice. Perhaps it already has. Perhaps—

No, it has not absconded, nor will it. The hieroglyph depicts Michelle/Ciely glowing with new life and states as plain as day that this is what the whale wants.

Why? Starfinder wonders. Resorting to anthropomorphism will not supply a satisfactory answer. Human attributes include selfishness, and the whale is apparently free from such a trait. Unquestionably its attitude toward the girl adds up to love, but it is not the kind of love human beings experience, and the factors that have contributed to it are alien factors that the human mind, by its very nature, cannot conceive of.

Play dead, whale, when they come for you, Starfinder "whispers." *They may never know the difference.* Aloud, he says, "Before I tell you, you'll have to prove to me that you've brought her back to life."

"Tomorrow morning, before you're taken to the Theater, Klike—" Gloria Wish indicates the cyborg with a toss of her head—"will bring you a holo-spool. When you play it you will see and hear the girl walking and talking. She will tell you she has been resurrected. You will then reveal to Klike the location of the whale."

"Suppose I refuse to. Once she's been decryogenized, even you can't reverse the process. You can't make her dead again."

"No, but I can make her wish she were dead. However, if you cooperate she will be given the choice of becoming a naturalized Ghaulian citizen, or of emigrating to any one of the terrestrialized worlds. In the latter case, she'll be provided with passage money. When Klike brings you the holo-spool he will also bring you a photostat of a statement to this effect, sworn to and signed by the Seven Sisters. Two other photostats will have been filed with the Bureau of Naturalization and the Office of Emigration, subject to withdrawal. You're well enough acquainted with Ghaulian law to know that a document of this kind can't be invalidated."

What she says is true. Ghaulian law can be bent, but only just so far. Moreover, Gloria Wish wants Michelle's future guaranteed as much as he does. In her mind this will make death all the more repellent

to him.

Well, she will be thwarted. There will be no fear in his eyes when the executioner approaches, no regret when the death needle is inserted into his basilic vein. His moral guilt cannot be erased by the resurrection of the woman he loved any more than his legal guilt was erased by the resurrection of the woman he hated. He still wants to die.

"I will need her name for our records," Gloria Wish purrs, believing she has won. "And her place of birth."

"Michelle D'etoiles," he murmurs. Then, "No, her real name's Ciely Bleu."

Arched eyebrows elevate. "Two names? Well, the latter will do. Her place of birth?"

"Renescence."

"That will do too." Gloria Wish makes two entries in a small wristpad. Her eyes return to his. "Klike will bring the photostat at dawn. I'm assuming, of course, that you will be prepared to reveal the location of the whale."

He nods. "If the girl's alive and the document's in order."

"Good. If you refuse to cooperate at that point Klike has instructions to cut out your eyes and your tongue."

"Dead men have no use for sight and speech."

"You'll be surprised how highly you value both when the time comes."

"All things considered," Starfinder says as she knocks on the outside portal to summon the corridor guard, "I'm glad I killed you when I had the chance."

Ice-blue darts leap from the frigid eyes and embed themselves in his brain. "I'm glad you did too," she says over her shoulder as she turns to leave. "Otherwise I might never have had the opportunity of watching you die. . . . I shall probably experience an orgasm when the capsule with you in it is blasted into space." She blows him a kiss as the door opens and she steps through the deactivated force field into the corridor. It lands icily on his lips, a kiss of death.

The girl in the cube walks back and forth on unsteady legs. Her face is soft and young. Not beautiful, but lovely in a wistful way. She is wearing a loose white tunic that echoes her every movement. Her eyes are flower blue; her dark brown hair drifts about her face each time she turns. The roses that once resided in her cheeks have yet to return, but she lives, she lives, she lives.

*Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown ...*

At length she stops, as the numbness leaves her limbs, and looks directly at him through the invisible walls of the cube; smaller than life, an exquisite doll of a girl. He plumbs her eyes, searching for the forgiveness he doesn't deserve, but their depths are dull from her long sleep, and he can see nothing.

*Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone . . .*

She speaks. "As you can see, Starfinder, I am alive. I have been brought back from the dead. This is what I have been told to say, and it is true. This is what I want to add: I—"

She vanishes, and grayness fills the cube.

The cyborg removes the spool from the holosole, the sheathed knives of his left hand functioning as fingers. He takes back the document that guarantees Michelle D'etoiles her Lebensraum, such as it is. "The whale is in synchronous orbit beyond the Shipyards, directly 'above' the city of Swerz." *There*, Starfinder adds to himself. *Now I am already half-dead.*

Klike summons the guard and departs.

Left alone, Starfinder says, *They're coming for you, whale.*

No answer.

Whale?

Again, no answer. The room, so warm a moment ago, has turned cold. Has the whale absconded after all?

He tries again. *Whale!*

This time, a hieroglyph forms in his mind:

The whale has not absconded. It is waiting.

They're coming for you, whale. Play dead.

Footsteps sound in the corridor. There is a clank of chains.

They are coming for *him*.

The Terminal Theater is not nearly as large as its name suggests. It does not differ greatly from the Terminal Theaters annexed to the Prejettisoning sectors of the other Correctional Centers to be found across the land, and its purpose, like theirs, is to bestow death efficiently and to provide sufficient viewing space for those members of Ghaulian society high enough on the hierarchical ladder to rate invitations. The rows of seats, each row a step higher than the one in front of it, bring to mind an ancient Greek amphitheater, and one might go so far as to call the elevated apron upon which the performance takes place the "skene." The "props" are Spartan. There is the capsule, of course, into which the condemned prisoner is chained upon arrival. In appearance it is much like an upright coffin with its lid open. To the left of it, in the foreground, is a metal stand that serves as a repository for exactly two items: the ampul containing the death serum, for which there is no antidote, and the rubberoid hose that, when tied around the prisoner's right bicep, causes his right basilic vein to swell, thus making it impossible for the executioner, usually a person with no medical training, to insert the needle in the wrong place.

There are three doorways: the main entrance, located midway behind the seventh and highest row of seats, the side entrance, located at the left of the skene, and the rear exit, located just behind the capsule. The last mentioned leads onto a loading dock. After the execution, the capsule, with Starfinder's body sealed inside it, will be wheeled out onto the dock by a pair of Complex technicians, loaded aboard a waiting aircart and whisked to the Swerz spaceport where a goodly crowd will be assembled to watch the liftoff. There, the capsule will be affixed to a booster already in place on one of the launching pads. One might think that those in attendance at the theater will be missing the best part of the performance, the grand finale, so to speak. Not so. Built into the theater wall above the skene is a 10' x 10' x 10' holo-viewer that already contains the image of the pad and the booster. Thus, without even leaving their seats, the audience can view the actual jettisoning: the slow, then rapid rise of the capsule into the heavens as the holographic camera at the port relays its ascent, the separation of the booster, the gradual fading from sight of the little sun ship as it heads unerringly toward fiery Farstar.

At one time, the condemned prisoner was jettisoned alive, but this cruel practice was long ago discontinued. Most observers of the galactic scene agree that it was discontinued because the humaneness innate in women, regardless of their walk in life, came finally to the fore. But there are a few inevitable cynics—one might go so far as to call them misogynists—who point gleefully to the fact that the practice wasn't done away with till after one of the jettisoned victims escaped.

Be that as it may. Starfinder enters from stage right, as it were, chained and accompanied by two armed guards. He is escorted over to the capsule and shoved unceremoniously into it and secured in place, his right arm turned palm outward. The guards then depart. *Exeunt*.

A capacity crowd is on hand. All those present are women, not because men are barred from such gatherings but because Ghaulian society is so constituted that they are unable to climb above the first rung of the hierarchical ladder and therefore do not rate invitations to executions. Complex authorities and members of the media comprise part of the audience, businesswomen and high-ranking officials the rest. All, without exception, are beautiful. And young—ostensibly so, at least. Indeed, one might liken the gathering to a garden of Ghaulian roses—seven parterres of them.

Even surrounded by roses, the rose of Gloria Wish stands out. Perhaps because her skin-cling morning gown is rose-colored. Perhaps because the tiny diamonds that are part of her coiffure resemble dewdrops. Perhaps because the beatific expression on her face suggests the breath of spring. Whatever the reason, she is this day queen rose of the rosebud garden of old girls.

The executioner is already on the skene, standing immobile beside the little table that holds her instruments. Her black cowl, her black robe, the black mask that covers the lower half of her face—all contrast jarringly with the gay crinolines of the spectators. It is as though Death has stepped into the garden, as in a sense Death has. But her presence has not paled the roses; indeed, if anything their color has been enhanced.

She wastes no time. Once the guards have departed, she picks up the rubberoid hose and walks over to the upright capsule. She loops the hose around Starfinder's right bicep and ties it tight. As she does so, she looks into his eyes. He looks back into hers. Hers are flower blue. There are hairline scars along her temples. A wisp of dark brown hair that has escaped the confines of her cowl forms a tiny curl upon her forehead. He is stunned.

She does not utter a word. Were she to, the theater acoustics are such that it would be carried to the farthest corner. Instead, she speaks with her eyes. But an unanalyzable veil obscures them and he cannot comprehend a word they say.

The whale, perceiving the communications gap, bridges it with a hieroglyph:

Michelle D'etoiles, a.k.a. Ciely Bleu, pastbacked.

She would not have needed to pastback far. Perhaps no farther than the day of his sentencing.

Suddenly he remembers the time lapse that occurred when he contacted the whale mere moments ago when the escort guards were coming for him. The lapse was the whale's dive time—the time consumed when it took her back to whenever/wherever she went.

Probably it contacted and updated her right after the holo-sequence was taped and arranged a rendezvous between her and the Staranger. She would not have been heavily guarded—perhaps she wasn't guarded at all. Whichever, the whale helped her escape during the night and she boarded the Staranger and joined the whale in space.

Apparently her absence has not yet been noticed. Or perhaps it has been noticed and disregarded. Probably all Gloria Wish requested was proof of the decryogenization.

Ghaulian women enjoy watching executions—witness the standing-room-only crowd in the present instance. But with very few exceptions they do not enjoy the role of executioner. As a result, executioners are chosen from the thin ranks of volunteers, and more often than not the ranks are so thin as to be nonexistent, and an executioner must be drafted. Probably all Michelle had to do to become Starfinder's executioner was to pass herself off as a Ghaulian citizen and volunteer for the job.

Why, whale? Starfinder asks. Does she hate me so much she wants to kill me with her own hands?

The whale does not answer.

And why did you hide all this from me till now, whale? Silence.

He is chilled to the bone.

The whale wants him dead too.

Why shouldn't it? With him dead, it will be free. Eventually, all friendships come to an end.

And Michelle. Why shouldn't she want him dead? After he marooned her on an island and damned her because she became an islander? After he seized the love she bore him and ground it beneath his heel?

Why indeed shouldn't she want him dead?

But to want to kill him with her own hands ...

She has returned to the metal table for the ampul and now she smashes the bulb that covers the

deadly needle and approaches the capsule once again. Again she speaks to him with her eyes, but again the unanalyzable veil hides whatever she is trying to convey.

A second hieroglyph from the whale dispels his last remaining doubt:

Yes, it is all said and done. He is jetsam.

But it is only fitting that he should be. That the girl he abandoned should abandon him. That the hand of her whom he killed should be the hand that kills him. And it makes no difference, anyway, by whose hand his death is brought about. His purpose will be served by the Star Girl's hand as well as any other.

She plunges the needle into his distended basilic vein and at once the darkness begins to gather. As it fills the oubliette, the mad Monk begins to scream. "Die, damn you! Die!" Starfinder whispers . . . and suddenly the walls of the oubliette fall in upon themselves and bury the Monk in dust and rubble, and his screams cease, and simultaneously a horrendous weight lifts from Starfinder's shoulders and for the first time in his life he feels free. He exults over his freedom, over having effected the Star Girl's resurrection against all odds, but his exultation is darkened by a vast regret. He is free—yes, but he cannot go forth and live, for he is manacled to Death.

Helplessly he blends into the black background against which all real-life dramas are played. Little remains for total unconsciousness to blot out, and the final transition from light to darkness is imperceptible.

11

The Construction Company

Out of the night that covers Starfinder a hieroglyph takes form:

It lingers in the darkness of his mind for a while, then gradually fades away.

It had no business being there to begin with.

He is dead, is he not?

"Try again, Charles," a nearby voice says.

Again, the hieroglyph brightens the darkness of the night:

Starfinder's eyes are tightly shut. He refuses to open them. If, as would seem to be the case, the death serum failed to take full effect and he is hallucinating, the blackness of the capsule's interior will merely replace the blackness of his mind, for whether he is dead or not, logic tells him that he is well on his way to his destination, perhaps already a captive of fiery Farstar's gravitational pull.

He feels a gentle kiss upon his lips. It is soft and warm and faintly moist. The same voice whispers, "Keep trying, Charles."

He knows now whose voice it is.

The third hieroglyph is more explicit:

His eyes open of their own accord.

There is a face just above his own. Not quite heart-shaped, not quite oval. Somewhere in between.

Once, it was a child's face, the face of a twelve-year-old girl who stole a star eel. There linger traces of its former thinness, just enough to hint at pubescent prettiness in the midst of what to him is classic beauty. It is the face, too, of a dead girl he adored, a dead girl in a white spacesuit with tears frozen upon her cheeks, a dead girl who rose briefly from the dead and brought the dying whale back to life, and then returned to her icy bier. And it is the face of the same girl he turned and saw that fateful night in the Serendipity House. And still another face: the face, all color gone, of the girl he reviled for conforming to a way of life she assumed in her innocence to be moral, and which, despite asseverations to the contrary by *soi disant* moralists before and since, may well have been—may well be—as moral as any other.

Girl of many faces, in the belly of the whale.

Yes, he is in the belly of the whale. He recognizes the room he is in, the bunk he is lying on. Both are his own. The captain's. The whale, after his "executioner" rejoined it in space, must have caught up to the capsule and psycho-kinesized it into the boat bay. Afterward, Michelle/Ciely managed somehow to bring him here. Perhaps he walked without knowing it. It can be argued that dead men cannot walk: but neither can they come back to life.

It is obvious to him by this time that he wasn't dead to begin with.

Michelle/Ciely—no, he must think of her solely as Michelle, since that is the name she chose—Michelle has removed the black executioner's mask and thrown the black cowl back from her face and hair. But she has not yet divested herself of the garment itself. Probably she has not had time. Or perhaps his deliverance is a dream and he is still in the capsule, hurtling toward the sun. He closes his eyes, then opens them again. No, it cannot be a dream. She is still there, sitting beside his bunk, her blue-flower gaze soft upon his face.

Abruptly terror strikes him. If *he* didn't die, perhaps the mad Monk didn't either.

But the blue-flower gaze informs him that this is not the case. In its gentle radiance he sees inside himself—sees the caved-in oubliette walls that mark the dead Monk's grave. *Requiescat in pace*. . . .

"How," he whispers. "How is it I'm still alive? I know you pastbacked. But the serum—I saw you inject it. Or was it a drug you injected instead—one that merely put me to sleep?"

"No, it was the serum. Executioners are barred from the complex lab. There was no way I could have substituted something else."

"Then *how*? There's no antidote."

"But there's an antedote." She emphasizes the longe. "Do you remember, Starfinder, back when you were a converter and living in Swerz, the girl who waylaid you in that dark street after you came out of the cafe, and kissed you on the mouth?"

". . . Yes, I remember."

"The bittersweet taste the kiss left on your lips was the antedote. The girl was me. . . . The so-called death serum consists of the schizomycetes of a lethal disease with an incubation period measurable in seconds. Haruch's Syndrome. A successful oral bacterin was developed years ago but was never put on the market. It provides ninety percent immunity—not quite enough to keep the disease from taking hold, but enough to limit it to its initial stage, which induces unconsciousness, and to eliminate its aftereffects. When I discovered there was such a bacterin I pastbacked until I found it."

Somehow he is not surprised. Perhaps because he is beyond surprise. Or perhaps because—despite the Monk's demise—his self-hatred is so intense that his sensibilities are blunted. He sits up on the bunk, feeling disgustingly alive. "You shouldn't have gone to such lengths. You and the whale. You should have left things the way they were. I wanted to die."

"I know. Charles and I had a heart-to-heart talk. He told me everything. Oh, Starfinder, if you *had* died—if the bacterin hadn't worked—I wouldn't have wanted to live!"

The unanalyzable veil still hides the depths of her blue-flower eyes, but it isn't really unanalyzable. It never was; it only seemed to be, and he sees it now for what it really is—The mist of unshed tears . . .

She is in his arms then, the upside-down years swirling around them.

After a thousand kisses, "The things I said—the names I called you. They'll never go away."

"But they will, Starfinder. They almost have already. I know now you couldn't have meant them. In a

way I knew it then—but there was no way I could get through to you."

"But I did mean them."

"Part of you did. That part's dead. Charles told me."

"What else did Charles tell you?"

"He told me you put me on a pedestal so high my hair became Berenice's."

"Your hair is Berenice's."

"It is not! It's just plain ordinary filaments colored brown."

"To you, maybe. Not to me."

"Charles said you were an incurable romantic."

"Did he tell you that I found a holo-photo of you on the bottom of the Space-Time Sea? That on it you'd written 'To Starfinder, with all my love.'?"

"Yes, he told me that."

"I thought then that I fantasized it. Now I'm not so sure."

"You didn't fantasize it. I'm going to have it taken and give it to you for your next birthday. Charles told me it's a good idea to stay in step with Time."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No, because I love you." She slips free from the black cowl. "Do ship's regulations allow the first mate to share the captain's bunk?"

"I just put through a new one to the effect that if the first mate doesn't share it from this moment on, she'll be put in irons."

"Oh, *you!*" says Michelle D'etoiles, and snuggles up beside him.

A long while later a hieroglyph appears in both their minds. It is the same hieroglyph the whale projected when it and Starfinder were on the bottom of the Sea.

Well no, not quite the same—

—a new element in the form of Michelle has been added. "I still don't know what you're talking about, whale."

"I know, Starfinder," Michelle says. "When he told me about the holo-photo of me you found at the bottom of the Space-Time Sea, he told me about what else you found—or rather, didn't find. Now he's telling us what we should do about it."

"Build a house?"

"Well, in a way. But that's the literal interpretation. He's telling us how to make up for there not being a Grand Design, how to beat the pointlessness of existence. The house represents the design the three of us, working together, can make; if we try hard enough, out of space and time."

"That's existentialism."

"No, it's not. Well, maybe a little bit like it," she amends. "But it's more like what Matthew Arnold meant when he wrote, 'Ah, love, let us be true to one another!' Charles is saying that the three of us should incorporate ourselves into a sort of construction company. That individually we can't build a 'house' out of the 'lumber' of space and time, because there isn't any such 'lumber,' but that together we can create our own 'lumber,' and that once we've created it we can build the most marvelous structure anybody ever laid eyes on and it'll be uniquely our own."

"I can't even see a board straight," Starfinder says. "So I guess you'll have to supervise the job."

"All right. I'll be the Construction Engineer."

"Fine. Shall we start with the foundation?"

"We've already laid the foundation."

"But I think it needs more work, don't you?"

"Well . . ."

observes the whale.

"Oh, *you!*" says the "Construction Engineer."