

# POLYPHEMUS

by

**Michael Shea**

The sunlight falls bright and strong on the wastes of Firebairn at noon, but the wind is fresh and cuts through the warmth of it. Consequently, murmions usually sun themselves in the lee of the buttes and the eroded volcanic cones that stud those plains. In the lee of one such cone – more like a ragged ringwall really, no higher on the average than a hundred metres, but more than four kilometres in the diameter of its enclosure – a murmion luxuriated on a patch of red sand.

The creatures are rather like baby seals in shape, though a bit smaller, which still makes them among the largest of Firebairn's terrestrial fauna. The lakes (such as the one in the crater behind this murmion) and the sea contain the overwhelming majority of the planet's animal life and all its most impressive forms. Indeed, the colonists there had recently established that the murmion evolved from an aquatic line, the same order to which the economically important and much larger delphs belonged. Members of this order were sometimes called 'mammalian analogues,' based on their reproductive systems, lungs, and vascular organisation, but there was something of the arthropod in all of them, perhaps most noticeably in this little pioneer of the dry land. It had a smooth chitinous hide and primitive eyes – ommatidia, really – like small black knobs, while its 'flippers,' fore and aft, were rigid and three-jointed, though of an oarlike flatness that proclaimed their ancestral function.

This murmion had chosen an unfortunate spot for its nap. It was dark blue in colour, and the reddish sand put it in sharp relief. This had not gone unnoticed by a second organism that now crouched upon the crater's rim, still dripping from the lake within, whence it had just emerged. This, known colloquially by the colonists as a 'gabble' (*Sturtis atrox thomsonia*), was batrachian in form, though morphologically a far simpler organism than any frog, being in fact more analogous to an immense rotifer or roundworm in its internal structure. Moving on four pseudopodia, it was a

green viscid mass with a vast slot for a mouth and, above the mouth, a freckling of rudimentary eyes reminiscent of a spider's. It found prey by a subtle discrimination of colour contrasts, and since it frequently left the water to forage along the land fringes, one could not help feeling the murmion's sunbathing habits were singularly maladaptive. The gabble was easily four times the size of the murmion, and swift and silent as liquid – properties it now demonstrated as it leapt and flowed down the side of the crater toward the sleeper. Its final lunge came from so high that the force with which it smacked down on the murmion imparted a paralysing shock to the prey. The gabble stepped daintily back from the stunned creature, bobbed and weaved, seemed to shudder with delicate anticipation, and swallowed the murmion whole.

The gabble settled down for a digestive nap on the warm red sand. Had it possessed more highly evolved eyes, it might have been alarmed, for something of immense size was already quite near, grinding its slow way across the desert toward the crater. Perhaps not. The gabble had no natural land-dwelling predators larger than itself.

The wastelands of Firebairn would have inspired awe in anyone susceptible to nature's grandeur. The genesis of this continent – and of the planet's only other one – was now well understood. Both were immense tables of volcanic outflow produced by several primary magma vents in the sea floor, and augmented by a multitude of lesser vents.

The period of active vulcanism was a hundred million years past, and there had long been established a global weather cycle that seasonally scoured the land with hurricane winds and hammering rains. Erosion had burnished the buttes and cones, scoured the obsidian fangs and claws off them, till now they shone like glazed ceramics in the sun. Of the once-towering volcanic cones, only the stumps remained, like twisted pots and cauldron rims. Everything was red, black, olive green, ochre, and orange – not just the buttes and the glassy ramparts of the worn cones, but the rain-polished sands and gravels too. These formed threads, ribbons, whole fabrics of colour, all woven and braided by the millennial winds.

And bejewelling this already jewelled terrain were the numberless lakes. Most of the lakes were in the craters, but many were on the flats as well, where their stark, cruel blue shone impossibly intense, framed by the polychrome mosaics of the plains. It was a world of inexorable beauty, through which a man might go in rapture, but only if borne in steel, only in a juggernaut harder than the harshness of that stern paradise.

The sand-hog was such a craft, a great tractor-transport, tank-treaded, that chewed across the gravel, gnawing it with a continuous fifty-ton bite. It bore three boats in its undercarriage, nine men and women in its upper decks. In its middle was a holding tank, a belly that whole schools of delphs could be swallowed into and carried off to sate the hunger of the growing colony. It was now farther from the colony than it had ever gone, not due to any shortage of delphs in the colony's immediate vicinity, but in order to combine forage with exploration and mapping of the continent. As the vehicle drew near the landmark its captain had selected for inspection, Penny Lopez, watching from one of the ports, said:

“Look. There's a gabble.”

Several of the others joined her at adjacent ports. The presence of a gabble indicated that the crater indeed contained a lake. More than this, it portended that the lake would contain delphs. Delphs and gabbles were ecological associates. Both inhabited only 'ocean-rooted' lakes – those whose surrounding craters had still-open vent systems that connected their waters with subcontinental oceanic influxes.

“Why is it wobbling like that?” asked the group's cartographer, Japhet Sparks. Nemo Jones, one of the two armourers, smiled within his ragged beard.

“He ate something nasty, I expect.” Penny looked at him sharply. The uncouth armourer had been a suitor of hers at one time. Repulsing his attentions had not sufficiently expressed Penny's dislike of him, and the power of even his most innocent-seeming remarks to irritate her was a source of open humour among the colonists. But Orson Waverly, who was the expedition's biologist, glanced at Nemo and shared his smile.

Indeed, the gabble did not look well. Pseudopodia spread, it seemed to be trying to brace itself, while spasms and tremors made it quake like a shaken plate of jelly. One of its sides bulged. From the bulge, something sprouted that looked like a blue, crooked knife blade, and even as it did so, a second identical one erupted from the creature's opposite side. With a synchronised sweeping motion, like oars plied by a boatman, these blades began to cut two jagged incisions through the flanks of the gabble.

“Captain Helion,” said Waverly, “would you go at one-third for a moment for a field observation?”

The formality of the request was necessary, for the captain, a tall and statuesquely handsome man, disliked modification of any of his procedures. He arched an eyebrow, nodded coolly, and cut speed.

The observation required little time, for as the gabble ceased its

impotent quiverings of resistance, a second pair of angled blades thrust from its sides. With an undulating swimming motion (not unlike a baby seal's) these four trenchant protrusions completed a circuit of the froglike belly. Head and forelegs flabbily collapsed, and from the bloody-edged barrel of the gabble's hindquarters, the snout of a murmion poked into the sunlight. It was a brief exulting gesture, such as a dolphin might make, breaking the surface out of sheer exuberance to dive again – and this the murmion did, greedily, into the nourishing pot of its prey's stomach.

Penny gave the smiling Nemo Jones a brief scowl. She went over to the piloting console, where Helion was already steering a course along the crater's perimeter, seeking an access to its interior negotiable by the tractor treads of the fishing craft the hog carried. She asked him the chances of finding such a break, and he cocked an eye at the crater and murmured a judicious reply. The captain's normal manner of stalwart composure was always faintly heightened by Penny Lopez. To Waverly, who was making a journal entry, Jones said:

“You rarely see that happen on dark sand. Murms always lie upon red or yellow, to show up better for the gabbles.”

“Don't tell me,” put in Jax Giggans, his fellow-armourer, who was readying the rifles. “You've hunted murmions on Katermand. Katermandian murmions. And you know all their tricks. And when they can't find sand the right colour to lie on, they make use of special polychromatic piss glands they have to dye it yellow.”

Nemo gave a single bark of laughter, practically a cachinnation from this rather solemn and formal man. Jax's joke might have been offered by any of the colonists. The backward jungled planet of Jones's origin, and his endless repertory of woodsman's tricks and lore, were a favourite target for humour. Nemo's normal reaction, however, would have been a courteous blankness – perhaps a blink of bafflement so straight-facedly feigned that many at first believed him slow-witted. But with Jax, he actually laughed, and riposted:

“No. They always piss green. Diet of gabbles.”

“A joke!” said Sari, one of the pilot-gunners. “Nemo Jones has made a joke! Check the ports – the sky may be falling.” There was a bitter edge to this sneer that was a little surprising to everyone who heard it, perhaps even to Sarissa Wayne herself. She didn't like the way it rang; it made her sound jealous of Jax's friendship with the Katermandian – which she was.

Sarissa considered punching Jones in the face. No, she would probably have to use some heavy blunt instrument to hurt him enough to get things

started. In any case fighting him, as Jax had done, seemed to be the only way to get close to him.

Nemo Jones had been less well liked during his first year on Firebairn. For one thing, when he offered solutions to problems arising in the field, they were often bewilderingly irrelevant to the courses of action everyone else was debating – and just as often, they proved to be the best solutions. Combined with his curious solemnity and the definiteness of his opinions, this was an irritating pattern. And for another thing, while he obeyed most orders (though sometimes with an air of stoic compliance that subtly pronounced them stupid), he would every now and again immovably *refuse* an order. And not always a significant order – sometimes quite a routine one. But he could not be argued out of these strange fits of stubbornness and had spent quite a few weeks in the detention cubicle.

Senior staff had soon determined that his usefulness outweighed his recalcitrance and generally allowed him his quirks. And his fellow-colonists in general quickly worked out the same equation on the social level – but not before Jax Giggans, overhearing Jones refuse some commonplace order, had gotten ‘fed up with the hairy little primadonna.’ Helion had been the officer in charge and had allowed the fight.

Jax was bull-bodied, over six feet tall. He shaved his scalp, and his head looked like a battering ram. Jones was a handsbreadth shorter, and lighter by fifteen kilos. He was not unimpressive – lean, wide-shouldered, his knot-muscle arms roped with veins, hairy as a goat. But still the smaller man by far.

It was an eventful fight, though not a long one. Jax lost an upper canine, had his nose broken and a rib cracked, and received a multitude of astonishingly large and vivid bruises all over his body. He was a man of courage and picked himself up no less than four times, but he fell five.

Afterward, he would unabashedly describe the fight to anyone who asked. He told Nemo that anyone who could fight as hard as he could had to have good and sufficient reasons for whatever he did.

And there they were – friends now in a way that Jones was with no one else. Sarissa was not averse by temperament to punching Jones in the face, but was ruefully aware that in any case she wanted something more than Jax had with him. First she wanted his friendship, his respect, and then she wanted to mate with him. The crazy phrase was his own, for ironically Jones had first made his suit to her. Back then, before she had known what to make of him, she had rejected his grotesquely formal gestures of courtship. He had gone on, in his methodical way, to woo the

more conventionally beautiful Penny Lopez – with a similar lack of success.

“We’re approaching a likely entry point. Pilot-gunners below-decks, please.” Helion, ever official, used the intercom, though he might have spoken over his shoulder and been heard by all. Sari went below with her friends Angela and Norrin, to check the chemical balance of the quarry tanks and see to their harpoon guns. Nemo helped Jax lay out the field kits of the party’s other weaponry while Orson Waverly and Japhet Sparks stood behind the captain, watching the terrain from the pilot’s port.

Erosion had broadened a crack in the cone wall, creating a gravel-floored defile that could be reached by a few metre’s climb from the desert floor. Hellion stopped the sand-hog below the defile. “Reconnaissance party stand by to disembark,” he said, again through the intercom. He thumbed a switch. The door coughed open and the gang ramp creaked outward, downward to the bright sand. He gave the controls to Penny, took his rifle from Jax, and preceded Jax and Nemo down the ramp. The three of them set out to reconnoitre.

The defile appeared more than adequate for the boats. Before they were halfway through it, they saw the lake: a vast, brilliant arena of water, steep-shored save for a small beach at the defile’s foot. Near the water’s centre, perhaps two kilometres offshore, was a small craggy island.

“There’s delph here. No doubt of it,” Nemo muttered. As was often his way on unknown ground, he moved tautly, ‘ready to drop to all fours’ as Sarissa had once expressed it. Hellion disregarded him, but Jax looked at his friend with an air of inquiry, not so much for the remark as for an undertone of unease he had heard in it.

The boats’ access assured, they climbed to the crown of the rim and moved along it. The island seemed to be a volcanic plug, an upwelling of magma that had succeeded the cone’s formation by a long time, for it was far less eroded than the wall they stood on, to a degree for which the wall’s shelter could not account. They had gone less than mile when a deep cove in the island’s flank was revealed.

“Shit,” Jax growled in awe. The cove teemed with delphs, by far the biggest school the men had ever seen. Even at that distance, they didn’t need the glasses to see the beasts – scores of them sunning in the shallows, their backs bulging above the water looking like a nestful of silver eggs, and scores more where the cove deepened, playing the leaping game of tag characteristic of the younger members of the species. Helion gazed in silent satisfaction. Nemo Jones said:

“There’s something wrong with the way the water moves. Have you noticed it?”

The captain’s face changed as if a sourness had touched his palate. Jax asked, “How do you mean? Where?”

“Out in midwater, this side of the island. Twice now it’s looked jittery in a way the winds don’t account for.”

Helion sighed. “For God’s sake, Jones. *Jittery*? There’s some wind chop, a little swell, the sun dazzle ... just what kind of ominous subtleties do you think you’re seeing?”

“It is subtle, Captain, and it’s not happening right now. But I’ve seen it twice since we’ve been up on the ridge here. Subtle but definite. At the least it means some kind of deep current.”

“Jones, you may be sincere, but you are also compelled to concoct frontiersman’s intuitions about even the most straightforward good luck. I’ve been watching the lake, and I saw nothing. What about you, Jax?”

“I can’t say I did, but I don’t make light of Nemo’s eye for things.”

“Nor do I make light of it, Jones. It’ll go in the log if you wish. Meanwhile our job here seems strikingly clear to me, and I think we’d better get to it.”

The Katermandian shrugged, staring not at the captain, but at the lake. “Maybe it’s meaningless – how can I say? But it wasn’t intuition. It’s something I *saw*.”

He didn’t immediately follow the other two back toward the sand-hog. He watched the water a few minutes more, then tensed.

“Again,” he murmured. “Yes, I see you. A convective eccentricity, from some magma vent? I think you’re too erratic for that ...”

He spat on the ground for luck and hurried to catch up to the others.

The boats, moored at the little beach, rode the soft heave of the waters, their armour-glass cockpit bubbles flashing in the sun. The expeditioners stood on the shingle. Nemo squatted a bit apart from the group, watching the lake, meditatively grinding his rifle butt against the gravel. Captain Helion stood facing the other seven. His stance was more erect than usual, truculent, one might almost have said.

“Captain, I have to question this,” Orson Waverly was saying. “If you make a special Command Override of it, naturally I’ll obey, but it seems needlessly –”

“Needless, Waverly? We don’t need delph roe? We don’t need fresh breeding stock for the pens at base? Maybe we should radio home and have our surpluses destroyed. Perhaps we should just relax, have a swim, and go back.”

“But, Captain,” Jax said, “two boats or three – what’s the differential?”

“You tell me the differential, Giggans. With three boats out there, we can dye the cove and drive damn near the whole school to shore in one sweep. With two, we might get a third at the first sweep, and then we could go back cruising and gunning all day and get not more than another third from the scatterers.”

“But that’s just it,” Waverly said. “More than two-thirds of a school that size would put the hog near overload. With the tanks that full, half the live take could die on the ride home. It’s roe we need more than meat.”

Helion’s proposal was a distinct departure from his normal style, undeniably unorthodox. Colony procedure was quite explicitly prescribed on this point: one fishing craft was to remain onshore at standby during any manoeuvre in unexplored environments. The captain’s numerical assessment of the situation was not wrong. For a few minutes after a school had been blinded by a dye grenade, it was panicked enough to be moved en masse if the boats’ ultrasonic pulsars could effectively bracket it with their crossfire. Here, three boats might handle it, but two could not. Meanwhile, blinded delphs rapidly reoriented to a sightless defensive pattern – sounded shallowly and dispersed – and individuals that eluded a first sweep would have to be painstakingly stalked and harpooned one by one.

But considering the probable yield of even the two-boat deployment, Helion’s insistence on the three-boat plan was unreasonable – gluttonous. Waverly saw that his objection hadn’t moved the captain, and he added:

“Listen, sir. I respectfully suggest that you’re excited by the size of the find. You want to make a record catch. You’re letting pride bend your judgement. I’m not rebuking – it’s normal, healthy ambition, but –”

“Thank you, Waverly. Now that you’ve spit out your bit of malice, we’ll proceed. We’ll start in Formation Delta, assignments as follows ...”

Nemo Jones crouched silent throughout the briefing, sombrely grinding his rifle butt against the sand. But as the group dispersed to their boats, he rose and touched Penny Lopez’s shoulder.

“Penny, I want you to take special warning. The captain won’t agree with this, but I think this lake is dangerous. It ... smells wrong. I think you



should stay especially alert.”

Penny scowled. It was hard for anyone to blame her for shortness of temper. Jones had importuned her with his embarrassingly formal attentions long past the time when anyone else would have understood her answer to be an emphatic NO. She turned to Helion. “Captain, Armourer Jones reports a negative olfactory observation on reconnaissance. Should it be entered in the log?”

Perhaps Jones was finally starting to get the message – he sighed and turned away. Sarissa to the exchange less well than he did, though only her fellow-pilot Angela Rackham observed it. Sari was dark, slight, and lean – always tautly poised. Anger in her produced an almost visible vibration in this tautness, like a plucked string, and seeing this vibration now, Angela threw an arm across her shoulders and detained her furious departure with a brief, discreet hug.

“Hey, Sari. The sap’s punctilious. He still thinks he’s her official suitor! He’s riding with you – why would he see the need to give *you* a warning?”

Sari shrugged off Angela’s arm, uneasy over being so accurately understood – but then gave her a kiss before getting into her boat. She hated being splenetic and jealous like this, but she was getting intensely fed up with Jones’s dense inability – or his peevish unwillingness? – to see that she’d thought him over and that she just might want him after all. When he and Japhet Sparks climbed into their seats behind her, she thumbed shut the bubble with a bang and pulled out onto the water without a backward glance.

The three boats – domed ellipsoids – moved out in a triangular formation, sliding noiselessly across the water’s softly breathing blue serenity. Their wakes were so slight they scarcely marred the waters, wherein the colossal wall containing them, all glossy carmine marbled with jet black, was repeated.

Japhet Sparks sat amidships, between Sarissa and Nemo. He had a true cartographer’s love for physical creation, and he turned his bony face greedily upon the scene surrounding them.

“By God, look at it! I’ve never seen such a gorgeous lake. A marine vent for sure – probably along the magma vent at the root of that island. And talk about recent vulcanism – if that island’s a day over ten million, I’ll eat it. Oh, for a week to check it out with a lung!”

Without turning, Sarissa asked, “How does the water smell to you?”

Sparks grasped the allusion, but only granted the jibe an irritated

shrug. Nemo stared at the back of their pilot's head. "I didn't say it in jest, Sarissa. What I meant I don't know, but –"

"You gave that stiff-necked bitch a special warning. What about *me*, you brainless idiot?"

At this point an impartial observer would probably have exonerated Jones from any charge of wilful unawareness of Sari's changed feelings for him. Deep in the grotto of his shaggy beard and vine-thick hair, a glint of surprise lit his eyes' blackness. Unfortunately the hawk-nosed, fierce-eyed little woman was past noticing such subtleties at the moment. She was so infuriated by the plaintive sound of her own outburst that some extraordinary gesture of anger was now absolutely necessary to avoid a meltdown in her emotional circuits. (Sari Wayne had spent a few days in detention herself.) She jerked the joystick, launching their craft on a wide, extravagant excursionary curve away from their prescribed formation.

The island lay between them and the quarry-filled cove on its farther side. Her gesture didn't compromise their mission, though she knew that it was going to enrage Helion. Even so, when his raging voice burst from the intercom, it angered her further. She had been pulling back in, but now she cut even more widely back out. Then with insolent leisure – rubbing in the redoubled insubordination – she began a slow return to formation, all the while enjoying Helion's furious diatribe in the manner of a musical obbligato to her grand gesture.

When Jones moved, it took both her and Japhet Sparks completely by surprise. He sprang from the stern seat and dove for the communicator, whose reply-switch he threw repeatedly, signalling the captain that he wished to cut in.

Helion was ordering Sarissa to dock at the nearest shelving of the island's shore, toward which he already had the other two boats putting in, and there to yield her helm to Japhet. Nemo's signals, far from inducing him to open the line, made him flood it even more furiously.

But in Sarissa's boat he now went unregarded. Both she and Japhet had just seen what Nemo had seen. With a moan of horror, she accelerated to catch up, zigzagging wildly as she did so, trying to set up a watery commotion that would draw the eyes of their friends behind them. The two lead boats were now at half engine as they neared the island. And just astern of them, a huge shape bulged beneath the surface of the lake.

It was not a turbulence, but a coherent pallid mass that glided after the boats perhaps a fathom down in the water. Subtler, but as horrific, was the wake it left – a greasy surface boil hundreds of metres broad,

bespeaking a bulk far vaster than was visible, though that blurred globe was many times the size of all three boats combined.

The two advance craft were scarcely a hundred metres from the island, and their pursuer half as far behind them, when Helion's boat accelerated explosively, a full-drive leap that should have run it straight up onto the shoal. Instead, its thrust snagged and slowed to the leaden crawl that shackles flight in nightmares. Black grass sprouted from the water, engulfing both the boats.

Grass that writhed like snakes as it grew, metres high and dense as on the lushest prairie – a medusa grass, dark as space, its every fibril clutching and raking the air with a blind and busy greed. Angela's boat was completely enmeshed, its stern cocked high above the water, turned weightlessly in the shuddering weave as a bug is turned by the spider wrapping it. Helion's boat, however, was gradually tearing shoreward from the net, whose grip its burst of speed had half-foiled.

And now Sarissa had reached them. At ninety knots she swerved obliquely to the uncanny meadow and ploughed across its fringe. A shock wave, as of pain, rolled through the field. Helion's boat lurched free, roared through the shallows and plunged, spraying sparks, up onto the island. Sarissa's drive had slowed to fifteen knots before she herself fought free into the shoals that fringed the isle and which the monstrous growth had not invaded. She swung parallel to the shore and tucked the boat into an inlet.

The colonists jumped from their vessels and gathered on the shore. Jax and Nemo broke out the rifles, but those they gave them to held them helplessly, standing in a rapture of horror, watching the struggle. Then, near the meadow's centre, the pale bulb rose and swelled from the water.

It was a titanic eye – a transparent orb of gold, intricately veined within, the pupil a scarlet rhomboid into which five sand-hogs could have drive abreast. Deep in the yellow ichor, black shapes moved, whole constellations of them swarming through the kelplike jungle of veins; while outside the globe, round its base, a collar of huge tonguelike tentacles stirred, stretched, and licked the air. With cyclopean sloth the whole orb rolled within this tentacular calyx and aimed the red vent of its pupil upon the captured boat.

And now a dreadful purpose entered the action of the fibrils. Various, testingly, they turned and tilted the craft, probing and caressing it in every orientation. There was a grinding noise. As a man might open a jar, the creature twisted off the boat's cockpit bubble, inverted and shook its hull.

Norrin and, a moment later, Angel Rackham tumbled down into the black seethe. The fibrils heaved and catapulted the boat away. It crashed on the island's shore.

All that the watchers did was as a dream. Jax and Nemo pumped explosive shot against every part of the eye and its corolla. The grenade slugs produced only negligible tatterings of its gelatinous substance. Sarissa struggled to free a coil of harpoon line from the wrecked boat's equipment locker, while Helion and Penny helped Sparks lift Orson Waverly – the only surviving occupant of the captured boat – from the space beneath the control panel where he had wedged himself and where he now lay bleeding and comatose. But all these were ghostly acts, performed in stupefaction, while every man and woman did but one thing – watch Norrin and Angela, and the thing that had them.

The black meadow undulated still, but less chaotically, with an insistent peristaltic surge that brought the victims toward the eye. Like castaways caught in a hideous slow surf, they struggled in the snakish multibrachiate grip – clutched, stroked, raised, and dipped, but always eased inexorably nearer the eye. The colonists saw now Norrin's arm clawing sunward, festooned with serpents, now Angela's back and shoulders, bucking to wrench her head free of the nauseous swell.

The tentacles nearest the victims began an obscene elongation, till finally two of them plunged down and plucked the captives free. Swinging them high, the tentacles brought the women inward and poised them above the alien pupil, which moved below, as with a savouring gaze. The tentacles uncoiled. The women plunged into the red vent and sank kicking down within the golden ichor.

In the eye blink of their vanishing through that red chasm, they entered another world and were transformed to different beings. Drifting down they came within the eye, dancing the drowning agony in a tempo surreally slow, an almost comic pantomime of life's wrenching-free from its frame. Their faces and limbs were bloated, corrupt of colour in the amber light. Angela's hair bannered wantonly, slow-motion, while those on the island could see her eyes – black holes in a gape-jawed mask – aimed downward on the swarming deep she sank to. Webbed veins, huge crooked roots now partly screened their fall, which showed in glimpses as the overall organic movement within the eye began to boil with a new energy.

Those on the island watched what followed with an amazement so complete it looked like rapture. At one point, responding no doubt to some impulse to avert his own eyes (though he never did so), Nemo Jones cried

out:

“Don’t look away! Remember details! We’ve got to know it to kill it.”

His companions needed these exhortations as little as Nemo himself did. Forgetting even to attend to Waverly’s serious head injury, they watched as if the universe and all time contained no other thing to see. And there were many details to be remembered.

The group sat in a circle around the camp’s field stove. Hellion sat closest to its light, more visible, more erect, than the others. But there was less pride of rank in his posture than an air of pained self-presentation, as if in response to a tacit charge lodged against him by the others slouched tiredly in the shadows. He had been arguing with Nemo for the last five minutes. Throughout, his normal inflexibility had been accompanied by an uncharacteristic calm. Now he shook his head definitively, rejecting in the gesture not only all the Katermandian had said, but all that he might say. When he spoke, it was formally, his eyes sweeping the whole group by way of preface.

“You will all, as a body, formally depose me and place me under arrest, to which I willingly accede, or you will do this as I prescribe, and with the personnel I have designated. There is no more to say, Jones. Take it or leave it.”

The Katermandian squatted on his hams. The light escaping the shadow pools over his eyes was baleful, and this the captain saw; but it was also – and this Helion did not see – compassionate. He set his words out carefully:

“Listen, I beseech you, Captain. You have all the good of pride, as well as the bad of it. You want to atone for our danger, but you’ve done no real wrong. If you’ve been foolish, why, everyone’s a fool! I’ve been one thousands of times – it’s a wonder I’m alive! It’s my plan. Do you want to throw on me the guilt of having someone else take the risk of it? You *know* that Jax and I are our best swimmers ...” He gestured awkwardly, breaking off. He read his failure in the captain’s sour smile before he heard the man’s answer.

“The plan was yours. The log already so witnesses. Our need for it, our predicament here, is wholly my doing, and the log testifies this as well. My decision is as before.”

Nemo stood up. He nodded and stepped out of the circle. The wind was freshening, but he left the shelter of the hollow they had camped in and

climbed up to the island's saw-toothed crest and found himself a seat overlooking the delph cove, some hundred metres below. He had not been there long when his fellow-armourer joined him. They sat in silence for a while, watching the stars in the molten black mirror of the lake.

"After we fought – remember?" Jax said smiling. "When I said you had good and sufficient reasons for doing things your own way? I was taking that on faith, just because you could fight so well. Well, now I know I was right. I could've sat down for a solid year and never come up with anything like this plan of yours."

"Jax." Nemo clamped a hand on his friend's arm, as if he had been waiting for this opening. "I'm having bad second thoughts. I'm afraid of this plan now. I think it will fail, if Helion goes. You have to dig your heels in – refuse to go unless you're teamed with me. He has no hunch-nerves. He's brave, but he has no *luck*. Your dissension would have more weight with him than anyone's. Force him to use me."

Jax was smiling, shaking his head. "What a storm of words! You're turning downright chatty lately. I'm sorry, Nemo. I know what you mean about his luck. But if he's denied this chance to redeem himself, it'll break him. He'll be good for nothing after this. And I've always liked the poor stiff-neck."

"Shit." Nemo said this mournfully, looking now more directly below their perch to the cover. Only eyes that had watched the school at dusk, when the beasts found berths in the fissures of the shore and emptied their flotation sacs to sink to their rest, could have found them now in the moonlight – vague torpedoes of silver just under the heave of the black water.

He scowled at them. The austere disapproval of his expression might have been that of some creating deity gravely displeased with what he had wrought. It was Firebairn and its unique biogenerative forces that had made the delphs, of course; Nemo had only made an escape plan that enlisted them. He looked again at Jax, his eyes bitter, refusing to reiterate his request, but also refusing to withdraw it. For answer, his brawny friend turned his face, wryly, to the island's northern quarter, where all explanation of the morrow's insanity lay.

It looked like an immense planktonic toadstool now, the pale orb still exposed, though half sunk from its former elevation. The field of cilia was similarly contracted. Only the tips of the tendrils showed, bristling the moon-polished waters, a field of thorns. The two men stared at the thing for a long time.

“It is watching us,” Jax said, speaking his decision in the debate that both had pursued internally. All useful speculations had long ago been traded, mutual conjecture exhausted. “So huge it is, and so sharply *aware* ...”

“It had to be Orson blinded,” Nemo mourned. “Something this big – it has to be marine, from up their vent. If we knew how it worked, there might be ...”

“Be what?”

Nemo shrugged helplessly. “Who’s that?” Someone was climbing towards them.

“Sari,” the pilot-gunner answered, choosing her handholds on the crag as easy and sure as someone gathering shells from a level beach. “Orson’s fully conscious,” she told them. “He took some broth. He wants us all to have a talk while the captain is still asleep.” Nemo heard the shade of pity in this – Sarissa usually called him ‘Helion.’ They followed her back down to the camp.

It was past midnight when Captain Helion was wakened. Jax and Japhet told him the group’s proposal. Any innovative consensus among his subordinates could now only strike the exhausted man as veiled mutiny. He gave Jax an *et tu Brute* look, and stared disgustedly into the glowing coils of the camp stove.

“It’s clear you’ll all do what you want. Kindly trouble me with no further parades of obedience. Spend the time any way you please between now and tomorrow.”

“No! Someone bring me out to him. Captain!”

As surprised as Helion, Jax turned to help Sarissa and Nemo carry Orson Waverly’s camp chair into the centre of the circle. The biologist’s eyes were bandaged. Some few tears of blood had escaped the bandages and tracked his cheeks.

“Captain?” The face scanned, hunting a voice-fix on Helion.

“I’m here, Waverly.”

“Listen, Captain. Don’t slacken now. Give us strictness here, where we need it. This will have to be a systematic information-pooling, using the log. Make it official to make it strict. This thing is epochs ahead of us in its adaptation to this world. We had better evolve a very sharp and efficient group mind to fight it with, and do it pretty damn fast, or else we’re all going to die, and you’ve seen how we’re going to die.”

The captain rose to the occasion, but only just. He nodded. “Wake me when it’s my turn.” He went back to his bed.

It was almost dawn. Nemo and Orson Waverly sat by the stove. Everyone else was asleep. Waverly had just turned off the log, which he’d had on playback, and now he sighed. The two men’s ears still rang with all the perplexities the tape had woven round their weary minds.

“Dear God, Nemo. What I wouldn’t give for an *image* of the thing, a five-second look at it to give me a nice solid, detailed picture. I’m awash in all these words. My brain is a knot, and all I’m visualising is a cartoon, a caricature.”

“So give it back to me – this caricature.”

Waverly sighed deeply. “Two distinct groups of carnivores, patrolling the interior of a huge transparent sphere. The sphere also contains thick growths of kelp. The kelp is rooted in a layer of basal muck that floors the sphere, and the two breeds of cruising carnivores – I see them as sharks and squids – are also rooted in that muck, or at least connected to it by long slender flexible tethers of translucent material, sort of like delicate umbilici that issue from their caudal extremities and trail down behind them to the floor of the sphere.”

“Mmmm. What’s kelp, and what are sharks and squids?”

When Waverly had explained these terrene forms, Nemo granted the general accuracy of the caricature. “Of course,” the biologist went on, “the things you’ve all described have more tentacles than squids, and a greater variation in tentacle size, and the others, except for the teeth, sound as much like delphs as they do like sharks ... You know, I find myself wondering about those tethers. Both groups in constant restless movement – even the ones still waiting their turn to feed – and all that dense growth in there. What kept those caudal umbilici of theirs from getting tangled, snagged – even breaking?”

“Orson! Yes! Now that you say it, I remember I saw exactly that. One of those squids, while they were all circulating, waiting their turn, as you say ...” Nemo paused fractionally here, and Waverly’s head lowered – remembering two young women, full of life. “Its tether snagged on a kelp stalk. I think it sensed it – it instantly reversed itself. But not in time, and the tether broke. It stopped cold, and then corkscrewed straight down to the bottom, and I lost sight of it. Actually, it’s amazing that didn’t happen more often. But then, their movements were so intricately patterned, so fluid ...”



Waverly said nothing, pursuing some thought, and Nemo sat motionless – like cupped hands cherishing a young flame to life within their stillness. But at length the biologist sighed again.

“I keep thinking their tethers could be some sort of alimentary connection with the larger structure containing them. But how could such an important pipeline be so delicate? The whole feeding relationship of the parts to the whole – I’m damned if I can get a handle on it. I want to hear Japhet again.”

Nemo keyed up Japhet’s testimony from the log. They skimmed through the first few minutes of it, seeking the juncture Waverly wanted. In the snatches of Japhet’s voice they heard his anguish, slightly miniaturised by the reduced volume. Angela and Norrin had been well loved by all, and not least by Japhet. Then the biologist nodded, Nemo turned it up, and they listened. First Waverly’s voice:

“OK, Japhet. Now let’s move to what happened to them on the inside.”

“They were still alive – kicking and fighting, but slower moving than you’d expect. Bloating, I think. Swelling a little – like maybe those fluids in there were some kind of enzymes? When they’d sunk to the top of all that – seaweed, those first things hit them. Fish-shaped, big saw-toothed mouths. Black eyeknobs set in stripe patterns – a little like delph eyes except for their having so many of them.

“Anyway, they hit them first. Started tearing chunks out of them. Swarmed on them thick as ants, till they looked like just two wriggling clusters of them. Their blood ...” The ghost of a groan was recorded here. “... their blood came out in clouds. Like smoke. It hid what went on.”

“I’m sorry, Japhet.” Now Waverly’s mouth made wry corners at the febleness of his own apology. “Did they keep sinking as they were being fed on?”

“Not much. The feeding activity buoyed them up. And then all those things broke away. Pretty suddenly. For a couple of seconds their ... remains just hung there, then started sinking again. Then the other things –”

“I’m sorry, Japhet, but I need you to tell me just how much –”

“All the flesh gnawed off!” It was a burst of rage evading intolerable pain. “All the skin, major muscle. Just skeletons, held intact by scraps of tendon, ligament. Some of the larger internal organs left ...”

“So then the others fed? And they were just as numerous?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve all said. You must forgive my putting it like this. I have to. But this arrangement seems to leave so small a share to feed on to this multibrachiate group.”

There was a silence before Japhet answered, not loudly. “I meant yes, they were just as numerous. But I don’t think they were *feeding* on them at all. It was more like they embraced them, and clung in a slightly pulsating way. Because Norrin’s face, I remember ... most of it ... was left intact by those first things. Then the second ones covered her face, like a fur of wriggling feelers – and yet there she still was, looking out at me, when those octopoid ones cleared away.”

And now Orson and Nemo sat surrounded by the same kind of silence that could be heard on the tape. During that silence the biologist groped his hand across the log’s keys and cut it off before the catechism continued. After a moment he raised both his hands to adjust his blood-crust bandage, resettling it gingerly against his maimed eyes. When he had done this, he let out the pain of the manoeuvre in one long breath.

“It may be that they’re detritivores – the tentacled things. You all report organic debris in the basal muck – the trash-heaped hard parts of larger, presumably bathic, prey. Yet none of you saw the squids penetrating the muck. On the other hand, both Helion and Penny saw sharks down there penetrating the muck – sharks, already amply nourished by their lion’s share of prey.

“I’m done for the night, Nemo. Right now my brain is a god-damned square wheel. I can’t get any kind of interpretation *moving*. It’s stupefying, this bizarre complexity. The field of prey-snaring cilia, the central mouthed dome of intestinal structures, surrounded by a calyx of major cilia – there are pseudo-coelenterates they’ve found over at Base Two that have these features. They’re littoral-benthic-zone dwellers – one metre across at the biggest, goddamn it, and with nothing like this kind of endosomatic complexity. There might be bathic varieties that are bigger, but the things are sensorially impoverished; slow, groping, tactile hunters. You say this thing tracked our boats toward the island and is now hemming us in, dodging laterally to catch any move we try to make from shore. This thing sees or smells or hears or all three. Monstrous. Incomprehensible. I need more medicine. I need some sleep. Maybe the answer will come in a dream. But I’ll give you one thing to dream on, Nemo. If this thing does in some way follow the model of those little pseudo-coelenterates they’ve found – if it hangs proportionally deep in the water and is able to expand as broadly in the lateral dimension – then its

tail end hangs down into this lake for at least half a kilometre, and its field of cilia is able to hug this island's whole perimeter, or damn near it, in its loving embrace.

“Take me to my cot, Nemo, and God help us all. Helion and Jax are going to die tomorrow. I'm sorry, but this seems to me a simple fact. I've told them what I'm telling you, but I couldn't change their minds. So I say to you now, brutal though it is – choose vantage points from which you can see down into this thing from all possible angles. Have the log's microphone run out on an extension, and issue field glasses. When our friends die, I want it to pay off with every scrap of sight and sound that can be gotten out of it. If Polyphemus takes their lives, it's going to betray itself to us in the process. Wake me an hour after dawn, and don't fail me. By the time they set out, I'll have a list of specific questions I want answered and some final arrangements I want made.”

Just after dawn, Sarissa Wayne climbed to the ridgetop where Jax and Nemo had sat the night before. She settled down and watched the preparations, already well along, being made in the delph cove below. She and Penny had begun them. The roll of metallic net that each craft carried had been taken from its spool in the stern of Sarissa's boat and brought over to the cover. One end of it was anchored to the cove's southern spur, and then she and Penny had swum it across the cove mouth.

They had made marvellously silent work of it, and only partly for fear of waking the delphs, which Jax and Helion were already edging up on with the tranquilliser guns. Polyphemus – this was what Waverly, without explanation, had bitterly dubbed their persecutor the night before – Polyphemus had already demonstrated how swiftly it could pour itself around the island's perimeter. The previous afternoon the colonists had done some experimenting. They had driven Helion's boat – only slightly damaged – to the opposite side of the island, choosing a launching spot more than four hundred metres upshore from Polyphemus's visible limit of extension. They detached its harpoon winch, anchored this onshore, and tethered the boat to its cable. They set it on autopilot with just enough fuel in the tanks for a few hundred metres' run. It was making thirty-five knots within the first four seconds of its launching and was snared by the giant's sudden-sprouting tendrils less than seventy metres offshore.

The capture was not resisted – cable was paid out as the titan wrestled its prey toward its central orb. But the craft never reached that organ. Well before the cilia had brought it within the grasp of the larger

feeding-tentacles, they froze, still gripping it. A few seconds later they flung it into the air and, by the time it had struck the water, had vanished from beneath it. The colonists hauled the boat ashore, feeling themselves, if potentially wiser, no less baffled and terrified.

Swimming in the black predawn waters with this recollection of the giant's speed, its inscrutable responsiveness, had been the closest thing to a lived nightmare in Sarissa's experience. Her legs could still feel that ticklish expectancy of Polyphemus's caustic, sticky first touch. Her heart still remembered its terrifying, clamouring haste, and her shoulder muscles their spring-steel readiness through every second it had taken to string the barricade.

But her mind was now wholly detached from these bodily memories. It was not the scene below that so distracted her. The tranquilliser darts used on captured delphs to prevent their panicking and crushing one another during their transport in cages to the sand-hog had paralysed six of the creatures in the cove. The men had collared them with cable in two trios, staggered so that the middle delph of each trio was positioned half a length in advance of its flanking fellows. The trios had been tethered to shore, and though the beasts were just waking and getting restive, Jax and Helion were able to slip into the undercarriages they had rigged and test their fit. Their boot heels were just visible through the water, kicking for purchase under the tails of the delphs. Their recirculating respiration packs made no more than a faint boil in the water, and this the delphs' motion, once they were goaded forward, would obliterate.

Sarissa's own life, and those of all the others, depended on this grotesque rehearsal, which did not alter her staring inattention. Her preoccupation was elsewhere, its focus revealed when her eyes narrowed at Nemo Jones's reappearance in the cove. He came down from the knoll that flanked it, where he had been helping Japhet make the two harpoon-gun emplacements she had requested the evening before. He went straight to Penny Lopez, who was working on a release mechanism for rolling back a segment of the cove barrier when it was time for Jax and Helion to make their sortie. Whatever Nemo said to Penny caused her to straighten and face him.

He talked to her for perhaps a minute, and when, with a queer formal bow, he left her, Sarissa's eyes didn't merely fail to follow him – they refused to. Thereafter, they didn't watch anything in particular so much as she avoided watching that sector of the crag that lay between herself and the point from which Nemo had left her view.

“Sarissa. Sarissa. I have something important to say. Will you talk with

me?” The question seemed necessary to Nemo, as she had not looked up when he saluted her. Still not looking, she said:

“Whether or not I’ll talk to you depends on what you have to tell me.”

Nemo nodded at this and sat down at a discreet distance from her so she would not have to strain to keep him out of her field of vision. He looked at the sky a minute before saying, “I’ve just given Penny Lopez my apologies and told her I was withdrawing my suit for her. To disappoint a woman is always grave, so no lying should go with it. I confessed to her –”

Sarissa snorted, shook her head, and, visibly in spite of herself, began to laugh. Nemo looked at his knees and waited humbly. Sarissa had to make several attempts before she could speak her retort:

“‘To disappoint a woman is always grave.’ Nemo, I swear to you. I was watching your exchange with her. After you walked away from her, that poor woman literally jumped into the air and clicked her heels together. If she doesn’t live another day, if none of us do, she’ll at least have that last day in peace. She’s *never* wanted you.”

“I agree her feelings are mixed. But I have never entirely displeased her. Once I had stated my case to her, last summer, she became sarcastic and piquish to me. Some of this is a kind of coquetry, for which a woman must be forgiven, as it is a natural defence against capture. But she started out \_”

“What did you confess to her?”

“She started out not entirely disliking me. I confessed to her that the woman I first chose, first desired – that I did not pay suit to this woman only because she *did* entirely dislike me, and though I am not fainthearted, it’s a fool that sets out hunting impossible quarry.”

Sarissa looked at him now. She studied him with wrath, perplexity, relish. “What was this woman’s name, this first choice of yours? This select soul, this feminine paragon, this august personage who merited Nemo Jones’s initial designation as his mate? Bless my ears with this pearl’s name.”

“Sari Wayne.”

She sat there, grinning a grin of sardonic vindication, nodding slowly, the picture of one who bitterly acknowledges an idiocy she has long struggled with.

“Me. Right. And I remember your first tender gesture. No! I put that too weakly! Your first tender gesture lives – writhes! – vivid as a flame, before my mind’s eye.”

New movement down in the cove distracted them momentarily. Helion and Jax had begun to goad their ‘mounts’ through some elementary paces. They did not use the sonic pulsars designed for delph herding – all too probably detectable by Polyphemus – but small electric prods that Jax had improvised. The method seemed to be working, though it produced an uncharacteristically jerky movement in the beasts. The sun’s edge kindled on the eastern crater rim. Sarissa and Nemo faced each other again. She resumed reminiscingly, mocking the tone of a tale-teller:

“It was that enormous hydra I harpooned on Gamma. A superlative shot, I do confess! But not like your thirty-metre dive from the ringwall! Nor your Herculean amputation of the major tentacle – even as it thrashed in its titanic death-throes. Being upstaged like that was not enough, of course. You had to drag the amputated member to me afterward. Everyone relaxing, having a sunset drink, rehashing a fine day’s work ... and up you come, toppling people left and right, blindly tripping them up behind you with the drag of the reeking obscenity you hauled! I, who run from nothing, nor no man alive, fled!”

“It was a declaration!” The Katermandian’s tone was both coaxing and exasperated in equal measure. “Embarrassment is for those who do routine work and scorn excessive notice! But love is ... drama! Excess is ... called for! Such marksmanship was once-in-a-million marksmanship! Could I do less and fitly show my love? I *meant* you to laugh at me, then *hug* me! Courtship’s comedy! Was I supposed to smirk and laugh? I did it for your entertainment.”

Sarissa had what in an earlier era had been called the Aha Experience. Why, she asked herself, were women so slow to identify irony or deadpan humour in men? Obviously, she answered, because they unavoidably deemed men to be a little dimmer than they sometimes were in fact. She gave a long sigh.

“Well, that may be true,” she admitted – both to what he had said and to what she had thought – “but you’re still a miserable idiot. Embarrass them enough and anyone will run. But after that you should have seen how I came to feel. I want you to pay suit to me, and love me, and make love to me, and not to anyone else. Now hasn’t that been plain enough, you fucking backwoods dolt? And whether it has or not, well, what about it? Here and now, once and for all.”

Nemo nodded energetically, but though his mouth opened, nothing came out of it. Apparently, this ardent inarticulacy conveyed an answer to Sarissa that she found satisfactory. She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his chest. He held her, looking over her

head toward the sunrise, and clearer than the happiness his face showed was his amazement. All in his world had been craft, the stalking, second-guessing, and teasing-out of quarry from the hostile complexities of its habitat. To have Sarissa, whom he had thought irreversibly inimical to him, holding him with such single-mindedness, was to him in the nature of a prodigy. It was as if, in his native rain forest, an archidand – that wily, toothsome biped, splendid-winged and brazen-taloned – had leapt from its cover in the dense warp-vine and sparx and – far from dodging away with invisible speed – had ambled up to the astonished hunter and dipped its head to nuzzle at his hand. The pair did not notice the two figures approaching them until they were in speaking distance and one of them, Japhet Sparks, hailed them.

Sparks was leading Orson Waverly. The lovers broke their embrace – not out of shame, but from a chilling of their hearts. They knew Waverly’s errand. Sarissa helped him to a seat. She, Nemo and Japhet – all those who must be Waverly’s eyes – now looked only at him, not down toward the cove, not at each other.

“I’ve already briefed Penny. I wanted to do it while they were still in the water. They know what I’m doing and approve, but it’s pointless to sicken them with the sight of my actually doing it. So let’s be quick. The captain will be assembling us for his own briefing in a little while, as soon as he and Jax make some last adjustments to their undercarriages. Sarissa?”

“Here, Orson.”

“The guns from Helion’s and Angela’s boats are set up. Japhet’s wound double cable on the winches and got the guns anchored where you wanted them. Give them both the field glasses, Japhet. Hang these around your necks now. Get them focused for Polyphemus immediately you take up your positions. I want you on the knoll across the beach from Sarissa’s, Nemo – Japhet has it worked out. You’ll be on the other side of the thing from her and almost as high above it. Penny and Japhet will be shoreside, watching it from different angles. They’ll both have mikes we’ve rigged to the log. I want to get any sound any of us makes correlated with a running account of its moves. We want all its behaviour, and every possible synchronicity of that behaviour with what happens around it.

“Because of course we can’t assume it sees, just because it looks to us like an eye. It twisted our boat open like – someone unstoppering a specimen bottle. But it could have felt organic presences inside vibrationally, electrochemically – we just don’t know. I’d been jamming in under the panel and it missed me. It makes me think the thing does see, and my invisibility to it saved me. If it does, I don’t think Jax and Helion

have a prayer.

“Here are my specific questions. First and foremost, how precisely does it track us? Every detail of its behaviour that we can correlate with any detail of its *prey* behaviour –” Waverly’s mouth moved speechlessly a few times. He resumed more quietly. “If we can relate these two spheres of activity in any new way, we may get a key to how to dodge it. Killing it seems to me as good as impossible. Nevertheless, it *has* occurred to me that if we understood its feeding mechanism, we could conceivably poison it. Its whole alimentary setup is one of the things that confuses me most. These quasi-independent packs. By the time they’re through with the prey, it’s just a carcass, seventy percent reduced in volume, that drifts down to the base of the orb. If they are highly articulated organelles, if they are the digestive apparatus itself, how are they transmitting the nutrients they absorb to the macro-organism? These threadlike breakable tethers seem ludicrously unlikely as transport ducts for nutrients of such bulk. If they are not transferring the nourishment, then Polyphemus itself must be a kind of huge detritivore, nourished by the sharks’ and squids’ carrion leavings. But then why the gross volumetric disproportion? Why does Polyphemus get forty percent, at most, of every kill, and these ... predacious saprophytes sixty or more? What service to the whole rates that big a part of the take?”

“But to test this, study the basal areas all you can – Sarissa and Nemo especially. That’s why I’ve got you high. Look for ... feeding debris, its relation to the inner landscape of Polyphemus. What’s the structure down there? If motile, how does it behave? Japhet and Penny will be studying the packs more particularly, but I want all of you to be constantly checking the whole, trying to catch overall gestalts of movement, responsiveness and what stimulates it.

“With the squids and sharks, two specific things interest me. Watch for waste excretion in any form. They could be using a selective fraction of their intake and be producing usable wastes that Polyphemus absorbs. Second: you all seemed to be in agreement that the squids didn’t appear to consume nearly as much as the sharks, if indeed they actually *fed* at all. Precisely what were they doing? Study that closely.

“That’s it. As far as productive guesses go, I’ve got next to nothing to offer at this point. This thing is completely incredible. God help us to think effectively together, because, so far, I am truly in the dark.”

Midmorning on Firebairn is, next to sunset, its most golden hour. The



jumbled colours of the igneous wastes blaze, melt, smoulder, under the sky's brilliance as if the land were still in its molten nativity. And in this particular place the young sun kindled a special jewel even more dazzling than the vast ringwall or the waters contained by it. As Nemo climbed the knoll assigned him, he looked upon that jewel with loathing and wonder. Within the sphere of lustrous amber, the patrolling packs wove their own distinct colours through the black-and-purple jungle. Those that Waverly called 'sharks' were especially striking. Their torpedo bodies had streaks of pigmentation that flashed iridescent as the things cruised through the filtered sunlight. Nemo thought of the cove – invisible to him now beyond the ridge Sarissa stood on – from which he had just come. Helion, grim and businesslike, had turned directly from the briefing to the water and slipped under, snuggling himself out of sight beneath his harnessed beasts. But Jax had paused by the brink so that Nemo could take his hand. Nemo had said:

“Lucky fellow. In an hour you'll be in the sand-hog, radioing air rescue.”

The big man had smiled, glanced at the binoculars hanging against the fur on the Katermandian's chest, drawing their owner's eyes upon them, filling his heart with wretchedness. But Jax had grinned:

“That's right. Use these, and when I climb ashore you can see me waving to you.”

Nemo had reached his position, but before he signalled to Sarissa, he looked down on their enemy. He pressed his clenched fist against his chest, which is the way the hunters of Katermand take oaths, and he said:

“Hear me, Polyphemus. My name is Nemo. Nemo Jones. And I am going to rip the life right out of you. We together will find the way, but it's me that's going to do it to you.”

He raised his arm and signalled to the short, slight figure manning the guns on the next knoll over. Even as he had turned his eyes away, a detail had snagged at their periphery. He caught up his glasses and trained them on the orb, at a point deep within the anchorings of the kelp.

Sarissa hesitated. Japhet, Penny, Nemo – all were stationed now, but for a moment she found herself unable to pass on the go-ahead to the cove. She checked the welded cable moorings Japhet had rigged for the guns and for the third time reassured herself that the crag she stood on would break before they did. She looked down into the cove, where Orson waited for her word, the barrier gate's pull-cord in one hand. Jax and Helion held their beasts ready – not near the gate, but by the shore of the inlet, for

before they emerged themselves they would drive out a large part of the school ahead of them and thereafter keep as many of these as possible around them as they penetrated the dangerous waters offshore.

The delphs had swum unmolested past Polyphemus; some of them had even cruised through its peripheral field of cilia. It was one of the first observations they had made the previous afternoon, once some measure of organisation had succeeded their initial trance of horror. The plan had seemed good. Now, without any of Waverly's biological training to reinforce her pessimism, she felt a gloom as deep as his. It was not going to work. It would fail because Sarissa now had everything to lose – not just her life, but Nemo as well. Whenever the heart prayed entirely for luck, that was when luck failed. She cupped her hands by her mouth and, in a tone scarcely louder than conversational, said:

“Now.”

Orson, seven metres below, pulled the cord. When Jax and Helion saw the opening, they launched prearranged converging drives on the gate that cut out about two-thirds of the school and herded it before them. “Close it,” Sarissa said. Orson relaxed his grip on the cord and let the gate spring back. If the sortie failed, its survivors would need food.

The shepherding of a protective screen of free-swimming delphs did not start well. The trios were bulky enough to exert a local dominance on their unharnessed fellows, but too awkward of movement to work the group as a whole into any formation. As the teams edged past the sheltering horn of the cove, the school began to dissolve before them, individuals and couples – gamesome with the unpent tensions of their confinement – dispersing swiftly. Sarissa watched the two men's cover bleeding away, branching out into the lake in quick, silvery trickles. She ground her teeth and looked to Polyphemus.

The giant was half the island away – the knoll she stood on walled off the cove from its vision, if vision it had. And with the captain and Jax angling sharply away from the giant as they penetrated the open waters, they would be three-quarters of the island's length distant from it before the shoreline ceased to mask them. It was not conceivable that two men, the subtlest shadows of men, really, clinging to the undersides of living screens twice their size, could be detected at such a range. And still Sarissa groaned at the steady shrinkage of the school. As the lure of open water grew stronger, the clumsy goading of the two trios came to seem itself a force of dispersal, an irritation even the nearer members of the school began to flee.

And then it seemed the two men abandoned the attempt to herd the rest of the school and began to make smoother progress outward. They were already a hundred metres offshore, and she watched them make the next fifty as quickly as they had that first stage. As if in illustration of her thoughts about luck, a fair-sized cluster of delphs, uncoerced now, cohered and stayed just ahead of the escapees.

Sarissa realised that for perhaps the last full minute, the men had been out in the zone of Polyphemus's unimpeded survey. Her head snapped round toward the colossus. The swarming globe was as before – though perhaps a shade further out from its sector of the shore? She swung her eyes back to the two little silver blurs, the escaping trios, but even before she focused on them, she had swept her gaze halfway back toward Polyphemus. Out there, between the monster and the hidden men, some hundred and fifty metres offshore from where she stood, a narrow boil of movement scarred the water. It was the surface track of an underwater thrust whose rate was perhaps thirty knots, and precisely aimed to intercept the trios.

Sarissa stepped over to the gun whose emplacement commanded the seaward sector of the water, kicked up the muzzle for a long shot, and trained it on the spot where the surface scar and the delph trios would impact. Touching the gun, which always calmed her, helped little – her heart was all hollowness and terror. The two men must have seen what was approaching them. The trios veered sharply about three seconds before it struck, and the water all around them sprouted Polyphemus's viperous cilia. Within another two seconds, she had already fired her first shot.

It was well over two hundred metres, at the very limit of the harpoon's effective striking power. Only her elevation made it even feasible. The line's silver arc sang out and down. She held her breath, as she always unconsciously did when she feared to disturb the plunge of a long shot that she already knew, as soon as it had left the cannon, was good. The medusa-tangle had meanwhile gripped the lead trio and propped the silver beasts upward, like three bright tombstones against the sun, while other cilia worked for what was under them. It was the delicate, discriminating motion of a man lifting a trapdoor to pluck something out from beneath it. The line's arc crumpled, shuddered through its 220-metre length as the spear impacted, transfixing the lead delph of the trio. With one hand Sarissa flicked on the automatic winch, and the line pulled straight – one puny machine engaging Polyphemus in a tug-of-war. Her other hand had already re-aimed the gun.

The second trio, while equally entangled, was not held so clear as the first. She fired and knew in the instant of doing it the shot was bad. She writhed through the seconds' wait before she could fire again. From under the trio she had hit, a struggling weave of cilia and human limbs fought its way round to the backs of the beasts. A snake-wrapped arm sought and seized the shaft of the harpoon.

“Yes!” Sarissa screamed. “That’s it! Climb the line!” Her second shot dove short of its mark. The instant the cable had ceased to pay out and cleared the feed-out spools, she fired again, and again knew she had it. A tremendous expectancy filled her. To beat this titanic enemy, rob it – never had she felt that the delicate geometry, the fleet calculus of her art, an art of parabolas and pin-sharp steel points, could achieve so much. Far away, a tiny Laocoön, the man wrestled half his body onto his trio’s backs, having to fight the panicked heave of the beasts as well as the great leeches woven around his frame. It was Jax. His shaven head, stripped of its respiration helmet, fought clear. Now he had the shaft by both hands.

Her third shot struck, and she winched in the line. As it tautened, she saw the trio come loose and thrash freely against its pull – utterly untethered by any cilia. She knew in that sickening instant what she would shortly see – *did* see seconds later: Helion’s struggling shape making the now-familiar storm-heaved progress through the black tentacular field, passed from cilium to cilium, moving Eyeward – for now a field of that black grass sprouted in a long swath, a pathway back to Polyphemus.

Sarissa howled with rage and concentrated furiously on the one she might save. Switching to her magazine of untethered harpoons, she began to pump them down upon the zone surrounding Jax, hoping to scythe down just enough cilia to give him a fighting chance.

And the armourer fought indeed against the giant – himself a giant of relentless will, his big muscles sharp-cut in the morning light with the strain. His struggle had tilted the trio toward him, and he had worked his grip up to the harpoon line itself. Sarissa’s shots rained around him, as close as she dared put them, and suddenly it seemed he had several fewer cilia round his chest. He surged up, working two handspans higher up the line – but the cilia had not withdrawn, merely shifted their grip to his shoulders. They bowed him backward, folded him impossibly. Sarissa saw his hands let go before the sharp sound of his breaking back reached her. He collapsed into the meadow, like a wearied man throwing himself back on the grass for a rest. His trio now also winched easily shoreward. The swath that bore Jax and, further along, Helion, now began a swift

contraction, without submerging. Round the island's shore the two were swept, while the huge orb rolled languorously and turned what she could not help but feel was a lusting gaze upon them as they drew near, the red rhomboidal pupil-mouth contracting and dilating in anticipation.

“When is she coming down?” Orson Waverly asked. “I need everyone's report. It just doesn't cohere yet. What's she doing?”

The other three traded looks.

“She's crying, Orson,” Nemo Jones said. “Let her be, just a while yet. She thought for a minute she had saved them.”

The biologist sighed. “All right. Let's rake through it again. Penny and Japhet agree they saw both squids and sharks excrete – eject large clouds of fine sediment, of considerable volume, that drifted down to the base of the orb. Meanwhile, early on, Nemo caught sight of some kind of large carcass, a cetaceanoid he thinks, being actively swallowed down, by minute movements, into the basal stratum. Cetaceanoids are bathic lake dwellers, and Polyphemus hasn't left the surface for the last two days. Conclusions: first, it is a giant detritivore; second, it's hunting and feeding from deep down even as it sits here, my guess being that it hunts with structures similar to those it uses up here and probably engulfed the cetaceanoid last night. Fine. At this point I see no way those things help us.

“Now to the packs. Very little that's new, essentially. Both Japhet and Penny now agree that when the squids fasten to their prey they show a shuddering movement that might be the reverse of peristaltic. But as to what they might be pumping into the bodies, you caught no clues. What would it *be*?” Waverly sounded petulant, exhorting his own imagination rather than the others. “Digestive fluids? Then what feeds the squids themselves if they just soften up the prey for Polyphemus – and if nourishment from it to them, how does it do so? And this about the sharks. You all three now say you saw them dive to the bottom even when their tethers had not been broken – saw more than one of them worming themselves belly-down against the basal stratum and then rejoining their packs above. Were they grazing on some of the detritus there? No one saw them using their jaws down there?”

All shook their heads, and Nemo answered for them: “No.”

“Shit! It's too much to cope with! Was there nothing else new, no change in the pattern of the packs' collective behaviour, for instance? In the way each group acted together, or the way the two groups interacted?”

“Well ...” All faces, including the blind one, turned toward Penny. “Look. This is nothing certain, but I had the *feeling*, at least, that the packs, both kinds, were concentrated a little more heavily at one side of the globe just before ... just before Sarissa started firing.” She had started weeping, though she struggled stubbornly against letting her voice break. Nemo laid a hand on her forearm, and she clutched it. She let herself go then, cried in slow, quiet gasps, which Waverly didn’t seem to notice. His mind had snagged on something.

“They concentrated on the side nearest the prey? Penny? On the side nearest the prey?”

“Yes. They ... always kept *circulating* ... circulating so much it was hard to say. But, yes, I think so.”

Waverly nodded. His face had tightened. His teeth ground slightly, busily, behind his closed lips, a sign of thought in him. The faded blood tracks on his cheeks ceased to resemble tears, looked more like war paint now.

“Japhet. Tell me again about the movement of the squids’ tentacles – not while they were on the prey, but well before that.”

“But what can I say that I haven’t already –”

“Try this on. You’ve all reported that their tentacles show size differential – some quite short and fine, others thicker and considerably longer. All, you’ve more or less agreed, ‘vibrated all the time.’ But are you sure? Absolutely? Did anyone notice, for instance, that sometimes it was the smaller, finer tentacles doing most of the vibrating, sometimes almost exclusively the larger ones, and only sometimes all of them together?”

Nemo’s eyes immediately came up, to meet Japhet’s. These were similarly kindled. Japhet said:

“Yes. That’s precisely right. Nemo saw it too.”

Waverly’s back straightened, and his palms rested carefully on his thighs. “And the sharks. Someone on the log, Jax I think, said their eyes were reddish-black, in three triangular clusters that tapered back to sharp points on the dorsum. And you, Japhet, said they reminded you of delph eyes. There are three clusters instead of two, but what would you others –”

“Look,” Nemo said. “Sarissa. She’s seen something.”

Even Waverly turned his futile gaze toward the knoll where the gunner stood. Her body was taut, and she had her glasses trained on Polyphemus. She lowered them, raised them again. Then she let them drop to her chest, spun around, and rushed to her as-yet-unused gun, the one trained on

Polyphemus's sector of the lake.

Sarissa sighed and wiped her eyes. She had cried this way once before, at the training camp on Cygnus IV. She had been just seventeen and had failed her first gunnery finals. Failed. She had placed third in the class (of over a hundred) – not first. She had gone into the sand dunes fringing the lake where the finals were given each year and thrown herself down like a piece of trash discarded in the wasteland. Then she had mourned her shipwrecked pride and mourned two target floats, grazed but unpunctured, that had bobbed back up to mock her after she had fired on them. Now, two faces grieved her, and these would *not* bob back up from the water they had slipped into an hour and a half before. She faced Polyphemus and spat toward it, feeling hate enough to make her spittle caustic, to make her eyes spout laser beams. She saw what looked like a deep crease forming down in the muddy floor of the giant's interior.

She trained her glasses on it. It was not a stable feature of the stratum. It had not been there before, and now she could see it deepen, as if the whole layer were contorting for some unguessable effort. A few seconds more, and a shudder passed through the titan that made the crystalline walls through which she spied blur in the magnified field of her vision. The puckered place at once began to smooth out again.

Perplexed, she took the glasses from her eyes and it was then, viewing Polyphemus as a whole, that she saw a boil of motion to one side of the globe, halfway out amid the circumambient field of cilia. She brought up the glasses again.

As she focused on the turbulence, its cause popped to the surface: a glassy, opaque ellipsoid, perhaps half the size of one of the fishing boats. One end was more tapered than the other, and at this end, two flagella, perhaps three meters long, were attached. With a slow, laboured thrashing, they drove the organism out of the black meadow that fringed the parental hemisphere.

Once the thing had been a few moments in progress, it seemed that it hugged, preferentially, the shallows fringing the isle, for it began to make its way round toward a point just off the knoll Sarissa stood on. The perception and the reaction came in the same instant. She rushed to the nearer gun, swept its muzzle downward, and waited. It was already within range, but she waited for the shot to become absolutely sure, and waited too for the slightest sign of divergence from its course as her signal to fire. She heard the others hailing her but spared no fraction of her attention

for a response. This little piece of her enemy she could take from it, and she meant to do so.

It was within a hundred metres when she saw bubbles appearing around its flanks and realised that it had begun to sink even as it thrashed onward. She fired. The line hissed vindictively, the barb plunged to the little orb's centre, fierce as a viper. The flagella continued to thrash impotently, but not, it seemed, particularly excitedly. She noted that the main part of the orb was tough only in its sheath and that its contents were gelatinous. So she set the winch going on the first line and planted her second shot at the base of the flagella, where she reasoned a greater muscular rigidity should give her barb a firmer bite. Her aim was surreally true – she saw where the lance would lodge well before it did so, and almost set the winch on the line before it had even struck. She was already hauling her catch along the surface of the lake by the time the others reached her.

“Polyphemus ejected it – its basal stratum seamed up and squeezed it out somewhere on that side, just below the water level.”

The winches had dragged it directly below them now and began to lift it from the water. The flagella, with a brainless mechanicity, did not cease to flail as the blubbery mass floundered up the rock wall. Out of the group's watchful silence, Nemo muttered:

“Polyphemus can see it – if it sees. Can hear it – if it hears. But it's not interfering.”

“Polyphemus sees and hears,” Orson Waverly said. “But it doesn't think. That thing isn't prey if it came out of the giant's body. And what isn't prey our greedy, mindless friend doesn't bother with.”

The five people stood around the thing, watching its flagella's movement weakening gradually. Their knolltop group might have been a scene of ancient sacrifice. The things Waverly had called for when the organism had first been lashed to the rock promoted the illusion. Japhet, Nemo, Penny and Sarissa all held flensing knives, and Japhet had used the little industrial lasers the boats carried to good effect on the plastic oars their emergency rafts contained. A large scoop, fork, and oversized pair of tongs had been fashioned, and a large sifting screen improvised from cable. The log was set up on a rock near the blunt prow of the sacrificial beast. The recorder's console might have been the abstracted face of the deity this druidic cult had gathered to appease: the Group Mind's memory-amplifier. Into this, the blindfolded priest meant to feed each



scrap and nuance of the offering he could not see, hoping to purchase with this rite the greater insight that he and his fellow-suppliants sorely needed.

The warm wind washed over the sacrifice, and the propulsive energy slowly metronomed out of its black stern-whips. Its smooth envelope had been faintly translucent, but now had grown waxier and begun to wrinkle. Out of the silence Sarissa said:

“I think it’s weak enough to cut. Let’s open it.”

“Remember,” said Waverly. “First the integument. If it has a distinct structure, flense me out sections and separate it as neatly as possible from what’s under it.”

At first, once their giant scalpels had been at work a few minutes, everyone was reporting that no clearly defined integument existed, but this proved an error. A distinct outermost layer did exist, but it was more than two feet thick. It was a gelatinofibrous material. Its fibrosity was attenuated at the outer levels, but the deeper into the stratum one went, the more sharply articulated and more darkly pigmented these fibre-bundles became until, at the stratum’s interface with the subincumbent tissues, it looked like a tightly packed surface of black-tentacled sea anemones. An embryonic Meadow of Medusa – all question of the thing’s identity was settled here.

Within the cavernum lined with this dark pile of fibril-tips was a smooth, elongate capsule perhaps twice the size of a man. Its surface was of a thin, tough material of linked hoop-shaped plates, so that the whole suggested a giant pupal case. The celebrants of the rite exhumed the whole upper surface of this sarcophagus shape. They worked with gusto, scattering the black, blubbery rugs of tissue about them on the sunlit stone, until the core of this biological torpedo lay upon a supporting remnant of the integument – lay on a crude-cut altar hewn from its own protective material.

Waverly, considering for a moment, decided, “Cut in thirds, carefully and gradually, along seams in the plating. Be looking for clear structures, and also be checking with each other as you cut to see how far along the length of the thing those structures run. Then, when you’ve cut halfway down through it, open it lengthwise, along a lengthwise seam if you can find one.”

His vatic crew raised their drenched blades and returned eagerly to work. Their concentration was complete. Their victim could have been as huge as its parent – their every move expressed an unconditional will to

sift its secrets out of it. But revelation was quick to come. The pupal case proved thin, easily cut, and all reported that a dense, very delicately fibrous grey tissue underlay the sheath. It was macroscopically featureless, and after they had gone some thirty centimetres down, it began to look like the sheath's sole content. Then Sarissa's blade scraped on something hard.

Japhet and Penny joined her with knives. They scooped a hollow round the object, shaved it free from webs of tissue, pried it out. It was a human skull, which the tissue packed within as it had without, filling its orbits with grey gelatinous pseudo-eyes. Sarissa held it up in the light of the noon sun. Her eyes stared into its jellied gaze, and her face worked as if she was struggling to read a message in its masklike expression. She said:

"It's ... fresh. There's still some cartilage in the ... nose hole."

Nemo came up behind her. He reached around, took it gently from her hand, gave it to Japhet, and gripped her shoulders. His hands strained, as if by the firmness of their grip he could throttle – as if with a tourniquet – the grief and horror rising in her. Face blank, she let Nemo steer her to a seat on the rock. She watched the lake.

Waverly was deeply excited by the find and made them bring him to the site of discovery. His hands, tremulous and lustful as a gloating miser's, caressed the socket the skull had lain in, palped the surrounding tissue. A blind augur, he did a thorough divination from the alien entrails.

"It's deep inside a highly specialised structure. It didn't just wander in. Saw it open. Comb out the tissues packed inside it."

The skull had hardly been opened before something was found: thumb-sized white ovoids, nearly a score of them, embedded in the tissue. Penny helping him, Waverly cut one open, fingered its contents with exquisite thoroughness. "Listen," he said. "Improvise a large comb, fine-toothed as possible. Start with the fork we made while Japhet makes something finer. Anywhere in this tissue, whether it's encased in fragments of prey or not, look for anything that might be an egg – smaller than these, larger, I don't know – but probably on a similar scale and, hopefully, of a recognisably different form. Nemo and Penny on that. I'm going to open a few more of these. Sarissa, I want you to help me with knife and tweezers, but first help me rig a little table. Sarissa?"

Not speaking, she came up, touched him. The augurs went to work.

A bit later, they all sat together on the knoll. Waverly sat at his little bench, where he and Sarissa had unravelled the innards of three more of the objects found in the skull. On the same bench were four black pellets,

half the size of those from the skull, which Japhet had just combed from the tissue of the sarcophagus. He had cried, “Orson! I found some. They’re black. They’re a little like delph roe. Smaller, harder, separate, but shaped like roe.” Waverly had straightened then. He had called them all around him, but once they had gathered, had sat quiet a long time.

They waited, the bright, bulky tatters of their butchery scattered all about. The chunks and gobbets of alien blubber surrounded them like the debris of some bizarre biological sculpture they had lately joined in finishing. In a way, this was true. They had hewn out the features, the intelligible form, of the being that imprisoned them. Waverly’s face came up, and he smiled slightly, as if with pleasure at the flood of sunlight that bathed him. His mouth groped for speech, but luxuriatingly, as if his mind were rummaging through a wealth of utterances.

“Delph eyes have the incredible motion-detective power of a jumping-spider’s, and we’ve recently confirmed to our satisfaction that this resolution of image and detail – of the very subtlest gestalts – that it probably surpasses our own. Polyphemus doesn’t eat delphs.”

This might have been the gloating introduction of a very hot paper read at an academy meeting. Waverly paused, visibly trying to sober himself. “I think the reason is that independent organisms, evolved more or less directly from the delphinid order, have become functioning saprophytes in the systems of Polyphemus’s kind. These delphinids have first crack at their host’s prey, and they function as their host’s eyes.” He talked faster now, rushing to include his fellows in his new overview. “My guess is that the sharks’ ancestors were engulfed by polyphemids as food, enjoyed some natural resistance to their digestive enzymes, and learned to thrive on their captors’ meals. If polyphemids resembled the smaller littoral analogues I mentioned, they had only tactile sensibilities, with perhaps some primitive olfactory discrimination. Any one of them whose saprophytes could start cueing it to their visual recognitions of prey would surely eat better than its blind fellow-hunters. And the saprophytes, evolutionally speaking, would feel a great stimulus to providing such clues.

“And I’m convinced the squids are similar in their history. Their tentacle activity is discriminative in just the way the cilia of our own organs of Corti are. When the smaller tentacles vibrate, higher frequency sounds are being registered; and when the larger, the lower frequencies, while all are usually in some kind of motion, as would be expected from the mixture of frequencies in most environmental noise. The squids are the giants ears – grotesque though it sounds, I have no doubt of it. Both these captured species have evolved a caudal nerve-link with the giant’s

own major ganglia, which I am certain are in that basal stratum. The kelp is part of its own neural system, and perhaps respiratory and alimentary as well. If what's in this egg's yolk is at all analogous, and I think it is, then the giant's basal stratum is a dense neural tangle, the plane of intersection for Polyphemus and its two breeds of saprophyte, as well as being its zone of absorption for nutrients. And when those sensory cooperatives breed, their reproductive packets are planted in that same stratum. The squids embed their eggs in the carrion before it is absorbed there. Quite possibly, they don't feed at all as adults and take in their life's nourishment during some kind of larval phase. The sharks go down and lay their eggs directly in the stratum. These genetic packages are then apparently well located to be included in that of the host itself, and the tidy partnership is perpetuated, while those that are not entrapped in the material of Polyphemus's spores no doubt hatch endosomatically to replenish the adult host's sensory packs. And as for the nutritive disproportionality between host and saprophytes, it's even less than I thought, for as the individual adult sensories die, they surely fall into the basal stratum and feed their master with their own corpses."

Waverly stopped, but with an air of cutting himself short. He sat, a small canny smile on his face, as if challenging his friends to see what he did. Nemo said:

"Then if those sharks are still close enough to being delphs – if their eyes are built the same – our dyes could blind them."

Waverly cackled – it was the most blatant hilarity that any of his fellows had heard from him. Then all five of them were talking at once. But when the first gusts of jubilation and (often fantastic) strategy had subsided, the biologist said:

"Listen. I think we can do it. And if it works, it's surely a start, a great satisfaction if nothing else. But it may not be enough. Because if blinding it fails to drive it away, its auditory mechanism may be all it needs to kill us. I've got one or two specific suggestions to add to all you've said. Let's get down to the beach, finalise our plan, and get to work."

The work that began that afternoon lasted most of the night, and decorated the island with a small, unsteady constellation of lights, of flaring and guttering stars. Japhet welded harpoon line into three-strand cables, Nemo and Sarissa toiled by camp lanterns modifying rifle ammunition, Orson and Penny converted the tough hides of freshly slaughtered delphs into a hundred meters of tubing, Orson scrolling the

material and holding it for Penny to fuse with the bright needle-fine laser beam.

Just after sunrise, the boat that Polyphemus had rejected once already set out from the island's shore. It was, as before, tethered to a rock, though even more strongly than before. But this time it had passengers: two rather rigid figures with heads of stuffed cloth, painted features, and stuffed wet-suits for bodies. A system of wires, guyed to one of the boat engine's flywheels, imparted a jerky agitation to the lifeless shapes.

Polyphemus reached for the craft the moment it was offshore. As soon as the creature took hold, Japhet stepped up the winch paying out the cable, to facilitate the giant's speedy taking-in of the prey. A quarter of the island's circumference away, Polyphemus's mouth opened.

And when that red-rimmed trapezoid dilated, there came a series of twelve explosive barks. They sounded from the knoll Sarissa had been stationed on the day before. Their noise, eerily gradual, travelled out to cross and fill the lake's whole vast arena, and before the second had sounded, their effects began to appear: a series of twelve splashes in the lake of ichor bordered by the mouth's rim. Violently expanding clouds of yellow smoke began to bloom within the orb, some near its surface, others deeper down. The coalescence of these roiling masses had stained the contents of the entire globe within a minute and a half. Sarissa and Nemo, whose rifles had launched the missiles, stood with field glasses trained on Polyphemus.

The giant's overall movement had suffered a marked change. The steady peristaltic surge of the cilia faltered – the entangled boat ceased to flow so smoothly toward the orb. It paused, was joggled as by choppy seas. The fibres enmeshing it grew frenetically active, but somewhat less purposive.

"It's groping the boat," Penny shouted up to the two on the knoll. She stood on the beach, the nearest of them all to the captive bait. "It's not pulling it in nearly so fast!"

Nemo and Sarissa probed the thinning mists of dye for clues to the fate of the giant's eyes. The pigment was dispersing, according to its normal behaviour in lake and seawater, the bulk of it settling out in a harmless precipitate within three minutes of going into solution. The orb's inner jungle melted back into visibility. Sarissa said, thick-voiced with desire:

"They're scrambling. Panicking."

"Yes. It's their normal patrolling motion, speeded up. Can you make out

the eye colour?”

“Yes! Red! Check that pack to the lower left.” In both delphs and Polyphemus’s visual sensories, the eyes’ normal colour was blackish-red in most light. And now the eyes on the ‘eyes’ of Polyphemus flashed deep ruby as they boiled in their kinetically heated-up patrol movements. This was the colour of dye-blinded delph eyes, once the chemical had converted their chromatophore molecules to an isomer that the impingement of photons could not reconvert – that is, once the eyes’ retinal substances had been permanently bleached.

“But they’re not colliding,” Sarissa said. The joy in her voice had diminished several degrees. “Getting snarled more often, but still coordinated. I think they can still hunt and kill ...” Nemo knew that the foreboding in her tone related not to this part of their assault, but to a secondary phase of their plan that everyone hoped would not need implementation, but he pretended not to understand this.

“So what? They can’t show it the way to its food, that’s all we care about.”

“The boat!” Penny called. “It’s started bringing it in again!”

The action of the cilia, though different in quality, more searching and gradual, was smooth again. The craft wallowed and toppled onward.

And it was, some moments later, consumed by the giant. There was no opening of it, no shaking out of the tasty nutmeat and discarding of the husk. The cilia brought it to the feeder-tentacles, which plucked it up, crushed it like a large shellfish, and hurled it whole into the mouth. As it sank, the sharks, clearly endowed with fine directional control and some form of sensitivity to mechanical vibration, swarmed on it. All took their turns, assaulting hungrily, retiring unsatisfied from the metallic morsel. The squids too took their futile turns, and at length the craft settled to the basal muck, with Japhet still paying out cable to allow it sinking.

The day’s agenda was completed a short while later, executed by five rather taut, silent people. A respirator, rigged to a float so that it rode some six feet under water, was set adrift from the cove. A hundred metres of improvised air hose linked it to the shore, where Nemo and Japhet worked a crude bellows of delph hide to produce a continuous aspiration to the device. Polyphemus struck it with violent accuracy a short distance offshore.

Sarissa Wayne tilted the muzzle of the harpoon gun a little higher. This

brought the grappling hook strapped to the underside of the harpoon up to her eye level. She reached out and touched one of its needle-sharp points, looked at the hook with distaste and unease.

“It’s ludicrous,” she said. “The more I think about it. How did we ever convince ourselves that it was rational? All of Orson’s goddamned *inferences* ...”

These words were addressed to no human shape, but to a grotesque manikin, half-beast, half-machine, that stood beside her on the flank of the knoll. The body was a squamous hulk, ensheathed in overlapping plates, shingles, and greaves of a dark leathery substance. The head that crowned it was a metal-and-glass bulb with insectoid mechanical mouthparts, while on its back something like an engine was mounted on a shoulder frame. This Caliban replied in an eerie remnant of a voice, filtered by the respirator mask:

“Don’t start doubting it now, Sarissa – you won’t function as effectively if you do.”

“Horseshit! I’m getting you out of there if I have to spear you and fish you out. Function effectively! You think I’m going to let you down, Jones? All this shit about trusting me, everything you said to me in bed last night, all lies, right?”

Nemo knew she was not really concerned with his words, that essentially she needed to hold him again before he went down. He shook his head, shifted his feet wretchedly in their delph-skin boots, his queer expeditionary armour a torment bottling up his answering need to hold her.

“Dearest love. I’m going in and I’m coming out.”

“Coming out,” she said quietly. “That’s just it. You won’t have any trouble getting *in* ...”

They looked at the cable that belted the entire hummock they stood on. From a point just under their feet it dove in a shallow arc to Polyphemus’s mouth corner. Within the orb the cable dangled through the kelp. Down on the neural mulch their eyes could just pick out the wreck of their decoy boat. Sarissa stepped over to the second gun and checked its angle, speaking in a tone so carefully constrained it sounded absent. “If this thing wants to pull away, submerge, all our lines together won’t hold it. If it’s aroused while you’re ... *deafening* it – if it reacts, it will take you down.”

“Listen, sweetness, if we let ourselves go over it all again, we only lose

what time we have to talk about our love.”

“Talk about our love!” She whirled on him. “Jones, you fool, with all your courtships and vows and declarations. I don’t want to talk about our love, I want to *have* it.”

Japhet Sparks called from the beach: “It’s ready!” He and Orson had slipped their bait into the water. It was the engine of their most seriously damaged boat, mounted on a cut-down raft and anchored to the rock by a length of tripled cable. Sarissa went round the knolltop and called to Penny down in the cove. She sat in the helm of their escape craft – their one good boat, driven in the shallows around the island and hooked to a trailer raft for the two riders who would not fit inside.

“Penny! Bait’s up! Here we go!”

“Hit it! I’m standing by!”

Nemo raised his gloved hand to Sarissa. She stood still and nodded, staring him straight in the eyes through his faceplate. Nemo took from the ground a large heavy hook with a handle-gripped bar attached. He eased down to the lower ledge cut for him to stand on, just under the cable where it began its plunge to the giant’s mouth. He checked the weaponry in the side racks of his back-frame. The motor the frame supported was one of the small ones with which each boat’s emergency raft was supplied. Nemo switched it on briefly for a final assurance of its stability on its improvised mount, and switched it off. Then he hung the hook on the cable above his head and gripped the bar with both hands.

“OK, Sarissa.”

She called down to Japhet: “Now!” The noisy little bait-raft fired on and chugged out toward the black meadow.

It was seized by the fibrils and tumbled orbward. Polyphemus’s mouth began to open and then the raft hit the limits of its tether. The cilia began to toil, frustrated, roused. The mouth, as if impatient, gaped fully open. Nemo jumped from the ledge.

As he dove, he felt metamorphosed into a kind of bomb. He wore two wet-suits, and to the outer one his delph-hide armour was sewn with steel wire. A padded, capsuled thing, his body was surreally snug and remote from the dreadful vision into which he plunged. The veined opacity of the orb’s wall loomed into sharper focus, and the teeming amber lake in the giant’s lips rushed to him. Nemo brought his feet up and locked his knees. With the sense of exaggerated mass his gear gave him, it seemed when his heels impacted that he struck a titanic hammerblow on the bell of his own



doom. The true proportionality of the matter was that he was like a sparrow touching down on the flank of a large hill. Even so, when he freed his hook and hacked it for purchase into the orb wall, the suicidal blatancy of the act horrified him. The material was tough, pierceable only with fierce blows. He worked his way up from the mouth-corner along the giant's lips, a swollen, scalloped border of tissue shot with purple fibrosities. He gained his feet and began to stalk along the border of the golden tarn.

From his rack he took a crooked scythe welded from the blades of three flensing knives. He stuck its razor tip into the ichor and vigorously slashed up its surface. Sharks, as fast as rockets, rose and converged on the spot, fangs foremost. Nemo saw that their ragged teeth moved independently in addition to the jaws' movement of them – mouths that worked more like shredders than scissors. The rabid schools milled insistently, their red, poisoned eye-clusters flashing with their sharp, snakish turns. Nemo racked the scythe and took down one of his three rifles. He began to pump explosive shot into the haggle-toothed mouths. Outside the orb, at the fringe of its dome just behind where he stood, something huge moved. It was a trio of Polyphemus's feeder-tentacles, beginning to elongate yearningly outward, toward the stubborn bait-raft. Nemo kept firing.

When he had killed perhaps a dozen, he found he was kindling un hoped-for havoc among these blinded sensories. Each one hit, as its head ruptured, went into spasms that snarled the coordination of its pack. Each, as it thrashed, scribbled the ichor with ribbons and wraiths of its blood, waking the appetites of the squadron it jostled. The cannibal frenzy spread as the blood got thicker and made every beast smell like food to its fellows. It was, apparently, some visual cue that normally inhibited this kind of accident – the taste of cannibal food itself certainly did not.

Two other of Polyphemus's feeder tentacles had gone out toward its recalcitrant prey. So far none had reached it, but all showed a slow, inexorable extensibility that was not yet exhausted. Nemo scanned the red uproar beneath his feet. His goal was now the basal stratum, and he sought a window to it through the fanged turmoil. He saw one down along a major strand of kelp, turned the ignition of the motor on his back, and dove in, rifle first.

They had seen Helion's still-masked face remain unaffected after his engulfment, while Jax's had soon begun to bloat and corrode, but, curiously, it was in his face that Nemo dreaded first feeling some caustic leakage, rather than his hands, which had been left fairly thinly gloved for the manipulation of his weapons. The stalk he followed was as thick as his

body, and he kept it just above his back, to force any attacker into a frontal approach.

Down where the stalks coalesced toward their common rootage, while there was still room to navigate between them, he branched off to his first task, where the wreck lay.

The hulk's cable had supported it against complete subsidence. It was sunk in a turgid half-liquid zone just above a more solid neural mulch. Its fractured hull offered many places where the coils of cable he had brought could be threaded through its chassis. Firmly and intricately, he wove the wreck to several major kelp stalks. Yesterday's bait had now set its hook in the prey that had swallowed it. Yesterday's bad luck – that Polyphemus should not flee in panic at its blinding, but feed regardless and wait to feed again – was today's good luck. "Take me down now if you want to," Nemo hissed in the smothered silence of his helmet.

Now came the task that probed luck's spiderweb. They had observed three distinct basal zones in which the sensories' neuro-umbilici attached. Now Nemo sped to the nearest of these and, trying to stay ahead of his fear, charged into it, scything through tethers in broad sweeps. He found a lateral branching of kelp to stand on and cut his motor.

As the squids came down, he shot them. They rained toward him with the erratic dodging movement of moths or snowflakes, and he shot them as they applied their caudal tips to the mulch to regenerate their tethers. The inner explosions tended to split them lengthwise, and several, in dying, vomited upward from their beaks little clouds of eggs like those found in the skull.

Nemo scythed the remaining tethers. Overhead, the silvery interface of ichor with open sky was visible in patches through the churned gore of the sharks, and Nemo saw it shattered by the impact of one of Sarissa's grappling hooks. The bait-raft's tether must be near breaking. He worked faster, darting upward from his ambush now to meet and kill those that were slow in descending. At least half of the tethers he cut must have been those of sharks, but few of these came down except in bleeding tatters, more mulch for the indiscriminating titan, which now dined upon its own senses.

And then Nemo was on to the second zone. Here he swept zig-zag through the field and mowed it all at once. Panic was big in him, trying to split from within the shell of his self-command. His compromise was to push the very limit of recklessness. He stood in the centre of the mown patch and fired directly overhead, accelerating his motor periodically

against the muddy tug of Polyphemus's appetite at his feet. The sensories came dodging down through the veiny gloom, while from the smoky plane of the higher turmoil shark-meat drizzled ever more continually, trailing wisps of torn tissue. He saw Sarissa's second hook hit the interface and glide toward its purchase in the giant's mouth-corner.

The rent and ragged molluscoidal shapes piled in little drifts around him. When the weapon's fifty-shot magazine gave out, he dropped it and snatched down another rifle. And then no others descended. He waited two seconds, five, then launched himself toward the third attachment zone.

In the same instant that he did so, the floor of his little ocean tore itself from under his feet. In the inertial shock that followed, Nemo sprawled helpless in the turbid boil. He collided with a stalk and hugged it, and then the giant was still. A moment later, the silver ceiling of this living cosmos exploded a third time. The bait-raft, its snapped cable fluttering behind it, dug an effervescent shaft down toward him. Nemo accelerated toward the last of the sensories' anchorages.

Those on shore saw him raise his scythe, dart forward – but then check his swing and pull up just short of the umbilical thicket. There, at the edge of the webwork, the scaly little man-shape paused and, from his place in the orb's deepest murk, seemed to gauge how far the thicket towered above him.

“What's he doing?” Japhet called to Sarissa from the beach. She didn't take her eyes from Nemo, and her answer to Japhet was spoken only to herself, almost whispered:

“He's thinking how to kill them from higher up. *Yes*. Get near the exit before you do it – get as near as you can!”

The scaly shape probed the kelp adjoining the thicket and separated out from it a slender side-stalk perhaps fifty metres long. Nemo grasped this by the tip and began to drag it in a gradually rising spiral round the thicket's perimeter. He tightened the spiral as he rose, gathering the lower parts of the neural tethers into a sheaf. When the stalk ran out, he tied it to a more massive growth and found another, higher branching one.

Orson Waverly had extrapolated rather extensively from what the previous day's test had shown them: “I think it fell back immediately on a more primitive feeding taxon, probably geared for motile but armoured or shelled prey. Maybe it feeds on some of the pseudobranchopoda – there's some big bathic ones just been found.

“But it's the implications of this behaviour that are most significant to

us. Totally blinded, and no panic reaction. I think these saprophytes, during their evolution, have maintained a very separable, interruptible kind of sensory feed-in with their host. After all, with tethers routinely broken, that kind of reaction wouldn't be very productive for Polyphemus. But, still, the complete deprivation of an important sensory input? My guess is that as long as the sensories are alive and maintain attachment, they transmit a steady flow of 'white noise', random neural firings, to the host. It doesn't experience a disruption of sensation so much as a kind of zero-information state, such as it might experience on a dark night, or very deep down.

"I *am* convinced that as the sensories are killed, Polyphemus will feel a cumulative encroachment of sensory deprivation – a state of 'total blank' as opposed to one of 'no news,' and it seems to me this *must* produce a violent reaction of some sort. Now understand that from this point I'm only guessing, but it's often the case that creatures as primitive as Polyphemus is, when you consider it apart from this startling adaptive turn it has taken – that such creatures can be relatively insensitive to extensive physical disruption. For my money, Nemo should have a good chance of killing at least a majority of the sensories before any radical sense of anomaly begins to dominate the giant's behaviour."

Now Nemo repeated Orson's words in a snarl – "for my money" – and began firing on the sensories his ploy had aggregated into a desperate snarl no more than twenty-five metres from the titan's mouth. He was prodigal of shot, perforated the bloody, frantic mass from every angle. When his magazine emptied, he let the rifle drop and grabbed his last. After a moment – during which the redundant butchery had him in a kind of vengeful trance – he realised his work was done. It was then that the giant moved again.

It filled Nemo with awe, as Polyphemus's previous lurching movement had not done, for this was an immense concerted muscular effort of the biocosmos that held him. The pressure of the ichor increased upon him as the entire orb tautened and strained to pull itself offshore, out to deeper waters. The message of darkness had at last definitely reached the titan's murk-shrouded ganglia. The giant was alarmed.

And on finding that a quintuple thickness of cable opposed its withdrawal from shore, alarm became the plainest panic. Nemo, who had felt so huge and blatant during his soaring approach to the enemy, now felt he was reduced to a jot of foam in the raging prow of a tidal wave. His motor's effort mouthward, skyward, seemed a ludicrous trivium. Polyphemus had a very powerful – awesome, even – capture-resistance

taxon. It had sought to move and found that painful stasis opposed its murky will. It tried again, and a fang of pain on a scale that it could feel was sunk into its core as its efforts to flee tore loose the roots of its own most central nerves. And now Polyphemus was an earthquake. Volcanic clouds of its black blood roiled up from the wounds of its self-violated ganglia. Pain could not vie with the blind will to escape that it had kindled in this colossus – unmolested, no doubt, through centuries of easy gluttony. Polyphemus strove, and an ink storm arose from its tearing entrails.

And when they tore free and the boat, trailing broken trees of nerve cord, came vomiting, rocketing mouthward, Nemo knew he would be trapped in the ichor's inertia – would fall with Polyphemus and join him in his dark retreat, if he failed to reach the boat before it erupted free. He gave up vertical striving and fought to intercept it.

As it erupted he saw he was missing it, was a helpless half-second too slow, but mindlessly he sustained his drive after the craft had passed him. A trailing nerve stalk clubbed his belly, and he hugged it with both arms and legs, while all the fluid volume of Polyphemus strove to strip him off and flush him down. The boat, the stalk, and then Nemo, were into the sky.

The sudden surge into free-fall tricked Nemo out of his grip on the stalks. He could see that he was falling free of the sinking feeder-tentacles, but that he was going to dive into the cilium-field sluggishly following the giant's subsidence. He fought to straighten for a sharp hands-first entry so that he could pull the dive shallow as soon as he struck. He hit the vipered foam and arched his back strongly as he entered. As he surfaced, he felt himself pulled short. A fibril had snarled in the screw of his motor.

The field was retiring laterally before it sank under – Polyphemus was pulling in its skirts, so to speak, off of the midshallows they had overlain. Nemo threw his feet in the air to flop backward where he could get a grip on the cilium. He just managed this, but was too awkwardly folded, legs flailing, to get a scythe free from his snarled rack. A red shock of pain ruptured his left foot.

An instant passed before he had the wit to seize hold of his foot and grab the line of the harpoon that pierced it. He wrapped it round his arm, feeling nothing so much as a vivid embarrassment and indignity in his position as he fought for a scythe with his free hand. He had been dragged past the littoral drop-off before he had it out and went under.

For a brief eternity he expected Polyphemus's full weight to haul against

his steel-wound arm, and then he got the scythe tip under the fibril and pulled mightily.

Jones lay on the beach the expedition had first set out from. Japhet had brought the medical kit from the sand-hog and waited at a discreet distance while Sarissa cleaned and bandaged Nemo's foot. She finished the bandage and patted his thigh, smiling absently with an unconscious appraisal and satisfaction in her eyes, such a gaze as a breeder might bend upon his prize beast, knowing it safe after some hazard.

"No artery hit," she said, "a few of the metacarpals broken, I think. At the worst, you'll have a slight limp and that won't make *you* any the less active."

Nemo nodded gravely and didn't answer at once. "I love you all the more for your ... determination to save me," he said at last. "No doubt you had an agonising moment there as you fired, dreading that the shot might be ... a little off."

"Not the slightest." She said it fiercely. Her large black eyes came up and bull's-eyed his; a distinct frost of impugned expertise gave them added bite. "I knew it before I even saw exactly what kind of fix you would get into: there was no way I was going to miss *you*, Jones."

Nemo nodded. "I see." He looked at the lake and smiled.

Down in its water, their enemy still pursued its ponderous retreat. Deep in the lake's root, the cold and lightless magmatic shaft, it sought the realms that were the ancient nursery of its evolution. Its encounter with the vertebrate bipeds had reft it of the fruits of five million years' development. It had found the butcherwork of these midgets far cannier than its own, and so it stumbled back down to the night of its origin.

## The End