

The End Of The Hunt  
by David Drake

Born in Dubuque, Iowa on September 24, 1945, David Drake graduated from Duke University School of Law and settled down in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with a job as assistant town attorney. For many years Drake had been trying to write horror fiction -- his first sale was in 1966 to August Derleth for an Arkham House anthology -- but was frustrated because law school, a tour of duty in Vietnam, and now his job left him with little time for more than the occasional short story. Quitting his job, he signed on as a part-time bus driver in 1980, and by the following year he was able to become a full-time writer. Since then he has written, collaborated on, and edited dozens of novels, collections, shared-world books, and anthologies. He is best known for his Hammer's Stammers series of space-mercenary novels and stories, although he is also at home in heroic fantasy and horror fiction. His latest books include Surface Action, Northworld, and Rolling Hot.

"The End of the Hunt" is one of that group of stories Drake was writing during the early 1970s and submitting, usually without success, to the few markets of the time. Most if not all of these stories, some of them revised, eventually were published. This one fell through the cracks until Drake recently found the manuscript and sold it to New Destinies. Highly praising this 17-year-old story, an English reviewer further observed: "David Drake's 'The End of the Hunt' is the first really mature story I've seen from him."

Corll's eyes caught the betraying dust trail of a pebble skipping down the canyon wall ahead of him. Realizing what it meant, he flattened in mid-stride, his feet and hands braced to fling him in any direction of safety. "Shedde," he demanded, "how do we get out of here?"

"Think," replied the other. "You're admirably fitted for it."

"Shedde," Corll snarled, "there's no time for joking! They must have reached the canyon mouth behind us by now -- and they're ahead of us on the rim as well!"

Corll had underestimated the ants again. His self-surety had led him to scout the territory the insects claimed with their many-spined mounds. He had not known that they would go beyond it in the savage tenacity of their pursuit. The comparison of his long strides with their tiny scrambling had left him scornful even then. But Corll needed rest, needed sleep, needed to hunt for water when the supply he carried grew low in these sun-blasted badlands; and those who pursued him seemed to recognize no such necessities.

"Run for the far end of the canyon," directed Shedde.

"Won't they have it blocked by now?" Corll asked, but he sprang into motion without awaiting the answer. He had feared this sort of trap ever since he learned that the ants had ways of moving beneath the surface more swiftly than they could above it. He now had proof that their intrusions in the subsoil must penetrate far beyond their range above ground.

Once already they had ringed Corll. He had thought it was finished with him then.

"They won't have to block the end," Shedde was saying. "This is a box canyon. Yes, I remember this

canyon... though it's been a long time. A terribly long time."

"Shedde!" Corll hissed, his brain seething with rage, "you will die with me, don't you understand? There is no time now for jokes!"

A ponderous cornice sheared from the right wall of the canyon. Corll spent a millisecond judging the trajectory of the orange-red mass, and then leaped to the right, his equipment belt clanking on the wall as his fingers scrabbled and found cracks to burrow into.

"Mutated vermin," Shedde murmured in revulsion.

The ledge of rock touched an out-thrust knob twenty feet above Corll; inertia exploded the missile outward. The knob shattered with it and slashed Corll as a sleet of dust and gravel. That he ignored, waiting only for the tremble of the last murderous, head-sized fragments striking the ground before he darted off again.

"Shedde," he asked, "can we turn around and break through the canyon mouth?" Through the crawling horde that would choke the ground. Through the things that shambled instead of crawling, the giants that would have justified Corll's journey if they had left him an opportunity to warn the others of his race. It seemed quite certain now that the giants would be the ultimate cause of his failure. Only two bombs still hung from his equipment belt, and their poison had already proven ineffective against the things whose size belied their antlike appearance.

"Keep running," Shedde directed. "They must be blocking the passage behind us for almost a mile by now."

"But --" Corll began. Fluttering jewel-flickers in the light of the great sun cut him off. There was no choice now. He lengthened his stride, freeing one of the heavy globes in either hand. Pain knifed his thigh. He ignored it, loped on. For the moment the pain was only pain, and had no margin to waste on comfort.

A ruby-carapaced ant sailed past Corll's face, twisting violently as though sheer determination would bring its mandibles the remaining inch they needed to close on Corll's flesh. The insect was scarcely an inch long itself, half mandible and entirely an engine of destruction. The warriors were light enough to drop safely from any height, ready to slash and to tear when they landed. They were pouring off the rim in a deadly shower that carpeted the canyon floor too thickly, now, for the runner to avoid. Agony tore Corll's pads and ankles a dozen times. More frightening were the ghost-light twitchings that mounted his calves. He had waited as long as he could.

Corll's right hand smashed a globular bomb against the massively functional buckle of his crossbelt. The bomb shattered, spraying the acrid reek of its vegetable distillate about him in a blue mist. The poison cooled his body where it clung to him, but its clammy, muscle-tightening chill was infinitely preferable to the fiery horror of the warriors' jaws. No matter -- he could feel the mandibles relax, see the wave of ants on the ground wither and blacken as the dense cloud oozed over them. Corll held his own breath as he ran through the sudden carnage. He knew that the fluid coating his lower limbs would protect him for a time, and he prayed that the time would be adequate.

"Not much further," Shedde remarked.

Dead ants scrunched underfoot. Jaws seared Corll briefly, then dropped away. His eyes scanned the rim of the canyon as it doglegged, noting that the rain of warriors had paused for the moment.

A long rock hurtled down, pitched with more force than gravity could have given it. Corll's leap took him a dozen feet up the cliff wall where his legs shot him off at a flat angle, a safe angle.... Stone smashed on stone beside him. A feeler waved vexedly from the high rim.

The ants had very nearly caught him three days before while he dozed in the shadow of a wind-sculpted cliff, certain that his smooth pacing had left the insects far behind. Through half-closed eyelids Corll had suddenly seen that tiny, blood-bright droplets that trickled toward his shelter were now picking out the ruddy sunlight on ruddy stone. The first bomb had not freed him then, nor had the third. When he had darted over the nearest rise with the poison and its bitter stench lapping about him like a shroud, Corll had seen the horizon in all directions sanguine with deadly life. The ants had waited until a cold intelligence somewhere had assessed their success as certain. But that time Corll had leaped through them as a lethal ghost, wrapped in his poison and guided by Shedde's calculated guess as the narrowest link in a chain of unobservable thickness.

If the insects or the brain that controlled them had reconsidered the capacities of their quarry, which had not caused them to slacken their pursuit.

"Their numbers aren't infinite," Shedde explained, "and they can't have laced the whole continent with their tunnels -- yet. Many of them are following us, yes. But it's the ones sent on ahead that are dangerous, and with every mile we run, the more of those we're safe from. There will be some waiting for us at the end of the canyon. If we could have bypassed them, perhaps we would have escaped entirely."

Corll was stung with wordless anger at his companion's objectivity; then he rounded the canyon's bend to see the cliffs linked sharply a hundred yards in front of him. The concrete of the blockhouse that squatted at the base of the cliffs would have been magenta in the light of the waning sun, save for the warriors that clung to it like a layer of blazing fungus.

Corll halted.

"There's a door," Shedde prompted.

"I can't get through those ants on the residue of the bomb," Corll said. The whisper-whisper of feet a million times magnified echoed in his mind if not his ears.

"Use the last bomb, then. There's no choice."

Nor was there. Baying a defiant challenge, Corll charged for the structure. A stride before he reached the waiting mass, he smashed his last defense into vitreous splinters on his breast. Do the ants feel pain? He wondered, the warriors only a dying blur at the edges of his mind. Then, expecting it to slam open, he hit the portal in a bound -- and recoiled from it. The metal door fit its jambs without a seam, refuge if open but otherwise a cruel jest.

"To the right," Shedde directed. "There should be a pressure plate."

The tapestry of ants, linked even in death, still hung in swathes across the blockhouse. Corll's hands groped through the insects desperately, feeling the desiccated bodies crumble as easily as the ashes of an ancient fire. The door swung open on a lighted room.

Corll sprang inside. "The inner plate is also a lock," his companion said. "Touch to open, touch to close. But only the touch of your kind." Corll slammed the door and palmed the device.

They were in a narrow anteroom, softly lighted by a strip in the ceiling. At the back was another metal door, half closed. The only furnishings of the anteroom were a pair of objects fixed to the wall to either side of the rear door. In general shape they resembled sockets for flambeaux, but they were thrust out horizontally rather than vertically. Corll's quick eyes flicked over them, but he did not move closer.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait, of course," replied Shedde. "If the systems are still working, there should be water inside." There was a pause before he concluded acidly, "And Hargen built to last."

Corll eased open the door. The inner room was much larger, but it was almost filled with dull, black machinery. Against the far wall stood the framework of a chair in a clear semi-circle. It was backed against another door, this one open onto darkness. On the floor before the chair sprawled a skeleton.

The outer door of the blockhouse clanged as something heavy struck it.

"Who is Hargen?" Corll demanded. Half-consciously he backed against the inner door of the anteroom, shutting it against the gong-notes echoing through the building. His breath still came in short, quick sobs. "Shedde, what is this place?"

"Hargen," Shedde repeated with a whisper of hatred. "Hargen was a genetic engineer. As a technician, as a craftsman, he may have had no equal... though perhaps the men who built his instruments, they were brilliant in their own right. But tools of metal weren't enough for Hargen -- he had his dream, he said, for the new Mankind."

Corll eyed the room. He was uneasy because he had never before known such vicious intensity in his companion. A pencil of water spurted from one corner of the ceiling down into a metal basin from which it then drained. Corll tested a drop of the fluid with his tongue before drinking deeply.

"He had to change us, Corll," continued Shedde. "Cut into genes, weld them, treat the unformed flesh as a sculptor does stone. 'Your children will live forever!' he said. 'Your children will live forever!'"

"Have we lived forever, Corll?"

The echoes that flooded the building changed note, warning Corll that the outer door was sagging. He quickly squeezed empty the long waterbag of intestine looped across his shoulders, and then refilled it from the falling stream.

"Where does the other door lead, Shedde?"

"A tunnel. Try it."

Pretending to ignore the undertone of his companion's voice, Corll attempted to leap the chair. Something caught him in mid-air and flung him back into the room.

"You see?" Shedde giggled. "Hargen wasn't just a genius, he had a sense of humor. He could sit there and control every machine in the building -- and no man could touch him without his permission. Do you want to leave that way, Corll?"

"If they can batter down the outer door, they can get through this one," Corll noted with the tense desperation of a fighter at bay. The sound of metal ripping underscored his words. "Shedde, what do we

do?"

Suddenly calmer, Shedde replied, "The weapons should have manual controls. There, beside the door."

Staring at the pair of hand-sized plates flanking the anteroom door, Corll realized what unfamiliarity had hidden from him: both plates displayed shrunken perspectives of the anteroom itself and the wreckage of the outer door. Joystick controls were set beneath the plates. When Corll twitched one of the rods, it moved the black dot he had thought was a flaw in the screen.

"If you push the top of the control rod," Shedde said, "It fires."

The outer door of the blockhouse squealed again as it was rent completely away. A pair of giants that seemed ants in all but size stood framed in the doorway, their forelegs bowed a little to allow them to peer inside. Uncertain of what he was doing, Corll squeezed his thumb down on the stick.

The dazzling spatter of light blasted powder from the concrete, vapor from the outer doorjamb. Corll's reflex slashed the fierce beam sideways across one of the giants. The creature separated along the line of contact.

The light blinked off when Corll raised the thumb-switch. The remaining giant was scrambling backwards. Corll flicked the control. The dot moved in the direction opposite to his expectations. He moved it the other way and squeezed, chuckling in wonder as the glare sawed lethally across the second monster as well.

"They're hollow," he exclaimed as he squinted at the jerking bodies.

"I wonder how they fuel them?" Shedde mused. "The exoskeleton would give adequate area for muscle attachment without the mass of digestive organs to contend with. Even the vermin seem to have their genetic geniuses."

"How long will this weapon burn?" Corll asked, caution tempering his elation.

"Perhaps forever," the other replied. "Near enough that neither of us needs be concerned. Hargen never took half measures.

"I stood here before," Shedde continued, "to plead with him. I had been one of the first, you see. 'You don't know what you're doing,' I told him. 'You call it freedom from the tyranny of the body, a chance for the children of the race to have the immortality that was only vicarious before. But it's the death of those you change! We don't breed, we won't breed -- it's not worth personal immortality to me to know that I'll never have a son.' And Hargen laughed at me, and he said, 'I have stayed here in this fortress for seventy-four years without leaving, so you think that I am ignorant. You can breed, little man; if the will is lacking, my knives didn't cut it out of you.'

"I shouted at him then; but before his servants pushed me out, Hargen stood and stretched his long bones, those bones that lie there in the dust, and he said, 'Come back in twenty thousand, come back in two hundred thousand years if it takes that long -- come back and tell my bones then that I did not know.' " Shedde paused for so long that Corll thought he was done speaking, but at last he continued, "Well, you were right, Hargen. If we failed to breed, then so did the men you didn't change -- and yes, you knew it. Just as you knew what would come of the race you formed and called, 'mere adjuncts to human immortality....' Gods, how you must have hated Man!"

Corll said nothing, leaning over the weapon control and watching the smear of tiny red forms thicken on the wreckage of the giants.

"But perhaps even you forgot the ants," Shedde concluded bitterly.

The warriors surged forward in a solid wave that covered all four faces of the anteroom. Corll zig-zagged his flame through them, but there was no thrill in watching a black line razor across an attack condensed in the sights to an amorphous stain. More of the insects flowed over a surface pitted by earlier destruction. Corll did not raise his thumb, but the ants crawled forward more quickly than he could traverse his weapon across their rectangular advance.

Shedde, answering the question Corll had been too harried to ask, said, "The small ones can't smash open the door, but they'll be able to short out the weapon heads."

Corll whipped his control about in a frenzy. With someone to fight the right-hand beam as well, the wave could have been stopped. But -- a scarlet runnel leaked across the wall toward the other wire-framed gun muzzle, and Corll realized the same thing must be happening in the dead area too close to his own weapon to be swept by its fire. A moment later the beam of deadly light vanished in coruscance and a thunder-clap that shook the blockhouse and flung the remains of the first dead giant a dozen yards from the entrance. Corll leaped for the other control. He was not quick enough. As soon as he touched the firing stud, the right-hand weapon also shorted explosively.

The sighting displays still worked. A third giant ant scabbled noisily into the anteroom, its feelers stiff before it. Held easily between its mandibles was a huge fragment of stone.

"Shedde," Corll hissed, "this door won't hold any longer than the other one did. How can we get out of here?"

"You can leave any time through the tunnel," Shedde replied calmly. "Hargen must have kept a vehicle of some sort there."

Corll hurled himself again toward the low doorway. Again the unseen barrier slammed him back. The anteroom door clanged, denting inward slightly.

"It throws me back!"

"It throws me back," Shedde corrected gently. "Hargen's sense of humor, you see. Unstrap me and get away from here."

The door rang again. Flakes spalled off from the inside.

Corll seized a machine of unguessed precision and smashed it into the quivering metal. "I carried you since the day my father died!" he shouted. "My stomach fed you, my lungs gave you air, my kidneys cleared your wastes. Shedde, my blood is your blood!"

"Your family has served my needs for more years than even I can remember," Shedde stated, utterly calm. "Now that you can no longer serve me, serve yourself and your own race. Quickly now, the door can't hold much longer."

The panel banged inward again.

Corll cringed back, in horror rather than in fear. "Shedde," he pleaded, "you are the last."

"Somebody had to be. This is as good a place as any, where the end began. Set me down and go."

Keening deep in his throat, Corll fumbled at the massive crossbuckle he had unfastened only once before, while his father shuddered into death after a thirty-foot fall. "Shedde...."

"Go!"

The upper door-hinge popped like a frost-cracked boulder as it sheared.

Sphincter muscles clamped shut the tiny valve in Corll's back as the tube pulled out of it. Only a single drop of blood escaped to glint within his bristling fur. He carefully swung Shedde to the floor, trying as he did so not to look at his burden: the tiny limbs, the abdomen without intestines and with lungs of no capacity beyond what was needed to squeak words through the vocal cords. In the center, flopping loosely, was an appendage that looked like an umbilicus and had served Shedde in that function for millennia. The genitalia were functional, but anything they had spawned would have had to be transferred to a host body for gestation.

The skull was fully the size of Hargen's, which leered vacuously from the floor. Shedde's eyes were placid and as blue as was nothing else remaining on the Earth.

"Good luck against the ants, Corll," the half formed travesty of a man wheezed. "But I'm afraid Hargen may not have seen as clearly as he believed he did when he planned his new race."

Corll clenched his fingers ('To hold tools for your children,' Hargen had said so long ago) and sprang upright. 'A stupid servant is a useless servant' -- Hargen had said that too, and Corll's forehead bulged with a brain to equal that of the man he had carried. But in Corll's eyes bled a rage that was the heritage of the wolf and had not been totally expunged from the most pampered of lap dogs.

But the man on the floor whispered, "Go, my friend."

And as the first of the giants smashed into the room, Corll whirled and leaped for the tunnel door and darkness.

## About this Title

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