

# BLOODED ON ARACHNE

**Michael Bishop**

Ethan Dedicos stood at the turnstile in the sapphirine depot with the other disembarked passengers of the *Dawn Rite*. Outside, the wind blew and the world fell away. Among the dronings of people sounds, it was his turn.

"I've come to be blooded," he told the man at the stile. Because of the noise, he had to repeat himself, shouting.

"Go the H'Sej," the stile-tender said out of a skinned-looking face.

Ethan glanced around: bodies, polarized glass, a series of plastic domes, red sandstone beyond, a pinprick sun. "I don't—"

"There, by the footslide. That one, boy. The hag-sage with the spider crown. Move on, Ethan Dedicos, you make us lag."

He went through. Bodies pressed behind him, angry of elbow, flashing-loud of teeth. Hands shoved at him, hands pushed him this way and that. By the footslide the H'Sej was staring at him, a man maybe old, with skin the color of burgundy wine and brown satchel clothes that swallowed him. The spider crown was made of blue metal, and the tips of its eight legs seemed to grow into the hag-sage's narrow skull.

"I'm Ethan Dedicos," the boy said. "I've come to be blooded."

"Who sends you, Ethan?"

"The Martial Arm. I'm to be a star-bearer, an officer of the Arm. Isn't that why you're here, H'Sej? Didn't you come to meet me?"

"I know you, Ethan Dedicos. But I have to know if you know what you want. Now you can come with me."

The hag-sage turned, ignoring the crowd in Scarlet Sky Depot, and maneuvered agilely onto the footslide. How old, the boy wondered, how old the H'Sej assigned me? He followed the burgundy man.

"Can you tell me your name?" he shouted.

"Integrity Swain, Child of Learned Artifice," the maybe-old man said, grabbing Ethan's arm and pulling him alongside. The name was a genealogy, not solely a descriptive designation. Learned Artifice had been this hag-sage's father, and their people lived in the salt gardens on the margin of Arachne's desolate sea bottoms. That was where you went when you were blooded, and that was all you knew until the H'Sej made you aware of more. "Sej, only Sej, is what the outli people call me, boy."

Then they were out of Scarlet Sky Depot, on the precipice-stair that fell into the basin where Port Eggerton lay: white larvae nestled plastically against the red sandstone. Other people went quickly into air tunnels that led down to the administrative complex.

The wind blew. The pinprick sun hurled glitterings across the sky, and even here the noise of a world continuously eroding and reshaping itself made real talk impossible. Dizzied, Ethan put an arm over his eyes to block the blowing sand, the scathing light, the fear of falling.

"Sej!" he shouted. "The tubes! Can't we take the tubes down?"

"We aren't going into Port Eggerton, lamb's eyes."

"I must report to the Martial Arm!"

"You report afterward!"

And the maybe-old blooder of boys led him away from the drop-tube terminals, away from the precipice-stair, across an expanse of plateau. They fought the wind to a chimney of rocks beyond Scarlet Sky Depot, now a shimmering bubble-within-a-bubble-within-a-bubble at their backs, and plunged down the wide abrasive chimney into silence.

On a ledge they halted, and Ethan Dedicos could see nothing but the dark-red rocks surrounding them. Above, maybe the sky. Below, faceted cliffs without bottom. In the wide stone chimney he trembled with a calmness as eerie as drugsleep.

"What do we—?"

"We wait, Ethan Dedicos."

"Why do we wait here, Sej?"

"For transport and because you aren't to see a friend-face until the blooding's done. You aren't to think of Earth or probeship voyagings. We provide now, my people of the salt gardens."

"And the blooding—what must I do?"

"Survive, of course." The hag-sage chuckled. "We play old games on Arachne."

And the maybe-old blooder of boys squatted on the ledge so that his brown vestments billowed around him and his burgundy hands hung over his knees like the bodies of skinned rabbits. He stopped talking, and darkness began climbing up the faceted cliffs below. Ethan leaned on the cold rocks, studied Sej's spider crown, and waited.

And stiffened with his aloneness.

On the other side of the plateau, down in the red basin, there were people just like him. Not just wind-burned hag-sages; not just the promise of cranky spiderherds, arrogant in their gardens of salt and sandstone.

Impatience burned in Ethan Dedicos like a secret fuse.

Then from deep in the chimney of rock a golden spheroid rose toward them, a ring of luminous orange coursing about its circumference. The coursing ring emitted a hum more musical than a siren's song. The entire canyon glowed with the spheroid's ascent.

"Sej!"

"The nucleoscaphe from Garden Home. Our transportation."

"Such a vehicle! I didn't think—"

"The spiderherds of Garden Home aren't barbarians, unblooded one."

Humming, the nucleoscaphe hovered beside them. The brilliant-orange ring swept upward and became a halo over the spheroid rather than a belt at its middle. A door appeared, and a ramp reached out to them like a silver tongue. The H'Sej, ignoring the chasm that fell away beneath the ramp, entered the nucleoscaphe. Reluctantly Ethan Dedicos followed, his eyes fixed on the darkness inside the humming spheroid.

Then he was inside, and the howling ruggedness of Arachne seemed light-years away. Beside the maybe-old blooder of boys he found himself in a deep leather chair the color of Mediterranean grapes. The chair swiveled, but the curved walls of the nucleoscaphe bore nothing upon them but silken draperies. Directly overhead, there was a stylized insignia depicting a spider as drawn from the top.

When the nucleoscaphe's ramp retracted and its door sealed shut, man and boy could not see out. Alone, in a gargantuan atom.

Soon they began to move. Unearthly music droned in their ears.

"Sej, this is a wonderful thing, this vehicle. Couldn't you have had it come to Scarlet Sky Depot? Did you have to make me climb down a hundred rocks to hitch a ride to Garden Home?"

"The nucleoscaphe belongs to the spiderherds, boy, not to your outli folk

in Port Eggerton. A long-ago gift of Glaktik Komm and the Martial Arm. You don't like climbing, heh?"

Ethan said, "Will it take us to Garden Home?"

"Close, close. We'll have to walk a few last kilometers, down from the perimeter cliffs." The H'Sej laughed. "But only because I like to climb, to walk, to hike. And your feet, lamb's eyes, how will they fare?"

Ethan was silent.

In only a few minutes, it seemed, the nucleoscaphe had stopped. It hovered, hummed insanely, and ran out its ramp for the maybe-old man and the boy to disembark upon. They went out into the night and the chill, onto a brutal ledge. The nucleoscaphe closed up behind them and dropped goldenly into the abyss, disappearing like a coin sinking through water. Overhead, the stars mocked.

"Come with me, Ethan Dedicos."

Along the ledges, down the uneven sandstone steps, the H'Sej and the boy struggled. At last they came upon a salt plain and left the escarpments behind. In the starlight, monstrously alone again, they walked across an empty whiteness. They walked all night. When dawn began reddening the yardangs that had at last begun to appear in the desert (grotesque, plastically shaped rocks suggesting the work of a demented sculptor), they finally sighted Garden Home.

"There," Sej said. "Punish your feet some more, darling Ethan."

In the morning's attenuated light Ethan Dedicos saw the salt towers surrounding the central butte of Garden Home: Garden Home, an assemblage of yellow syntheskin tents huddled in a cove beneath the encircling pillars of white. Forty or fifty such tents, all of them large. The encircling pillars, larger yet, pitted with arabesque holes by Arachne's winds. It was a dream city, but as cruel and as real as eroded rock.

"How can you live out here?" Ethan asked.

"Nowhere else is so dear. For three hundred years there have been spidherds in Garden Home, supported at first by Glaktik Komm but living here now like even our own arachnids. And each year the Martial Arm sends us its stringclinging neostarbs to be blooded. Such as you, lamb's eyes."

"Why was Glaktik Komm a patron, Sej? In the beginning?"

"Someone must care for the spiders, they said. Must keep them away from the new depot. In their saliva is a terrible virus that can affect almost

any kind of living cell, a virus to which the arachnids themselves are evolutionarily immune. We must study the Stalking Widows, they said, we must have people who will watch them and destroy their poisons. The first scientists who watched them invented the symbodies you carry in your veins, Ethan Dedicos, to keep your blood lucid starwhen and starwhere. The spidherds of Garden Home are the children of the makers of the symbody, the children of the outli folk who killed disease, for always."

They were close enough to see people among the yellow tents.

"Why must you stay here now?" Ethan asked. "Why must anyone remain in this angry desert of salt?"

"To call the spiderlings home, boy, to sing them back to Garden Home when they have gone ballooning."

Ethan remembered something vague. "Isn't that but once a year?"

"Aye. But we love our leggy beasts. They are as thought-bright as you or any stringclinging manbud in the Martial Arm. We stay because we belong to them, because we talk the spidherd-Stalking-Widow talk."

"You talk to them? And understand their talk?"

"Talk to them, croon to them, pipe to our spiderlings the homing call of Garden Home. The Stalking Widows are a people, too, unblooded Dedicos."

Ethan said nothing. They strode into a crowd of burgundy people who moved among the plastic buildings. A few of these people hailed the H'Sej wordlessly by dancing their fingers like spider legs. The sun was now full up. Its strange light glittered on people, tents, and stones alike. Ethan felt lost, alone in the long shadows that rippled from the fanciful salt pillars: lovely, sensuous, weird.

They were in front of a tent. A piece of plastic facing unzipped, and a woman darker than the red wines of Jerez stepped from behind the yellow flap into their paths.

The boy saw that she was not a maybe-old woman, she was antiquity given flesh. Her hair was stringy magenta. Her albino eyes stared out of the crimson-brown stain of a face rivuleted with time webs. She wore brown sacks. A witch for really real, the boy thought. And the witch twisted her head upward in order to see him from her stoop.

"Allo, N'tee Swain," she said to the H'Sej. (A voice like the high notes of an aeolectic flute.) "Is this the boy you bring us to put out for the bleeding?"

"Ethan Dedicos he is," Integrity Swain said. And then the blooder of boys added, "This is the Widows' Dreadwife, Ethan. Embrace her well."

The neophyte star-bearer embraced her. Surprisingly, she had no smell, even though her face flesh was against him close. Then she drew back. Albino eyes stooped to see him and crinkled in their mask.

"Come inside, unblooded one. Breakfast for you. Then to the top of Garden Home to see the Stalking Widows and their chirren."

They entered the large tent and ate sand locust from earthen bowls. Ethan noticed a vacuum well in the center of the tent—a sparkling chrome mechanism that could tap water from deep within any planet's crust. Odd to see it in the hands of this semiprimi people. The Widows' Dreadwife fetched him a bowl of water, and her fluty voice echoed in the big syntheskin canopy.

"It never rains on Garden Home, nor on the sea bottoms beyond. We spidherds'd die if Glaktik Komm took back our well."

"True it is," Sej said. "The Stalking Widows and the sand locust have their own ways to water, but the vacuum well is ours. Blood our boys and keep our well, they say."

"And you eat only the sand locust?"

"No, no," the Dreadwife said. "Dull eatings, if so. Also eaten are murdered husbands of the spider people, egg sacs, sea-bottom merkumoles, and our own dead when such dyings come." The Dreadwife laughed, a falsetto piping. "I am soon to be eaten, I think."

Unblooded Dedicos asked no more about the spidherds' diet.

They went out into the hot bright morning—Dreadwife, hag-sage, and boy. Through the paths among the yellow tents they ambled, to a natural stairway leading through salt glens to the roof of Garden Home. This wide, uneven roof overlooked the sea bottoms, which were hidden from the city in the cove by the enclosing pillars themselves.

Before they reached the high place, they stopped beside several valleys in the rock where spidherds tended their charges and sang to the Stalking Widows out of dutiful throats.

"Look upon them with your lamb's eyes, boy." Sej pointed. "Down there you'll see the people who go eight-legged and wraithly in our hearts."

And so he looked down into a bleached, grassless glen and saw a burgundy boy of his own age singing in the lovely patois of Garden Home to a horde of ghostly, stilt-standing mistresses. Fifty or sixty Stalking

Widows—tall white ladies whose bodies were almost transparent—moved jauntily about in the glen, and the spider-boy moved among them. Ethan could not believe it. They were as tall as elephants.

The burgundy boy stooped now and again to stroke the colorless hairs on his ladies' bellies, sometimes even blowing voluptuously on the wind-sensitive trichobothria furring their legs. When he did this, his ladies reared up, waved their foremost limbs, and opened their jaws—but more from pleasurable excitation than from fear or anger. The boy's song, the boy's breath, worked on them almost sexually, but without the end result by which they divorce themselves forever from their spider husbands. The boy was not eaten.

"Can they hear his singing?" Ethan asked. "I didn't think some spiders could hear."

"On Arachne," the Dreadwife said, "they hear, they hear." The spectacle hypnotized Ethan Dedicos. The wind in his own hair prompted pointless stirrings in his loins. Then the burgundy boy in the glen saw the three of them looking down and waved his loose fingers at them in the characteristic greeting of the spidherds. "Threnody Hold," the Dreadwife said. "A masterful touchsinger."

They went on. They looked down into other valleys, saw other spidherds touchsinging, watched the stilt-legged giantesses dance. And Ethan Dedicos felt the planet's heat in him like unrequited desire.

They reached the roof of Garden Home and stood looking across the sea bottoms stretching endlessly away to the horizon. And beyond, Ethan thought. The wind blew blastingly here, but not as hard as it had on the plateau outside Scarlet Sky Depot. They did not have to shout to make themselves heard.

"We drop you in the bottoms on the morry," the Dreadwife said.

"What?" Ethan looked down at her sharp profile.

"That's where your bleeding begins, as you know," Sej said. "But we begin tomorrow."

"What do I do out there?"

"Come back to us, sweetling," the Widows' Dreadwife piped. "Come back to us with blood on your hands—all bedighted in a grown-up's skin."

"Allo, Baby Tranchlu!" Sej suddenly shouted. He hailed a girl of seven or eight who had just appeared at the top of the path on the other side of the butte and who was walking across its wind-pitted surface toward them.

The girl had a wide Oriental face stained a tentative mauve. She drove before her a group of spiderlings so colorless they seemed to be made of glass. They were a third of the size of the prancing ladies they had seen in the salt glens, but still as tall as Baby Tranchlu herself. Mere babies, they moved on splinter-thin legs, as clumsy as newborn colts. Only the scopulae on the pads of their feet kept Arachne's winds from blowing them away.

Ethan stepped back as the little girl and her spiderlings approached. He wanted to fall into the planet's sky. And drown.

"Come here, Tranchlu. Say allo to this summer's neostarb, here to be blooded."

"Allo," Tranchlu said.

Her spiderlings, nine or ten in all, tottered about the four human beings and ruminantly waggled their mouth parts. Pedipalpi. A combination of hands and soft teeth, these mouth parts; a strange melding. Baby Tranchlu stared at Ethan.

The Dreadwife asked her, "Have you brought these chirren for the wind, small girl?"

"These be firsties," Tranchlu said. "More on the morry. Goose summer we have. They go fly."

"It's gossamer time," Sej translated. "The spiderlings disperse. These that Tranchlu has attempt the wind today, but tomorrow thousands will go ballooning. Many will die. Every year a thousand spidikins fly, and one boy is blooded."

"Go on," the Dreadwife said. "Put them about it, pert smirl."

Baby Tranchlu did a gangly little dance and sang to her babies in the lilting patois that Ethan couldn't understand. She turned, and pirouetted, and danced along the butte to a place where several salt spires thrust up into the sky. The spiderlings followed, stilt-legging in her wake and flashing glassily in the sun.

"Watch how it is," Sej told Ethan.

The spiderlings, as if on the pert smirl's commands, climbed the pitted rocks and fought both wind and gravity with sticky feet. Ethan lifted his head to watch. Clinging precariously to the spires as they moved, the spiderlings turned in slow circles and ejected strands of silk, which floated on the wind. Their underslung spinnerets paid out more and more glistening thread, more and more. And more and more.

The sky was a pale crimson suspended in a crystalline net, a color



captured in webs.

"There they go, Tranchlu!" Sej shouted.

And the leggy babies, still clinging to their skyey umbilicals, lifted from the rocks. Upward they were dragged like parachutists jumping backward for the door of an invisible aircraft. Ethan felt as if he were watching a film being run the wrong way. Up, up, up, the spiderlings floated.

"But where are they going?" Ethan asked. "Out there are the sea bottoms—nothing else."

"Out there is all of Arachne," the maybe-old man said.

"What happens to them?"

"Some of them die, some of them come back. None of the people of the Stalking Widows live anywhere but here at Garden Home."

"Then why should these little ones go out at all? Why disperse, if only to die or come back?"

"Goose summer it is, lamb's eyes," the H'Sej said. "They go out."

And when Baby Tranchlu's babies were lost in the webby welkin, the hag-sage, the Dreadwife, and Ethan Dedicos descended the paths of the salt-garden butte to the yellow tents in the cove.

The winds died, the afternoon trekked by, and night came out like a dark maiden wearing candles. There was food, and talk. Then Ethan laid himself down among the bodies of murmuring spidherds, closed his eyes, and slept his first sleep on Arachne. While he slept, the maybe-old man touched his face and whispered, "I love the boys I blood. Remember that, lamb's eyes." Ethan heard an orange humming. Groggy, he rolled over.

And woke up on the sea bottoms.

He got to his feet. The sun was already up. He turned around. In every direction, whiteness whiteness whiteness whiteness.

"Sej!"

There was not even an echo. Only a dead word falling from his mouth, and a hint of wind. The desert air smothered the word, and he wondered if he had shouted anything at all. The sun glowered.

"SEJ!"

Again and again he turned around. It was impossible to be this alone. How could they have done this to him? With the nucleoscaphe only. He remembered its humming. *Be sure, be sure.* Kneeling, he looked at the floor of the sea bottom and saw no tracks, no footprints, no telltale

striations on its hard white surface.

He stood up. He turned around again. There were no landmarks anywhere. Where was his hag-sage?

*"SEJ, YOU BURGUNDY BASTARD!"*

This was his bleeding. Drugsleep they had hyped him with in Garden Home and put him out to cope. The Widows' Dreadwife had told him how it would be. Sej had said, "Survive. We play old games on Arachne."

Ethan Dedicos was a neostarb of the Martial Arm, and neostarbs were blooded. So be it. He would play. He would think, and grapple, and run. Very well. What had they given him to play with? What survival pieces had he at hand?

Ethan Dedicos looked at himself and enumerated:

—The silver-blue, seemingly seamless uniform in which he had come to Arachne: light, indestructible, proof against weathers.

—A curved knife; heavy, elaborate of haft, hurtful.

—Two narrow cylinders of water fitted like cartridges into the belt on which he had found the knife; a maybe-supply for two days.

—Nothing else but his wits.

"Sej!" he shouted. "Sej, how are you blooder of boys when you leave your charge to blood himself?"

Irony of name-making. Cruelty of trust. Ethan Dedicos, doubting his neostarb's soul, turned around and around on the salt sea bottom and cursed the probeship fathers, every one. In his head his blood beat loud. And Arachne ached around him like a whitened world wound.

Knowing no directions, Ethan struck out toward the mid-morning sun. He walked and walked. The horizons remained ever distant, ever smooth, annoyingly undisturbed. He looked behind him to see his own footprints, and saw none. He walked some more.

In the midday heat he uncapped a cylinder and drank his first drink: one, two, three drops on the tongue. And walked toward the place where the sun no longer was. And took his second drink: four, five, six drops moistening a cobwebbed mouth.

Then knelt in the middle of nowhere and shut his mind off, *click*. His gut, rumbling, would not so obligingly click off.

Thoughtless, he squatted.

His eyes saw a little hole on the sea bottom, a crumbly place in the

whiteness. Ethan Dedicos told his mind to come on. *Click*, it did. Then he dug at the hole and pulled away salt shards and stabbed down with his knife. Scrabbling with his hands, he caught a stunned merkumole and pulled it free of its burrow: an ugly beastie with a hair-horn nose and spatulate feet. In the hot sun Ethan slew it and ate it, sucking the sinewy flesh as if it were candy, crunching the mush-marrowed bones. He drank off his first cylinder of water. The skin and hair horn of the merkumole he thrust back into the caved-in hole contemptuously.

Then shut down his mind, *click*. And walked on the feet of his own shadow, offmindedly trying to step on the shadow's elusive gray head—a bobbing, shadowboxing shadow's head.

His mind would not stay off. What he saw was too strange to look at out of dreamily dead eyes. He halted and gawked at the horizon, the horizon before him. Pale light pinked its curving edge, but higher up, the sky was streaming with movement. It was raining there.

"No," Ethan said aloud. "It doesn't rain on the sea bottoms." But what he saw *resembled* rain—even though the only clouds in sight were three or four miles up, and as feathery as goose down. Didn't the distant sky glitter with columns of down-pouring moisture? Didn't the density and height of those columns verify a desert squall? An advancing shower?

"It's not supposed to rain out here!" He shook his fist at the translucent columns for trying to deceive him. He wanted a rain, but dared not hope. Looking at the lofty cirrus he thought: As feathery as goose down. Analogy into equation: Goose down: goose summer: gossamer.

And suddenly he knew that he was looking at neither a mirage nor an on-sweeping squall. "Spiderlings coming to see me!" he shouted. "Tranchlu's ballooning babies and all their thousand cousins!"

The wind in his mouth, he sprinted toward the arachnid aviators on their glistening silken tethers—a shower of blowing cobwebs. If they were coming toward him, then Garden Home must lie behind their filamentous squall line. All he need do was walk in that direction, and he would survive his bleeding. His time in the wilderness would be successfully won through. Thinking that, Ethan Dedicos let out a joyous yelp. He was sixteen.

But not stupid. He halted again and reconsidered. He had only one remaining cylinder of water. What were his chances of stumbling on the burrow of another merkumole? The spiderherds of Garden Home had said farewell to their tottering glass babies early that morning, had watched them fly off, most likely, right after sunrise. How far might the spiderlings

have ballooned in twelve hours' time? Maybe, Ethan decided, as many as two hundred kilometers, conservative estimate.

"Sej, you burgundy bastard," he hissed. "Glaktik Komm, child murderers, and sadists. Venerable starbs of the Arm, go to Vile Sty."

He hoped these maledictions covered everyone. He would not be able to walk two hundred kilometers, or more, before his water ran out and he fell over from the heat. Doornail Dedicos.

Standing there with the sun at his back and before him curtains of proteid thread catching the sun's last light, he peeled a strip of dead flesh from his nose, crisped it between his fingers, and thought. Glaktik Komm, the Martial Arm, and Integrity Swain were indeed child murderers; they murdered the child so that a man might move in and reanimate the vacated corpse. Absolutely. There had to be a way out of the sea bottoms. The Martial Arm did have probeship officers, after all, and every one of them had been blooded.

About a kilometer away Ethan caught sight of a single drifting spiderling. Sunlight ricocheted off its body and twinkled from the five or six incredibly lengthy threads streaming from its spinnerets. Cephalothorax down, the spider floated toward him. In less than five minutes, as best as Ethan could judge, it would sweep right by him. Then the others, the hundreds of others who were still together, would come ballooning past, too.

"You're my way out," Ethan said. "I'll board you."

But the first balloonist drifted by overhead, out of reach.

Ethan Dedicos waited. In another ten minutes six more of the advance guard had floated by, all of them either too high or too far to his left or right to permit a hijacking. He left off waiting and once again sprinted forward.

On Arachne the afternoon was deepening inexorably into twilight. The air seemed to be laden with melancholy music played upon countless strings.

Ethan, still running, was surrounded by showers of gauze. At last he caught the forelegs of one of the airborne spiderlings and attempted to hoist himself over its outraged eyes into the saddle between its abdomen and cephalothorax. For a moment his feet were off the ground, pedaling air. Then several of the spider's leg joints broke off in his hands, and he crashed back down on the sea bottom, still holding severed leg pieces. He got up and cast them aside. Rocking back and forth, the maimed

spiderling floated on.

Half-panicked, Ethan turned in rapid circles in the eye of the silk storm. His hands felt sticky. He stopped turning and looked at them. A viscous goo—the colorless blood of the spider people— adhered to his palms.

As he watched, this goo began taking on a faint pinkish cast; in another moment it had turned the brilliant burgundy that was the hallmark of the Garden Home spiderherds. Contact with air. A chemical reaction. Ethan realized suddenly that he had been blooded. Symbolically blooded. Now all he had to do was survive the very real ordeal of getting back to Garden Home—the part of the blooding that counted.

He wiped his hands on his uniform. "I'll board one of you!" he shouted. "I'll outlive all of you!" He was sixteen.

But he was crying. He wept for himself and the spider whose legs he had pulled away. Sej had as much as told Ethan that the Stalking Widows were intelligent creatures, sentient in the manner of man— or in a manner totally their own, at least. And he, Ethan Dedicos, had cruelly hurt one of their people.

It was not to weep about. He had to try again. Most of the ballooning arachnids were too high to reach, much too high to reach, and the sun had already set; soon they would be flown into starlit darkness. He pulled his belt tight and ran forward, his eyes half misted shut and the immense desertcape glinting with buoyant silk.

Ethan leaped. He caught a spiderling about its thin middle and desperately hung on.

For a moment he feared that the strands supporting it would crumble beneath his additional weight and come cascading down around both of them. He lifted his knees beneath him. The floating spider dipped, then dipped again. Ethan's toes dragged the hard sea bottom, slowing their progress. He lifted his knees again and curled his toes away from the earth. Come on, he thought, come on.

They were up, the spiderling and he—up in the pearly evening sky among hundreds of other airborne travelers, an assault force with no one to make war against. Ethan shut his eyes completely and stretched his legs out. They hung free now, just as he hung free. And the wind washed around his dangling body as if he had been submerged in a beautiful giddy-making tonic.

Finally Ethan opened his eyes and found himself in a jungle of writhing legs. His head was pressed against the spider's belly. He pulled himself up,

squeezing his way between two of the creature's hind legs to its chitinous back. He straddled the spiderling, facing rearward, and grasped two of the threads that emerged from its spinnerets. He leaned forward and hung on. After a while his unwilling mount ceased to struggle.

Over one shoulder, Ethan could see the white sea bottoms receding beneath them. The planet's horizons broadened, and broadened, and broadened even more. But only the sea bottoms filled this broadening expanse. Where were they flying off to?

Ethan locked his legs together, tested his grip on the silken cords, and was soon rocked to sleep—deep adolescent sleep, womb-warm slumber. He dreamed that he was piloting the *Dawn Rite* through the surreal glooms of id-space, lost in a comforting nightmare of power.

He woke once, remembering where he was almost immediately. Since it was too dark to see the ground, he closed his dreaming eyes again. The air seemed refreshingly cool, not at all cold. He let the wind sail him back to sleep.

When Ethan Dedicos next woke up, he did so because his spiderling was twisting about in a determined way, as if hoping to dislodge him. He hung on with locked legs and aching hands. It was light. Sort of. He could see neither ground nor sky. The two of them were drifting in a luminous fog, insulated from the outside world. Tatters of insubstantial silver-gray floated past Ethan's face, but the spider's persistent twisting kept him from enjoying the scenery. A cloud bank they were in—a fog of turbulent wispy batting. Where were the other balloonists?

"Stop it!" Ethan shouted. "Damn you, you . . ." He promptly christened the spiderling Bucephalus. "Damn you, Bucephalus!" His voice was muffled by the fog, smothered in moistness.

Bucephalus continued to writhe and sway. The boy wondered how far he would fall if the creature did dislodge him. Several times he felt himself slipping, but gathered his strength and clung like a cat on a bedspread. Shortly he was hanging head-down, while Bucephalus faced skyward and used its forelegs to hoist itself up the silken threads creasing its belly and disappearing into the moving clouds high above.

"What are you doing?" Ethan shouted. "You can't climb up your own balloon wires, you leggy spidikin!"

Then the beast ceased climbing; it left off torquing about. Their frail airship achieved a kind of rocky equilibrium. Looking over his shoulder, upward, Ethan saw Bucephalus joggle several drops of condensed moisture down the flowing silk into its pedipalpi: a drink in flight. Better

than Ethan himself could manage.

They floated on for a time, through the silver-gray fog, and then the spider abruptly released its grip on its balloon wires and dropped until jokingly caught up at its own spinnerets. Ethan screamed but held on. When the beast at last stopped bucking, the boy was head-up again.

"You damn near did me that time, Bucie. You damn near did."

They rose through the mist, at last breaking through into painful sunshine. Beneath them their cloud bank undulated like a wide living fleece; above them the sky was the thin Arachnean scarlet that Ethan had almost forgotten. At unhailable distances Ethan saw several other ballooning spiders. He counted nearly forty, whereas before there had been hundreds. The dispersal, he supposed, was progressing as a dispersal ought.

"But to no point," Ethan said aloud. "You either die or return to Garden Home. I hope you're a returnee, Bucephalus. I don't like cloud-walking, it's not first on my list of career priorities."

Through a break in the cloud bank the boy saw that they were over water, water of multicolored blue. The waves sparkled, but it was impossible to judge how high he and his spiderling were. When the clouds at last thinned to mere ghostly wisps, nothing but ocean lay beneath them.

For two or three hours they sailed casually over water. Twice Ethan Dedicos looked on in amazement as companion balloonists reeled in a bit of thread and slowly tailspun into the sea, suiciding. After collapsing upon them, the downed flyers' webs bobbed in random patterns on the bright surface. It was not until these odd self-drownings that Ethan realized his own spiderling might have some control over where they were going.

"Say, Bucie Belle, are you my pilot?"

Ethan looked up at the wind-weaving threads bearing them aloft and tried to discover where the threads ended. He could not. The sun made him squint. Was Bucephalus manufacturing more proteid secretion and silently paying it out? Was it reeling some in, his pilot? Had this been going on all along?

"I wish I knew your talk, Bucie. What kind of blooder of boys fails to teach his neostarb the spidikin lingo?"

Sej, he thought, Sej, you treacherous spidherd.

Far away he saw red cliffs rimming the sea. Their airship drifted in that direction. Eighteen or twenty balloonists still accompanied them, that Ethan could actually see and count. The remainder were gone now, having

either plunged into the water or shrunk to invisibility with distance.

Ethan was hungry. Maybe Bucephalus could survive on a drop or two of water every morning, but Ethan wanted food. The taste of yesterday's merkumole was still acrid in his mouth; nevertheless, his stomach made noises as if he had not eaten for a week. But for the moment the boy satisfied himself with a careful sip from the cylinder that Sej and the Dreadwife had provided him.

He looked down and saw earth instead of water, intricate topography instead of the sea's smoothness. Infertile and brownish-red, all of it. Fit country only for predatory arachnids. Why had Glaktik Komm come here? Was it solely to blood probeship captains for the Martial Arm?

No, not solely.

Once, many many years ago, scientists had ogled through microscopes the virulent, shape-changing virus in the saliva of the Stalking Widows. They had done so in order to devise a plastic, semiliving symbody, an adaptable counter to almost any antigen that might enter the bloodstream. Ethan carried these artificial counters in his own blood, while the spiderherds of Garden Home had long since developed natural immunity to the arachnid virus.

"How about that, Bucie? You got a mouth full of hungry germs?"

Later Arachne had become an administrative and commercial center, a seedy port. A number of those who came to Arachne were touri-tramps, rugged crazies who sometimes ventured out to Garden Home or even into the dead sea bottoms.

"Not much to see in them, though," Ethan Dedicos told his pilot. "Except the silk storms—and they happen only once a year. Right?"

Bucephalus, the spiderling, kept its own counsel.

They passed over cliff after cliff of creviced sandstone. The entire planet now seemed to be made of lusterless copper. First, white desert. Then, ocean. Now, sandstone.

Shortly it was night again. As myriad stars commenced to burn, the earth blanked out.

Weakened by a night and day aloft, Ethan Dedicos hung on to Bucephalus lethargically. Now another night lay ahead. He uncapped his second cylinder and emptied it in a single breathless gulp. Then the cylinder fell from his fingers and tumbled into darkness. He had eaten nothing all day. His stomach lurched painfully with each new gust of wind. His lips were chapped, his cheeks and forehead blast-burned. And if he



went to sleep again, how could he be sure that Bucie would not suicide during the night, plummeting them both to destruction?

He could not. That was the answer: he could not. Knowing the answer too well, he slumped across the spiderling's upturned rear, gripped the threads emerging from its spinnerets, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, only ten other arachnid aviators remained in sight, all a good ways in front of them and conspicuously higher. In the dawn glow over the land Ethan saw a vista depressingly similar to yesterday's endless sandstone. Except that now there were canyons in the rock—monstrous canyons, labyrinthine and cruel. The canyons were new.

Ethan remembered climbing with the H'Sej from Scarlet Sky Depot into a crevice like the mighty ones below. He remembered the nucleoscaphe. Might not these canyons be tributaries to the one he and Sej had traveled in? Did Port Eggerton lie near? Did Garden Home lie near? Probably not, Ethan thought. We have crossed an ocean.

His speculations ceased when Bucephalus began writhing its legs and threatening to topple him into skyey space. Time for a morning drink. Midnight moisture on the balloon wires. Symbolically blooded Dedicos prepared for the spider's topsy-turvy toast to dawn. Inebriate of dew, he silently cursed. Drunken whoreson!

And he was suddenly upside down, admiring red rock.

Then, moments later, he was traumatically upright again, wind whirling blue in his mouth, sun stitching his eyes into a squint.

That day was a dull one. Several times he thought about trying to control the direction of their travel himself—either by cutting a silk strand free or by attempting to pull more thread from one or two of the spinnerets. But he was afraid to experiment. And if he could control their climb and descent, where would he take them? Enigmatic Arachne gave few topographical clues, all of them dreary-dull. Dull. As this marvelous floating was finally dull.

Ethan's hunger grew. His weakness, he realized, would soon be an obstacle to his survival. Faint, fatigued, feverish, he would be bucked into free-falling anonymous death by bronco Bucephalus's next dipsomaniacal quest for water. And he would die. It was as simple as that. He—Ethan Dedicos, neostarb of the elitist Martial Arm—would die, his body burst upon abrasive rock or abusive sea, his grave a canyon or a watery grotto. Just another abortive bleeding.

*Die.*

And so, as the afternoon wore on, Ethan made up his mind to kill the spiderling. He didn't want to. He had to. To be successfully blooded, one had to survive. That meant that Bucephalus would have to die.

"I'm sorry," Ethan Dedicos said, meaning it. "I'm sorry to have to do this."

He removed the knife from his belt, locked his legs farther down the creature's cephalothorax than usual, and reached his arms around the abdomen in order to find the soft membrane where its legs joined its body. Only here could his knife penetrate the horny skeleton. Bucephalus, exasperated, languorously waved its legs, but Ethan found the spot anyway.

And stabbed. And jerked the blade sideways. And stabbed again. The spiderling spasmed. Its body hiccuped violently. Lame, its legs thrashed. Overhead, silken streamers buckled in the wind, buckled and fluttered. But, forearmed and resolute, the boy survived these gimp aerial throes. He hung on for drear death—the spiderling's, not his own.

Its spasming done, they floated on almost as before. When Ethan next looked at his hands, they were covered with clear viscous fluid. He watched as the discharge turned bright burgundy. This new stain overlapped the old—from his palms and knuckles, all the way up his wrists. He felt a murderer, a Jacobean villain, a deranged hero. Oh, blood, blood, blood, he thought.

And put the thought out of his mind, *click*. So that he could ensure his own survival. Pilotless now, he had to hurry. An hour or so ought to suffice, time in which to eat and plan a second hijacking. If he remained too long aboard Bucephalus's dead husk, the winds might eventually send him flailing into nowhere. Only living spiders made it back to Garden Home. He needed a pilot.

Ethan Dedicos, hanging on with one hand, used his knife to crack open the chitinous back of the spiderling. Imagine it's lobster, he told himself. Same phylum, after all. Arthropoda. This knowledge proved uncheering.

Deliberately, Ethan ate of the clear tubular heart, squeezing it section by section through the hole he had punched in Bucephalus's back. He ate until he could eat no more. The taste was vile. His uniform was blotched with wine-colored stains on his chest, and on his thighs, where he had wiped his hands. Again and again he willed himself not to vomit. When he could force no more down, he pulled out still more of the heart and cut loose a large section to hang from his belt. For tomorrow, he told himself. Imagine it's lobster.

By this time, the spiderling's translucent body, open to the air, was shot through with marblings of deepest ruby. To lighten the load that the balloon threads had to bear, Ethan methodically cut away each one of the corpse's legs. He dragged out reddening entrails and heaved them into the wind. They dwindled slimily in the late-afternoon sunlight, spiraling downward in dreamy slow motion.

And as he had hoped, his pilotless airship began to rise.

Four balloonists floated above him now. No more. He had not seen any of the other six spiders plunge into the knife-edged canyons that day; they had simply sailed off. These four remaining ones were his last hope. He had to board one of them before the twilight deepened into night, before night scattered his last hope beyond the prospect of capture. He had to maneuver his fragile craft by body shifts and tuggings of line—expertly, as if he had flown on streaming silk his entire life.

Clumsily, Ethan Dedicos managed. Seldom looking down, he leaned and yanked his way alongside the slowest of the four spiderlings—the slowest and the heaviest. Even so, it bobbed several meters out of reach, to his left and above him. A chasm of air intervened, a frightening chasm of air.

Ethan hacked away portions of Bucephalus's body until he had almost nothing to cling to. Using the toe of one foot against the heel of the other, he pulled his boots free and kicked them into the dropping sun, where they seemed to catch fire and disintegrate. Very little time remained. It was like his last evening on the sea bottoms all over again—but more urgent, more insanely desperate.

Ethan leaned and yanked on the tethers, shifted his weight, and muttered incoherently into the wind. He looked up and saw that Bucephalus's threads were weaving themselves among those of the spider that he hoped to board. Indifferently, the beast watched him approach. He could almost touch its dangling forelegs, almost look into its mouth. But he wasn't rising anymore. An unbridgeable gap existed, a chasm.

Not knowing what else to do, Ethan unfastened the belt the spiderherds had given him and let it drop. Food supply and all: Bucephalus's tubular heart.

Like a buccaneer, he held his knife between clenched teeth. Come on, he thought. Come on. Maybe coincidentally, maybe because of his action, his craft bobbed higher. Then higher again.

And instantly Ethan Dedicos jumped.

He was conscious of his knife slicing his mouth, spinning silverly away.

He was conscious of rocking impact and blurred, out-of-kilter horizons. Then he felt his newly filled stomach plummeting canyonward, and his body irresistibly following.

A tailspin. Silk tearing on the sky. This is it, Ethan said to himself. This is it.

At which point he was yanked up by the gossamer canopy pouting from the spiderling's tail, and the world snapped back into place with a *pop*. Miraculously, he was still astride his hijacked arachnid, but now he could see their elongated twilight shadow on a wall of rock below. How far they had fallen! His entire body trembled, his blotched, clinging hands most of all.

Far, far above them the mutilated corpse of Bucephalus rode the gusts ever upward. Ethan felt empty, alone.

"I'm not going to name you," he told his new pilot. "I promise you that: I won't give you a name."

By the time it was completely dark, his heart had stopped its riotous beating, and they had gained a bit of altitude again. Both relieved and exhausted, Ethan pressed his body against his host's, tightened his grip on the silks, and, for the third time in as many nights, went to sleep as if in a treetop cradle. He slept the big drugsleep, he bobbed on the lullaby winds. And dreamed of solid ground grown over with lovely grass.

In the middle of the cool night he opened his eyes and thought he heard the distant sloshing of waves. He did not look down. Soon he was asleep again, dreaming of clip-on epaulets and probeship glory. A venerable starber was he in his sleep rhythms.

The following morning he survived the spiderling's flipover for water, and, head-down, got a good view of the sea. The same sea as before, or a new one? Multicolored and sparkly, it looked just like the other, but there was no way for Ethan to be sure. White froth and indigo; cream combers and lilac—but not a seacoast or sailing vessel in sight.

Not even in the air was there a sailing vessel. Rightside-up again, he quickly determined that they were alone. The last three balloonists had skyed away during the night, or maybe crumpled down in the dark, to drown. Not again would he be able to switch corpses in midscream (a thought not hateful, so breathstopping had his jump been). Nor could he kill off his current mount for food— but for desperation, but for sheer desperation.

"You're my ticket, trick, and trump," the boy whispered. "You're it,

beastie."

Then Ethan himself shook water down the silks, and drank. He was not desperate. Not yet. And all that day they floated where the wind and the spiderling willed—over bright ocean. Until the late afternoon brought land into view once more, a whiteness punctuated with bizarre yardangs; then the red rocks again. A maybe-new continent. He couldn't tell for certain.

Then, at eventide, he suddenly saw Port Eggerton!

And the sapphirine bubble-within-a-bubble-within-a-bubble of Scarlet Sky Depot, high on a cliff above the nestling city!

"We've circled around!" Ethan shouted. "You've brought us back!"

He thought about trying to wrench the airship to earth, about crash-landing on the plateau by the depot. Maybe these bubbles and domes signaled his last chance to look upon the work of man. It would be dark soon, his fourth night aloft. But the Widows' Dreadwife had said, "Come back to us, sweetling. Come back to us with blood on your hands." He had to trust in his spidikin pilot, he had to go cruising craftily back to Garden Home. Otherwise the bleeding would be blotted, an all-for-naught mistake. What, what should he do?

With poignant regret Ethan Dedicos watched Port Eggerton slip away beneath them. An opportunity lost. After which, remorseless night fell.

But this night Ethan could not sleep. He made no attempt to sleep. To sleep would be madness. This night, he felt sure, they would balloon their way to the salt escarpments above the spiderherds' cove of yellow tents. His journey would be over, his bleeding complete. The petty demands of the body—hunger, thirst, weariness—could not eclipse the importance of such a fulfillment.

Adrenaline flowed in the boy, a tiny glandwind raging where Arachne's winds could never roar.

The passing hours, the turning stars, mocked his excitement. He and the spiderling drifted in darkness. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Had the winds changed again? Would morning again find them over water?

"Weave a spell for us, hag-sage. Burnish your spider crown, Sej, and lift lovely Garden Home out of the desert. Put it anywhere you like, but put it close. Put it goddamn close."

To no avail, this plea. They dipped, and rose, and stuttered in nearly utter blackness, only the stars gleaming. Ethan began to despair. He thought of another day aloft, of his wind-scorched lips and his knotted sinews and the idea of dying at sixteen.

Why not simply slide backward off the arachnid's stupid snout and let whatever lay beneath snuff out his life? In that thought was some sweetness, a temptation like young girls' bodies. It seduced him, almost.

A thin singing saved him, a fluty piping on the wind.

Through the tall darkness, Ethan Dedicos heard this music, and the child of the Stalking Widows heard it too. Instantly they dropped several meters. Ethan's stomach told them that they had dropped. He gripped the silks and pulled himself up a little, so that in a moment he saw far in front of them two tiny flames, like matches burning, and the slowly emerging silhouette of a jagged landform.

It was the roof of Garden Home!

Or was it a dream, a cruel deception?

"No, no," Ethan said. "It's the spiderherds' fortress, the Stalking Widows' roost. Home in on that singing, Widows' babe. Home in on it, I tell you!"

They homed. The silver singing, as unearthly as everything else he had encountered on Arachne, led them in.

As they approached the great butte of the Stalking Widows, he could see that the match flames were torches. The dark, milling forms of many people crowded the opening between two salt spires, an opening toward which his pilot was apparently navigating.

And around them, around them in the dark, he somehow knew there were other balloonists sailing in. A very few at a time. Homing in on the eerie song that they had all heard from afar, picking it up long before he himself had heard it. The survivors of goose-summer madness, riding their gossamer tides back home.

And he, Ethan Dedicos, among them. Decorously blooded.

They swept toward the gap in the rock. Torchlight illuminated the strange upturned faces of a hundred burgundy spiderherds. He heard cheering, cheering that overrode the ghostly song of the Widows' Dreadwife, for it was she who had sung them in. As they gusted in, he thought he saw her albino eyes flashing out of a fire-tattered face. She was apart from the others, standing on a high ledge. Singing.

The spiderling and boy swept through the gap. Hands caught at him, friendly hands—the hands of spiderherds. The cheering swelled until he thought it would rupture the very darkness and spill daylight over all Arachne. Hands clutched at him. Hands held him upright. The press of celebrating bodies bore him staggering, grinning, away from his glassy beast, along a narrow path. Faces among the hands, Baby Tranchlu's and

Threnody Hold's. Torches bobbingly accompanied them.

Solid ground, Ethan thought. I'm on solid ground.

And then their procession of faces and hands abruptly halted. And numbly turning up his eyes, Ethan saw a burgundy-dark, maybe-old man in the path in front of them. A hag-sage wearing loose brown sacks and a glinty-blue spider crown. The H'Sej, flickering brightly there.

"Oh, what a man you are now," Sej said. "You're stained and smeared and shredded, just like a spidherd. Just like a spidherd, lovely one."

For a moment Ethan Dedicos stared uncomprehendingly. Then grinned. Then felt a cold, violent ache in his heart. Then crumpled in the hands of the gentle rowdies who had led him to his blooder.

Just like a spidherd Ethan looked, just like a spidherd. Now the Martial Arm would let him drop probeships into id-space. Why did his gut hurt so? His heart, too?

Lurching forward on his knees against the many friendly hands, he heaved up undigested bits of something saddening. Spittle dripped from his lips and chin. Then he heaved up air, only air.

Then he threw back his sweaty face and looked at the imperceptibly lightening sky, where winked a thousand scornful stars.

Just before he passed out, Ethan whispered the word "Bucephalus." No one heard him. No one knew his hurt.