

# **Beastchild**

**by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-**

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**Dedication**



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The characters in this book are entirely imaginary and have no relation to any living person.



*BEASTCHILD IS FOR LISA TUTTLE  
AND DANNY JENNINGS  
AND JACK CORDES  
AND FOR THE USPO WHICH INTRODUCED US*

The Hunter was born to hunt, as his prey was born to be brought down at his desire...

Sara Laramie moved through the iron castings in the foundry yard, keeping low so that she was at all times concealed from view. The Hunter Releamar was in pursuit of her. She did not know that he was a Hunter; it was obvious, however, that he was different from other naoli.

Deep scream, lovely scream, wanting out... She reached the thousand gallon storage tank in which she now made her home. She pulled open the entry plate (it squeaked; Releamar listened for squeaks) and went inside. Behind her, there was a scraping noise... Rats, she thought, lighting the glow lamp. The tank brightened to a warm yellow.

„Hello,“ said Releamar the Hunter. He was trying to smile.  
This time, she did not suppress the scream...

## **Chapter 1**

In his onyx-walled room in the occupation tower, Hulann, a naoli, had disassociated his overmind from his organic regulating brain. He removed it from all stimuli, including the cells of his memory banks, where it could not even dream. He slept the perfect death-like sleep that only his kind, in all the myriad worlds of the galaxy, seemed to be able to achieve.

The naoli? The lizard men? They're the ones who die every night, aren't they?

To Hulann in his sleeping state, there was no sound whatsoever. No light. No images of color, no heat or cold. If there was a taste upon his long, thin tongue, his overmind could not know. Indeed all the stimuli were so censored that there was not even darkness. Darkness, after all, represented only nothingness.

He could return to wakefulness in any one of three ways, though there was a decided order of preference among these methods. First, and most unpleasant, was his body's built-in danger alarm. If his regulating brain, the heavily convoluted organic portion of his mind, should discover something seriously amiss

with his temporal shell, it would be able to contact and wake his overmind through a fail-safe system of seldom-used third-order nerve clusters. Such a contact would shock its own gray cortex opening the nether-world pocket in which the ethereal overmind sleeps. (Pause here for an anecdote or two. In a thousand places across the stars, stories are told which concern the naoli and the seriousness with which alcoholic beverages affect their „danger alarm“ waking system. These stories are told in barrooms in port cities, down in the basements of questionable buildings that lease their rooms to even more questionable businessmen, or in sweet-drug centers on better looking but no more honest streets. It seems that while sweet-drugs bring only euphoria to the naoli, alcohol transforms them into bobbling, bouncing, scaly-tailed clowns who-after half an hour of making total fools of themselves-collapse into their death-sleep. They stretch out stiff as ice right on the floor. In some less reputable establishments (which is to say most of these places) the other patrons make great sport out of carrying the unconscious lizard men to odd places like garbage bins and ladies' washrooms and letting them there to wake. This damages nothing but the naoli's ego. A far more nasty pastime among these same drunken buffoons is to see how far they must go to trigger the naoli's „danger alarm“ system. But the alarm is stupefied by alcohol and does not work well. The stories you hear later are about naoli lying there with their webs sizzling, not even twitching in response. Or of a naoli with fifty pins stuck in its legs, sleeping peacefully while its heavy blood seeped out through its tough gray skin. Naolis do not often drink liquor. When they do, it is usually alone. They are not a stupid race.) Much less unpleasant but still not desirable, a naoli could come awake if the Phasersystem had something to tell him. That could, of course, be anything from urgent news to another spate of propaganda from the central committee. More often than not, it was the latter.

Finally, and best of all, the overmind could awake of its own accord. Before retiring into the nether-world, the overmind could plant a suggestion with a time-trigger. Then, ten or eight, or fifteen or twenty hours later, it would click into consciousness with the clarity of a tri-dimensional screen being turned on.

This morning, Hulann, a naoli archaeologist among the thousands in the occupation forces, was tuned into the real world by the second of these three methods, the Phasersystem.

One moment: Nothingness.

Then: Color. Crimson to bring total wakefulness. Rouge to indicate psychological conditioning period (i.e.-propaganda). Then amber to soothe jangled nerves.

Finally: Three-dimensional, total-sensory visions of the Phasersystem, fed directly into the organic brain and translated by the now functioning overmind.

In the Phaserdream, Hulann was in a thick forest of strange, dark trees whose criss-crossing arms and broad, black-veined leaves thatched a roof that thrust back the sun. Only fine rays of peach light filtered through to the wet, rustling, musty floor of the place. These were soon dissipated, for there was nothing here from which they might be reflected. The surface of each growth was dull, filmed with a mucous-like substance of a uniform gray-brown color.

He was on a narrow, winding path. Each step he took down this trail only isolated him farther from whatever place he had begun his journey, for the tangled

mass of vegetation flourishing on the forest bottom closed in behind him as swiftly as he advanced. There was no going back.

There seemed to be things hiding in the trees, He moved on.

Eventually, the trail began to narrow. Vines, stalks, and ropy roots, pressed closer, closer, until he could no longer walk without the chilling touch of the cold, slimy life forms.

He tucked his tail between his legs, wrapping it around his left thigh in the age-old reaction to danger, to the unknown, to that which made the scales of the scalp tighten and ache.

To the naoli, a voice chanted monotonously from nowhere, the human mind was unfathomable...

Still, the forest closed in on him. He could almost see it moving.

The things in the swaying trees whispered to one another.

They were whispering about him.

To the human, the same voice said, the naoli mind was equally mysterious...

Yes, definitely, something was moving in the trees. In several places, simultaneously, he caught a shivering, shimmering, rippling action. He was not certain whether he was seeing the movements of a dozen creatures spread along his flank-or whether one was being hidden behind the trunks and the leaves, watching.

The confrontation, the chanter chanted, was an inevitability. It was clear that the naoli had to move first in order to protect its very future...

Now, the trail had ceased to exist. Ahead, there was only dark vegetation. It seemed to writhe.

He looked behind. The trail had closed.

The naoli met the aliens...

Hulann saw that the small, bare circle where he stood was rapidly being encroached upon by the eerie fungus-like vines. A tentacle of green slithered over his foot, making him leap in surprise.

The naoli saw the danger...

The forest reared up, snaring him with its chlorophyl ropes. He found his arms pinned at his sides by clutching leaves. Roots had grown up one side of his feet, across them, down the other side and into the earth again. He could not move.

The movement of the things in the trees came closer.

He tried to scream.

If the naoli had not acted, the voices said—The things in the trees sprang, great dark shapes leaping onto him, engulfing him, chilly, wet things with fog for eyes and fingers that touched the insides of his over-mind, squeezing the warmth out of it...—the naoli would have died! The voice finished.

And Hulann died. The dark beasts sucked away his warmth, and he slipped out of his body forever.

There was a moment of intense blackness. Then the Phasersystem began to feed colors to him again, as it was feeding to nearly all the naoli on the occupation force. Amber to soothe the nerves again. Then blue to engender a sense of pride and fulfillment.

hen the last stage of the psychological conditioning/ propaganda began. The questioning to determine fitness:

Why did the naoli strike first?

Hulann's overmind replied and was monitored by the main computer behind the Phasersystem. „For survival of our race.“

Why did the naoli strike so completely?

„The human race was tenacious, ingenious. If the naoli had not been thorough, the human race would have grown, regrouped, and destroyed the naoli forever.“

Should any naoli feel guilt over this extinction of the human race?

„Guilt has no role in it. One cannot feel guilt over something on so cosmic a scale. Nature ordained the meeting of our races. Since we have met with the other eleven races without trouble, it must have been intended as a test to match us against the humans. We did not wish to war. It was a natural necessity. I feel no guilt.“

There was a pause in the Phasersystem's interrogation. A moment later, the voice continued, but on a slightly different tonal level. Hulann knew that he had been taken off the general program of questions and was receiving individual attention from a more refined portion of the computer's „brain“.

*You have registered eighteen points on a scale of one hundred in relation to your sense of guilt.*

Hulann was surprised.

*Is this a conscious guilt?* the computer asked. *Please be truthful. You will be under observation of a multi-systems polygraph.*

„It is not a conscious guilt,“ Hulann's overmind replied.

There was another pause as the Phasersystem considered the sincerity of his answer. *You are honest,* it said at last. *But if this guilt index should rise-even if it remains subconscious, you understand-beyond thirty points on a scale of one hundred, you will have to be replaced in your position with the occupation forces and returned to the home system for recuperation and therapy.*

„Of course,“ his overmind replied, though he felt depressed with such a prospect. He liked his work and considered it valuable. He was trying to save the fragments of a race none of them would see again.

The Phasersystem continued to probe his psyche, looking for faults that could open and swallow him.

*Somewhere, Hulann, a group of these humans is still holding out. Now and then, a representative of them is reported to have contacted members of the other eleven races in search of support for a counter-attack. We have thus far been unable to find the place they hide, the place they call the Haven. What do you feel when you consider the existence of this small but alien group?*

„Fear,“ he said. And he was telling the truth.

*If you discovered the whereabouts of these last creatures, would you report it to the central committee?*

„Yes,“ Hulann said.

*And if you were chosen to be in the expedition charged with the destruction of these last humans, could you kill them?*

„Yes.“

The Phasersystem was silent.

Then: *Consciously, you are telling the truth. But your guilt index jumped to twenty-three on both questions. You will request an appointment with the traumatist at his earliest convenience.*

Then the colors came in, orange at first, then fading through various shades of yellow. Lighter and lighter until there were no colors and the Phasersystem had released control of him.

Hulann remained in the force webbing that held him suspended four feet above the blue floor. It seemed as if he floated above the sky, a bird or a cloud, not an earthbound creature. He probed his own mind, looking for the guilt the computer told him was present. He could see nothing. Yet the computer could not err. When he thought of the Haven, his scalp tightened and hurt. He was afraid. Afraid not only for himself, but for his race and history.

For a short moment, he had a vision of dark, fog-eyed things hiding behind a shield of trees, watching.

He snorted, opening his second set of nostrils now that he would need a full air supply for movement. When his lungs swelled and adjusted to the new air flow, he got out of bed.

For some reason, he was sore this morning, as if he had done a great deal of work the day before (when, in fact, he had not)-or as if he had tossed and turned in his sleep. Which was impossible for a naoli who slept the graveyard slumber. He very much wanted to cleanse himself, but he would soon have to be at the diggings to direct the day's operation.

He dialed breakfast, devoured it within minutes (a delicious paste of fish eggs and larva, something a remote force of naoli would surely have had to do without even a mere fifty years ago. Progress was truly wonderful.) and looked at the clock. If he left now, he would arrive at the diggings before the others. He did not want to do that.

Well, after all, he was the director of the team. If he were late, that was merely his prerogative.

He went into the cleansing room and cycled the watertight door behind. He set the dials where he liked them, and the thick, creamy fluid began to bubble upward through the holes in the floor.

He scrunched his toes in it, feeling good.

When it was up to his knees, he bent and splashed it over himself. It was warm and viscous. He felt it sluicing at his thousands of overlapping scales, drawing out the dust that had accumulated between them.

When it was four feet deep in the cubicle, he stretched in it like a swimmer, letting the stuff buoy him. He was tempted to return to the dials and set the room for longer cycles, but he wasn't that irresponsible. Soon, the mud-cream began to grow less heavy, thinning, thinning, until it seemed only as thick as water (though it still buoyed him with the same efficiency of the mud-cream). This new form washed off the cleansing cream, dissipated it. Then the clear fluid began draining out of holes in the floor.

He stood, waited until it was gone. His scales were already dry. He opened the door and went into the living room, gathered up his note tapes and stuffed them into the recorder case. He slung the recorder over one arm, the camera over the other, and set out for the diggings.

The others were busy with their individual projects. They toiled through the half-demolished structures, prying with their tools, x-raying partitions and mounds of fallen stones and steel. They had been assigned the ruined sections of the city which the humans had destroyed with their own weapons trying to fend off the naoli forces. Hulann did not care that their site was a difficult one. If he had been assigned to the group tilling the un-destroyed sectors of the city, he would have been bored to tears. Naoli could cry. There was no adventure in gathering things that were sitting in the open. The pleasure came from unearthing a treasure, from the painstaking work of separating a find from the rubble around it.

Hulann nodded to the others, stepped by Fiala, then turned to look at her collection of statsheets which she had uncovered only yesterday. They had been waterlogged but readable. She was translating.

„Any luck?“ he asked.

„Nothing much that’s new.“

She licked her lips with her tongue, then stuck more of it out and flicked at her chin. She was pretty. He did not understand how he had almost walked by without stopping.

„Can’t expect a treasure every day,“ he said.

„But they have a mania for repetition. I’ve found that.“

„How so?“

„Day after day, the same stories appear in the stat sheets. Oh, new ones come along. But once they printed a story, they didn’t let up on it. Here. Look. For seven days in succession, this stat sheet gave frontpage coverage to the destruction of their Saturn moon bases and the pulling back of their defense ring.“

„It was a major story.“

„No story is that major. After two or three days, they were only repeating themselves.“

„Research it,“ he said. „It may prove interesting.“

She went back to her papers, forgetting his intrusion.

He watched her a moment longer, reluctant to leave. More than any other female he had seen in the last two hundred years, she made him want to make a verbal commitment. It would be a delight to go away with her, into the warren of his own house back on the home world, and fuse for sixteen days, living off the fat of their bodies and the ceremonial waters they would take with them.

He could envision her in ecstasy.

And when she came out of the warren, she would have the gaunt, fleshless look of a desirable woman who has mated for a standard fusing period.

She would be gorgeous in the aura of her femininity.

But Fiala was not concerned with the things in his reproductive pouch. Indeed, he often wondered if she had a sex drive. Perhaps she was not a male or a female at all. Perhaps she was a third sex: an archaeologist.

He continued along the diggings until he reached the end, walked a hundred yards through a narrow street where the substantially damaged buildings still stood. He had saved the best spot for himself. Others might consider that reprehensible, but he viewed it as a simple prerogative of his position.

He went through the doorway of a large, marble and concrete structure. The door had been of glass, shattered during the final battles. Inside, he crossed the littered floor and went down the dark stairs, feeling a delicious thrill at entering the catacombs of the mysterious creatures whose planet this had once been. At the bottom of the steps, he flicked on the lights he had rigged three days ago.

Light sprung up for a great distance. Today, he would extend the bulbs another few blocks. The cellars and the sub-cellars of this entire section of the city had been connected and turned into a repository for what the humans considered precious. Hulann meant to open all of it and see everything first-hand before pulling the other members of the team from their present tasks to sift through what he had found.

He walked to the end of the lights and took his camera and recorder off his shoulders, piled them next to the cases of tools left since yesterday. Taking a handlamp, he went to the wall of rubble, where a ceiling had partially caved in. There was a gap between the ruins and the walls that he just might be able to push through to reach the cellars beyond and string his lights.

He clambered up the stones, sliding back a bit for, every piece of progress he made. Dust rose around him.

At the top, he stretched on his belly and went through the gap into darkness. He turned up the power of his lamp and illuminated most of the chamber in which he found himself. The place was a library of sorts, full of booktapes. For the humans to have buried it this deep must mean that the tomes here contained were considered by them as most valuable.

He advanced to a rack of spools and began to read the titles. He did, not recognize most of them. What ones he knew were fiction. This, of course, was quite a surprise. The humans he had met-that his race had met-in the stars some hundred and seventy years ago had not been the type to enjoy fiction. They had been cold, precise men with little time to smile and only a slight imagination.

Yet here, apparently, was a room full of novels.

And they had thought highly enough of them to bury them against destruction.

He was still fumbling through the racks, amazed, when the light, airy voice called to him in pure, unaccented Terran: „Above you! A rat!“

He whirled, looked up.

The rat hung almost upside down from a beam. It's red eyes glared with reflected light.

Foolishly, he had come without a weapon.

He held the beam of the handlamp on it, paralyzing it, blinding it. He could see it plainly, and he was not happy with what he could see. It weighed a good twenty pounds; it had the wide mouth of a mutant, and the extra long teeth. He could hear them gnashing. Its claws, now hooked around the overhead beam, were more wicked than those of a normal rat. It was ironic that one of the naoli's own weapons might kill a naoli. Ironic, not amusing.

The naoli had introduced mutated rats into the humans' home planet some sixty years ago, one of the preliminary weapons for the five-plus decades of the final assault. They had bred true in the sewers and cellars and had done their damage.

Bright teeth: gnashing.



Hulann held the light on the rat, keeping it hypnotized. He looked around for a weapon, something, anything. It was not his time to be particular. To his right was a length of steel pipe that had twisted loose, fallen to the floor. The end had twisted away in some bomb blast and was pointed, deadly. He inched to it, stooped, and picked it up with his free hand.

The rat hissed at him.

He advanced on it, clutching the pipe so firmly that the muscles of his six-fingered hand ached.

Perhaps the growing brightness of the light warned the rat. It stiffened, then scurried along the beam, almost escaping the blinding radiance.

Hulann shifted the lamp, leaped, jabbed the sharp end of the pipe up at the low beam, caught the mutant on its flank. Blood appeared.

The rat screeched, scurried further along, confused and angry. Froth tipped its brown lips and flecked its dung-colored fur. When he followed it with the light, it scrambled about on its perch and tried to go back the way it had come.

He jabbed at it again.

It fell onto the floor, momentarily escaping his light. When it came to its feet, almost instantly, it saw him and came for him, chittering insanely. It was more than likely rabid; the mutated rats had been built with a low tolerance for diseases which they might catch and later transfer to humans.

He stepped back. But that was not a good move, and he knew it.

The rat's feet chattered on the cement floor. Pieces of cement, shards of glass, and other small debris rattled out from under it.

There was no time to open a link with the Phasersystem and send for help. He would be dead by the time they got there. He had to rely on his own agility. He side-stepped, swung out at the beast with the pipe and connected, locking it end for end.

The rat's squeal echoed from wall to wall. For a moment, there were a hundred rats in the room. It came up, staggering, and scampered back at him, completely mad now.

He swung again, missed the rat, and slammed the pipe into a steel support beam. There was an explosion of sound in the room, and the concussion surged back into his arm, making it numb. The pipe fell out of his fingers, clattered on the floor.

The noise made the rat leap aside and fall back. But now that the echo had died, it came at him once more.

His hand was still too weak to grasp anything.

The rat was close enough to leap. It had almost launched itself—when a chunk of concrete smashed into it, crushing its hindquarters. Another chunk rained down, missing it. A third connected. And a fourth. It stopped squirming then—absolutely dead.

In his excitement, Hulann had all but forgotten the voice that had first called out a warning to him. The warning that had been in pure Terran.—Unaccented Terran. Massaging his numbed arm, he looked around until he saw the human.

It was a young one, about eleven years old, crouched on a shelf of rubble to his left. It looked down on him with a curious expression, then eyed the rat.

„Is it dead?“

„Yes,“ Hulann said.

„Are you all right?“

„Yes.“

„It was a mutant.“

„I know. Yes. A mutant.“

The boy looked at the naoli, then back the way the alien had come. „You’re alone?“

Hulann nodded.

„I guess you’ll turn me over to the rest of them.“

Hulann’s chest was afire. He was waging a constant battle between his mind and overmind, trying desperately to stifle at least a little of the fear his organic brain was feeding the higher levels of his thinking apparatus. He had seen humans before. But never when he was alone. And never when they would have so much to hate him for.

„Will you turn me in?“ the boy asked.

Hulann was afraid. Desperately. Painfully. But there was something else stirring in him as well. It took some moments before he realized that this other thing was guilt.

Though surely there must have been things the boy wished to say to Hulann (curses and damnations should fill at least an hour; a naoli rarely engaged in physical violence with one of his own kind, resorting to sustained verbal denunciations to work off accumulated frustrations), he merely sat upon the rubble, the concrete, wood and steel, the plastic and aluminum, watching the alien. He did not seem frightened nor particularly angry. Curious, more than anything else.

It was quite an uncomfortable situation as far as Hulann was concerned. To be spat upon and reviled would have raised his own hatred. Hating the boy, he could have acted. But the lengthening silence was a wall he could not breach.

Hulann went to the rat, kicked the chunks of stone away and looked at the corpse. He prodded it with a tentative foot. The fleshy body quivered with a post mortem muscle spasm and was still again. He walked back to the boy and looked up at him where he sat just slightly above eye level.

The boy looked back, his head tilted to one side. He was, Hulann supposed, a pretty specimen by human standards. His head seemed somewhat too large, but its features were well placed for his species. He had a thick mass of golden hair. Hair alone astounded the scaled naoli; golden hair was nearly too much to comprehend. Blue eyes beneath yellow brows, a small nose, and thin lips. His smooth skin was dotted here and there with what the humans called „freckles“ and strangely considered an attribute—but which the naoli chose to regard as imperfections in coloration and possibly the marks of disease (although they never had been able to study a freckled human at close quarters).

„What are you doing here?“ Hulann asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

Hulann interpreted this as indecision, though he was not certain that some more subtle, complex answer was being given.

„You must have some reason for being down here in the cellars!“

„Hiding,“ the boy said simply.

Hulann felt the guilt again. He was doubly frightened. To be in the presence of a human after all that had happened was terrifying enough. But he was also afraid of his own guilt—and his lack of concern for that guilt. A good naoli would immediately call for help on the Phasersystem, then turn himself into the traumatist and get himself sent home for therapy. Somehow, though, the guilt feeling seemed fitting. Deep in his overmind, he had a desire to know penance.

He repeated the arguments fed to all the naoli by the Phasersystem during the psychological conditioning periods every morning. He attempted to recall that cold, eerie forest where the plants had been sentient and monsters had lurked in the trees. But that seemed silly now.

„Are you turning me in?“ the boy asked.

„That is my duty.“

„Of course. Your duty.“ It was said without malice.

„I would be severely punished.“

The boy said nothing.

„Unless, of course, you were to escape before I could apprehend you,“ Hulann said.

Even as he spoke, he could not believe his vocal apparatus had formed the words. He had always been an individual of great common sense, of cool thought and reasoned action. Now, he was engaging in sheer madness.

„That’s no good,“ the boy said, shaking his head so his yellow hair bounced and sprayed about. To Hulann, the sight was breathtaking. „I can’t get away. I crawled in here because I thought it was safe. I thought I’d come out when you’d all gone.“

„Ten years,“ Hulann said. „That would be ten years.“ The boy looked surprised. „That’s how long our researches will take—the reconstruction of daily human life alone.“

„Anyway,“ the boy interrupted, „I’m stuck here. There’s food and water. I thought I could hole up. Then you came along. See, it’s my leg.“

Hulann moved closer, raising the double lids completely free of his huge, oval eyes. „What’s wrong with it?“

„I was hurt,“ the boy said, „in the final stand.“

„You participated in the battle?“

„I was on a grenade lobbing station. Loader, not marksman. We were struck with something. Don’t know what. See? Here. It’s kind of dirty, but you can see.“

Hulann was within a foot of the boy now. He saw a tear in the lad’s thigh, perhaps five inches in length. It was crusted with dirt and blood, very ugly looking. His trouser leg had been torn off, and there was nothing to protect the wound from all the filth it had come into contact with. Hulann could see a giant bruise spreading out in all directions from the gash.

„You’ll poison from that,“ he said.

The boy shrugged.

„Oh, certainly you will.“ He turned and started back toward the other cellar, beyond the caved-in ceiling.

„What are you doing?“ the human asked.

„I’ve got a kit in the next room. I’ll bring it back and do something for your leg.“

When he returned with the medicines, the boy had come down from the rubble and was sitting on the floor. Hulann could see that he was in pain. But the

moment the boy realized the naoli had returned, he erased the grimace from his features.

„Some of the medicines would endanger you,“ he said, talking as much for his own gratification as for the human’s. „But I think I can remember which ones will do some good.“ He fumbled through the kit, brought out a hypodermic needle designed for naoli skin. He would have to remember to be gentle; human skin was fragile. He filled it with green liquid from a green bottle. When he turned to inject it into the boy’s thigh, he stopped. „It should be cleaned,“ he said.

„It won’t clot,“ the boy advised. „It stopped bleeding a lot faster when I let the dirt collect.“

Hulann dampened a sterile sponge and bent to the muddied wound. Abruptly, he recoiled, realizing he was going to have to touch the human.

„Could you clean it?“ he asked of the boy.

The human took the sponge, smelled it for some reason or other, then began swabbing the wound. It was soon apparent that three hands were required to do a proper job, two to hold away the ragged edges of the flesh and the third to daub at the crushed slash.

„Here,“ Hulann said at last, taking the sponge. „Hold your hand here.“

And he touched the human. He held one side of the wound while the boy held the other, and he worked the antiseptic into the flesh until he had sponged away the last of the dirt. New blood slowly welled, ran down the leg.

Hulann injected the green fluid into several points about the wound, then bound the thigh in a pressure bandage of light, two-molecule cloth that had almost no bulk. The bleeding stopped.

„It will be healed in three to four days,“ he said.

„We had these bandages too. But they were pretty scarce for civilians during the last ten years of the war.“

As Hulann repacked the kit, he asked, „Why didn’t you just let the rat kill me?“

„They’re ugly. No one should die under one.“

Hulann winced. His double stomach burned on both levels with acidic agitation. Surely his guilt index must have risen higher than eighteen points. Or was it merely that his guilt was now a conscious thing?

„But I am a naoli,“ he argued. „We’re at war.“

The boy did not answer. When Hulann clamped down the top of the medical kit, the boy said, „My name’s Leo. Do you have one? A name?“

„Hulann.“

He thought it over, nodded his yellow head with approval. „I’m eleven. How old are you?“

„Two hundred and eighty-four of your years.“

„You’re lying!“ To lie seemed a greater crime than all the acts of war.

„No, no. We have a long life span. Your kind dies at a hundred and fifty. We live for five or six hundred years.“

They sat in silence a time, listening to the rustle of things in the rubble, to the moaning wind that had picked up above and somehow found its way down into this dungeon. At last, the boy said, „Are you turning me in?“

„I guess so,“ Hulann said.

„I don’t think you will.“

„What?“

The boy indicated the leg dressing. „After healing me, why take me in to be killed?“

Hulann watched his enemy, his friend. His overmind was overtaxed trying to analyze his own behavior. He was obviously quite a sick creature. It would be a crime against his race to release this beast. It would have bordered on sin, except that his people had no such concept. Whatever this boy did from now until his death would be Hulann's fault. He might murder other naoli. And if Hulann's crime were discovered he would either be tried as a traitor or sent home for total washing and restructuring.

The organic brain specialists had developed startling techniques during the war. They had learned how to totally erase a captured human's mind and refill it with false identity and purpose. It had been these unknowing traitors among the human fleets who had signaled the turning of the war tide against mankind. The naoli doctors had now learned to use the same procedures on their own kind in the treatment of the most mentally deranged.

Once washed, he would never remember his first two hundred and eighty-seven years of life. The centuries to come would be nothing more than a farce without history—and therefore without purpose. Such a thing should be avoided at all cost.

Yet now he was considering letting the human escape, thereby risking all of these things. It had to do with the boy's saving him from the rat. But there was also that great pool of misery lying on his soul bottom: the knowledge that he had assisted in the extermination of an entire race.

„No,“ he said. „I am not taking you in to be killed. But I want you to be gone from here as fast as possible. I will be back tomorrow to continue my work. You will be gone?“

„Of course,“ Leo said. Hulann thought of him as Leo now, not just as a human or a boy. He wondered if Leo also thought of him by his naoli name.

„I'll go now,“ Hulann said.

He went. He took with him the knowledge that he was now a criminal against all others of his race, against the naoli treasures and traditions, against the beloved home worlds and the powerful central committee. Against Fiala—and maybe against himself as well.

Banalog, the chief traumatist of the occupation forces' Second Division, leaned his head into the scope of the tapeviewer and watched the life history of Hulann Po'naga flit before his weary eyes. The film moved at a rate four times faster than he could consciously comprehend.

The end of the film passed, then only whiteness. Banalog pushed the viewer away and settled back in his chair, crossing his hands on the slight rise of his primary stomach. When his overmind had mulled the data, he punched a desk stud and spoke to the air in a gruff, commanding tone—his natural voice.

„Tentative recommendation based on files. Hulann should be returned to home world for therapy. Otherwise, he will become a hopeless neurotic. He is a fine and gentle person; the war has affected him more than most. Too, he has a history of mild obsessions. Therapy will be to his advantage. Naturally, final

recommendation will be deferred until I've seen the patient first-hand as per the Phasersystem's advice. Perhaps it is relevant to note that, although he was told to contact me as soon as possible, Hulann has thus far not come to schedule an interview. This may be an indication he is suffering and subconsciously nursing his guilt. The Phasersystem should remind him of the necessity of making an appointment during the condition period in the morning."

He shut off the recorder.

For a while, he sat in the office with the lights dimmed nearly to total darkness. Not much illumination filtered through the windows from the late winter afternoon.

He thought of the home world where his family was now safe. The menace had been put down; mankind was gone. There would be much mating, many days spent in the warrens in rejoicing. He thought of his children, the entire brood of three hundred and some. How many exactly? He did not know. But he was proud of all of them.

Inexorably, his mind traced rambling patterns until it had returned to the situation at hand. The occupied planet. The dead cities. The ill naoli stationed here.

So Hulann's conscience was bothering him. Genocide was a bitter pill to swallow.

Banalog toyed with the recorder microphone, then thumbed the lights completely out. The room seemed to shrink in the darkness until it was the size of a closet.

He rose from his desk and went to the window to look upon the fallen city that the humans had called Boston. He could not see much, for the clouds hung low and a snowfall was beginning. Sheets of fine white flakes drifted by the glass, some smearing wetly along it, distorting what little the traumatist could see of the place where men had once lived.

So Hulann's conscience was bothering him, eh?

Well, there were other naoli with the same problem...

Later that same night, Fiala stretched in the invisible strands of her bed and allowed the pleasant power web to caress her lithe body. Though her flesh tingled excitingly and began to feel better as the tension and fatigue drained from it, her mind still boiled. She was cultivating her hatred for Hulann.

There was no reason why he should have been appointed director of this team. His record was no better than hers. Not substantially, anyway. And his time of service was actually somewhat less. She could see no logic in his receiving the position other than the possibility that he had been able to pull strings of which she had no knowledge.

Today, when he had left the diggings early, he had looked drawn and troubled. His lids had been drooping until his eyes were only slits. He had his lips drawn tightly over his teeth, covering them: the sign of shame. She knew that he was a strong possibility for therapy, and she had been expecting him to be pulled out of the operation by this time, sent home to recover. Yet he hung on.

Damn him!

And she could no longer afford to wait for his breakdown. Whoever brought this job to a conclusion would be established for the rest of his or her career. It was the

greatest chore in the history of archaeology, in the entire span of naoli scientific history. And Boston was one of the few unatomized cities where something worthwhile could still be uncovered.

There must be some way of hurrying Hulann's certain collapse, she thought, though the method presently evaded her. She toiled over various plans, rejecting one, after another, and finally gave up on it for the night.

Elsewhere in the dead city:

Hulann slept the death sleep, his overmind tucked in its nether-world pocket. Even with his burdens, he could know peace in this manner.

Leo had finished fashioning a place for himself among clothes that had spilled from a shattered closet. He nestled deeply in them to ward off the cold of the New England night. There was a knife by his side which he could reach easily if he should need it. As he was falling asleep, a picture of perfect clarity burst into his mind. It was of his father, lying dead beneath the grenade lobbing station. He sat upright in the clothes, as if activated by a spring, shivering. He refused to allow himself to think about it. When he felt he could trust to sleep without a nightmare, he laid down again and sought his pocket of warmth.

Two blocks away, above ground, a winter bird worked its way down into a nest of offal and grass, string and ribbon, pecking and plucking at the fibers of its home with a quick, unpleasant nervousness. Farther along the rain gutter, a hundred feet from where the bird worried, a sick and dying mutant rat crept as stealthily as it could. Its head kept drooping, and it found itself stopping at the same spot for long periods of time, delirious. Its legs felt weak and almost useless to it, and there was a sharp burning sensation along its spine. It could not know of the naoli virus that did deadly work within it. It only knew that it was hungry. When it was within a few feet of the nest, it stopped and tensed to leap. Somehow, the bird heard it and took wing into the darkness. The diseased rat jumped, in one last, desperate effort, missed the slapping feathers, and felt itself going over the edge of the rain gutter. It clawed wildly at the stone, but could find no purchase. It fell away from the top of the empty cathedral toward the silent street below.

In the chief administration building of the occupation forces, the programmers of the Phaserdreams worked industriously on the broadcasts for the following morning. Now and then, one of the technicians took a break, went outside and popped a sweet-drug lozenge for fifteen minutes of drifting pleasure, watched the snow fall and eddy around his splayed feet. Under the effects of the chemicals, it seemed as if the naoli were one with the floating flakes, as though losing his identity to the natural forces of this world.

## **Chapter 2**

The second warning from the Phasersystem had disconcerted Hulann. He had honestly forgotten all about the need to make an appointment with the traumatist. He was shaken by his neglectfulness and decided to complete his obligation before

going to the diggings. He set a time with Banalog's computer-secretary for late that afternoon. He went to work, late for the second day in a row.

He passed the others without comment, noticing the odd looks he drew from them. Realizing that his lips were pulled in over his teeth giving him a look of shame, he quickly rearranged his facial composure until he seemed nothing more than a happy bone hunter on his way to rich graveyards.

He went into the tumbled-down building, down the stairs, into the cellar, flicking on the lights as he went. He walked to the break in the continuous stretch of rooms, took his handlamp through the hole and into the chamber where the human child had been yesterday.

Leo was still there.

He sat in a pile of clothes, wearing two coats to keep from freezing, eating some earthly fruit from a plastic container. The container apparently had a heat tab, for steam was rising from it.

Hulann stood in disbelief, his eyes totally uncovered, the lids folded like accordions in the overhanging ledge of bone above his sockets.

„Would you like some?“ Leo asked, offering the fruit.

„What are you doing here?“ Hulann demanded.

Leo said nothing, took another bite of food, swallowed it. „Well, where else was there for me to go?“

„The city,“ Hulann said. „The whole city!“

„No. There are other naoli. It is all occupied.“

„Out of the city, then. Away from here!“

„My leg's better,“ Leo admitted. „Though I couldn't walk well on it yet. Even so, there isn't anything outside the city. There has been a war, remember.“

Hulann could find nothing to say. For the first time in his life, he felt that he could not control his emotions. There was a great desire in him to kneel and relax and cry.

„It's so cold,“ Leo said, still eating. „Yet you don't wear anything. Aren't you cold?“

Hulann crossed, sat down in the dirt a few feet in front of the boy. Almost absentmindedly, he said, „No. I'm not cold. We have no constant body temperature such as humans have. Ours varies according to the cold. Though not greatly, really. And then there are our skins. Little body heat can escape us if we wish to contain it.“

„Well, I'm cold!“ Leo said. He put the empty can aside. Slight white vapors still steamed upward from it. „I've looked for a personal heating unit ever since the city fell. I can't find one. Do you think you can bring one to me?“

Hulann looked incredulous. Yet he found himself saying, „I've seen a few recovered from the ruins. Maybe.“

„That would be swell.“

„If I bring it, would you leave?“ he asked.

Leo shrugged his shoulders, which seemed to be his most characteristic gesture. Hulann wished he knew for certain what emotion it expressed. „Where would I go?“



Hulann waved his arms weakly, pointlessly. „Away from the city. Even if there isn't much of anything out there, you could take food and wait until we were gone.“

„Ten years.“

„Yes.“

„That's silly.“

„Yes.“

„So we're back where we started.“

„Yes.“

„Doesn't that hurt?“ Leo asked, leaning forward.

„What?“

„Your lips. When you pull them in over your teeth like that.“

Hulann quickly showed his teeth, put a hand to his lips and felt them. „No,“ he said. „We have few nerves in our outer layers of flesh.“

„You looked funny,“ Leo said. He drew his own lips in over his teeth and made talking motions, then burst out laughing.

Hulann found himself laughing also, watching the boy mimic him. Did he really look like that? It was a mysterious expression on a naoli; or at least he had been raised to respect it as such. In this mock version, it truly was humorous.

„What are you doing?“ the boy squealed, laughing even harder.

„What?“ Hulann asked, looking about him. His body was still. His hands and feet did not move.

„That noise,“ Leo said.

„Noise?“

„That wheezing sound.“

Hulann was perplexed. „Mirth,“ he said. „Laughter like yours.“

„It sounds like a drain that's clogged,“ Leo said. „Do I sound that bad to you?“

Hulann began laughing again. „To me you sound strange. I had not noticed before. You sound like some birds that we have on my world. They are great, hairy things with legs three feet long and little, tiny bills.“

They laughed some more until they were tired.

„How long can you stay today?“ the boy asked when they had sat in comfortable silence for some minutes.

The depression settled on Hulann again. „Not long. And you can stay for even a shorter time. You must leave. Now.“

„I've said I can't, Hulann.“

„No. There will be no refusal. You must leave now, or I will turn you over to the executioners as I should have in the first place.“

Leo made no move to leave.

Hulann stood. „Now!“ he commanded.

No, Hulann.“

„Now, now, now!“ He grabbed the boy, lifted him off the floor, surprised at his own lightness. He shook him until the boy's face was a blur. „Now, or I will kill you myself!“ He dropped him back onto the floor.

Leo made no move to depart. He looked at Hulann, then down at the clothes spread around him. He began to draw them in against himself, cuddled into a

hollow to contain the heat from his body. With only his upper face uncovered, he stared at the naoli.

„You can't do this to me,“ Hulann said. He was no longer angry, just exasperated. „You can't make me do these things. Please. It is not right of you.“

The boy did not answer.

„Don't you see what you're doing? You're making a criminal of me. You are making me a traitor.“

A gust of cold air found its way through the debris and twisted by the two of them. Hulann did not notice. The child drew deeper into his nest.

„You should have let the rat kill me. You were a stupid child for warning me. What am I to you? I am the enemy. I was better dead to you than alive.“

The boy listened.

„Stupid. And a traitor to your own race.“

„The war is over,“ Leo said. „You won.“

Hulann hunched as if bending over a pain in his stomachs. „No! No, the war is not over—until one or the other race is extinct. There is no quarter in this battle.“

„You can't believe that.“

Hulann did not speak. He did not, of course, believe it—just as the boy had said. Perhaps he had never believed it. Now, he realized the war was somewhat of a mistake. Man and naoli had never been able to co-exist even in a cold war sort of situation. They were too alien to meet on any common ground. Yet this child was reachable. They were communicating. Which meant there had been a flaw in their reasoning—which meant the war could have been avoided.

„Well,“ Hulann said, „I have no choice. I must open these cellars to the researchers on my team. I cannot hide their existence. I'll string the lights. If you are not gone when I call them in, it is your problem. It is no longer mine.“

He got up and began his work for the day. Two hours before he was due to go to the traumatist, he had strung lights through most of the cellars. He came back and looked at the boy. „The next cellar is the last. I've finished.“

Leo said nothing.

„You should be going.“

Again: „There is nowhere for me to go.“

Hulann stood, watching the child for a long while. At last, he turned and unstrung the glow bulbs, pulled up the poles he had planted, rewound the wire and took everything into the outer cellar. He came back and put his handlamp with the boy.

„It will give you light tonight.“

„Thank you,“ Leo said.

„I have undone my work.“

Leo nodded.

„Perhaps, tomorrow, I can fill up the crevice in the wall of ruins, seal this at the last cellar and try to keep the continuation from being discovered. Then, you would not be bothered.“

„I'll help you,“ Leo said.

„You know,“ Hulann said, his heavy face strained so even the boy could see the anguish in the alien features, „you are... you are... crucifying me?“

And he went away. Leaving the boy with light.

„Come in, Hulann,“ the traumatist Banalog said, smiling and friendly as all traumatists are with their patients. He exuded a fatherliness, an exaggerated sense of well-being that could not help but infect his charges.

Hulann took the seat to the right of Banalog’s desk while the older naoli went behind and sat down in his customary chair, leaned back and feigned relaxation.

„I am sorry I forgot to arrange an appointment yesterday,“ Hulann said.

„Nothing damaged,“ Banalog assured him gently, quietly. „Just shows that this guilt is not so bad as the Phasersystem computer thinks. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been able to continue working as you did.“ Banalog wondered if his lie was transparent. Hulann seemed to perk up, and he thought that he had told it with conviction. But now he was certain that the archaeologist was consciously aware of his guilt and trying to hide it.

„I didn’t know I had a guilt complex until the Phasersystem told me about it.“

Banalog waved his hands to indicate the unimportance of the situation Hulann now found himself in. The point was to, a little at least, put the patient at ease. He pulled his chair in closer to the desk, rested his arms on the top and began to punch a series of buttons on his multicolored control console.

There was a stirring above Hulann’s head. As he looked up to see the cause of the noise and movement, the hood of the monitoring robot, gray and dully burnished, descended like a landing shuttlecraft. It stopped two feet above where he sat, the four-foot diameter of the hood radiating, to all sides of him.

Banalog worked other controls, calling forth a post which consisted of lenses and sensors of various types, all of high receptivity. It rose from the floor, half a dozen feet before Hulann, stopped when it was at his eye level.

„I thought this equipment was for severe cases,“ he said to Banalog, losing the sense of ease he had entered this room with, a hard edge of terror in his voice.

„Misconception,“ Banalog said as if he were quite bored, really, with this whole affair. „We have much more sophisticated equipment for a severe case.“

„But are you afraid that I would lie to you?“

„No, no. I do not insult you, Hulann. Such a thing is opposite of my purpose. But remember that the mind is strange. Your overmind may lie to you. You would sit there telling me what you thought was the truth about your guilt complex-but it would still be festering inside you. We are all creatures strange to our own selves.“

The machines vibrated slightly as they came to life out of oiled slumber. Some of the sensors glowed green, like a naoli’s eyes. Others were yellow and purple. Hulann’s skin crawled as the probing waves penetrated him without sensation and began collecting data for the traumatist.

„Then it is necessary?“ he asked.

„Not necessary, Hulann. That makes it sound as if you are in a bad way. You do not feel ill, do you? I should hope not. Believe me, I think your problem is a minor one. Not necessary, just standard procedure in such a case.“

Hulann nodded, resigned to it. He would have to be extremely cautious and hedge his answers, try to be as honest as possible—but also try to phrase his responses so that they were literally true while not giving away the exact situation.

The questioning began gently.

„You like your work, Hulann?“

„Very much.“

„How many years have you been an archaeologist?“

„Seventy-three.“

„Before that?“

„A writer.“

„How interesting!“

„Yes.“

„A writer of what?“

„History. Creative history.“

„Archaeology, then, was a natural follow-up.“

„I suppose so.“

„Why do you like archaeology, Hulann? Wait. Why do you like this archaeological job in particular?“

„The excitement of resurrecting the past, of finding things unexpectedly, of learning.“

Banalog checked the readout monitors on his desk and tried to keep from frowning. He looked up at Hulann and, with an effort, smiled. „Does your work here on this planet assuage your guilt any?“

„I don't understand.“

„Well, do you feel as if you are working out a penance, so to speak, in reconstructing the daily life of mankind?“

„And so the questions went. Probing... prodding... It soon began to be clear to Hulann that Banalog was learning more than he had intended to let him discover. He tried to answer as well as he could, but there was no way to hide from the probing traumatist and the clever machines.

Then the trouble came.

Banalog leaned forward, conspiratorially, and said, „Of course, Hulann, you are as aware as I am that your subconscious guilt is now a conscious one.“

„I—“

Banalog frowned and waved him to silence before he could offer denial. „It is. I can see that, Hulann. But there is something else you are hiding from me.“

„Nothing.“

„Please, Hulann.“ Banalog looked pained. „This is for your own good. You know that, don't you?“

„Yes,“ he said reluctantly.

„Then, will you tell me?“

„I can't.“

„You would feel guilty?“

He nodded.

Banalog sat back in his chair and was quiet for a long while. The machines continued to hum and lance their invisible fingers through Hulann. Banalog turned to the window and watched the snow falling in the dim light. It had been spitting for a day now, but it was putting the white stuff down in earnest finally, had been doing that since noon. He worked over the details he had thus far uncovered, munched them with his overmind until he thought he had the proper question to pose next.

Hulann, does this have anything to do with something you have uncovered in your diggings?”

The monitors on Banalog’s desk reacted violently.

„No,“ Hulann said.

Banalog ignored the answer and paid close attention to the opinions of his machines. „What have you found?”

„Nothing.“

„What could it be that you would consider so important that you would risk a washing and restructuring to hide it from me?”

Hulann was terrified. Suddenly, he saw his world falling down around him, crumbling to ruin, powdering, blowing away on a cold wind. His past would be erased by the washing techniques. His first two hundred and eighty-seven years would be taken from him. He would have no past for his children. The stigma would be borne by his family for a dozen generations.

Banalog raised his head, his lids stripped back, looking suddenly shocked. „Hulann! Have you found a human in those ruins of yours? A living human?”

„You have!“ Banalog gasped.

Hulann had a vision of Leo being dragged from the shattered, charred building. He had another vision of the boy’s frightened face—and a final picture of the small, twisted, bloodied body lying on the frozen earth after the executioners had finished with it.

He came out of the chair with a swiftness he did not know he could summon, a swiftness reserved for the first two hundred years of a naoli’s life. He went over the desk, not around it, tramping on the screens of the traumatist’s data devices, flicking switches off and on as he scrambled over them.

Banalog tried to scream.

Hulann toppled the traumatist’s chair, spilled both of them onto the floor, using his forearm to choke the other naoli’s mouth so full that the call for help could not be heard. Banalog tried to push up. Though he was a hundred years Hulann’s senior, he almost managed to break free.

Swinging his arm, Hulann cracked Banalog’s head. It bounced off the floor. The wide, green eyes were shut off by the slowly descending double lids.

Hulann struck again, to make certain. But Banalog was unconscious and would remain that way long enough for Hulann to make plans.

Make plans.

The full understanding of his position came to him harshly, making him dizzy and weak. He thought that he might vomit. He felt the contents of his more sensitive second stomach surging back into his first stomach. But he managed to stop the regression there. Up until a moment ago, he had been a candidate for washing and restructuring. That had been bad. Now, it was worse. He was a traitor. He had struck Banalog to keep himself from being committed and to keep a human child safe. They would surely execute him now.

Once he had thought losing his past was the worst they could do to him, worse than death as a traitor. Now he realized this was not so. At least, restructured, he could give his children the heritage of his future deeds. But executed as a turncoat, he would give them nothing but disgrace for centuries to come.

What could be done? Nothing. There was no way to salvage his family name. He was only thankful that he had bred so few children. He rose from Banalog and considered his next step. Suicide, at first, seemed the only honorable path. As not even that would redeem his name, it seemed silly. He had nothing now but his life. He must salvage that.

And the life of Leo. That too. For, after all, it had been for Leo that he had ruined himself. To let Leo die now would be to give an air of farce to the entire affair.

The first thing, then, was to secure Banalog so that he could not spread an alarm until Hulann and the boy were beyond the clutches of the Second Division.

Transferring the unconscious traumatist to the chair beneath the hood where he himself had recently sat, he searched the office for something with which to bind him. He uncovered nothing of value. At last, he took down the drapes to either side of the window and tore them into strips. He wet the strips in the attached toilet and secured Banalog to the chair. Both feet first, then both hands. He looped his rope around the naoli's shoulders and tied that strand to the chair. Then his chest. Then a strip across his lap and under the seat.

„That would seem enough,“ Banalog said.

Hulann stood, startled.

„It would take a trick expert to escape from these.“

Hulann drew his lips over his teeth.

„No need for that,“ Banalog said. „You're doing what you consider correct. You are ill. You do not know better.“

Hulann turned for the door.

„Wait. Two things,“ Banalog said. „First, an injection of sweet-drugs so that my Phasersystem contact is no good. Then a gag for my mouth.“

Numbly, he went back, found the traumatist's sweet-drugs in the center drawer, filled a needle with a strong dose of the potent liquid form, slipped the stuff into a vein in Banalog's neck. Then he gagged him. All of this, he kept thinking, made no sense. Why was Banalog cooperating? Hulann was tempted to remove the wad of drapery material and ask the older naoli. But there was no time for that. He was a fugitive now. He had to move swiftly.

## Chapter 3

The street of the diggings was deserted in the early evening's muddy light. The heaviest machinery that could not be easily removed from the scene was covered by blown plastic to protect it from the storm. Four inches of snow had softened the jagged outline of the ruins; it drifted into crevices and filled them up, swept over peaks and spikes, obliterating them. There was a sepulchral silence on the land, save for the constant humming moan of the wind and the swish of the flakes as they drifted over one another like specks of wet sand.

Hulann made his way along the shrouded avenue, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, though his dark body stood out painfully against the

snow. He found the building where Leo waited, went down into the cellar, turning on the lights, back through the crevice in the rubble into the room where Leo waited.

The boy was asleep. Hulann could see nothing but the child's eyes, closed, and a bit of his brow. His face was almost totally buried in his covers.

„Leo,“ he called softly.

The boy did not stir.

Now, Hulann thought. Now there is still time. I haven't wakened him. I haven't told him we're leaving. Now I should turn back before it's too late.

But it was already too late. He was well aware of that. From the moment he had attacked one of his own kind—Banalog—to protect a human, he had become an outcast.

Besides, he could remember the visions he had seen. Leo being dragged outside. Leo, frightened. Leo, dead. Blood on the snow. And he could also recall the rat, hanging above him, ready to fall and tear with talons and teeth. The boy had called out.

Hulann went to him, knelt and shook him gently. „Leo!“

The boy stirred, suddenly leaped up, wide awake, his eyes fully open, his hand clutched around a knife that Hulann had not even seen. He held the blade on the naoli for a moment, then relaxed and dropped it, put his cold-numbered fingers under his improvised blankets again.

„It's you, Hulann.“

„We have to go,“ Hulann said.

„Go?“

„Yes. Get up.“

„You're turning me in?“

„No!“ Hulann hissed. „I've been found out. They know I have been harboring you. We have to leave.“

„I'm sorry,“ the boy said.

„It's nothing. Come. Quickly.“

The boy stood, shedding coats and dresses and trousers and hats and sweaters and shirts that he had been layered with. Hulann picked up a few of these that seemed the boy's size and ordered him to put them on over his own clothes, explaining that they might have to spend time outside of a shelter in the early hours of their escape.

„But where will we go?“ the boy asked.

„Beyond the city.“

„There is nothing out there.“

„We will find something.“

„What?“

„You ask too many questions. We don't have time for them now. Hurry.“

They went back through the rooms to the first cellar where Hulann turned off the lights. They climbed the stairs, moved through the quiet building to the empty doorway where the snow was blowing in and drifting against the frame. Leo huddled against himself, kept to the right and slightly behind the naoli. Hulann stepped into the street, his wide feet sinking in the soft whiteness. When he had

looked both ways and listened intently for the sound of life, he motioned the boy to follow him.

They progressed up the avenue, keeping against the still erect walls of as many buildings as possible. Though they listened for approaching naoli, there was nothing for their ears but the wind and the swish of the calcimine fluff, the biting squeak of their own footfalls. Hulann had drawn his double lids down to leave as little of his big eyes exposed as possible, but he remained vigilant.

They left the avenue for the comparative safety of an alleyway cutting off to their left. It was a narrow path, twisted and unevenly paved. The buildings rose so high and abruptly on either side that the snow had only put an inch or so of depth here. Though there was little likelihood of being seen in such a sheltered, dismal place, they nevertheless hugged the shadowed walls and moved with caution.

Hulann made more changes of course until, in time, they came to the mouth of another alley which was blocked by a tumbled wall and the overturned hulk of a human military vehicle. They crept over the bricks and mortar until they were stretched out against the flank of the vehicle, looking beneath the turret of a large gun. Beyond, the sleek naoli occupation force structures sat in a leveled area, free of human artifacts.

„What have we come here for if we're running?“ the boy asked.

„We couldn't expect to get far without food, could we? And even a naoli needs warmth sometimes. We ought to have heat units. And weapons. And I don't want to start walking until we have to.“

„You have a car?“

„No. I have no need for one. But I know someone who has one I may be able to get.“

Which was Fiala. Aside from her own courses of research, she was the courier for the archaeology teams in Boston. Once every afternoon, she made the rounds of the various sectors, delivering notes from team directors and collecting whatever artifacts the directors thought would do more good with another director's line of study. Whether he could persuade her to let him have it on some pretext was highly unlikely, but he had no other choice.

„Wait here,“ he said. „If I get the car, I'll pull it over close to the alley and open the door on your side. Get in as quickly as you can.“

Leo nodded.

Hulann pushed up, went around the tank, clattered down the hill of debris, and strode off toward the naoli complex and the tower on the end where both he and Fiala—and everyone else on this team—had a room. He was almost to Fiala's door when he decided his idea was full of holes big enough to crawl through. Perhaps Banalog was sympathetic, but that was no guarantee Fiala would feel the same. If she suspected him, she could call for help through the Phasersystem before he could do anything to stop her.

He went up a few more floors to his own quarters. He packed an equipment case full of food which he dialed from the tower kitchen. He hoped there was not a repairman monitoring the food system; this large an order would draw attention he could not afford. He packed his own personal heat source and a handgun for protection against mutant lifeforms. He could think of nothing more to take.



He got his supply of sweet-drugs and filled a hypo full of the stuff. There were still two doses in the bottle. He tucked the bottle in the case with the other things, closed the case. Then, carrying the provisions in one hand and concealing the hypo of sweet-drugs in the other, he went downstairs to see Fiala.

She answered her door on the third ring. She was stunning, as usual, and she aroused a pang of desire in him that made his reproductive pouch contract pleasantly. He also knew a moment of guilt at what he was about to do.

„Hulann?“

„May I come in?“

She looked at the satchel he carried, but did not see the needle in his other hand. She stepped back from the door to allow him by her.

When he was around her, he turned, swept the needle into her hip, jabbed deep, depressed the release. The bright fluid drained into her in less than half a dozen seconds.

But even as the first drops had been injected, she had ceased to whirl, to try to get out of his grasp. Her motions became relaxed. She had lost, from now until the sweet-drugs wore off, the ability to seek help through her Phasersystem contact.

„What are you doing?“ she asked dreamily, her eyes heavy.

The needle still stuck out her rump. He pulled it free and laid it on top of his suitcase, set next to her desk.

„Come,“ he said.

She allowed herself to be led to the couch.

„What do you want of me, Hulann?“

„The keys to your ground car,“ he said, looking down at her. „Where are they?“

„Why do you want them?“ Her words were thick, slow, syrupy words.

„Never mind. If you won't tell me, I'll have to search the place. I won't be gentle, Fiala. I'll wreck some of your files.“

„They're in the desk. Top left.“

He went and got them. When he turned to come back, she was opening the door to the corridor.

He took three leaps, fell on her, dragging her away from the portal, kicking it shut, crushing her under him to smother any scream she might attempt. And she attempted several.

He pressed down on her, used his left hand to pinch off the wide, four-nostriled nose. When she passed out, he could tie and gag her as he had Banalog.

But she feigned unconsciousness. And when he let go of her slack body, she drove a well-muscled knee upwards into his pouch, making him gasp with pain and fall off her. Colorful flashes erupted in his head. His stomachs contracted. He clutched at himself to try to stop the pain, but it was no use.

Fiala was up, weaving as the drug drew her farther and farther away from reality. She found the door again.

He fought his nausea, reached out, grabbed her legs and pulled her backwards.

She fell over him, clawing, tearing at him with her fingers and her wicked teeth.

He wrestled her, trying to get another chance at her nose, to cut off her breath until she was genuinely unconscious. But she tossed her head and bit him.

The pupils of her eyes were enormous as the drug worked against her and for Hulann. But he was not going to be able to wait for it to help him.

She drew blood from his hand and made a gurgling sound of pleasure deep in her throat.

She bucked, almost threw him off.

At last, regretting the necessity for his action, he drew back his open hand, and slammed the flattened palm into her sex pouch. She made a harsh strangling sound, gagged as he had gagged. He did it again, sending a new wave of paralysis through her.

Then he stood. She was in no condition to run now. She writhed on the floor, calling him names and hugging herself. She said something about his buying his directorship from the commander of the Second Division and of how she would now get the job she should have had in the first place.

He ignored her. His mind was not clear enough to handle any more problems than those he already had.

Ten minutes later, he had her tied in a chair, gagged as thoroughly as Banalog had been. She did not know what he was doing or much about anything in the Here and Now. The sweet-drugs had taken her to another land that was much more enjoyable than this one. She murmured and cooed at the imaginary things she saw.

He went into the corridor, found the drop shaft, punched for the ground floor, and stepped into the nothingness, fell down and down and down until the winds of the mechanism began to slow his descent.

He found the ground car parked with the others behind the tower. He opened the door, climbed in, inserted the key. The engine purred to life. The rotors in the undercarriage coughed, sputtered, and then beat steadily. The car lifted off the ground, bobbling slightly in the stiff, snow-laden wind.

Hulann pulled out onto the cleared square, located the overturned tank where Leo would still be waiting. He accelerated, arced, slowed before the rubble. Leaning across the seat, he touched the door stud and flung it open. The boy crashed down the slope, tripped over a twisted length of aluminum and fell full length. But a moment later he was up moving again. He leaped into the car and pulled the door shut behind.

Hulann knew that only one street out of the square was clear enough to negotiate. He turned to head that way and saw the naoli guard coming across the snow-covered fused glass floor of the compound. He was waving his arms and shouting. As yet, he had not opened contact with the Phasersystem (Hulann would have heard) but he would do that any instant.

The guard came between Hulann and the exit from the square. He still waved and called.

Hulann depressed the accelerator. The blades whined faster.

The guard realized his mistake in not calling for help earlier. Hulann heard the shift in the Phasersystem silence as the other naoli prepared to issue a general alarm.

He accelerated, closing on the guard.

*Attention:*

The first word of the Phasersystem alarm boomed inside Hulann's head.

Too late, the naoli guard tried to jump aside. The front of the ground car struck him, knocking him back. Then the thick, steel blades went over him, barely registering a change in their speed of revolution.

Hulann did not look back. He concentrated on the street ahead. He had succeeded in cutting off a warning. Even if the guard were soon found, they would have no way of knowing who had hurt him. Hurt? No, lulled. Hulann had killed the guard.

There was a spreading numbness in his body as the realization began to reach the depths of him. He, who had never killed, had never carried a weapon in anger against another intelligent being... He had murdered.

He drove with a hypnotic concentration now, unable to stop the car, unable to think of anything to do but run. Run not only from the naoli who would be searching for him as soon as Fiala or Banalog was found, but running also from the dead guard. And from his past. Faster, Hulann, faster. Booming through the darkness in the fluttering insect machine.

In the occasional flushes of light as they passed other naoli buildings along other parts of the city, Leo could see the traces of tears on Hulann's thick, gray alien hide.

The traumatist Banalog sat bound in his office chair. He had turned it so he could look out the window at the snow.

If the universe is truly as balanced as all our studies have indicated, he mused, then how fundamental a part of the equilibrium is a race? An intelligent race? One of the eleven races, for instance. The naoli? The humans? Would the destruction, the total extinction of a major galactic race have an influence on the overall balance? Would it be a large or small influence? Small. Yes. We think too highly of ourselves. The loss of a race will have but a small effect. Yet will that small effect snowball? Will more and more things change because mankind no longer exists? And will this snowball grow so large that, a hundred thousand years from now—a hundred thousand centuries, perhaps—it will roll over the naoli as well? Have we, in the last analysis, damned ourselves? Have we only managed to borrow a little time against the end of everything?

He would have thought on it more, but for the growing delusions of the sweet-drug. Outside the window, the snow was now crimson and yellow.

It formed faces.

Hulann...

A Human boy...

It was pretty. He watched, letting the unreality engulf him...

The Hunter sleeps. His is the death sleep of the naoli. He does not yet know that it will soon be time to stalk.

This time, his prey will be a lizard man, not a human. This will be unique for him. He will enjoy it. He has within him the seeds of destruction. He has longed to walk among his own kind with his sword of light and his permission to pass judgment. He will soon have that opportunity.

Now, he sleeps...

Leo was quiet for a long while, watching the wipers thrust the thickening snow to the ends of the windscreen. At last, he turned to Hulann and said, „Where are we fleeing to?“

„I told you. Just away from the city.“

„We will have to stay away ten years. We should have a destination.“

„There is no destination.“

Leo considered a moment. „The Haven.“

Hulann looked sideways, almost lost control of the craft. He pulled it back onto the road, then talked without turning his attention away from driving. „It is not even certain that such a place exists. It may be a myth. Even if there is a sanctuary for the last humans which we have not reached, its whereabouts is a well-held secret.“

„There is a Haven,“ Leo assured him. „I heard it talked about in the days of the last stand. I knew of certain leaders and irreplaceable specialists who were ferreted out of the city to be taken to the Haven.“

„You know where it is?“

„Not exactly.“

„What does that mean?“

Leo scrunched down in the corner between the seat and the door, turned sideways. He played with the hole in the seat which let the naoli tail through to the rear floor. „Well, I know that it’s on the coast. The West Coast. Along the Pacific Ocean.“

„That doesn’t pinpoint it.“

„But it’s a start,“ he insisted.

„How would we ever search so much coast once we got there? And avoid the naoli forces all the way across the country.“

Leo did not seem perturbed by what seemed insurmountable obstacles. „We’ll find a way. You’re a naoli. You can bluff your way through if you have to.“

"Not likely."

„Otherwise,“ the boy said, „we hang around here until they catch us. And they will, you know.“

Hulann hesitated. „I know.“

„Well, then?“

„I couldn’t enter the Haven with you. What would I do?“ The worst thing now was to be utterly alone. He could not have put it in words, but it was the thing he most dreaded. To be an outcast, a murderer, and without friends on an alien world of which he could never hope to be a part of.

„I’ll talk to them. You’re different, Hulann. I’ll make them see.“

„Well—“ he said.

„Please, Hulann. I want to be with my people again.“

Hulann could understand that desire. „All right,“ he said.

They followed the markers over the beltway, eventually heading west across the great expanse of the North American continent. They did not see even one other car in the hours left of the night. In the silence and gently thrumming music of the blades beneath them, Leo fell asleep, once more.

## Chapter 4

As Hulann drove, he allowed his mind to wander, for a deluge of memories seemed the only present manner of assuaging his depression. Therefore, he raised up a monolith of the past and walled off the recent events, then studied the brickwork of his partition.

He had met his first human while aboard the naoli ship Tagasa which had been of the private fleet of the central committee. He had been a guest of the government, a writer of creative history then. The Tagasa had been en-route from the home worlds to a series of outlying colony planets in the Nucio System. The rich background of the Nucio colonies had been obvious material for a series of tapebook adventures, and Hulann had been quick to take the chance to investigate the worlds first-hand.

The Tagasa had been in port on the world called Dala, a place of vegetation and no animals. He had returned to his cabin after a day of exploration of the surrounding jungle. He had seen the snake vines which moved almost as fast as a man could walk, slipping oily over each other and the trees on which they grew, pollinating the flowers that grew on the bark of some of the larger pines. He had seen the plants which ate other plants (and which impolitely spat out his finger when, at the urging of his guide, he had stuffed it into the pulpy orifice). He saw the breathing plants with their baggy, lunglike flowers, busy spewing out carbon dioxide to continue the cycle that had started here eons earlier.

„An incredibly old culture,“ his guide had said. „To have evolved plant life this far.“

„No animals at all?“ he asked.

„None. They’ve found a few insects, little mites, that live between the outer and second layer of bark on the red-top trees.“

„Ah...“

„But there’s a question about those two. Seems the boys working on them in the labs have found traces of chlorophyll in them.“

„You mean—“

„Plants too. Looking quite like insects. Mobile. Able to suck up nutriment from other plants and move about like animals.“

The guide—an elderly naoli with a jewelry affectation: he wore a raw iris stone around his neck on a wood bead necklace—had shown him more. The Quick Ferns, for instance. Cute little, frilly, green things, lush and vibrant, swaying briskly under the slightest breath. They lined the forest floor, the shortest growth, a carpet beneath all else. As he watched, they grew, pushed up new plants, spread their feathery leaves—then grew brown, blackened, collapsed, gave off a puff of spores, and were gone. In a place where there was no animal feces, no animal decay, the vegetation had come to rely on its own death to give it life. For so much life—there was a wild, thick sprawl of growing things unlike anything he had ever seen before—a great deal of fertilizer was required. It was natural, then, that the Quick Ferns should have a total life span, from spore germination to death of the plant and ejection of the next spore cycle of fourteen minutes. At the end of each

summer on Dala, there was a five foot layer of thick, black organic material lying on, the forest floor. By the following spring, it was decomposed, gone, and the Quick Ferns began their job again.

„No animals at all,“ he said to the guide, still amazed at the society of this primitive world.

„Not now,“ the guide replied, chuckling.

„What’s that?“

„I said, not now. There used to be.“

„How do you know?“

„They’ve found the fossils,“ he said, fingering the stone hanging about his withered neck. „Thousands of them. Not any that might have been possessed by intelligent creatures. Primitive animals. Some small dinosaurs.“

„What happened to them?“ Hulann asked, fascinated.

The old naoli waved his arms around at the jungle. „The plants happened to them. That’s what. The plants just developed a little faster. They think the animals were a slow lot. When the first ambulent plants arrived on the scene, they ate flesh.“

Hulann shivered.

The forest seemed to close in on him, to grow from just a pleasant patch of trees to something malevolent and purposeful. He felt himself backing away toward their shuttlecraft, stopped himself, and chided himself for his youthful superstition. „Yet now the plants are finally subservient to animals. To us.“

„Wouldn’t be so certain,“ the old man said. He pulled on the iris stone. The warmth of his gnarled hand made the black and green gem pulsate, the green iris growing larger and smaller with the changes in temperature.

„How so?“

„The plants are trying to adapt to us. Hunting a way to do us in.“

Hulann shivered. „Now you’re talking the kind of superstition I just got finished scolding myself for.“

„It’s not superstition. Couple of years ago, the first Concrete Vines showed up.“

„They—“

„Yeah. Eat concrete. The wall of the central administration building fell in. Killed a hundred and some. Roof collapsed under the stress. Later, they found a funny thing. They found these vines, only as big around as the tip of your tail, honeycombing the wall. They had come in from the forest edge, growing underground until they reached the wall. Then they grew upwards until they had weakened it. Ate the insides out of that wall. After a few more cases like that, we started building with plastics and plastic metals.“ He laughed an ancient, dry cough of a laugh. „But I suppose we’ll be seeing some Plastic Vines before long. The jungle has had time to work it out, I guess.“

Hulann had gone back to the Tagasa with a brooding idea for a speculative fiction work about what might happen on Dala when the plants finally launched a successful attack against the naoli colonists. The book had been a critical and financial success. Twenty-one million cartridges had been sold. Forty-six years after publication, the plants of Dala launched a successful revolt...

He had been making notes into his recorder about his day with the guide when a messenger had come from the captain's quarters with a private note that he did

not want sent over the Phasersystem. It was a simple request to come to meet a few humans who had come to Dala to argue various trade contracts and whom the captain had requested aboard.

Hulann, having seen only seven of the eleven races (some are quite hermetic) and never having seen a human, was more than eager to comply with the request. Too, humans were the novelty of the many worlds, having only appeared in galactic society some twenty years earlier.

He had gone to the captain's quarters highly excited, unable to control the dilation of his primary nostrils, or the faint quivering of his interior eyelids. In the end, he had come away disappointed—and more than a little frightened.

The humans were cold, efficient men who seemed to have little time for pleasantries. Oh, they made all the gestures and did some customary small talk in broken naoli home-world tongue to prove their desire for cooperation. But the pleasantries ended there. They constantly steered the conversation back onto business topics whenever it strayed for more than a moment or two. They only smiled—never laughed. Perhaps it was this last quality which made them, in the final analysis, so terrifying. When those solid, phony grins were summoned to cover their faces, Hulann had wondered what laid behind the facade.

At first, this difficulty was deemed natural. None of the other races had been easily understood. It had taken as much as fifty years to break down the cultural lines and begin meaningful communications and day-to-day relationships. The naoli expected it would take at least as long with the humans.

Fifty years came and went. The humans moved farther into the galaxy, spreading out, founding colonies on unclaimed worlds (only the naoli, the glimm, the sardonias, and the jacksters wanted to compete for oxy-nitrogen planets; the other races considered such places at least undesirable, and at worst intolerable). Their rate of expansion into the many-peopled stars was slow by some standards, but the humans explained that they had their own method of pioneering. It was a not-so-polite way of telling everyone else to mind their business.

Fifty years came and went, and the humans that the naoli—and the other races—saw were still as withdrawn, cool, and unfriendly as ever. By the end of the second fifty years, various disputes arose between the naoli and the humans over trade routes and colony claims and half a hundred other things more petty. In not one case, could the races reach agreement. The humans began to settle many problems by force, the most expedient route—and the most illegal in the eyes of the naoli.

Eventually: the war.

It was not necessary to convince Hulann that the war was essential to the naoli's survival. He had always carried with him the memory of those humans on the Tagasa, the strange, smooth-skinned, hairy creatures with the brooding eyes and the quiet, solemn faces that argued for a shrewd and wicked mind within their skulls.

Long ago.

And this was the Here and Now. And Leo was beside him, sleeping, curled feotally. Why was the boy different? Why was the boy easy to reach? This was, as far as he knew, the first instance of intercommunication between naoli and man in

the hundred and eighty years of their acquaintance. It went against all that was known of humans. Yet, here they were.

He abruptly broke his train of thought. It was leading him back through the events of the last two days, and he did not want to be plagued with those things again.

He blinked his large eyes and looked carefully through the wet glass at the road and the landscape around it. If anything, it was snowing harder now than when they had left Boston. Long, almost impenetrable walls of snow swirled by on both sides while the craft knifed between them, kicked up an even whiter inferno behind as its own draughts stirred the fluff on the road surface. The markers at the edges of the throughway were drifted over here and there. Elsewhere, just their orange, phosphorescent caps peaked out. The direction signs suspended overhead were collecting a film of the hard driven snow, becoming increasingly difficult to read.

If the storm grew worse and the drifts covered the roadbed, they would founder. A shuttlecraft could cross snow—as long as it was light enough to blow out of the way and give the down-draught a clear blow surface on the roadbed. Hard-packed drifts created an uneven surface, which invariably led to disaster.

Near Warren, in the human province of Pennsylvania, moving at a hundred and ninety miles an hour toward the province of Ohio, disaster stopped waiting and leapt at them...

Hulann was squinting through the snow, paying strict attention to the highway in order to keep his mind off things he would rather not ponder. It was this extra attentiveness that saved their lives. Had he been lax, he would not have seen the glow of the crater...

He made out a light, green flickering between the sheets of white that whirled by him. Then, through a part in the curtain of the storm, a brilliant ripple of emerald fire shot out into the distance.

He braked, fought the wheel to keep the tilted blowers from carrying them toward the guardrails and into the fields beyond.

The blades whined, ground as if tearing through metal grit. The shuttle bumped, started a spin. They were going backwards now toward the shimmering green fire.

Then they were around, had swung an entire three hundred and sixty degrees.

He steadied them.

The speedometer read fifty miles an hour. The edge of the crater was only a few hundred yards away. He could see the great black depression, the sheets of energy shimmering and exploding across its vast length.

He pushed the brake into the floor, stomped and stomped it like a madman. The engine stalled. The blades clattered to a halt. He braced himself for the impact to come.

The rubber rim of the shuttlecraft sloughed into the ground as they dropped (now without an air cushion under them) onto the road. The craft bucked, leaped, came down hard again. Hulann was thrown forward, had the air knocked out of him as he struck the controls with his chest.



Then they were sliding. There was a jolt as the rubber cushion rim began to rip free. He saw a great snake of it spiral into the air and fall away behind them. The bare metal grazed the road, sent up sparks of yellow and blue.

The craft listed, then righted, turning sideways.

And then, they were still.

Hulann sat, his head bent over the wheel, taking in heavy loads of air which felt good in his lungs. It could have been the stalest, most polluted air in the galaxy, and yet it would have been a treasure to him. For, had they slid another fifteen feet, he would never have breathed again. That close, the rim of the crater gleamed with its jeweled flames...

„That was close,“ Leo said from his nook next to the far door.

Hulann sat up. „Very. Perhaps you don't know how close.“

The boy leaned forward and stared out the window at the seemingly endless expanse of the crater. He watched it making its lights for a while, then asked, „What is it?“

„Come,“ Hulann said. „I'll show you.“

They got out of the car and hunched against the power of the winter night. Winter morning, now. Leo followed the naoli to the edge of the depression, stood with him, staring across the nothingness.

„What did it? What exploded?“

„One of our weapons,“ Hulann said. „Although it was not quite what you would call an *explosion*.“

Leo stepped closer to the crater and cocked his head, pushed his long, blond hair away from his ears. „What's that noise?“

There was a faint hissing noise, now and then a grumble like the first stirrings of a volcano.

„That's part of it,“ Hulann said. „It wasn't a bomb really. Not as you're thinking of a bomb. All along your Great Lakes, there was, at the start of the war, a vast complex of factories, robo-factories producing the vast quantities of materials needed to wage a galactic battle. Not only was ore mined from your own world, but brought from your moon, from the asteroid belts of your solar system. It was a formidable complex. The easiest way to wipe it out was to drop a few conversion cannisters on it.“

„I don't understand,“ Leo said. „We weren't told the Lake production centers had been hit.“

„Only seven years ago. It was the final blow. Otherwise, the planet would have held us off incredibly long.“

„You said *conversion cannisters*?“

The constant sheet of green fires that played across the crater from rim, up and down, zig-zagging, puffing like balls of burning gas, now flashed through with a faint streak of purple that caught their attention and held it for some minutes.

„Conversion cannisters,“ Hulann continued, „contain one of the most virulent bacterial lifeforms in the known universe. The bacteria are capable of attacking certain forms of matter and converting them to energy. In the labs, various strains have been developed, some of which will attack only fixed nitrogen, others which will convert only iron, others for calcium, lead, on and on for as many elements and types of elements as there are.“

„The hissing—“

„Is the conversion of matter taking place. The variety of strains included in the cannisters dropped here during attack, only the elements in your chief building supplies—and in the average sample of your topsoil for this area of the earth. The bacteria will convert everything in its path, convert it to a slowly-leaked form of energy rather than explosions of the atomic sort, down until it hits bedrock which it is not equipped to devour, and onward until it reaches water or some other *indigestible* barrier.“

„And the green light is the only result?“ Leo asked, stepping back as the edge of the pit came almost imperceptibly closer.

„No. The green light energy is what we can see. Above your range of audio reception—even above mine—there is a great deal of sound energy generated. Also, there is an enormous amount of energy consumed by the bacteria themselves to enable them to continue their conversions and to reproduce at the rate the lab men set for them.“

„And it'll go on until there's nothing left?“

„No. We don't want to destroy a world. Within a few days, a special naoli team will arrive to begin antibacterial work to halt the progress of the crater and destroy the mites.“

„But the air will carry them,“ Leo protested.

„No. Such catastrophes have been guarded against. The bacteria are designed to anchor themselves to whatever elemental molecules they are bred to attack. Thus, a wind would have to blow away the entire linkage of ferrous trace elements in an area to also spread the iron-eating bacteria. And if a bacteria cannot find, within moments, any of its particular *tropic* substance to latch on to, it dies. There are all sorts of built-in protections.“

„Why not a series of nuclears to wipe out the Lake complex?“

Hulann shook his head. „Nuclears cannot damage well-shielded underground establishments. The bacteria can—by dissolving the earth that covers them, then converting the very structural materials of the installations.“

They watched the pit, the shimmering, glimmering flames. Faint heat waves rolled over them and kept the snow melted around the perimeter of the hole. If they strained their ears, they could hear the sound of the energy of conversion being released far up the scale of vibrations.

„We didn't really have a chance against you,“ Leo said at last.

Green erupted, staining their faces.

„No,“ Hulann agreed.

Leo went back to the car. Hulann followed.

„Will it still fly?“ Leo asked.

Hulann bent and inspected the bottom of the craft. There was almost nothing remaining of the heavy rubber cushion rim. The metal frame was bent and ripped, but not so severely that it would push in against the blades in the recessed undercarriage. If there still were any blades under there. He looked back on the snowy highway but could not see any large dark objects that might be shafts or rotors.

„Let's see,“ he said.

The engine coughed, but turned over. They rose on the wind of the blades, though there was a steady vibration that gently rattled the frame. „Well, it runs,“ Hulann said. „But where do we go from here? The road ends, as you see.“

„Over the median,“ Leo said. „On back to the next exit. We'll just have to take secondary roads until we're past the crater and can get back on the good beater surface of the throughway.“

Hulann took the shuttlecraft over the concrete bump in the center of the highway, wheeled the craft around and started back, looking for a way off the useless expressway—a way that would take them west where they wished to go.

The Hunter will soon be awakened.

The Hunter will rise up in his glory and take upon him the robes of his power.

The Hunter will seek.

Before, there has always been success.

The Hunter was born to hunt, as his prey was born to be brought down at his desire...

They made much poorer time on the secondary roads than they had on the highways where the beater surface was solid and flat. Here, the pavement had been originally designed for wheeled vehicles, which made it far too uneven and twisted to offer much to a shuttlecraft. Besides, they were moving into the mountains near the end of the Pennsylvania line where the weather, if anything, was more fierce than before.

The wind had picked up a few notches, battered the already beaten craft until the shuddering of the wounded mechanical beast grew severe enough to shatter one of the two round ports on the rear, behind the luggage shelf. Glass imploded, spun throughout the cabin. A piece of it caught Leo on the cheek, drew blood. Other pieces stuck in Hulann's flesh but not deep enough to cause him pain or to make him bleed.

Hulann maintained a low blade revolution count in order to hug the road and avoid the draughts that were much stronger even a few feet farther up. Sudden rises in the pavement gave them hair-raising moments as Hulann fought to go around them—or increase the rotar speed and go over them—to keep from sheering off the blades.

Then there was the snow. There seemed to be half a dozen inches of it now, and the steadiness with which it fell indicated no soon end to the storm. The biting wind—now whistling and howling through the shattered rear port and leeching out their cabin heat—piled the white stuff into every nook and crevice, stacked it against every outcropping of stone, layer on layer until it backed up across the highway, thick, cold fingers packing hard and making progress on air cushion even more difficult. Un-drifted snow was light and flushed away under the blades. But the wind-packed stuff was solid as ice, would not blow away, and gave Hulann trouble with his machine.

„How much can it snow here?“ he asked Leo as they flitted up the side of a mountain which should have been tunneled through. He was amazed at the impracticality.

„Maybe a foot. Two feet is not unusual.“

„Two feet!“

„Like you and me.“

„That’s impossible!“

„You don’t have snow on your world?“

„Not that much!“

„Wait,“ the boy said, smiling.

He waited.

The snow continued. Mounted. Blew. Drifted. The shuttlecraft slowed and slowed until he could not drop their forward speed any further. It was maddening to realize there were forces behind which would soon be after them and that they could only crawl along at under ten miles an hour. The only consolation Hulann could find was the realization that those chasing them would also have to move slowly. Then that consolation was ruined too. The Hunter—would the Hunter be turned loose on them? It seemed likely although the situation would be unique—would wait until the storm had ended, then come by air, in a helicopter.

They rounded a bend in the road near the top of the mountain, were confronted by a wall of packed snow four feet high, stretching across from the road bank of their right to the precipice on their left. Hulann braked, but not fast enough. The shuttlecraft bumped into the drift at seven miles an hour and wedged the first few feet of itself into the smooth, wind-polished whiteness.

„Stuck,“ Leo said knowledgeably.

„We have nothing to dig with. I’ll have to maneuver.“

Leo braced himself, feet against the dash, back pressed into the seat. Hulann laughed. „Ready,“ Leo said.

Hulann fed power to the blades, and kicked the side jets into reverse, The craft lurched but held fast. He eased down on the accelerator until it was almost floored. The blades chewed at the snow that packed the front section of them, seemed only to lodge themselves more firmly.

He eased off on the pedal until the blades whirred softly, then tramped it down hard. The shuttle started like an animal, wiggled. He eased up, slammed down again. The craft jolted free and swept backwards, sliding sideways toward the guardrails and the long, deadly embankment.

Hulann let up on the pedal, but too quickly as... the engine died and the blades choked and he no longer had control of his machine...

They struck the rails, tilted, went over.

The car hung there, caught on some projection, teetering. Then it fell.

Glass shattered.

And they were rolling down, down...

## Chapter 5

It was a hundred and five minutes before dawn of that day.

In the city that had once been called Atlanta when there were men to make with names, one of the few human metropolises not destroyed by its owners in the last convulsions of their defeat, Sara Laramie moved through the iron castings in the foundry yard, keeping low so that she was at all times concealed from view on at least three sides. The Hunter Releamar was in pursuit of her, had been for some days. She did not know that he was called a Hunter by his kind or that his name was Releamar. It was obvious, however, that he was different from other naoli.

He moved quietly, stealthily, like a wraith. She had watched him prowl a street from a vantage point on the roof of a department store. At times, she had even lost sight of him, though there was damned little he could hide behind in an open avenue. She had been glad she was not down there, running. She saw, for the first time, why she had not been able to lose him before this. He was not a naoli. Not really.

He was something else. Something more.

A special breed of animal.

While she had been watching, he suddenly turned and scanned the rooftops along the street, as if some extra sense had warned him of her whereabouts. She had ducked behind the parapet, breathless, trembling. Her hands had begun to shake, and she felt a scream building up in her lungs that she could not allow into her throat.

Time passed.

She looked out.

Releamar, the Hunter with the Fourth Division of the naoli occupation forces, was still there, standing in his dark clothes—the only naoli she had ever seen dressed—and watched, listened, felt the darkened buildings for her presence.

Then he moved, crossing toward the department store... Deep scream, lovely scream, wanting out...

At the last minute, he veered from his projected path and went into the building next door.

She breathed out, swallowed the scream, digested it. Then she moved fast, down through the department store, into the street and away before he could return.

Now, in the foundry yard, she slipped from hulk to hulk until she reached the thousand-gallon storage tank in which she now made her home. She went to the end, pulled open the entry plate as gently as possible (it squeaked; Releamar the Hunter listened for squeaks) and went inside, deposited her burlap sack of food on the metal floor. She had found a rare little grocery that dealt in specially still packaged foods—of all things! She was not partial to such exotic, weird items for her menu, but it was all she could find. With the destruction of the city generators, the dial-kitchens no longer functioned.

Behind her, farther back in the single room of the hollow tank, there was a scraping noise.

Rats, she thought. They found their way in through the entry plate which had no lock, of course—and which would have been sealed had the tank ever been completed. Rats did not bother her as much as they once would have. She would have run screaming only a year ago. Now she had learned how to beat them, how to avoid their lunges. Not the mutated kind, of course. Just the friendly little earth

normal breeds. She had not seen a mutated rat since shortly after the fall of the city.

She bent and found the glow lamp next to the entrance, fumbled with it in the utter pitch.

The tank brightened to a warm yellow.

She turned to locate the rat, choked, and dropped the glow lamp. It fell to the floor, making shadows dance on the walls, was still, unbroken.

„Hello,“ said Releamar the Hunter.

He walked slowly forward from the rear of the room.

He was smiling. Or trying to.

This time, she did not suppress the scream...

It was ninety-four minutes before dawn of that day.

David stood in the center of the book shop, looking around at the hundreds of cartridges. Now and then, he withdrew one from its rack and looked at the title and author. If he was intrigued, he would put the earpiece in his good right ear and touch the tab for a summation of the volume and a few critical comments. If it sounded good, he dropped it in the plastic bag he carried and went on, looking for something to balance what he had just selected. If he had just taken a cartridge of poetry, he made certain his next acquisition was a novel of sheer adventure. Then something in the nonfiction line. Then something humorous. Then a heavy novel.

He was delighted. Here was all the art he wanted—for nothing. That had always been the problem with art before: it had cost. And he had not had enough to spend on it. No matter how much he earned or what he scrimped from other necessities, he could not buy all he wanted. Now the cartridges were free for the taking. Who was to stop him? Certainly not the owner. The naoli had finished him off long ago, had disposed of his corpse in a sanitary fashion. The naoli were quite fastidious.

When he had gathered all he needed—which was all that interested him—he slung the heavy bag over his shoulder and went into the street. He moved quickly to the alleys and the walkways between the building mazes which were ideal for secretive travel now that their lights did not burn and their police monitor eyes did not see. He wound through the great city, breathing in the cold air, enjoying the specters of his frosted breath, until he arrived at the train yards.

Bluebolt stood on the side track where he had left her, long and shiny, as magnificent as ever. He stood in the yard, admiring her lines and speculating dreamily on the journey ahead. What better way to cross the continent? A luxurious form of travel he could never have afforded. Bluebolt was a private train—or had been before the war—and would have cost several million to construct.

He climbed up the stairs, palmed open the door into the engineer's cabin. The lights of the computer board winked softly blue and green. He took his books through into the second car, which was the living room, deposited the bag of them beside a luxurious simulated leather chair. Stacked other places in the room were the other provisions he would need.

He nodded with approval, smiled, and went back to the cabin, whistling. He slipped into the comfortable command chair before the thick plexiglas window and took a moment to enjoy the silent power of the great engine.

If the handiwork of man had all been as smooth and pure as, the Bluebolt, Earth never would have fallen. She would not have deserved to fall. He looked out the window again at the dark yard and the glimpses of the captured city that he could see. It all looked shabby and corrupt next to Bluebolt. It was the creation of Man the Capitalist.

Capitalism was fine. As long as man used it. But when the system had become so big that it guided the destiny of society rather than society regulating it, then capitalism had become dangerous. The interest of capitalism rampant had led to the serious air pollution crisis decades ago. It had led to the population crisis too (more babies meant more buyers). It had ground out plastic, imitation streets and cities like this one. In the early days of war, no attempt had been made to find out why the naoli wanted to fight, because a war used products. Selling products was the name of the game. When it was obvious the naoli were winning, there was too much hatred to start the talks that should have been initiated immediately. So the senseless war had been waged-and lost deservedly.

Bluebolt was a capitalist's toy, which proved the system could produce quality. But the man who had built this had been a rare bird indeed: in command of his money instead of a servant to it.

David swung the programming board around and looked at the typewriter keys. He thought for a moment, then punched out:

CALIFORNIA. SHORTEST ROUTE.

The computer gurgled, buzzed, and chimed three times. It said: „Destination acknowledged. Route established. Proceeding on command.“

He typed:

PROCEED.

Laboriously, the Bluebolt built speed, pulling out of the darkened yards, faster and faster, until it was barreling past the empty city, moving quietly on polished rails and its almost frictionless, rollamite processed wheels. David fought an urge to pull the silver cord of the train whistle. He wished to make as unspectacular a departure as possible.

Eventually, he was torn between two desires. He wanted to watch the landscape flash by, wanted to see the dawn from his command chair. Yet he felt like some time with a cartridge. At last, he went back and brought an adventure novel up front to plug in his ear. The sound and the visions came-the sound deep in his ear, the visions behind his eyeballs. Whenever he could no longer contain himself, he stopped the sound and the pictures and watched the Bluebolt gobble rails toward California and the Haven...

It was forty-nine minutes before dawn of that day.

Soon, the Hunter would rise.

And dress in the hides of a hunter.

And make his prayers and set forth to do vengeance...

## Chapter 6

Hulann's overmind had to wait only a few moments for his organic brain to come to life. When he was fully alert once again, he was immediately conscious of the cold. For a naoli to feel such a sharp sensation of temperature, the situation had to be drastic.

As it was.

He had been flung free of the shuttlecraft, slid along the snowy mountainside, scraping even his tough naoli hide raw in places. He came to a rest in a deep drift sloping into a row of seven, thick-boled pines. He was looking out of a depression in the drift now, up the well his body had made by falling in. His body heat had melted the crystals, and the severe cold had re-frozen them. He was coated in ice that kept melting the re-freezing. The bitterness was worst on the torn patches where he would have bled if the blood had not been frozen solid.

Even a naoli could not survive for long in a situation such as this. He pushed up, stumbled erect, and wearily slapped and kicked his way free of the drift. He stood in the early morning air, half an hour before dawn, scanning the darkness for a sign of Leo or the shuttle.

He could see neither.

Indeed, much of what he could see was blurred by the great clouds of ghostly vapor spouting from his four nostrils, especially from the lower, secondary set which, when operative, did the greatest amount of respiratory work. He was annoyed at this, yet he could not close the secondary nostrils without operating on a semi-dormant level. And he presently needed to move as fast and wisely as possible.

He looked up the side of the mountain, but he could not see the top. A combination of darkness and shifting snow kept his range of vision down to thirty feet. How far down the slope had they come, then? At what point had he been thrown free of the shuttlecraft? Had the car gone to the bottom of the mountain, or had it too come to a stop only part way down? Was Leo alive—or dead? Or dying?

He felt a rising panic at the last few questions. If Leo were dead or dying, then what purpose was there? If Leo were dead or beyond Hulann's help, then this entire flight, and the crime which had given it genesis, was without meaning. He might just as well turn himself in. The point was lost. The symbol had evaporated.

„Leo!“ He called loudly, but his words were torn away by the wind, lost in the howling of the natural elements.

He turned and huddled against the wind, cupped his hands on either side of his mouth, shouted again. His hands withered the sound, only served to make the wind's final dissipation easier. Besides, if Leo were dead or unconscious, shouting would do no good whatsoever.

He stood, legs spread, drifted snow up to his knobbed knees, and looked around at the wilderness, confused and frightened. In all his nearly three hundred years,



he had never found himself in remotely as dire a situation. The most dangerous moments of his life had been no more horrifying than those with the mutant rat in the cellar only days earlier. This was something else again. He was in a strange landscape, trapped without transportation other than his own feet during a furious spell of weather unlike anything he had ever encountered on the naoli home worlds. Somewhere, there was a boy, perhaps wounded seriously, whom he had to reach. And even if they did get out of this, onto the road again, there was nowhere to go. They had no friends.

The wind blew about him, whipped the snow hard against his scales, leaving it packed on him in some places. As he stood, huge green eyes picking up what little illumination there was, he seemed more of a statue, sculpted by a madman, than anything truly alive and functioning. An alien in an alien world, it seemed almost as if he generated the wind with his very presence, caused the snow to fall by merely standing and watching the darkness.

At last, he moved tentatively to his right, which somehow seemed the proper direction—though there were no signs by which he could intelligently judge. He knew that the car would surely have left a trail as it careened down the mountainside, and he hoped to cross over this eventually, then turn and follow it until he discovered the shuttle or whatever remained of it after its jolting descent.

The wind pounded him as he moved directly into it, buffeted like padded hammers. He could only progress when bent, making himself into a battering ram to crash through the eternal succession of the wind's doors. White breath gusted around him, swirled into the darkness.

He pushed to the last of this clump of pines, brushing a low, snow-laden limb out of his way. The vibrations of his rude passage swept upward through the tiers of the pine, causing a heavy deluge of snow that almost drove him to his knees.

A hundred yards later, he began to worry about his choice of direction. As yet, he had come across no signs of the shuttlecraft, only the smooth blown skin of the storm. Surely he could not have been thrown this far! He decided to make another twenty agonizing steps before turning back to explore the other direction. On the seventeenth step, he came to the edge of the ravine.

He almost stepped into the gulf. As he put a foot down, he realized the front of it curled over a break in the terrain. Cautiously, he pulled it back and went to his knees, peered into the fuzzy mask of the storm. As he concentrated, he began to make out the lines of a cut in the mountainside. He could not see the other side of it, but it was easily a few hundreds yards long, since he could not make out a point of origin or termination on either side.

It was also deep. It ended in a tumble of broken, jagged rocks that peeped up here and there, through their white blanket. If the shuttle had gone into that, then Leo was dead. There was no sense in descending to look for him.

Hulann stood and retraced his steps. During the last hundred feet or so, the wind had obscured his tracks, and he was forced to rely on what little he had noticed about the landscape on his way out. Still, using pines for markers, he got lost twice, spent several minutes stumbling drunkenly both times. He found the drift where he had awakened, for his fall had disturbed it too badly for the wind to heal it in minutes. Here, he hunkered for a moment against the trunk of a pine, trying to recover his breath, energy, and a little of the body heat he had lost.

He picked at the layer of ice that crusted him everywhere but at his joints, then stopped, deciding that the ice would offer his flesh some protection from the wind. He did not want to think about the warmth the ice itself sucked from his system.

After only three minutes of rest, he stood, stretched, and set out over the unexplored region to his left. At first, the wind was an asset, at his back now. It seemed to buoy him along, to make his treading lighter. Soon, the illusion disappeared. The wind became a great fist shoving, slamming against his rear. It sent him stumbling sideways, threw him to the earth and bulleted over him. He kept his long head tucked as much between his shoulders as he could, but the icy blasts against the back of his skull could not be ignored.

But he found the track of the shuttlecraft ripped through the virgin mantle of the winter storm. The snow had begun to fill it in, and the drifting wind had made fast work, narrowing it considerably from what it must have been in the first moments after the car passed. Hulann looked up the trail toward the top of the mountain, wondering if Leo had been thrown free, farther back. He tried to recall the long, falling moments after they had crashed through the rails, but it was all a blur even to his usually observant overmind. He would have to hope that the boy had remained in the craft. Stepping into the trail, he started down to find whatever there was to find.

At times, the way became so steep that he was afraid of stumbling, falling, losing control and sliding as the car had slid. In these places, he went to his hands and knees, crawling from one sprout of vegetation to another, from one jutting rock outcrop to the next. Here, the car had often left the ground, then smashed back to continue sliding.

Hulann found a few twisted pieces of it.

He held on to a few of them as he crawled forward, until he realized there was no purpose in that. He threw them away to free his hands again.

The cold air burned into his lungs. His chest had begun to ache strangely, and spasms of sharper pain more frequently lashed through his entire torso with a fierceness that forced him to stop and grit his needle teeth into his lips, drawing blood. It was some time before he understood that his tender lung tissues were being frozen by the winter air. The soft, wet internal flesh would harden and crack under this sort of punishment. He would have to take smaller breaths, slower breaths, so that they had more of a chance to warm on their way to his lungs. He could not get by on his primary nostrils, though he might be able to manage on the larger secondary set. He allowed the muscles of the primary pair to force down the blockage flap further back in his sinuses.

There was a mysterious grayness in the air. Dawn was coming, and even reaching small fingers through the clouds and the snow, through the pine needles to the floor of the earth where he so desperately needed it. Then, in the slightly increased light, he saw the fractured hulk of the shuttlecraft ahead.

It was wedged between two columns of rock which thrust out of the mountainside like markers for some sacred portal. At first, he thought they were artificial, but discovered they were natural—albeit odd—formations. The craft was on its side between the rocks, crushed by a third, battered beyond recognition. From this vantage point, looking partly in on the bottom of it, Hulann could see that both rotars were gone, that all of the drive mechanisms had been torn free.

He had not expected it to be operative, of course. Yet its final, total death was somehow depressing.

Giving way to the slope, he slid and stumbled to the vehicle, came up hard against the back of it. He gripped it, breathing hard through his secondary nostrils. When he felt steady again, he looked the car over, cataloguing the dents and scrapes, then found a way up its side, along it until he came to the driver's door. The other door was pressed flat to the earth on the other side.

He could see nothing inside, for the passenger compartment was in total darkness.

„Leo!“

There was no answer.

„Leo!“

Silence.

He wrenched at the door, frantic. The guilt that had begun to lose its edge in him now flowered larger than ever. If the boy were dead, then he had killed the boy. Surely. Yes. Because he had been driving; because he had not been careful; because he was a naoli, and naoli had set up the conditions which had made their flight necessary in the first place.

But the door held, jammed, locked by bent and intermingled parts. It rattled slightly in its mounts, nothing more.

He fought it until he was exhausted. Then he called the boy's name some more.

The boy did not answer.

He tried listening for the sound of breathing from within, but he was defeated by the breath of the storm, which was greater, louder, more dynamic.

When more work at the door would not help, he leaned back and inspected the shuttlecraft for a breach that might give him entrance. He saw, then, that the wrap-around windscreen had been shattered. There were only a few splinters of glass sticking in the edges of the frame. He broke these out with the flat of his palm, then braced against the rocks and the hood, worked himself inside the car.

Leo had crawled—or had been tossed—into the luggage space behind the seats. It had been, in the plummeting, disintegrating car, the safest place to be. Hulann lifted his own suitcase off the boy's legs, rolled him over onto his back.

„Leo,“ he said softly. Then louder. Then he shouted it, slapping the small face.

The boy's face was very white. His lips were slightly blue. Hulann used the sensitive patches of his fingertips to test for skin temperature and found it dismayingly low for a human. He remembered then how little tolerance these people had to changes of temperature. Two hours exposed like this could do great damage to one of their frail systems.

He rummaged through his suitcase, brought out the powerful personal heat unit and thumbed the controls on the smooth, gray object that looked like nothing so much as a water-washed stone. Immediately, there was a burst of warmth that even he appreciated. He placed the device next to the boy and waited.

In a few minutes, the snow that had blown in melted and ran away, down the slanting floor to collect in the corners. The blueness left the boy's face; Hulann deemed it proper to inject a stimulant now. From the sparse medicinals in the case, he filled a hypo with serum and slid the needle into the visible vein in the

boy's wrist, being careful to do as little damage as possible with the naoli-broad point.

Eventually, Leo stirred, kicking as if in a nightmare, Hulann quieted him by stroking his forehead. Ten minutes after these first signs, he opened his eyes. They were bloodshot.

„Hello,“ he said to Hulann. „Cold.“

„It's getting warmer.“

The boy moved closer to the heat unit.

„Are you all right?“

„Cold.“

„Aside from that. Broken bones? Cuts?“

„I don't think so.“

Hulann leaned against the back of the passenger's seat as he sat on what should have been the wall of the car. He breathed a sigh, realized his primary nostrils were still closed, and opened them. The warm air was good inside his chest.

In time, Leo sat up, held his head in his hands, began to massage his temples.

„We have to get out of here,“ Hulann said. „They'll be after us soon. We can't waste any time. Also, the heat source is going to give out if we have to keep it on full power. We'll have to find someplace to shelter and regain our strength and perspective.“

„Where?“

„Up the mountain. There's no sense in going down. We don't know if there's anything down there. But there's a road at the top. If we get back on that, follow the guardrails, we should come to a building sooner or later.“

Leo shook his head with doubt. „How far up?“

„Not far,“ Hulann lied.

„I'm still cold. And tired. And hungry too.“

„We'll use the heat unit,“ Hulann said. „We'll have just a little to eat before we go out.“ You'll just have to fight the weariness. We must make time. The Hunter will surely be sent out soon.“

„Hunter?“

„One of my kind. Yet not of my kind. He hunts.“

Leo saw the terror in Hulann's eyes and stopped arguing. Maybe there were two kinds of naoli. The kind men had fought, Hulann's kind. Hulann was friendly. The other kind hunted. Maybe that explained the war. Yet Hulann had given him the impression that there was one Hunter—no more than a few. So that did not explain the war. That was still a mystery.

Hulann withdrew some doughy material which he compared with wheat bread—though Leo thought the taste altogether different, and inferior. He did not say so. The naoli seemed proud of the quality of the food he had been able to bring and considered these things minor naoli delicacies. To argue otherwise would only be to insult him.

They also had the eggs of certain fish suspended in a sour honey-gel. This, Leo thought, was indeed something special. He would have eaten much more if Hulann had not pointed out the danger of requiring too much heat for digestion

and thereby forfeiting that needed to keep from freezing to death. Also, it might be wise to begin rationing.

When they finished and were as warm as they could get, Hulann closed the case, shoved it through the window. It slid down the hood, caught in among the rocks of the column on that side. He went out next, back into the maelstorm, and pulled Leo through the broken windscreen. They scrambled down until they were on the ground. Hulann fetched the case. He had Leo hold the heat unit, though the boy protested that Hulann was the naked one. He promised he would take turns with the unit now and then, and stay within a few feet of the boy in order to benefit by what it broadcast.

They turned and faced up the slope. Though daylight was now upon the land, visibility had not increased much. He could see an extra thirty feet, no more. The sky was low and threatened to stay that way for many hours to come. Hulann was thankful. At least, in the gloom and the walls of dancing flakes, Leo would not be able to see how far the top of the mountain really was...

„I'll break a way,“ he said to Leo. „Stay close, in my steps. Crawl when I crawl, walk when I walk. Okay?“

„I can take orders,“ the boy said haughtily.

Hulann laughed, slapped him on the shoulder, then turned and took the first step of the trek back to the highway... and simultaneously heard the first word of the Phasersystem alert...

Banalog stiffened in his chair when he heard the beginning of the Phasersystem alarm. The last traces of the sweet-drugs had left him an hour earlier, though he had decided to wait as long as possible before giving the alarm that would wake the Hunter and send him stalking Hulann and the boy. At first, he thought this alert had nothing to do with Hulann. It was being given by a woman named Fiala, an archaeologist and moderately well-known essayist in certain technical circles. When he ascertained, after the first few words, that she too was now tied and gagged by Hulann, he waited no longer. He added his voice to hers.

Moments after they had finished, there were naoli in his office to untie him, to take the gag from his mouth. One of them was a military officer named Zenolan, an extremely large person, a foot taller than Banalog, a super lizard with a head half again as large as a head should be. He took the empty hypo with the traces of sweet-drugs in it from the hands of one of the other naoli.

„Sweet-drugs?“ he asked Banalog unnecessarily.

„Yes.“

„When?“

„Last evening,“ Banalog lied.

„Why was he here?“

„A session under the machines.“

Zenolan looked at the equipment hanging in the recessed section of the office ceiling. „A session? At night?“

„Early evening,“ Banalog said. „And it was because he had forgotten his appointment for this afternoon. Or so he said. I contacted him to get him in after hours. He was reluctant even then. Tried to make excuses. I wouldn't have any of it.“ He looked at Zenolan to see what effect the story was having.

The big man seemed to believe it. „Go on,“ he said.

„Then, when he was here, he tried to outwit the machines. Which is impossible, of course.“

„Of course.“

„When I found his secret, that he was harboring a boy—well, he overpowered me, smashed my head against the floor, knocked me out before I thought to use my Phaser contact. When I woke, he had me tied and drugged.“

„You’re sure it was not any earlier than last evening?“

Banalog looked perplexed. „If it had been, the sweet-drugs would have worn off. I would have contacted you sooner.“

„That’s what I mean.“

„Are you suggesting—“

„No,“ Zenolan said, shaking his huge head. „Forget it. I’m just upset.“

Banalog snorted to show his contempt. He knew better than to get too irate. Too much anger would make them suspect he really did have something to cover. He was pondering his next move when his desk phone buzzed. He wondered what private message he was receiving that could not be sent over the Phasersystem. He picked up the receiver and said hello.

„You will come to see me in ten minutes,“ the smooth, cold voice on the other end said. „I will want your full story.“

It was the Hunter Docanil...

The Hunter Releamar stepped out of the thousand-gallon storage tank in the foundry yards in the city that had been Atlanta. He opened his Phasersystem contact and informed the military officials who assigned his missions (and, incidentally, everyone else linked to the Atlanta area system and the Fourth Division system) that he had completed his assignment. Then he broke contact.

He did not look back at what had been Sara Laramie.

He stuffed his clawed hands into the pockets of his greatcoat and walked across the yards toward the exit gate.

There was only a slight chill in the air, yet he could not go without clothes, as other naoli could.

He was a Hunter.

He was different.

Elsewhere at that time:

Fiala finished the necessary tapeforms for application for director of her archaeological team. The job that should have been hers in the first place. There was no problem now. She could not help but get it. Hulann had cracked without her help. She felt terribly pleased with things.

David watched the dawn from the viewglass of the engineer’s room in front of the plummeting Bluebolt as it streaked down a two-mile incline toward a flat plain where speed could be safely raised. It was one of the nicest dawns he had seen in some time. When it was over and day had insinuated itself on the world, he planned to go back to the sleeping car for a nap.

The body of the dead naoli guard who had fallen under Hulann’s shuttlecraft was annointed with sweet-drugs, wrapped in a purple shroud, and burned...

The edges of the conversion cannister crater near the Great Lakes continued to crawl forward, hissing and spitting green light...

## Chapter 7

Attention: it struck Hulann with the force of a piledriver, mentally and emotionally, not physically. He stood very still, receiving the alert until there was nothing more to be heard except official messages and directions which could do him little or no good now.

„What is it?“ the boy asked.

„They have discovered my absence and know its reason.“

„How?“

„They found the traumatist I tied and gagged. And the woman from whom I stole the shuttle.“

„But how do you know this?“

„The Phasersystem.“

Leo looked perplexed, screwed his face up until his eyes and mouth seemed to be sucked in towards his nose. „What’s that?“

„You—you haven’t such a thing. We do. A means of talking together without talking. For intercommunication.“

„Mind reading?“

„Sort of. Only it’s all mechanical. A little thing they implant in your skull when you’ve just grown big enough to come out of the brood hole.“

„Brood hole?“

„Every house has a brood hole near its warren where—“ Hulann paused, blinked his big eyes. „Forget it. For now, anyway. It just gets more complicated to explain.“

Leo shrugged. „You want the heat?“

„You keep it a while. We have to get moving.“

Before he could start, a second interruption drew his attention. There was loud crash from somewhere near at hand, the sound of metal striking metal, and the hollow ring of an echo.

„What’s that?“ he asked the boy.

„It came from over there.“ He gestured to their left.

The noise came a second time. Not as loud, but definitely metal against metal. Big pieces of metal, too.

Hulann forced down his terrors. The Hunter could not have come this far in only moments. He would not have received the alert any sooner than Hulann had. They still had many hours of grace. He turned and walked in the direction of the clanging noise, Leo close behind.

They had not gone forty feet before the faint outlines of the pylons began to be visible through the snow. And the swinging, squarish bulk of the car. „An aerial cable-way,“ he said as much to himself as to Leo. He was astonished. He had heard of the things, had heard that earth-men had built them in places where they considered elevators impractical. But to see one...

„It must go somewhere,“ Leo said. „Perhaps there is a town above. That would give us shelter.“

„Perhaps,“ Hulann said distantly as he watched the yellow cablecar swinging in the wind. If he drew his lids down, it seemed as if the car were a great, yellow bee dancing above the storm.

„You said we should hurry.“

Hulann looked at the boy, then back to the swaying yellow car dangling from the nearly invisible filament of the aerial cable. „Perhaps we could ride up,“ he said, „It would save us walking.“

„We’d have to go to the bottom to get on the thing,“ Leo said. „It would be easier to go up.“

The wind seemed to increase in fury. Snow whipped them like buckshot pellets, exploding by, whining through the trees, gone.

Hulann watched the car. „It’s farther up the mountain than I led you to believe.“

„You lied?“

„Something like that.“

Leo grinned. „Or are you lying now—so you can get to ride the cableway?“ When Hulann made the sign of naoli shame, the boy pushed by him and trudged off toward the nearest pylon. „Come on, then. It might not work anymore, but you won’t be satisfied until we find out.“

A few moments later, they drew up next to the ice-crusting pylon, looked up at the hobbling yellow bee that waited overhead. They involuntarily ducked as it slammed into the pylon again. The sound of crashing metal echoed painfully in their ears.

„There,“ Leo said, pointing down the mountainside. „We don’t have to go clear to the bottom after all.“

Two hundred yards down, there was a boarding station on the middle of the mountain. Stairs wound around a pylon, then jutted out near the top on a support beam, stopped at a platform which served as a boarding and debarking station. It was all quite ghostly seen through the waves of snow, like the ruined tower of a long dead civilization.

Leo was forty feet away, kicking up clouds of white as he stomped down the steep slope, huddled against the wind, cradling the heat source against his chest. Hulann shook off his reverie and followed. At the base of the stairs up to the platform, Leo was waiting, staring up the steel rungs, licking his lips, squinting as if wrestling with a difficult problem.

„Ice,“ he said to Hulann.

„What?“

„Ice on the stairs. No maintenance since the war. It’s not going to be easy to climb up there.“

„There’s only thirty steps.“

The boy laughed. „I wasn’t suggesting we give up. Come on.“ He grabbed the single hand railing and started climbing.

Before they were even halfway up, Leo slipped twice, banging his knees on the icy steel, and fell backwards once. If Hulann had not been close behind to stop him, the boy would have rolled to the bottom, banging his head on riser after riser, scrabbling uselessly at the purchaseless ice. When they realized that the reason



Hulann was having no trouble was because his hard toe claws shredded the ice under him, the alien went first, making the glossy stuff into runneled treads which the boy could manage.

At the top, they found the controls were frozen solid, jammed with drifted snow. They used the smooth gray heat source to melt this, freeing the levers. They studied the board until they were relatively certain of what they were doing; then Hulann depressed what appeared to be the proper device. There was a grumbling somewhat louder than the storm, a deep, angry sound like gods are said to make. Slowly, it grew louder. Louder still. Until it was the sustained cough of an avalanche bearing down on them.

Then the yellow bee car rolled into view, and they saw the source of the artificial thunder: the cables were sheathed in ice from disuse, and the advancing car was cracking this away as it pressed toward its summoners. Long, translucent chunks fell down toward the white earth. The bee pulled next to the boarding platform, stopped slightly beyond it, swaying in the wind, the door only half aligned with the platform.

They were forced to chip at the ice sealing the seam of the sliding portal. When that broke away, they opened the cablecar, jumped from the platform into the shiny interior. Hulann was fascinated with the dozen passenger seats, all bright black plastic leather studded with chrome—though surely the interior of a naoli spacecraft was quite a deal more spectacular than this simple cabin.

Leo called from the far end of the cabin—fifteen feet away. He was standing by a console, much like the one on the platform outside. Hulann went to him, looked down.

„We're in luck,“ the boy said, pointing to the topmost toggle on the board. Beside the toggle was a label telling where the cab would take you if you chose to flip this one. THE FRENCH ALPINE, it announced.

„What's that?“

„A hotel,“ Leo said. „I've heard of it. I didn't know we were close to it, though. It'll be a good place to rest.“

Hulann reached forward and set the toggle.

The bee jolted and began humming as it moved back the cable toward the top of the mountain.

They looked through the window in front of them, holding onto the safety bar that ran around all sides of the cabin, except where there were seats. The snow spat at them, coursed around them as they moved into the heart of it, gaining speed. It was very strange to be plummeting up, to be speedballing without the touch of wind. Hulann held tight to the safety bar, inspecting the magnificent view, seeing:—the gray snake of the cable stretching into the snow haze;—the rimed land stretching to all sides, losing its contour under the coverlet of winter, losing character and sex, like a sleeping giant concealed by cotton;—the great dark pines that bristled like whiskers out of the cold foam;—an onrushing pylon, steel arms spread to receive them, then jolting past them, making them sway so all these other things danced delightfully beneath them;—a flock of dark birds, moving by the mountain, flying level with them, knifing the storm with soft feathers;—his and Leo's breath fogging the glass so that the boy had to reach out a hand and clear the port...

Hulann's tail snapped, then wound around his left thigh, tight.

„What's the matter?“ the boy asked.

„Nothing.“

„You look upset.“

Hulann grimaced, his reptilian features taking on a pained look. „We're awfully high,“ he said in a thin voice.

„High? But it's only a hundred feet down!“

Hulann looked mournfully at the cable sliding past above them. „A hundred feet is enough if that should break.“

„You've been in a shuttlecraft without even a cable.“

„The highest they go is fifteen feet.“

„Your starships, then. You can't get any higher than that.“

„And you can't fall, either. There's no gravity out there.“

Leo was laughing now, bending over the waist-high safety bar and giggling deep down in his throat. When he looked up again, his small face was red, and his eyes were watery. „This is something else!“ he said. „You're afraid of heights. Naoli aren't supposed to be afraid of anything. Do you know that? Naoli are vicious fighters, hard, ruthless opponents. Nowhere does it say they are permitted to fear anything.“

„Well—“ Hulann said weakly.

„We're almost there,“ Leo said. „Just steel yourself for another minute or two, and it'll all be over.“

Indeed, the bulk of the receiving station loomed out of the storm ahead. It was a gaily painted Swiss-styled header with a scalloped shelter roof over the entrance trough and large windows divided into dozens of small panes by criss-crossing spines of polished pine. As they glided up the cable, it seemed as if the header was moving to meet them, as if they were the stationary object.

A dozen feet from the header station, the yellow bee jolted, leaped up and down on its connections, bouncing the two occupants severely. There was a crunching sound, much like that the ice had been making on the last few hundred feet of unbroken trail—though this noise was nastier and somehow frightening. The car seemed to stop, then lurch ahead. Then, very definitely, it slipped back. There was a second jolt, worse than the first, which knocked Hulann's feet out from under him and made him fall in against the wall and the safety bar to which he still clung.

„What is it?“ he asked the boy.

„I don't know.“

The car tried to move ahead toward the looming header station, thumped again, slipped back, began swaying wildly. It was a combination of ferris wheel, roller coaster, out-of-control shuttlecraft, a dizzying, horrifying explosion of movement, sound and swirling light. Hulann felt his second stomach reject its refined contents, tasted the product of his first stomach in his throat. It required all the effort he could muster to avoid vomiting.

Leo lost his hold on the safety bar, went rolling across the front of the cabin, slammed hard against the far wall. Hulann thought he heard the boy squeal in pain, but the rattling of the bee and the singing of the tortured cable drowned it out.

The car moved forward again, leaped again, was tossed backwards a few feet on the cable.

The cabin swung like a pendulum. Leo rolled away, arms and legs akimbo, came up sharply against the edge of the guidance console, only a few feet from Hulann.

The alien could see the bright blood trickling from the broken corner of the boy's mouth. Leo reached for something which might give him a handhold, scrabbled ungloved fingers over smooth, cold metal. The car swung violently, ripping him back across the bottom of the bee.

The arcs of the pendulum were high and distant now, the swings so long and wild that they made Hulann feel giddy like a child on an amusement ride. But he was not amused.

Leo pulled himself into a tight ball to protect his more vulnerable regions, rebounded from the far wall without much damage, bounced back and came up against the housing of the guidance system again. There was a bruise along his left jaw, already brown-blue and growing darker.

Hulann held to the safety railing with one hand, reached out and clutched the boy's coat with the other, slid his six claws into the layers of fabric to hook it securely. The cabin tilted again, but Leo did not go rolling back. Painstakingly, Hulann began to use his great but not well-cared-for muscles to reel the boy in. When he had brought him against his own heaving chest, he pulled himself erect with one hand, then drew Leo up with the claws that were hooked in the boy's clothing. Leo seized the rail once more, held it so tightly that his ungloved knuckles were bleached white.

„We have to stop it!“ he shouted to Hulann. His small face was lined like the weathered visage of an old man. „It'll jump the cable any minute now!“

Hulann nodded. They were facing the window again, and he could not take his eyes off the view, like a man hypnotized by the wild lion stalking him. The Swiss header station whirled dizzily back and forth. Again, it seemed as if it were the building that moved while the bright cablecar remained still. Yet, if that were the case, then the pines below were also moving, performing an eerie ritual dance. And the sky was coming closer, then receding, the great masses of blue-gray clouds scudding forward, then reversing their direction.

„Shut it off!“ Leo insisted. He was afraid to let go with either of his small hands, for he knew he would be torn free, sent stumbling, crashing across the room again.

Hulann reached out to the console.

The car moved forward, jolted against whatever was halting it, reeled backwards, setting up an even more torturous arc.

He shut down the systems. The car ceased to challenge the obstruction, settled to a halt on the cable. Gradually, the swaying began to settle until it was no more severe than it had been before the trouble started. The wind kidded it into a gentle rocking, nothing more.

„What now?“ Hulann asked, obviously quite shaken, Leo released the safety rail, looked at it as if he expected it to be bent where he had grasped it. He flexed his hands, trying to take the numbness out of them. „There's something wrong with the cable. We'll have to see what.“

„How?“

Leo examined the ceiling. „There’s the access door.“

Halfway back the room, against the right wall, rungs led up to a trap door in the ceiling.

„You’ll have to be the one,“ Leo said. „I’d get blown away out there.“

Hulann shook his long head in agreement. His tail was still wrapped tightly around his thigh.

## Chapter 8

Banalog sat stiffly in the heavy green chair in the dimly lit chambers of the Hunter Docanil. If he had been a scientist of any lesser form of knowledge, he would not have been able to withstand the probing interrogation of the Hunter. He would have made an error in detail, would have betrayed himself with a stutter or a flicker of fear across his wide features. But a traumatist was a man with total knowledge of the mind, its physical functions and the more refined thought processes of the overmind. He knew how to control his own emotions to a degree that no other naoli—aside from a Hunter—could manage. He repressed his fear, sheltered his deceit, and amplified a projected image of sincerity, honesty, and professional concern. He thought Docanil was fooled. He could not be certain, of course; no one could ever really know what a Hunter thought. But it did seem as if he were pulling this off quite well.

Docanil stood next to the room’s only window. The heavy, amber velvet drapes had been tied back with thick cord. Outside, the early morning light was weak. The snow continued. Docanil seemed to be looking beyond the snow, beyond the ruins, into some pocket universe only he had the vision to penetrate.

Banalog watched the other creature with barely concealed interest. He was fascinated by every detail of a Hunter, always had been. This was a professional concern that was not faked. He longed to take a Hunter under analysis, longed to work deep into one of their minds to find out what went on in there. But a Hunter would never need a traumatist’s care and counseling. They were totally in control of themselves at all times. Or so the legend said...

Docanil was dressed in snug, blue slacks that were tucked into black boots. A sweater-like garment cloaked his torso, came up high on his long, thick neck. The blue of these was almost dark enough to be called black. Around his waist was a stretch belt with dull, silver buckle and over the buckle the insignia of his trade: the reaching hand, claws extended to capture the enemy, the circle of wicked-looking nails enclosing this. Tossed across another chair was his greatcoat, a heavy, fuzzy thing that looked like it was made of fur-lined velvet. This was black. On the shoulders there were black leather decorative straps. A black leather belt around the middle. There were buttons instead of a pressure seal, and they were as large around as a naoli eye, stamped from heavy black metal, each with the reaching claw and the ring of nails.

Banalog shuddered.

He knew that Hunters wore clothes for a practical reason: as Hunters, destined to their trade even before birth, they were in all ways more sensitive to external stimuli than other naoli. Their body temperature could not easily adjust to changes in the atmosphere as could those of normal naoli. In intense summer heat, they were forced to remain in shadows as much as possible and to drink great quantities of fluids to replace those lost by their bodies. In bitter winter cold, they needed protection against the elements just as fragile humans did.

Yet, there was something sinister in their clothes. Not just in the fact that they wore them—but in the type of garments they chose. Or was this just a childish fear of the unknown? Banalog thought not. He could not pinpoint what, exactly, disturbed him about the sort of uniform the Hunters had adopted, but his uneasiness persisted.

Docanil turned away from the window, looked across the gloomy chamber to the traumatist. Hunters did not seem to need much light to see well...

„What you have told me is of little value,“ he said. His voice was haunting, a deep, whispered hiss of a voice that somehow managed to carry as well as Banalog’s own.

„I have tried to—“

„You have told me about the guilt. About the sort of trauma growing more common which has caused Hulann to act as he has. I understand what you say—though I do not understand the trauma. But I must have more information, more theories about how this individual will act now that he is on the run. I cannot go by normal standards.“

„You haven’t tracked naoli before?“ Banalog asked.

„It is rare, as you know. Once before. But he was a common criminal, similar in his reaction patterns to our enemies. He was not, however, a traitor. I cannot understand Hulann.“

„I don’t know what else I can say.“

Docanil crossed the room. His boots made soft ticking sounds on the floor.

He stopped by Banalog’s chair, looked down from his great height, his hideously high cranium picking up bits of the glow lamps. He looked down, smiling the most frightening smile Banalog had ever seen. Beneath his blue-black sweater, his heavy, abnormal muscles bulged and rippled as if they were alive.

„You will help me further,“ he hissed to Banalog.

„How? I have told you—“

„You will accompany me in the chase. You will give me your advice. You will try to analyze Hulann from what he does and try to project his next move.“

„I do not see how I—“

„I will use the Phasersystem in an attempt to get his general location. That should succeed. Whether it does or not, we will then begin. Be ready in an hour.“

The Hunter turned away, started for the door into the other room of his quarters.

„But—“

„An hour,“ he said as he passed through the portal and closed it behind him, leaving Banalog alone.

The tone of his voice permitted no argument...

On the northernmost petal of the daisy-shaped continent of the home world of the naoli system, next to a pincer-formed cove where the green sea beat softly insistent, stood the House of Jonovel, a respected and ancient establishment. Deep within the rock-walled, hand-hewn cellars of the venerable mansion was the family's brood hole in which the most recent Jonovel children rested and grew. There were six of them—blind and deaf and mostly dumb as well—snuggled in the warm, wet richness of the brood hole mothermud. Each was no larger than a human thumb, looked more like a small fish than a naoli. There were no visible legs, though the tail had already formed and would remain. The arms were little more than filaments. The tiny heads were buds that could be crushed between thumb and forefinger with little effort. They laid in their individual womb-wads, the slimy white semi-living discharges that had carried them out of their mother after the first stage of their development had been achieved. Fine amber-red ganglia connected them to the wads. Traceries of darker wine-hued blood vessels fed them fluid and took away their wastes. The wads pulsed around their charges, regulating all the delicate processes of life. In two months time, the wombwads would no longer be needed. The Jonovel children would squirm loose of them. The wads, deprived of their patients, would die. The rich mothermud of the hole would then begin to break them down and absorb their protein-laden tissues to maintain a healthy mixture for future births. The children, moving now, no longer blind nor deaf—and totally free to speak their nonsense words—would feed upon the cultures of fungus ringing the walls, sucking for their own life upon the mothermud. The children, at the end of six months, would be brought forth. The Phasersystem contact would be surgically implanted. Education, then, would be rapid, fed right into their overminds without need for vocal instruction.

Retawan Jonovel stood above the brood hole, looking down from the entrance foyer onto the mothermud and his six offspring. They were his first brood in fifty-one years. And, damnit, there should have been nine of them!

Nine. Not six!

But Hunters had to come from somewhere...

Shortly after his mate and Retawan had come forth from sixteen days in the warren, the central committee had authorized the Hunters' Guild to treat three of the barely fertilized fetuses and to withdraw them from the woman's womb for development in the artificial wombs beneath the Hunters' Monastery.

He should have expected it sooner or later. The Jonovel's were ancient, pure stock, just the sort the Hunters liked to use. If they had not come for part of this brood, they would have come the next time.

Still...

The six below cluttered and squealed mindlessly.

Retawan Jonovel cursed the Hunters and the need for them that made their existence a reality. He left the brood hole, closing the iron door behind. The heat, smell, and noise was getting to him...

A white-haired man stood in a cleft of rock, letting the wind flap his clothes and uncomb his frosted mane. It felt good to stand here in the open on his own world after so long in the depths of the fortress, so long in artificial light and darkness. He watched the foamy breakers toiling in toward shore, cresting, battering,

spraying up on the rocks three hundred feet below at the foot of the mountain. It was a truly wonderful sight.

Taken from them now. As everything had been.

Unconsciously, he scanned the sky for sign of a naoli copter. But the skies were clear.

The sea rolled in... crashing, spitting up, frothing.

The sea had great strength. Perhaps the world could survive this. Perhaps man could. No, not perhaps. They would survive. There could be no doubt! For doubt would be the end of them...

The scattered clouds burned away. The sun was full and radiant. It felt warm on his face, even though the wind was cool. A long while later, he turned and went into the channel in the cliffside, followed the twist in it until he came to the well-known spot. He made the recognition signal, waited for reply. The door in the rock slid slowly open. He stepped into the Haven and returned to the dismal burden of his duties...

## Chapter 9

Hulann pushed the access door up and away to his right. Instantly, the booming storm winds rushed down the hole he had made, swept by him, made Leo, who was standing at the foot of the rungs, shiver and hold himself with his arms to contain his heat. Hulann went up two more steps until he could see above the roof of the cab. He inspected the suspension bracket for damage, though he was not certain he would recognize any if he saw it. As the cold bit at him and the wind decided to take off the flat flaps of his ears, he tried to think of some way to avoid crawling onto the roof-and decided there was none. He climbed the rest of the way out, staying on his hands and knees to offer as little resistance as possible to the wind.

He edged his way over the icy roof toward the suspension bracket, grabbed hold of it with both arms when he reached it. He was breathing heavily, and he felt as if he had traveled a dozen miles instead of eight or nine feet.

He looked back the way they had come, at the endless length of swinging cable. Nothing wrong behind them. He turned, looked forward the dozen feet to the header station. There it was. Two feet before the car wheels, there was a lump of dark-cored ice a little more than four inches thick, perhaps half a foot long. The wheels had come up against that, repeatedly, and had been forced back.

It was a minor miracle that they had not been bumped off the cable to crash on the rocky slopes below.

Below...

He looked down, over the edge of the cab, then quickly looked back up. The distance down had seemed frightening from inside the cabin. Unenclosed as he now was, it was perfectly terrifying. He realized, with little surprise, that he was never meant to be a rebel. He was never designed, emotionally, to be on the run, to take risks, to be an outlaw. How had he gotten into this? Guilt, yes. He hadn't

wanted to turn the boy in to be slaughtered. But that all seemed so petty now. He was willing to turn a hundred boys in if necessary. Just so he would not have to do what he was beginning to understand he must do if they were to survive.

„What is it?“ Leo called.

Hulann turned. The boy had climbed the rungs and had poked his head out of the hole in the roof. His yellow hair seemed almost white now, fluttering above him, sweeping down now and then to blot out his features.

„Ice on the cable. A huge chunk of it. I don't know what caused it. Very unnatural.“

„We'll have to go back,“ Leo said.

„No.“

„What?“

The car began swaying slightly more than usual as a stronger gust of wind caught it broadside.

„We can't go back,“ Hulann said. „I might have tried climbing half the mountain before. Not now. We both got battered around in the cab. We've lost more strength. I'm afraid I'm getting too cold. I have no feeling in my feet at all. We have to get there by cableway or not at all.“

„But we'll be thrown loose trying to cross the ice.“

„I'm going to break it loose.“

The boy, even with his face distorted in the cold, looked incredulous. „How close to the car is it?“

„A couple of feet.“

„Can you stand on the roof?“

„I don't think so,“ he said.

„You mean you plan on—“

„—hanging on the cable,“ Hulann finished.

„You'll fall. You're scared of heights even inside the cab.“

„You have any better ideas?“

„Let me,“ the boy said.

For answer, Hulann stood, gripping the cable, and held it as he walked gingerly along the roof toward the edge.

„Hulann!“

He did not answer.

It was not that he was heroic or that he indulged in acts of foolish courage. At this moment, it was abject fear which drove him, not courage of any stripe. If he did not break that ice, they would die. They would have to go back to the boarding station at the middle of the mountain and make their way up the slopes to the top. Though the storm had not increased in strength, it seemed to have gained thirty miles an hour in velocity, for he could not withstand its battering as well as before. And the wearier they became, the more fierce the storm would seem—until they would collapse in it, go to sleep, and die. There was no sense in sending the boy out on the cable to do the job, for he would surely be blown loose, fall, and shatter upon the rocks. And then there would be no point in going on. It would be as good to die.

He left the roof, holding to the cable with both hands, the muscles of his brawny arms corded and thumping under the strain.



He did not hang on a plumb line, but was blown slightly to the left. He had to fight the wind, his own weight, and the growing ache in his arms...

He found that his hands had a tendency to freeze to the cable.

His lungs burned as the bitter air scorched them. He would have been better off on one set of nostrils, but he could not close the primaries down and still operate on full capacity. And he needed everything he had...

Some of the outer layers of scales were pulling loose. He did not feel any pain—chiefly because the wounds were artificial, but also because his flesh was numbed.

A moment later, he reached the ice lump. He looked up at it, saw a dark, irregular shape within. He could not guess what it might be, but he had no time for guessing games anyway. He let go with one hand, holding the other ready an inch from the cable in case one arm proved too weak to hold him. But, though his nerves screamed and his shoulder threatened to separate at its socket, he found he could manage on the single arm. Raising the other hand, he swung at the ice lump, claws extended.

The very ends of the hard nails shaved the ice. Some of it fell away and was lost in the pulsating snow sheaths.

The impact of the blow sent a tight vibration through the taut cable. The vibration coursed down the arm by which he hung, made his flesh pain even more.

He swung again.

More ice was sliced off. A major fracture appeared in the lump. He reached up, worked his claws into the crack, twisted and pried. The ice broke. Two large pieces fell away. He saw, then, what had caused the lump. A bird had struck the cable, lodged itself on long enough for ice to form to freeze it in place. Since then, the ice had continued to build over it.

He knocked off more ice, then tugged the mangled bird free, looked at it. Its eyes were frozen solid, white and unseeing. Its beak was broken and covered with frozen blood. He dropped it, grabbed the cable with both hands, and began the tricky turn-about to head back for the safety of the roof, then the cab, then the header station, and finally the shelter of the blessed FRENCH ALPINE HOTEL...

Docanil the Hunter sat in a gray swivel chair before a bank of blinking lights and shuddering dials, flanked on either side by Phasersystem technicians who watched him from the corners of their eyes as one might watch an animal that seemed friendly but which one did not quite trust, despite all assurances. „How soon?“ he asked the room.

„Any moment now,“ the chief technician said, flitting about his own console, touching various knobs and toggles and dials, turning some, just brushing others for the assurance they gave him.

„You must find all you can,“ Docanil said.

„Yes,“ the technician said. „Ah, here we are now...“

*Hulann*, the voiceless voice said.

He woke. Though not completely. The voice murmured to him, kept him slightly hazed as it asked questions of him. He felt it probing into his overmind, looking for something. What?

*Relax*, it whispered.

He started to relax... then sat bolt upright!

*Open to us, Hulann.*

„No.“ It was possible to close down one’s contact with the Phasersystem. In the beginning, centuries upon centuries ago, the central committee had decided that if the naoli could not have privacy when they wanted it, then the Phasersystem might become a tyranny, a thing from which there was no escape. Hulann was thankful for their foresight now.

*Open, Hulann. It is the wise thing.*

„Go. Leave me.“

*Turn the boy over, Hulann.*

„To die?“

*Hulann—*

„Go. Now. I am not listening.“

Reluctantly, the contact faded, broke, and left him alone with himself.

Hulann sat in the dark lobby of the hotel, on the edge of the sofa where he had been sleeping. A few feet away, Leo snored lightly, drawn into a foetal position, his head tucked down between his shoulders. Hulann thought about the Phasersystem intrusion. They had, of course, been probing to find where he was. He tried to recall those first few moments of the probe to see whether he had given them what they wanted. It did not seem likely. A probe takes several minutes to be truly efficient. They couldn’t have learned anything in six or eight seconds. Could they? Besides, would they have prodded him to give up the boy if they had discovered his whereabouts? Highly unlikely.

Before his thoughts could begin to stray to his family in the home system, to his children that he would never see again, he stretched out on the couch and, for the second time in less than an hour, disassociated his overmind from his organic regulating brain, slipped into the nether world pocket of death sleep...

„Well?“ Docanil asked the chief technician.

The man handed over the printouts of the probe. „Not much.“

„You tell me.“

The voice was a rasping command, given in a low but deadly key.

The technician cleared his throat. „They’ve headed west. They passed the Great Lakes conversion crater. The scene was clear in his mind. They got off the superway at exit K-43 and took the secondary route toward Ohio.“

„Nothing more?“

„Nothing more.“

„This is not much.“

„Enough for a Hunter,“ the technician chief said.

„This is true.“

Docanil left the room, went into the corridor where Banalog waited. He glanced at the traumatist as he went by, as if he did not know him and was only mildly curious. Banalog rose and followed him to the end of the hall, through a plasti-glass door into the frigid morning air. A copter was waiting, a large one with living quarters and enough supplies to last the two of them as long as the hunt required.

„You found them?“ he asked Docanil when they were seated in the cockpit of the craft.

„More or less.“

„Where are they?“

„West.“

„That’s all you know?“

„Not quite.“

„What else?“

Docanil looked at the traumatist with interest. The glance made the other naoli cringe and draw away, tight against the door of the cabin.

„I was just curious,“ Banalog explained.

„Fight your curiosity. The rest is for me to know. It can mean nothing to you.“

He started the copter and lifted it out of the ruins of Boston, into the wind and snow and bleak winter sky...

## Chapter 10

### **POINT:**

In the Nucio system, on the fourth planet circling the giant sun (the place once called Data but now called nothing at all) it was early evening. A brief but intense rain had just fallen, and the air was saturated with a fine, blue mist that settled ever so slowly on the glossy leaves of the thick forests. There were no animal sounds anywhere. Occasionally, there was a soft ululation—but that was not the cry of a beast.

Near the calm sea, where there had once been beasts, the jungle labored to turn a tangle of steel beams into dust. The metal was already eaten through in many places...

A hundred feet beyond this, closer to the water's edge, a walking vine snaked a healthy green tentacle through the empty, yellow eye socket of a long, gleaming naoli skull...

## Chapter 11

### **COUNTERPOINT:**

In the city of Atlanta it was noon. It was a bright day, though a cloud or two drifted across the sun. In the foundry yard on the west end of town, everything was still—except for the rats scrambling about the interior of a huge storage tank at the yard’s end. There were about a dozen of them, chittering and hissing at one another. This had once been the tank that temporarily housed Sara Laramie. The rats feasted...

## Chapter 12

As they neared the border of Pennsylvania and Ohio, the Hunter Docanil prepared to initiate as careful a search as possible of the oncoming terrain. He withdrew the sensory patch-ins from their slots on the console. The patches were little metal tabs whose undersides were studded with a dozen half-inch needles of the finest copper alloy, honed and sharpened to a rigid specification. There were six of them, and Docanil pressed each of them into a different set of nerve clusters on his body, having to roll back his sleeves in the process; his trousers were equipped with zippers along the legs to open them for the same purpose. When he was patched into the exterior sensory amplifiers on the copter's hide, he settled back in his chair, six wire snakes winding from him to the console, making him look like some automaton or some part of the machine and not a living creature in his own right.

Banalog watched, fascinated and horrified. What fascinated him would fascinate anyone watching a Hunter at work for the first time. What horrified him was the ease with which the creature became a part of a machine. He seemed to suffer no psychological shock in the process. Indeed, he seemed to enjoy linking to the copter and its electronic ears and eyes and nose. The mechanical devices amplified not only his perceptions, but his stature, his very being—until now he was as some mytho-poetic creature from legends.

Docanil had closed his eyes, for he did not need them now. The exterior cameras fed sight data directly to his brain—that super brain that could interpret all sensations much more thoroughly and readily than the average organic mound of gray tissue.

The copter swept up the mountainside, following the road that its radar gear said existed beneath the billowing, undulating dunes of snow.

Banalog had never seen so much snow in his life. It had begun snowing steadily only yesterday afternoon, and in one day had put down almost a foot. The occupation force meteorologists said the end was not in sight. It looked as if the storm could last another six or eight hours and put down another half foot of the white stuff. Not only was it a record breaker in duration and amount of precipitation (in naoli experience) but also in the area it blanketed. It stretched all along the top of what used to be called the States, from the Mid West to the New England coastline. It would have held the traumatist enthralled, had not the Hunter also fascinated him.

The copter drifted on, flying itself, only twenty-five feet above the land.

They were almost to the top of the mountain when Docanil opened his eyes, leaned forward, kicked the automatic pilot off, and took control of the machine.

„What is it?“ Banalog inquired.

Docanil did not answer. He brought the copter around, headed back down the mountain for a few hundred feet, then set the machine to hover.

Banalog looked out the windscreen, studied the area that seemed to concern the Hunter. He could make out only what appeared to be a few guardrails thrusting above the snow, a tangle of safety cable, and a great deal of drift.

„What?“ he asked again. „I’m supposed to help you if I can.“

He thought the Hunter almost smiled; at least he came closer to it than any Hunter the traumatist had ever seen.

„You help me to think ahead of Hulann. I can pick up the trail myself. But since you are curious... Do you see the rails and the cable?“

„Yes.“

„The rails are crooked, as if they have been partially uprooted or bent out of shape. The cable is broken. See how it meanders across the snow. Something has struck here. Perhaps they have already died. See the drift ahead? They could have swerved to miss that.“

Banalog licked his lips. He wanted to twine his tail about his leg, but knew the Hunter would see. „I didn’t know you were so sensitive to clues this small or to—“

„Of course,“ Docanil the Hunter said.

He took the copter over the rails and down the side of the mountain, handily avoiding the pipes, swerving through breaks in them that Banalog did not even see until they were upon them, zigging and zagging, using the stiff wind that tried to batter their craft, moving with it instead of against it.

„There,“ Docanil said.

Banalog looked. „What? I see nothing.“

„Between the two columns of rock. The car.“

If the traumatist looked closely, strained his big eyes until they watered, he was able to make out pieces of a shuttlecraft body peeking through the snow, no section more than a few inches square.

„The vehicle is on its side,“ Docanil said. „And it is the one they escaped in.“

„They’re dead?“

„I don’t know,“ the Hunter said. „We will stop and look.“

Leo was roused by the stuttering blades of a copter. He sat up on the plush couch and listened closely. The noise was gone now, but he was certain he had not dreamed it. He sat very tensely for a time. At last, he got up and went to the windows, walked from one to the other. There was nothing but the trees, the snow, and the hotel grounds.

Then the sound came again.

A helicopter. Close.

He ran across the room to where Hulann slept, shook the naoli’s shoulder.

Hulann did not respond.

„Hulann!“

Still, he did not move.

The sound of the copter faded, then came back again. He could not tell if it was coming closer or not. But he knew it was almost a certainty that the passengers of that machine were looking for him and Hulann. He continued to harass the sleeping alien, but with no more luck than before. There are only three ways to wake a naoli from his nether world slumber...

Docanil the Hunter clambored out of the smashed shuttlecar, walked across the side of the twisted wreck, and jumped to the ground, sinking in snow up to his knees. Despite the difficult conditions, he moved with grace and catlike quiet.

„Are they dead?“ Banalog asked.

„They are not there.“

Banalog managed to keep his relief from showing. He should have been anxious for the Hunter's success and against anything that benefited the renegades. Irresponsibly, he felt just the opposite. He wanted them to escape, to find refuge, to survive. Deep within, he was aware of what the Phasersystem said would happen if humans survived. A hundred years from now, two hundred, and they would find a way to strike back. His irresponsibility, if it became popular, would be a danger to the race. Yet... He did not stop to analyze himself. He did not dare...

They boarded the chopper again.

Docanil pulled the patch-ins from their slots and reconnected himself to the exterior pickups. The cords dangled. When the copper alloy needles had slid into his flesh, he started the machine and-keeping it under manual control-took it up into the grayness.

„What now?“ Banalog asked.

„We quarter the mountain.“

„Quarter?“

„You are not familiar with search techniques.“

„No,“ Banalog agreed.

The Hunter said no more.

At length, after they had danced back and forth, up and down a relatively small portion of the slope for some time, Docanil brought the copter in over a pylon boarding station that was part of an aerial cableway running from the base of the mountain to the top.

„There,“ he hissed, as excited as a Hunter could get.

Again, Banalog could see nothing.

Docanil said, „Ice. See? Broken from the steps. And it has been melted from the control board recently.“ The helicopter passed over the platform; he brought it around once more. „They've used the cablecar. Also notice that the ice has been broken from the cable going to the top of the slope, though it still remains on the cable leading to the bottom. They went up.“

He turned the copter; they fluttered toward the peak.

The cable ran by below them.

The Swiss-styled header station laid ahead, becoming visible through the snow...

Leo had heard stories of naoli and the condition they entered when they slept and when they drank alcoholic beverages. He knew there were other ways to wake them, but he did not know what they were. He had only heard about the application of pain, heard about it from spacers who had been in the outer reaches, among the many races of the galaxy. He did not want to hurt Hulann. There was no other choice.

The chopper was working closer now, swaying back and forth directly down the slope from them, around the cableway system. He could hear it coming gradually closer, then receding, only to come back again.

„Hulann!“

The naoli did not respond, and there was no time to try anything but that which he knew would work. He stood and ran through the lobby, along a corridor and into the main dining hall. The tables were set, everything ready for a full house—except dust had collected on the silverware. Leo moved between the tables, through the double doors at the rear of the room and into the large hotel kitchen. In moments, he found the knife and went back to the lobby.

He knelt next to the couch where Hulann slept. His hands shook as he brought the blade forth, and he dropped it as if it were red hot the first time the gleaming point touched the tough alien skin. He looked at the knife on the carpet and could not bring himself to lift it.

The helicopter's engine changed tone. Then, the roar of it grew steadily louder. It was coming directly for the hotel!

He picked up the knife in both hands so that he could be sure of holding onto it. He pricked the point of it in Hulann's biceps.

The alien slept on.

He jabbed deeper. A small well of blood sprang up around the edges of the knife. A thin trickle of it ran down Hulann's arm and dripped onto the couch.

Leo felt ill.

The copter's engine boomed abruptly louder, three times the volume as before, as it came over the brow of the mountain down near the header station.

He twisted the blade, opening the wound farther.

More blood sprang up.

The copter passed over the hotel, turned to come back.

The room shook with its noise.

Leo gritted his teeth, twisted the blade viciously in the rubbery flesh.

Instantly, Hulann sat up, striking out with an arm that caught the boy on the side of the head and knocked him sprawling on the floor.

„They're here!“ Leo shouted, not angry that he had been struck. „I thought you were—“

„They're here!“ he insisted.

Hulann listened as the Hunter's craft swept low over the hotel roof. He stood, his entire body trembling now. It had to be a Hunter, for they could not have been found so quickly by anyone else. The Hunter—Docanil. Yes, that was his name.

Dark blue velveteen trousers and shirt... Black boots... Heavy greatcoat... Gloves for the six-fingered hands, gloves with the ends open to permit the claws their deadly full-length when he chose to unsheath them... The high skull... The deadly, steady eyes... And the extended claw circled by the sharpened iron nails...

While he stood, nightmares flushing through his mind, the copter settled onto the promenade before the hotel, only a hundred yards from the lobby doors.

„What can we do?“ Leo asked.

„Hurry,“ Hulann said, turning and striding across the lobby toward the rear of the great hotel complex. He was not certain where he was going. Panic was guiding him. But panic was better than paralysis, for it carried him away from the Hunter Docanil, gained a few extra minutes in which to think.

Leo hurried behind.

They passed the dining hall entrance, went beyond a small mall with a plasti-glass roof that gave a view of the sky. Here, there were a dozen shops for the hotel

patrons, a few little restaurants, a barber, curios, and a hundred-seat theater. They went out the other side of the mall and into the offices of the hotel administration. These were bare now. The doors stood open. Dust gathered on what had once been urgent memos and important reports.

At last, they reached the back of the hotel, pushed open a heavy fire door, and stepped into the snow again. They had gotten several hours sleep, but the moment the cold and wind hit them, they felt as if they had only paused a minute or two since getting off the cablecar.

Ahead, the top of the mountain stretched. There were various markers indicating the direction to the ski slopes, toboggan trails, and other points of interest. A hundred feet away, they spotted a squat, block building perched on a small knoll, windowless, with a single sliding door that rolled away overhead.

„There,“ Hulann said.

„But they'll check that after they search the hotel.“

„We're not staying there. I think it may be a garage. The skiers had to have some way to reach the slopes besides walking.“

„Yeah!“ Leo said, grinning.

Hulann could not grin, and he marveled at the boy's delight over such a small treasure. Even if it turned out to be a garage, there might be no vehicles there. And if there were cars, they might not run. And if they ran, there was still no guarantee they could escape Docanil and his copter. Certainly no time to grin.

The boy reached the door first, palmed the control set in a black panel in the concrete wall. The metal portal shuddered, then groaned upward, admitting them. The interior of the place was like a tomb, dim and cold and sifted over with dust and frost. But there were cars. There were heavy tread vehicles for use in drifts of almost any size.

They boarded the first, found that it would not turn over; the second was in the same condition. As was the third. But the fourth one coughed twice, sputtered like a man with a mouthful of some unpleasant food, and grumbled into life. Hulann brought the clumsy beast out of the garage, surprised that—now that it was running—it made almost no noise. That would be better for an escape. And for something else he had in mind. He turned the car toward the front of the hotel.

„Where are you going?“ Leo wanted to know.

„To see if they left the helicopter unguarded,“ Hulann said.

Leo grinned. Despite himself, Hulann grinned too...

Docanil and the traumatist stood in the deserted lobby, surveying the rich draperies and plush furniture. Now and then, the Hunter would go to a chair or couch to inspect it. Banalog could not begin to guess what he expected to find.

„They've been here?“ he asked the Hunter.

„Yes.“

„Are they still—“

„Perhaps.“

„It is a large place to have to search.“

„We will not have to search it all,“ Docanil said. He bent to the carpet, his steady eyes on it. „The dust. Here. And there. And leading that way. It has been disturbed.“



„I cannot see—“

„Of course not.“

Docanil peeled off his gloves and tucked them into the pockets of his enormous coat. Banalog looked at the hands. Though they were larger than most naoli hands, they appeared no more deadly. He knew the truth to be different. They were the deadliest tools in the galaxy...

He strode off toward the back of the hotel... and stopped instantly as the crash sounded from the front promenade.

„The helicopter!“ Banalog said.

But Docanil was by him, running for the door, a huge, dark figure much like something a human might have painted to represent a demon of Hell fleeing the wrath of the Almighty. He burst through the doors and onto the porch, Banalog a few steps behind.

The copter was lying on its side. It had been rammed by a heavy, ten passenger ground car, toppled from its landing skis. The car circled and came back, running headlong for the front of the plane. It struck with a resounding jar that shook the ground and even sent a tremble through the patio on which they stood. The windscreen shattered. The nose crumpled inward, jamming the control mechanisms.

Docanil leaped into the snow, covering several yards, landing more lightly than Banalog would have thought possible. He started for the ground car in which Hulann and the human rode.

The car turned from the demolished copter, struck for the side of the hotel, trying to get behind it and away across the wild top of the mountain.

The Hunter Docanil turned, trying to cut them off, running faster than was possible in snow so deep.

Hulann gunned the engine of the car. The tread kicked up chunks of snow and mud, threw them back over the Hunter.

But it would take a few moments for the car to gain speed, whereas the specially nurtured, specially constructed muscles of the Hunter had ground into high gear in a fraction of a second. It would be a toss-up who would reach the end of the hotel wall soonest.

Banalog was furious that he could do nothing. But, if he had the power to decide the outcome of the contest, who would he choose? Hulann and the boy? And go against his race. Or side with the Hunter—and be responsible for the other two deaths. Two deaths? A human death was merely an extermination, was it not? His head spun dizzily...

It was now apparent that, despite his furious pace, Docanil was going to lose the race. The ground car was moving now, leaving him a few more feet behind every moment.

The Hunter stopped, not even panting for breath, and raised his bare hands.

The car was at the corner of the hotel.

Docanil's fingers twitched.

Around the car, flames sprang up, and the snow burned.

The fingers twitched again.

The rear left fender of the car burst like a balloon, the fragments of steel whirling upwards into the snow, ringing down on the patio or falling with soft plops in the whiteness.

But Hulann kept his foot on the accelerator. The car moved on, around the wall, out of sight.

The Hunter Docanil ran to the corner and stared after it. Once more, he raised his fingers and tried to destroy it. But it was beyond his range now.

He watched it for several minutes. Soon, the elements pulled a white veil over it.

Watching the spot where he had last seen it, he took his gloves from his pockets and slowly pulled them on his freezing hands.

„What now?“ Banalog asked at his side.

He said nothing.

The Hunter's Guild perpetuates the original conception of the proper making of a Hunter. While the foetus is still in early stages, steps are made to limit the emotions its brain is capable of. Things like love and sympathy are, naturally, excised! Duty remains. A Hunter must have a sense of duty. Hate is left in too. That always helps. But perhaps, most important of all, a Hunter is permitted to feel humiliation. And when once humiliated, he is relentless. He pursues with a dogged determination that rules out all possibility of escape.

Docanil the Hunter had just been humiliated for the first time in his life...

## Chapter 13

It was three o'clock in the morning when Docanil the Hunter found the abandoned groundcar that Hulann and the human child had used to escape. He would have discovered it sooner (they had only driven it twenty miles before leaving it) but he had been forced to wait for a replacement helicopter to arrive in reply to his Phasersystem summons. Now, when it was the time to sleep and store energies, he was toiling more vigorously than ever. Though naoli preferred to sleep on much the same schedule as humans, they could go as much as five days without rest and still function properly. A Hunter, it was rumored, could perform his duties well for up to two sleepless weeks.

Banalog, on the other hand, was beginning to drag. He followed Docanil about the groundcar as the creature explored it for every thread of evidence left clinging to it. Then the search pattern widened, taking in the rest of the cluster of buildings that made up the little town of Leimas near the base of the mountain, at the opposite side of the hotel.

Docanil stopped before a squat building to their right, turned and carefully approached it. He started to take off his gloves, then ceased as he more fully interpreted the data supplied to his oversensitive system.

„They aren't here?“ Banalog asked.

„No. They were.“

„Oh.“

Docanil turned from his examination of the premises and stared openly at the traumatist with an intensity common only to Hunters. „You seem relieved.“

Banalog tried to remain expressionless. A Hunter might have the talent to see deeper, but a traumatist had the talent to increase the depth of his facade. „What do you mean?“

„Relieved. As if you were glad they have still managed to avoid me.“

„Nonsense.“

Although he tried to maintain a self-righteous look, tried to keep his lips from drawing tightly over his teeth, tried to keep his whiplike tail from lashing around his thigh, Banalog was certain that the Hunter had seen the crack in his facade, had seen the festering doubt that he held concerning the value, morality, and wisdom of the naoli-human war. After an uncomfortably long while (which could actually be no more than one or two Earth-length minutes) the Hunter looked away.

And he had seen.

Yes...

Banalog was certain Docanil had found that crack in his false front, had peered through it and had seen the turmoil within the traumatist's mind. He would report what he had seen to higher officials. There would be a Phasersystem probe of him some morning soon, during the psychological conditioning periods. Enough would be found for him to be sent to a session with the Third Division traumatist. If his guilt index was as high as he sometimes thought, he would soon be boarding a ship for the home system and a stretch in a hospital for therapy. Maybe they would wash and restructure his tainted mind. Wipe out his past. That was possible. Was it desirable? Well, it would allow him to start fresh. He did not want to be a detriment of the naoli race. He did not want to be always plagued with these stirrings of self-disgust and displeasure with the doings of his people. The idea did not hold as much terror for him as it had for Hulann. True, his children would be denied his past, would have to found their homes on only scraps of history. And he had far more children than Hulann. Yet he did not mind the idea of washing and restructuring so much—for he had sent so many people to have it done. And in justifying all those cases, he had pretty much convinced himself that the process was desirable and beneficial, not only to society, but to the individual in question.

„You see?“ Docanil the Hunter asked, interrupting the other naoli's reveries.

„I'm afraid not.“

A mixture of disgust and pleasure crossed the Hunter's face. Disgust at the traumatist's lack of powers of observation; pleasure at his own superior powers. A Hunter felt pleasure in a limited number of situations. He could not enjoy sex. He loathed it. Hunters did not reproduce, but were made from normal foetuses. He had little interest in food beyond supplying himself with a well-balanced diet. He felt nothing when administered sweet-drugs. His system burned alcohol so fast that the drug could have no effect, ill or beneficial. He did have an ego, for the ego is the motivator for all good work. When anything fed this intangible portion of his overmind, he felt comfortable, happy, and warm as he could in no other way. His ego was subjugated only to the Hunter's Guild; it fed triumphantly on all other naoli. „Look,“ Docanil went on. „The drifts about the buildings on this street.“

Banalog looked.

„Compare them to the drift before this building.“

„They are deeper,“ Banalog said.

„Yes. This one has been disturbed and has had to rebuild itself during the last several hours. There was a shuttlecraft within, most certainly.“

Inside the structure, they found three shuttlecraft—and a space between two of them where another had been parked until quite recently. Docanil knew the fourth had been moved only hours earlier, for a brown mouse had made a nest in the undercarriage of that long-stilled vehicle and had been chopped to bits when it had started and the big blades had stuttered to life without warning. Though the flesh and blood were frozen, the eyes were not solidly white as they would have been had the incident occurred more than a day ago.

They went back into the night and the snow, which was finally beginning to taper off. The wind whipped what had already fallen and blew that around, stinging wet clouds of it that cut their range of vision as thoroughly as if the storm had still been in progress.

„Do you know which way?“ Banalog asked.

„West,“ Docanil said. „So they went that way.“

„What are the signs?“

„There are none. No physical ones. The snow has obliterated their passage.“

„Then how—“

„The Haven is to the west, is it not?“

„That’s mythical, of course,“ the traumatist said.

„Is it?“

„Yes.“

„So many of their leaders have not been found,“ Docanil said. „They must be hiding somewhere.“

„They could have died in the nuclear suicides. Or been carried away in the general holocaust. We have probably already disposed of them, thinking them only part of the common people.“

„I think not.“

„But—“

„I think not.“ There was no argumentative tone in the Hunter's words. His opinion was stated in the same voice a scientist might use to set forth an established law of the universe.

They boarded the new chopper.

Docanil lifted it into the night, after connecting himself to the patch-ins. Banalog saw that the copper needles had a film of dried blood on them.

Docanil flew, watching. Banalog, resigned to the unrelenting pace of the search, settled into his seat, freed his overmind from his organic brain, set a time alarm in his subconscious, and slipped into simulated death...

It was dawn, and Hulann had driven the shuttlecraft far enough south to leave the snowline and enter a place of leafless trees and cold, clear skies. The naoli thought the weather was now comfortable, though Leo told him it was still somewhat chilly by human standards. They kept to secondary roads, simply because it would be easier for the Hunter to check the main arteries, therefore

easier to be found if they rode them. Besides, the snow no longer hid the pavement, and Hulann was able to adjust their blade speed and elevation far in advance of any change in the surface.

They had been making light conversation on and off through the dark hours of their flight. At first, the talk had helped to soothe them, had distracted them so that they could not dwell on the memory of the Hunter's Lightning that had torn off the rear fender. It was not „lightning“ of course. The Hunters had several surgically implanted weapons systems within their overlarge bodies. In their arms and hands was the gas pellet gun. From a storage sack in their arm, the system drew a highly compressed droplet of liquid oxygen, propelled it through the tubes by the controlled explosion of other gas, and fired the pellet from beneath the fingernails. It sunk into its target, expanding, and exploding the target from within. It was a short-range device. But effective. Knowing how it worked did not make it seem any the less mystical.

Hunters made an effort to cloak themselves in the attributes of gods—even in a race without a religious mythos. It was no surprise that they succeeded. Indeed, when Hulann had first comprehended the „gods“ concept held in several of the other galactic races, he had immediately wondered whether—in a hundred or a thousand centuries—the naoli would look back upon the first Hunters as ancient gods of a sort. Perhaps these genetically engineered creatures were destined to be the first of a line of saints that would one day be held in more esteem than they truly deserved. Worshiped? Maybe...

Eventually, their conversation turned to more personal channels, away from the artificial, frantic chatter which had first been subconsciously meant to blot out unpleasant thoughts. They talked of their pasts, of their families. Hulann was surprised at the compassion the boy showed, at the way he cried when he told of the death of his father and sister (his mother had died shortly after his birth). It was not like a human to show such emotions. At least, it was rare—and always with less intensity than this. Humans were cold, with little laughter and even fewer tears. This unemotional, stoic reserve was the thing that made them so basically alien to the naoli. And alien to all of the other races as well—all of which were gregarious.

Then the understanding came.

It sliced through his brain, stabbed upward into his overmind, jolting the entire foundation of his reason.

It hurt.

The first inklings of comprehension stirred and began to blossom when Leo pointed to a distant light of a rising naoli starship, easily a hundred miles away to the east. He watched the flame and the blue-green haze it created with the gaze of a washed and restructured naoli longing for his past. He sucked in his breath as the majestic plume grew longer on the velvet backdrop of the still dark sky. (just the horizon rim was touched with orange daylight). Hulann's mind leaped into the chasm of discovery when Leo said:

„I wanted to be a spacer. Always wanted it. But I wasn't chosen.“

„Chosen?“ Hulann asked, not realizing yet where the conversation was leading.

„Yes. My family stock was not what they called *prime*.“

„But you are too young to have applied for space work.“

Leo looked confused.

„You said you were only eleven.“

„You’re chosen before you’re born,“ the boy said. „Isn’t it that way with naoli?“

„That makes no sense!“ Hulann said. „You can’t be trained for space work until you’re older, able to grasp basic physics.“

„It would take too long that way,“ Leo said. „To be a spacer, you have to know so many things. Hundreds of thousands of things. To learn them as an adult—even with the help of hypnoteachers—would require too long.“

„Forty years. Fifty at the most,“ Hulann said. „Then there are centuries ahead in which—“

„Exactly,“ Leo said when Hulann failed to finish the sentence. „Humans only live to an average age of a hundred and fifty years. Only the first two thirds are *strong* years in which we can withstand the rigors of intergalactic travel.“

„That’s horrible!“ the naoli said. „Then your spacers spend their entire lives doing the same thing?“

„What else?“

Hulann tried to explain that the naoli held many occupations in one lifetime. It was unthinkable, he said, that a man should spend his short years doing the same thing. Limiting. Boring. Deadly to the mind. But it was not easy to press across this basic naoli principle of life to someone of so short-lived a species.

The understanding was hovering closer. Hulann felt the weight of it, though he could not understand exactly what was weighing on him...

„Once,“ Leo said, „in the early days of our space programs, spacers were not trained from before birth. They grew up, led normal lives, went to the moon, came back. Maybe they remained in the space program, maybe not. Some of them went into business. Others entered politics. One of them became President of the major country of that time. But when the faster-than-light drives were perfected and we began to accumulate more and more relevant data a spacer had to learn, the old way of choosing astronauts had to be replaced.“

There was now full understanding. Hulann realized why there had been a war, why Leo was different from the humans the naoli had met in space.

„The fertilized egg is withdrawn from the mother soon after conception,“ the boy went on. „The Spacer Institute then takes it and develops it into all the things a spacer should be. A spacer has toes twice as long as non-spacers, because he needs them for grasping in free-fall. The big toe is also an opposable thumb after the genetic engineers are finished. His range of vision runs into the infra-red. His hearing is more, acute. When the foetus is four months developed, it is subjected to a constant learning environment where data is fed directly into its developing brain. The human brain never learns faster than during that five month period.“

Hulann found he could barely speak. His voice was thinner, hoarser than normal. His lips kept drawing in over his teeth in shame, and he had to withdraw them to speak clearly. „How... did the non-spacers feel... about the spacers?“

„Hated them. They were different from the rest of us, of course. They could survive much better in space, in any alien environment. There was talk of beginning to send out non-spacers as passengers, but the spacers fought that for a good many years. They guarded their own power.“

„And they were cold,“ Hulann said sickly. „Showed very few emotions, never laughed...”

„Was bred out of them. The less emotional they were, the better job they could be counted on to perform.“

„The war—“ Hulann said.

When he did not finish, Leo said: „Yeah?”

„We thought the spacers... We never considered that they might not be typical of your race. We met hundreds. Thousands of them. They were all alike. We could not know.“

„What are you saying?“ Leo asked curiously.

„The war was a mistake. We were fighting Hunters. Your spacers are the equivalent of our Hunters. And we destroyed all of you because we thought your Hunters—your spacers were typical of all of you...”

Master Hunter Peneton sat in the control chair of the Shaper, three hundred and sixty-one electrodes attached to his body, snaking away from every part of him, disappearing into the vast machinery of the micro-surgical machine. His fingers danced across three hundred and sixty-one controls on the board before him.

He shaped.

He changed.

In the steamy, sealed plastiglass module beyond the foot-thick quartz wall, a tiny foetus was buoyed on a cushion of forces that would be forever beyond his understanding, even when he was grown into a full creature. For this foetus was destined only to be a Hunter. Not a Master Hunter.

That was something else again. There was a special program of genetic juggling, a program of the highest complexities, to be used in the creation of Master Hunters. It was used only once every Century. There were never more than five Master Hunters at any one moment.

Peneton was a Master Hunter.

He shaped.

He changed...

In a storage tank in Atlanta: rats...

In the morning light, the Great Lakes conversion crater's light looked more yellow than green. Along the southeast rim, the first team of naoli anti-bacterial warfare technicians deployed their equipment and began to introduce the proper anti-toxin to eliminate the hungry, microbes. By nightfall, the warmth and the heat and the lovely emerald radiance of conversion would be gone...

## Chapter 14

Ahead was only desert, a vast stretch of yellow-white sand broken through with patches of redder dirt. Now and then, a volcanic plug arose to break the monotony, great columns of stone, freaks of the land-forming process. There was a

sparse scattering of vegetation, none of it particularly healthy looking. It was not a place to be. Hulann stopped the shuttle on the crest of the ridge, looked down the highway that crossed the endless spanse of desolation.

„It'll make good beater surface for the shuttle, even if we get off the road,“ Leo said.

Hulann said nothing, merely stared ahead at what they must cover. The last eight hours had brought a lot of soul-searching. He had turned the facts over and over in his mind, and still he did not cease to be amazed, intrigued, and horrified by them. The awful, bloody war, had been totally unnecessary. But who would have guessed any race would have been breeding spacemen like naoli bred Hunters? Did this lessen the naoli guilt? Did this make their acts of genocide somehow more justified—or, at least, reasonable? Could they be held responsible for such a whim of Fate? Surely not. Yet...

Even if one considered the trick of Fate, the war did not become acceptable. Instead, it became morbidly amusing. Two giant races, both able to travel between stars with relative ease, waging total, blows-to-the-end combat over a simple misunderstanding. The entire affair became a cosmic comedy. And such awe-inspiring death counts should never be fodder for humor.

„What are you thinking?“ the boy asked.

Hulann turned from the desert and looked at the human. So much had transpired between their races—with so little meaning. He looked back out the windscreen; it was easier to meet the glare of the desert than the soft, patient eyes of the child.

„We should tell them,“ Hulann said.

„Your people?“

„Yes. They should know about this. It changes everything so much. They wouldn't kill you once they knew. And they wouldn't wash and restructure me or hang me or whatever. They couldn't. Oh, some of them will want to. But the evidence does not permit it. If any humans are still alive, we must do whatever we can to help them.“

„We aren't going to the Haven?“

Hulann considered it. „We could. But it would serve no purpose. It would solve nothing. Our only chance is to let the others know what I've found. Oh, they'll get it on their own sooner or later. There are archaeological teams sifting the ruins of every city not ruined. There are anthropologists piecing your culture together. Others will find that the spacers were a different breed. But it may take months—even years. And in that time, the few remnants of your race may be found and killed. And then knowing about the spacers will do no good at all.“

„I guess,“ Leo agreed.

„Then I'll call the Hunter off.“

„You can do that?“

„I can try.“

„I'll go for a walk,“ the boy said. „My legs need stretching.“ He opened the door, stepped onto the road, slammed the door behind. He walked off to the left, stooped to examine a small, purple-flowered cactus.

A moment later, Hulann opened his contact with the Phasersystem.

He sensed the channel of minds.



„Docanil,“ he said with his mind. „Docanil the Hunter.“

There was silence. Then:

*Hulann...*

He shuddered at the coldness of the thoughts.

„We will not run any longer,“ he said to the distant Hunter. „If you will listen to us, we will not run.“

*Listen, Hulann?*

„To what I have discovered. I—“

*Am I to understand you are surrendering yourselves to me?*

„More or less, Docanil. But that is not what is important. You must listen to what I have discovered about the humans—“

*I wish you would run. If you are begging mercy, you are not being realistic.*

„You will not want to kill us when you hear what I have to say.“

*On the contrary. Nothing you say can influence a Hunter, Hulann. A Hunter cannot be made to sympathize. And a Hunter cannot be deceived. There is no sense in what you plan.*

„Listen and you will not kill—“

*I will kill on sight, Hulann. I will dispose of you at once. It is my prerogative as a Hunter.*

Docanil the Hunter had only been humiliated once in his life. Having little emotional range, a Hunter clings to and nourishes whatever deep feelings arise in him. Even if those feelings are humiliation, anger, and hatred...

*I know where you are Hulann. I will be there soon.*

„Please—“

*I am coming, Hulann.*

Hulann spread the area of his broadcast, boosted it so that it was something that could not escape the notice of any naoli on the Second Division system. He said: „I have discovered something vital about the humans. It is something which makes the war senseless. You must listen. The humans—“

But before he could continue, the psychological conditioning dreams began...

He was standing on a dark plain. There were no boundaries to either side, nor any ahead or behind him. He was the highest point for a thousand miles. He stood upon a cushion of vines that tangled in upon one another, concealing the real floor of the land.

*We are in an unknown place, the conditioning chanter whispered. This is not the home of naoli...*

He realized, for the first time, that there were animals in the spaces between the vines, hiding beneath the surface. He could hear them rustling, scampering about. He thought they must have long claws and sharp teeth, small red eyes, poisonous venom. Though he did not see any evidence to support this conception and did not know why he imagined them as beasts.

*Because they are beasts, the chanter said.*

He felt their fingers at his feet, trying to topple him. He knew that, if his face came close enough, they would shred it, go for his vulnerable, green eyes.

*They are clever...*

He thought he felt one coming out of the vines and starting up his leg. He kicked, tossed it free. He began to run, though he found that when he moved his

feet tended to slip between the vines, down into the holes where the things waited...

He fell, rolled, gained his feet. There was blood running down his face from where the claws of a beast had struck in the split moment he had been down.

There is no running. They are everywhere. The naoli had to realize this. There could be no running, for the beasts came wherever the naoli went.

Slowly, he began to realize that the beasts in the vines were really humans. The Phasersystem increased his fear tenfold, fed him a host of anxiety patterns.

The only thing to be done was exterminate the beasts. Exterminate them or be murdered ourselves...

He found himself with a flamethrower in his hands. He trained it on the vines.

Yellow-crimson fire leapt forward, flushed into the growth.

The beasts squealed below.

They leaped into the open, Burning.

They died.

The vines did not burn: a naoli only destroyed that which had to be destroyed.

The beasts did death dances on flaming toes, tongues lit, eyes turned to coals and then gray ashes...

And Hulann enjoyed it. He was grinning. Laughing now... and suddenly gagging.

He choked, felt his stomachs contracting. The conditioning dream had not been strong enough to counteract the truth he had learned. The humans weren't vicious enemies. They were basically as peaceful as naoli. What should have been done was this: the Hunters should have been pitted against the spacers. And the normal citizens of both races should have been left to their gentle lives.

*The dreams were your last chance, Docanil said through the Phasersystem. I did not agree to the plan. But others thought you could be reached.*

Hulann said nothing. He opened the door and vomited on the sand. When both stomachs were empty, he became aware of Docanil the Hunter still speaking on the Phasersystem link.

*I am coming, Hulann.*

„Please—“

*I know where you are. I come.*

Hulann broke his Phasersystem contact. He felt seven hundred years old, in the last of his days. He was hollow, a blown glass figurine, nothing more.

The boy returned to the car, got in. „Well?“

Hulann shook his head.

He started the engine.

The shuttlecraft moved forward, down the rise into the great desert, on toward the Haven somewhere in the mountains of the west...

Half an hour later, Docanil the Hunter brought his copter down on the same knoll where Hulann had stopped to contact him. He looked out across the plain of sand and stone and cactus, grinning. A very wide grin. Some minutes later, he looked away, took out the maps, and looked them over. Banalog watched him trace a route for a moment, then said, „Aren't we following them?“

„No,“ Docanil said.

„But why?“

„There is no need.“

„You think the desert will kill them?“

„No.“

„What then?“

„The naoli have some expensive and effective weapons systems,“ the Hunter said. „But none more expensive or more effective than the Region Isolator.“

Banalog felt the scales of his scalp tighten painfully.

„The next two hundred miles was—at the beginning of the war—a major nuclear weapons stockpile for the humans. An Isolator was dropped to effectively cut the humans off from the greatest number of their warheads. It has not yet been dismantled. It will seek out any human life with its sensors, engineer a weapon, and destroy that target. The boy, if he is not dead already, will perish before nightfall.“

Banalog felt ill.

„Then, what will Hulann do?“ the Hunter mused. „I can hardly imagine. If they planned on going to the Haven, that will be impossible. He could not get in without the boy’s aid. We will fly around the region affected by the Isolator. There is only one highway exit. We will wait there to see if Hulann continues his journey.“

He was grinning quite widely—for a Hunter.

## Chapter 15

In a glass bubble laced through with fire, the gnome danced, its feet snarled in filaments of spun milk, millions of puppet strings stretching away from it into invisibility. The creature was no larger than a man’s hand, but fired with the energy of multitudes. It spun and waltzed and jiggled with itself, flailing its tiny arms about, leaping and frolicking this way and that until the transparent walls of its prison made it turn and twirl in a new path. As it cavorted, it cackled and gibbered, laughed at its own gems of humor, spoken in a tongue of nonsense and folly.

The glass ball spun slowly, slowly, as if the gnome were upon a revolving stage.

He danced more furiously than ever to a music that did not exist. He laughed and cackled and whooped explosively, stomping his tiny feet hard against the inside of his prison. He began to whirl, standing on his toes like a ballet dancer, faster and faster, his feet stamping smartly in a tight circle. His face flushed, and perspiration rolled out of his flesh, beaded on his miniature forehead, trickled down his doll’s face. Still, he moved at an increasing pace until he was all but a whirl.

Then his flesh began to grow soft. His facial features melted and ran together. He no longer had a nose or mouth. His eyes flashed and dribbled down his face...

He did not slow his pace. From deep within him, the sound of his manic laughter continued—though the lack of a mouth denied the sound full egress. He bobbed, bounced, weaved, his smooth whirl becoming more erratic as his feet and legs began to fuse and obliterate the ankles.

The glass sphere filled with licking green flames to replace the warm orange tongues that had been there.

His arm fused with his side and ceased to exist, except for a thumb which stuck out just below his last rib. A moment later, the second arm disappeared as well.

The emerald fire became all-consuming: the gnome was reduced to a thick pudding within the glass, a semi-living jell that gurgled and sloshed against the sides of the small sphere and was, at last, silent...

The Isolator regarded the glass ball, juggling it on fingers of pure force. It began to shape the jell into another figure, but suddenly felt a wave of depression wash through it, battering the foundations of its being. It dropped the glass ball and watched the trinket splash down into the pool of its own temporal mass. It digested the thing and waited...

Waiting had been what the naoli had designed it for—waiting and destroying. But there had been so little of the latter and so much of the former since the war had been won that the Isolator craved activity (and tried to satisfy the longing through toys like the gnome). Perhaps, the Isolator mused, it was not wise to build weapons which were alive. Did their designers know how bored a thinking weapon could get—when it had been designed only to think about its job and its job had become obsolete?

Then it ceased to think about that. The naoli had made certain that the Isolator could not think about itself, as an entity, for more than a few seconds at a time. In that manner, they could be certain it would never get ideas of its own beyond those programmed into it. The Isolator, gurgling within the huge vat that contained it, raised its alert to red station and began checking the monitoring posts in the outlying areas. Its pseudopods of plastic flesh thinned into two molecule thicknesses and pressed through the vat, beyond the Isolator station and into the warm sands of Earth's desert. In a moment, it had formed a net beneath the land for a thousand feet in every direction. Such first-hand data gathering was senseless when its mechanical aides could assist so dependably, but the only way to defeat the boredom was to do something.

It pulsed beneath the sand, fifty percent of its body withdrawn from the subterranean vat. It wished it could go further and explore the surrounding terrain. But its physical bulk could not extend more than these thousand feet from the vat. It was not truly mobile. It was only a thing, not an individual, no matter how much it tried to bridge the gap into full awareness.

A thing, nothing more.

But a very efficient thing.

The harsh sting of the alarms sliced through the Isolator from the monitors in the station. Quickly, it withdrew from the sand, back into the vat. It formed an eyeball of a thousand facets and examined the three-dimensional vision on the bank of screens on the station's second level. For the first time in months, it knew excitement. It almost rushed the majority of its bulk through the wall into the screen room and managed to check itself just a hair this side of disaster (at least half of the Isolator must remain within the nurturing vat at all times). There, on the screen, was a floating shuttlecraft, fluttering along the sand, stirring clouds of dust in its wake. It had not issued the recognition signal; any naoli would have done that. Which meant it was more than likely a human...

The Isolator tapped one of the monitoring posts which the shuttlecraft was approaching, released a spy-bee from the distant outpost's storage unit. As the bee spun out across the desert, the Isolator guided it, watching what the mechanical insect saw as the images were projected on the largest of the screens. In moments, the shuttlecraft appeared in a swirl of sand. He directed the spy-bee directly at it, toward the windscreen. The mite passed through the whirl of dust, shot across the hood of the vehicle, then hovered inches from the window. Beyond the screen, a naoli sat at the wheel, peering ahead at the shimmering heat blankets rising from the sands.

The Isolator felt despair as it looked at the lizard face. It was about to destroy the spy-bee and return, its attention to the making of gnomes and other baubles when it thought to turn the bee's attention on the passenger's seat. And there, of course, was the boy, Leo.

There was no more time for gnomes.

Within the vat, the Isolator rejoiced. It heaved upward in a great, joyous surge, pushing stickily against the cap of the vat which it could have penetrated had it wanted. It splashed down into itself, then ceased its celebration and turned to the chore at hand.

It had killing to do.

„Look at this, Hulann,“ Leo said, leaning forward in his seat, straining against the automatic belt that held him.

Hulann shifted his eyes from the terrain ahead. It was not necessary to watch the path so cautiously in a shuttle-craft, and he had only been using that as an excuse to avoid conversation and let his mind race through the plethora of new data it had accumulated in such a short period of time. It was good, now, to give his eyes a rest. „Look at what?“

„Out the window. A mud wasp,“ the boy said.

Hulann looked, and when he could not spot it immediately, asked the boy to show him.

Leo leaned even farther forward, pressing a finger against the glass toward the hovering wasp. „How can it do that?“ he asked.

Hulann looked, found the mud wasp, and felt his scalp tighten painfully as fear gripped him, squeezed him, and nearly voided his lungs of air.

„How can it do that?“ Leo repeated. „It's flying against us, yet it's standing still.“

„A machine,“ Hulann explained.

„Machine?“

„A naoli weapon,“ Hulann said, gripping the wheel, his eyes riveted to the electronic mite hovering before them. „Or, rather, a scout for a weapons system. The thing directing it is called a Region Isolator.“

Leo frowned, made slits of his eyes. „I've heard about them. But no one really knows what they do. No one has ever gotten close enough to find out.“

„I know. The Isolator is deadly. It is also expensive and prohibits mass production because of the time involved in structuring one. They were used sparingly in the war—or it would have all been over much sooner than it was.“

„What is it?“

„The Isolator itself is a huge mass of large cells with oval nuclei that require the bulk of the cell shell. The overall mass must be as large or larger than one of your houses.“

Leo made an appropriate whistle of appreciation.

„Of its billions of component parts, each is identical to the last. This lack of cellular diversification and specialization is possible because every cell of the creature is capable of life without relying on the others and contains all life processes within its cell wall.“

„It sounds like one large *amoeba* made up of millions of smaller *amoeba*,“ Leo said.

„Somewhat. But it has other powers—which contribute to its effectiveness as a weapon.“

„Such as?“ Leo asked.

„The Isolator was created through the same techniques used to develop the Hunters, through gene juggling and careful genetic engineering, though the subject was not a human foetus this time. It was, instead, a small jelly fish of my home world, an animal that had exhibited rudimentary intelligence and the capacity to learn. The genetic engineers worked from there, and rumor has it that the project required more than three hundred years. It was begun during a past war the naoli was engaged in and was not completed in time to be used in that conflict, was not completed until this new war had broken out between our peoples.

„The Isolator has been imbued with a—a Proteus power. It is able to assume any form it wishes. It can use its mass to break off parts and form organic weapons. And if it wants, it can have that organic weapon reproduce itself on and on. It is a genetic engineer, using its own mass to make its children. And it is intelligent, not just a machine-like being. Not like you or I, of course, but clever enough to out-think us.“

„It doesn't sound good,“ Leo said.

„It isn't.“

„You aren't giving up, are you?“

„No.“

Leo grabbed Hulann's heavy biceps and squeezed, grinned at the scaly naoli. Hulann grinned back, though he did not much feel in the mood for such a pleasantry.

The spy-bee ceased to hover and snapped against the windscreen, shattering into dozens of little bits and leaving a chip on the plastiglass.

„It broke!“ Leo said.

„The Isolator ordered it to destruction,“ Hulann corrected him.

„But why?“

„Don't get your hopes up,“ the alien said, pulling his lips back from his teeth, baring the gleaming points, his four nostrils flared and his eyes wide and cautious. „If the Isolator has destroyed the bee, that can only mean that it is already sending a weapon for us and does not need the little mechanical monitor any longer.“

„Oh,“ Leo said. He crouched a little deeper into his chair, watching the sky which had begun to cloud over with low, gray blankets of mist like a burnished steel bowl laid over the world. He searched the flat stretches of sand in all

directions, peering intently through wavering fingers of hot air that sought to delude him. „I don't see anything,“ he said at last.

„You won't,“ Hulann said. „It will come too quickly for that.“

„What can we do?“

„Wait.“

„There must be something more!“

„We can drive,“ Hulann said. „We can make this shuttlecraft move as swiftly as it can. The Isolator only covers an area of a hundred or two hundred miles square, depending on the model. If we drive fast and long enough, we should escape its territory—though I have never heard of anyone escaping an Isolator.“

„That's pessimism,“ Leo said.

„That's right,“ the alien agreed.

There was dark sky.

And sand.

And something else on its way, something they could not define or imagine until it was upon them...

Within the vat, the independent cells of the Isolator worked together according to the dictates of their group consciousness. It was true, as Hulann had told the boy, that each individual cell was perfectly capable of sustaining life on its own. But the intelligence of the beast was a conglomerate one. And all the cells had been programmed, by the naoli engineers, to respect the need for group action above the natural urge and ability of each particle to separate itself and exist in isolation.

The mother mass burred contentedly, like a fat baby chuckling deeply in its throat, lying there in the bottom of the vat, contemplating its catalogue of destructive devices and employing its limited but genuine imagination to modify the catalogue items to make them even more deadly than they had been intended. It was an amber jelly now, shot through with streaks of green as bright as newly mown grass and blotted with patches of gray as the cells combined to function in various specialized fashions at least through this moment of crisis when every resource had to be called upon and used.

If anyone had been within the vat, he would have been repelled by the odor: the smell of death and decay, even though things were being born—not dying. It emanated from the flesh of the Isolator and clung to the warm, metal walls like a film of grease. It was generated by the heat which was, in turn, generated by the intricate and exhausting processes of creation which the mother mass was employing to develop its weaponry.

Deep in the mechanical works of the complex, around the vat itself, the food constructors and dispensers increased the supply of liquid protein that was fed into the bottom of the vat where the mother mass absorbed and digested it almost instantly, each cell taking what it required and passing the rest on in a form of high-speed osmosis unmatched by any earthly plant. The machines, to obtain the higher demand for food on the part of the creature they were created to serve, opened the surface receptors of the ingestion plant and collected more sand, rock, weed, and cactus for conversion into liquid protein, at the same time obtaining

water from underground pools which other systems siphoned upwards into the humming works of the station.

The smooth surface of the amoeboid mass churned like pudding stirred from beneath by a beater. The thin tension cracked as an arm of the jell soared upwards toward the roof of the vat, waving lazily in the darkness and the steamy mists that now rose from the main body of the Isolator. The hand-like ball at the end of the „arm“ broke free and continued to soar upward, as if it were lighter than air. As it rose, rolling slowly, slowly, it began to lengthen from a spheroid into a streamlined form in the fashion of a knife, though a great deal larger. From either side, thin membranes spread outward to help it ride on the mists. These wings were more in the nature of the appendages of a bat than of the feathered limbs of a bird. They flapped wetly, cracking in the confines of the great tank.

Birth had been given.

Slowly, the creature took on features as the mother body smoothed its work. The face was thin, wicked, and marked with two deep eyes with cataracted blue-white surfaces that see in all ranges of light. Through these, the mother mass in the vat would see all that the „child“ saw. The beak was long and horny, razor-edged. The small, reptilian hands that grew from beneath it were tipped with sharp, impressively lengthy claws.

The mother mass burbled happily again.

The bat thing flew to the side of the tank, crystalline eyes glittering despite the fact there was no light within the subterranean chamber, and attached itself to the warm metal wall after growing suction caps on the rounded bulge of its belly. Quietly, efficiently, it began to lose its form, to congeal into the amber-green-gray jelly once more. In moments, it had melted through the wall of the chamber, its own molecules juggling through the molecules of the metal, onward into the sands of this alien earth. It rose through the loosely packed soil and broke the surface, puddling on the ground above, shapeless, quivering to begin. When all of the thing had exited the station and the presence of the mother mass, it swiftly regained the bat-like form once again, much like a chunk of memory plastic returning to its structured form after being battered out of shape.

It spread its wings. It flapped them experimentally.

In the light of day, it seemed almost as much a vulture as a bat, though greatly larger than either of those things.

It threw its neck back and screeched. The sound echoed across the flatland and sent rabbits scurrying into burrows.

The cataracted eyes looked at the sun, at the blue sky. Without a moment's more hesitation, it rose from the dull earth with the speed of a bullet fired from a gun and sought out its prey with an inhuman relish for destruction, for destruction was its purpose and it had to meet its purpose if it were to have any meaning for existence...

Hulann was conscious of the descending beast only a split second before the monstrous thing swept over the roof of the shuttlecraft at such a speed that the air currents of its passage ripped the wheel from his hands and sent the car careening across the desert, off the rugged but reliable path of the highway. There was a movement, an immense shadow, then the moan of its passage and the



heavy turbulence in its wake. The shuttlecraft spun in a complete circle, its rotors whining as sand was kicked up into them and threatened to foul the system.

Leo grabbed the dash against which he was hurtled, then wheezed as the belt caught him at the last instant, jerking him viciously backwards against the seat. His vision blurred for a moment, and he felt like a man falling in weightlessness, unsure of his directions, unable to tell up from down and left from right.

Hulann grabbed the wheel, but another blast from the beast's wake shook them, spun the wheel the opposite direction, scraping his hands rudely as he grappled for control.

Sand hissed across the windscreen.

The craft hobbled dangerously, tilting back and forth, the rim brushing along the surface of the dunes that undulated gently toward the distant mountains. If the blades struck those dunes, there was nothing but disaster for them.

„So big!“ Leo finally managed to gasp.

Hulann had the wheel now, gripping it firmly in all twelve fingers, hunched over it like a race driver or as if he thought he could mesh with it and thus make it impossible for the thing to be pulled loose of him. „It is smaller than I expected.“

Before either of them could say more, the Isolator fragment swept back at them streaked only feet above the shuttlecraft roof again. It was as large as a two passenger aircraft, three times the size of their car. Again, its wake struck them like a wave of water, bounced them sideways, the heaving wheeling wrenching back and forth. Hulann managed to hold it this time, having been prepared for the attack, but having possession of it did little good. The wind thrust the car where it wished regardless of what his hands commanded the wheel to perform.

The shuttlecraft slid sideways through a cactus, smashing the growth into dozens of pulpy pieces. The watery sap splattered over the craft, streaking the window. Instantly, the whirling sand stuck to the fluid and opaqued the window.

Frantically, Hulann sought to reach the windscreen washer and wipers, but the jerking of the craft kept tossing him away from the dash. If he couldn't get the window cleaned, he wouldn't be able to see to steer when the wind died—and that would be deadly...

Abruptly, even that problem seemed academic as the bat thing zoomed back, crossing from side-to-side this time, and the car was sent on an even wilder, more dangerous careening plunge across the sand.

There was a jarring thud as they struck something more solid than a cactus. The frame of the shuttlecraft rang like a bell, and the rear window on Leo's side smashed into countless fragments of glittering plastiglass. They rebounded and were carried elsewhere on their nightmare ride.

Hulann expected the beast to collide with them at any moment. It could not kill itself. It was part of the mother mass of the Isolator—and, therefore, immortal. It could ram the shuttlecraft head-on, totally demolishing it and turning the two of them into blood jelly already packed neatly in the can. Why it had not already done this, he could not fathom; but he gritted his teeth, waiting for it.

The roar of wind died and the craft began to stabilize again. While movement was possible, Hulann leaned forward, turned on the washers and wipers and watched as the thick coating of sand and watery sap were sluiced away. As

visibility returned, he saw they were cruising toward a thrust of weathered rock five hundred feet high and at least a mile long.

„Hulann!“ Leo shouted.

But he didn't need advice. He threw all of his weight into the wheel, brought the car around in the last moment before impact.

The side of their craft, as they made the nerve-shattering turn, scraped the rock wall; they drove along the cliffside for more than a thousand feet while Hulann fought to keep them from total disaster and to get them back onto open land. The metal whined and squealed much as if it were alive. Sparks leaped up the stone walls and danced against the plastiglass only inches from Leo's face.

The rock passed so swiftly that it had no form and registered only as a gray-brown swath of moving color. Pieces of it snapped loudly and broke away. The exterior doorhandle on that side exploded away as the bolts and rivets refused to meet the strain.

The seatbelts kept them from being thrown forward into the windows, but they did nothing to counteract the up and down motion of the car as it bucked and kicked like a wild horse under them. Leo's head bounced off the ceiling, and as he reached up to rub the sore spot, he saw Hulann was taking worse blows than that since his greater height required less of a bounce to bring him into contact with the roof.

Then they were away from the rock wall, though still following it, and a semblance of sanity and safety returned.

„Where is it?“ Leo asked.

Hulann scanned the sky, discovered the bird to their left, out in the open desert, flying fairly low and slowly along the parched earth. He pointed to it, then put his mind back to driving.

„Why doesn't it attack?“ the boy asked, craning his neck to get a good look at the behemoth where it soared along the ground, rushing toward them with great wings flapping like blankets. It was watching them—or at least it had its milky blue-white eyes turned in their approximate direction—but its intent was unclear.

„I don't know,“ Hulann said. „I would feel much better if I did.“

„Do we have a weapon?“

„Nothing.“

Leo shrugged. „I guess not much would be of use against it anyway.“

They drove on.

The rock fled by on their right.

The bat thing paralleled them on their left, moving in, closing the gap, but with less purpose than it had previously shown.

Hulann dared to hope that the sluggishness of the brute meant that they were near the border of the Isolator's influence and that they would soon break free into an area where it could not approach them.

But that was soon proven to be a false hope when the creature screeched a reverberating war cry that danced along the dry earth and rebounded from the rocks. A moment after the ear-piercing scream, it turned more directly toward them, paralleling them less, and swept in for the final kill...

„Here it comes,“ Leo said.

Hulann cursed the shuttlecraft, wishing there were some way he could milk more power from it, could push it faster than it wished to go. At the same time, he realized it was futile to try to avoid the beast, for it could summon more energy and more speed than any mechanical construction could ever muster. It transcended machine just as surely as it transcended naoli—at least in the art of destruction.

„Hulann!“ Leo cried, grabbing the naoli by the shoulder, urging his attention through the window toward the oncoming bulk of the bat thing. „Look! What's happening?“

Hulann took his eyes from the way ahead and reluctantly looked at the Isolator's weapon. The bird was losing its shape. The wings were shrinking inward while the body was flattening out and losing its streamline shape. The face was mashed flat and the features were rapidly disintegrating—except for the eyes, which seemed only to be shielded behind thick crystal panels now. The clawed hands were gone altogether. In a moment, it had transformed itself from the bat thing into a pulsing mass of plasti-flesh.

And it was going to be carried these last hundred or so feet by its own momentum, was going to crash directly into the shuttlecraft and drive them into the rock wall.

Hulann tramped the accelerator.

There was nothing more in the machine's guts.

The huge ball of the Isolator's flesh crashed into them with a sickeningly soft thud that sent the craft tumbling onto its side, smashing the roof against the rock wall and stalling the blades. The Isolator surged around the machine, a colorful mass of rippling amber and emerald, the gray patches no longer in evidence—or perhaps muted by the sun in favor of the brighter hues.

Though the car was on its side, the seatbelts held them in place and kept Hulann from tumbling down the seat to crush Leo. The alien gripped the wheel, his body wracked with convulsive spasms of nervous shivering as the inhuman beast beyond the windscreen sought entrance. „Are you all right?“ he called out. There was little light in the craft, for the Isolator blocked the direct sun. Only an orange-tinted luminance penetrated its flesh and flushed dimly upon them.

„I'm here,“ Leo said. „What do we do, Hulann?“

The alien said nothing.

„Does fire hurt it?“

„No.“

Leo watched the stuff sliding along the glass, bubbling and gurgling, only an arm's length from them.

„What, then?“ he asked Hulann.

„I know of nothing.“

„But there must be something we can do!“

Hulann had to fight a tendency for his overmind to withdraw into its nether-world sleep pocket. His body was reacting to the huge amounts of emotional stimulation washing it, and it wanted release from the inundation. Sleep would be very nice... And death...

Except for the boy. He had come so far, gone through so much, lost everything that had made up his life to date. Was he now to be undone by something that

was the creation of the engineers of his own race? Was there to be no dignity at all connected with this affair?

„Look,“ Leo said quietly, his voice permeated with a subtle, whispering fear that Hulann understood at once, Along the seam of Hulann’s door, the Isolator was pushing its way in, a thin gooey wad of it surging steadily, inexorably into their sanctuary... In the amber light, it was even sort of pretty...

Bluebolt thundered along the rails. It was stormy where David now traveled, but he could not hear the thunder. The rails were not in the best condition, corroded dangerously, and the train’s own noise cancelled out the uproar of the elements.

He watched the track ahead with interest, but with little fear. If he were to die now, it would not be exceedingly difficult to accept, for he had been living on borrowed time for quite a while.

Lightning flashed in the heavens, streaked downward and touched the earth only several miles distance. The resultant play of shadows on the desert and the rails was lovely. David grinned and relaxed even farther into his chair.

The doors of the French Alpine Hotel stood open, and the snow had found its way inside. It drifted into the great lobby, over a pair of chairs that faced each other over a magazine table. Long white fingers grasped at the rug and clawed toward the plush couches. In the rear of the establishment, the delivery room, behind the kitchen, was as hoary as Methuselah, with great icicles hanging from the waterpipes and a blanket of snow across most of the floor.

Everything was quiet.

In the depths of the place, a pair of cats snuggled in a cellar corner, licking each other, wondering for the thousandth time why there were no guests any more...

Docanil the Hunter stood along the highway at the pass out of the desert valley. He had changed clothes to match the weather. Here was no place for a greatcoat. He wore a light, porous suit of a fabric that resembled vinyl in appearance and cotton in comfort and to the touch. Between his shoulder blades was the clawed fist ringed with nails. He still wore gloves and boots, for the hands and feet of a Hunter are very sensitive.

„See anything?“ Banalog asked from behind.

The Hunter did not respond.

„Perhaps they are already dead,“ Banalog suggested.

„We will soon go in,“ the Hunter said.

Banalog looked into the long desert beyond the rock pillars that flanked the highway at the end of the valley. He was almost selfish enough to hope that they were already dead. Alive, they might be forced to talk, to inform on him. And then the Hunter—Docanil or another, it hardly mattered—would be coming for him.

The tableau was broken as the lowering skies began to rip open and dump a fine sheet of rain on the thirsting land beneath. Docanil turned and hurried for the copter and the dryness inside. The rain was cold—and a Hunter is a sensitive creature.

High above the Earth, clouds of dust and debris, hurtled into the stratosphere by the nuclear blasts men had touched off in the last hours of the war, shifted and stretched into bands. The long streams of stones, dust, paper, wood chips, pottery

shards, and other rubbish would circle the globe for weeks and possibly even months before finally settling onto the scorched surface of the planet from which they had come.

There were pieces of bone, too.

Circling above the earth.

Orbiting.

Slowly coming down again.

## Chapter 16

In the pulsing mass of amber flesh pressed against the plastiglass windscreen of the shuttlecraft, the Isolator formed an eye, one of the blue-white frosted orbs that had adorned its bat form only minutes earlier. It stared through the glass at Hulann and the boy where they hung in their straps, watching as its own flesh oozed inside where it could reach them at its leisure. It was as if they were suspended at the moment of Judgment on the final day of the world, hanging by a thread of time, knowing full well that the decision could only go against them.

„Can you start the shuttle?“ Leo asked, cringing against his door as the yellowish jelly pressed more insistently into Hulann’s side of the cabin, advancing quietly but steadily.

„It won’t do any good. We can’t go anywhere. It’s got us trapped. For one thing, we’re on our side against the cliff. Secondly, even if we were upright, its weight is enough to press us into immobility.“

The glob of the Isolator already in the cabin was as large as Hulann’s arm. It weaved in the air, before his face, like a snake rising from a charmer’s basket. It did not, however, attack him. It seemed, instead, intent on going for Leo.

„Of course!“ Hulann said, his voice suddenly miserable.

„What is it?“

„We couldn’t understand why it didn’t demolish the shuttle in its bat form. It couldn’t. It’s programmed never to hurt a naoli. If it had destroyed the car, I would have died as surely as you. The only way it could get to us was to get inside the cabin. It will kill you and leave me alone.“

Suddenly, the Isolator began pouring through the metal and glass itself, threading its bulk through the molecules of the car and dripping inside from a hundred different places. In seconds, it would have enough of itself within the car to destroy the boy.

Frantically, Hulann considered starting the engines and hoping the abruptness of the action would cause the Isolator to draw back long enough for them to rock the car right-side-up and get out of there. But he knew such a stratagem was pointless, for an Isolator could never be surprised. It was far too clever for that. The only way to beat the Isolator was to divide it into so many parts that none of them could carry enough group consciousness to move efficiently...

And he had the answer. In its wild rambling from one point to another, his overmind had discovered the only thing that might work. Hulann reached down, primed the engines, and reached for the switch.

„I thought you said that was useless,“ Leo said.

„It may be. But I've just realized that, since we're on our side, the Isolator is pressed up against the blades, perhaps meshed right in there with them.“

Leo grinned. Hulann was amazed at the human's capacity for humor in such a dire circumstance.

He turned to the switch, twisted it, felt the engines cough. They did not catch.

The mass of amoeboid flesh within the car was half as large as Leo now and growing larger every second. It drew toward him, slopping over the seat, an amber pseudopod tentatively feeling in his direction.

Hulann hit the starter again.

The shuttlecraft groaned and shuddered. Then the blades stuttered, whirred, and burst into life, chopping through the huge mass of the Isolator's weapon, shredding it into thousands of minute pieces and scattering those across the sand in every direction.

The mass within the car jerked and twitched like an epileptic. It surged back toward the glass and the metal through which it had come. The Isolator was confused, perhaps even momentarily panicked. It pulled away from the glass, trying to heave itself free of the car. It merely succeeded in getting more of its bulk sucked into the whirling rotors where it was hacked into useless segments and tossed messily into the hot air.

„Rock the car!“ Hulann shouted above the whine of the blades. „In time with me.“ He started swaying heavily back and forth, putting most of his force into the surges to his left.

Leo joined in, happier than ever.

The car leaned too far, at last, and crashed upright again, bouncing on its rubber rim, then leaping two feet above the sand as the air cushion buoyed it. Hulann leaned over the wheel, thrust his splayed foot into the wide band of the accelerator, and sent them slipping swiftly across the desert toward the road the bat thing had driven them from only a short time ago.

„What now?“ Leo asked.

„We move fast,“ Hulann said. „With luck, we'll escape from this area before the Isolator can get another weapon after us.“

„What about that?“ Leo asked, pointing at a mound of quivering amber flesh on the floor between them.

„It's too small for the Isolator to control,“ Hulann said. „It's on its own now—brainless. We'll just endure it until we're out of the danger area. I don't want to waste time stopping and getting rid of it.“

Leo pulled close to his door and watched the glob of flesh carefully, though it seemed quite as harmless as Hulann said it was.

Thirty minutes later, Hulann's spirits were tremendously revived. He was fairly certain the Isolator was not going to reach them now. It had more than likely suffered physical shock when such a large portion of itself had been chopped into separate, uncontrollable entities by the blades of the shuttlecraft. If it had recovered from that by now, it would find it too late to manufacture a new weapon,

he hoped. Ahead, a mile or two, laid the opening in the valley wall that, he imagined, was the end of the Isolator's domain. Beyond that, freedom...

Rising over the top of the rock wall was Docanil's copter, the blades like the wings of a dragonfly, mere blurs of gray against the lighter gray of the sky.

Hulann's foot strayed toward the brake, then slammed back into the accelerator once more. There was nothing to be gained by stopping. There might be equally little to gain by going on with the Hunter so near, but it was the only reasonable choice they had.

He looked at the boy. Leo looked back, shrugged his shoulders.

Hulann turned his attention back to the road, steering for the pillars of rock and what had once been freedom but was now only more fear, uncertainty, and anguish.

The copter angled down toward them, seeming to gain speed as it approached, although that was the illusion of their mutual rush toward each other. Behind the bubble window, the shapes of two naoli could be seen. One of them was Docanil, the other the traumatist Banalog. Even from here, Hulann fancied he could see the grin splitting the heavy features of the Hunter as the creature smelled its prey.

Closer...

Hulann waited for the discharge of a missile that would blast the two of them and the shuttlecraft across a mile of bleached and arid sand.

Then, without apparent reason, the copter made a steep climb and a vicious turn to its right, up and away from them. Even as Hulann was puzzling over the maneuver, the huge bat form swept over them, low, passing with a furious wind in its wake, and slid by the helicopter with too little safety margin. Had Docanil not rose and banked, the Isolator's second weapon would have struck him head-on. As it was, the blades of the Hunter's machine sliced into the pulpy flesh of the Proteus creature and stuttered to a complete halt. The helicopter listed, groaned as the Hunter attempted to start the engines again, and fell thirty feet to the desert floor.

In its anxiousness to get the boy before the shuttlecraft passed into lands beyond its control, the Isolator had carelessly bungled the Hunter's almost certain chance to destroy them. Now they slid out of the valley and into more desert, past the last of the beast's monitoring posts. Behind, the gigantic bat form glided back and forth in the sky, looking mournfully beyond the confines of its operating limits.

Leo began laughing heartily, bent over, his small face red, tears streaming down his face.

„It was very close,“ Hulann said.

Leo merely continued to laugh, and soon the sound of his mirth brought a twisted smile to the alien's features. They slid across the earth, punctuating the sound of the blades beneath them with bursts of their own hilarity.

Six hours later, Docanil debarked from his battered copter beside Hulann's abandoned shuttlecar. The fury within his mind was almost greater than he could contain. His fingers twitched, and he longed to see the flames leaping from his fingers and devouring the fugitives, longed to see them twisting, writhing, turning black as they died in extreme agony. And he yet might have the opportunity to

enjoy that spectacle. They probably thought the copter had been totally demolished and that he had to wait for another. They would not be expecting him so close on their trail.

„They aren't here?“ Banalog asked, descending from the helicopter.

Docanil did not respond. He looked up and down the twin steel railroad lines, speculating. He examined the rails with his superb vision, calculated from the brake markings which way the train had been coming from and which way it had gone after it had picked up its two new passengers. He could not conceive of who might be driving it. But he would soon find out.

He looked West, grinned tightly. If possible, his orders had said, he was to return Hulann and the human alive so that traumatists might examine them. Yet Docanil the Hunter knew it was going to have to be death for them. There was no other recourse to alleviate his fury. Death... It was just going to have to be...

Inside the glass ball, floating in the darkness and heat above the pulsing mother mass, a naoli and a human boy, each no larger than a man's hand, danced through flickering orange flames. They were in intense pain as the Isolator increased the pressure in the globe to the point where their eardrums burst and their noses bled. Yet, far past the point where they should have been dead, they lived and suffered.

The Isolator saw to that.

The boy fell to his knees and curled into a foetal position to try to cradle the pain and make it easier to bear.

The Isolator jerked him erect.

The Isolator increased the pressure.

The naoli's eyes began to bleed.

The two creatures within the glass were screaming.

The Isolator changed the fire within the shell from flickering orange and red to the more intense and more acidic licking tongue of emerald. The flesh of the two miniature creatures took on a green glow. As the gnome had done before them, they began to melt...

They clawed frantically at the glass.

The Isolator had given them intelligence and emotions of a sort, in order to make the torturing more enjoyable.

They dissolved.

They became quivering pieces of flesh.

The Isolator maintained their consciousness even to this point, thrusting them through wave after wave of excruciating horror and pain.

Then it abruptly dropped the ball into its mass and digested it. There was no fun in such games. Not really. It could not strike from its mind that it had failed on the real mission. But who would ever have expected a naoli to work against it? It had been expecting help from the lizard that was with the human—and had received only hindrance.

It burbled in the tank. It was restless.

A glass ball rose out of its pudding-like mass and hovered in the darkness. Inside was a gnome, dancing and gibbering on milky threads, laughing happily to itself.



## Chapter 17

When Hulann leaned over David's shoulder to watch the young man programming the train's complex computers on the simple keyboard, the human jumped in the command chair as if struck by a bullet, his entire body convulsing in what must have been, at least, a slightly painful spasm. His face drained to the color of dry sand bleached by the sun, and his eyes were circles stamped out by a die-press. Hulann stepped backwards, shuffling his large feet, then went to the side window to look at the passing scenery.

„I told you that he wouldn't harm us. He's our friend,“ Leo said impatiently.

David looked sheepishly at Hulann's back; he swallowed hard. „I'm sorry,“ he said.

Hulann nonchalantly waved a hand to indicate that the incident had been of no import. He could hardly expect a grown man, conditioned by twenty years and more of anti-naoli propaganda, to respond to him as quickly and as easily as an eleven-year-old boy whose mind was still fresh and open to changes of every magnitude. He remembered how reluctant he had been to touch Leo in that cellar when the boy had needed his leg wound dressed. How much harder it must be, then, for one of the defeated race to get accustomed to the presence of one of those responsible for the death of his kind.

„Why don't you sit down?“ David asked. „I get jumpy; but it's the truth—when you're parading around behind me like that.“

„Can't sit comfortably,“ Hulann explained.

„What?“ David asked.

„His tail,“ Leo said. „Your chairs here don't have any holes in them to let his tail hang out. A naoli has a very sensitive tail. It hurts them just to sit on it.“

„I didn't know.“

„So he has to stand,“ Leo said.

Confused, David returned to the keyboard and finished typing his instructions to the computer. Yesterday, such a short time ago, he had been serene, content to flee from the enemy in his swift-wheeled magic wagon; today, he was ferrying a naoli across the country and was no longer certain he could tell an enemy from a friend. It had begun yesterday when he had watched, from the corner of his eye, what seemed to be a shuttle pacing the train, yet attempting to remain concealed.

Near dusk, he came to a place where debris clogged the tracks and was forced to stop the Bluebolt and examine the disaster before trying to nose through it.

The blockage was a mangled trio of shattered shuttle-craft. On every side, the country was littered with dilapidated and decaying machines. People had congregated here as they had in all the „wild“ areas of the world, seeking to escape the burning, exploding, crumbling, alien-infested cities where the major battles roared. But the naoli had come here too. It had only taken a little longer. And in trying to escape at any cost, the shuttle drivers had collided as in this tangled despair. David did not look too closely at the mess, for fear he would see skeletons

that had once been drivers, bony fingers clutching wheels, and empty eye sockets staring through shattered glass.

When he finally determined that he could move the wreckage with the engine's cowbumper and proceed on his way, he turned to board the Bluebolt again—and came face-to-face with a naoli!

His first instinct was to go for a weapon, though he had nothing lethal and was not the type to use a gun even if he had possessed one. The second instinct was to run; however, he saw the young boy then, and the boy showed no fear—he did not seem to be stupefied by drugs. Having hesitated this short moment longer, he found it was too late to run. They both babbled excitedly at him, trying to state their case and falling all over each other in their verbal confusion. He listened to them, numb, disbelieving at first, then being won over by the story of the Hunter-Spacer correlation. The naoli had thought spacers were typical of all humans. It was just absurd, just hideously comical enough to be true.

Their shuttlecraft was seriously depleted in power stores and had no way to recharge. They proposed that the three of them ride the Bluebolt since the train could make better speed anyway. They assumed David was going to the Haven—though he found it difficult to comprehend that Hulann's destination was the same.

Now they were into the province of California after a high speed, all night run. They could soon begin a quest for the Haven, for the final safety and a new life—if this Hulann did not betray them.

As the train's computer answered David's programming with brilliant blood letters on its response board, Hulann pressed palms against the side window, as if trying to push the glass away to get a better look at something. His four, wide nostrils were all open, and his breathing was more than a little ragged. Abruptly, his tail snapped and wound snakelike around his bulging thigh.

„What is it?“ Leo asked, coming out of the command chair next to David.

„Docanil,“ Hulann replied. He pointed to the sky, far above them. A coppery speck flitted along the bottom of the high clouds. It was monitoring them, maintaining perfectly matched speeds; that could not be accidental.

„Perhaps he doesn't see us,“ Leo said.

„He does.“

„Yes.“

They watched the copper until big muddy droplets of rain spattered the thick glass. In this dark sheath of mist, the Hunter's helicopter was lost to their sight.

The Bluebolt thundered on, hugged the rails as the sky lowered and the clouds appeared to drag by at little more than arm's length overhead. The four heavy rubber wipers thumped back and forth in hypnotic, melancholic rhythm (*tunka, tunka, tunka*), efficiently sloshing the water off the windscreen and into the drainage scoops.

When Docanil struck, it was too swift to allow even for surprise. Several hundred yards up the track, the familiar copter bobbed out of the scudding clouds, skimmed toward them only inches above the rails. A firing tube opened in its side, and the first of its small power launch tubes spat a fist-sized missile.

Involuntarily, they flinched from anticipated impact and dropped to the floor, clutching at handholds. The concussion almost threw them erect as the missile

exploded a hundred feet ahead in a rich wash of crimson. Docanil had not been trying to kill; such a long-range retaliation would not have absolved his humiliation. He had only been trying to derail them so that he could reach them easily for a more personal revenge. Such was the way of a Hunter...

The engine's front wheels leaped the twisted ends of the steel track, sank through the crossties and into the yielding sand. The cab tilted, toppled sideways in painfully slow motion. It pulled the other cars inexorably after it, whirling them free of the rails and hurtling them onto the wet sand. The shrieking, clanging, squealing noise grew until it was a vicious, impossible assault on the ears—then died with the abruptness of an exhausted man falling into sleep.

David felt blood trickling down his head from a number of superficial cuts on his skull and a nasty gash on his right temple. For the first time in his life, the meaning of the war came home to him—like a fist in the guts. He had been separated from it before. He had told himself that a writer's duty was to be separate from the grossness of his generation. Later, he could comment. But now the blood was real.

Aching, bloodied, they got to their feet inside the disordered, canted cabin, struggled upwards toward the sheered section of the big cab where the Hunter Docanil waited, silhouetted by the light gray dreariness of the stormy sky.

A few drops of rain fell.

Somewhere, there was thunder.

Outside, the three fugitives stood against the overturned hulk of Bluebolt, watching Docanil parade proudly before them, recounting the details of his careful search from the first moments of the Phasersystem alert. In a human or a naoli normal, such behavior would have been known as a braggart's act. But with a Hunter, it was more than self-aggrandisement; it was something more sinister, something tied closely to sadism.

When Docanil finished his account, he described in brutal detail what he would do with them. He obviously relished this chance to stretch out the actual executions, glorying in the anticipation. When Banalog objected that they were to be brought back alive, Docanil withered the traumatist with a glance that frankly threatened him. That done, he began his series of revenge deaths with David. Again, his bare hands came out, twitching. David's flesh, reacting to the invisible weapon, took on a ruddy glow.

Docanil played his hands over the man's body, back and forth with obvious pleasure, then used one hand to increase the force of the deadly plague on David's right arm. The clothes flashed and burned away from that arm, fell onto the ground as ashes.

„Stop!“ Banalog pleaded miserably.

Docanil ignored him.

The outer layer of skin on David's arm began to shrivel as if it were dehydrating. It broke open and exposed pinker layers beneath. These too were quickly browned by the Hunter's weapon. There was a smell of roasting meat.

David was screaming.

Leo was screaming also, holding his hands up to the sides of his head as his mind thrust memories at him: memories of his father beneath the grenade launcher, twisted, broken, charred... dead...

Hulann put his arm around the boy, tried not to let him see what was becoming of David. He felt, surprisingly, as if the boy were one of his own brood, of his own loins. And the touch of the human child was warm, not ugly and frightening as it had been that first time when he had tried to dress his wound in the Boston cellar. But Leo felt worse for not knowing what was happening and pulled away to watch.

David rolled, cradling his damaged arm under his chest to keep it from being totally ruined. Even now, it would take months to heal it. But what was he thinking? He would not be alive months from now—or even minutes from now. He was dying. This was real.

Docanil brought his fingers to center on David's legs. The boy-man's clothes caught fire and ashed, as did the first layer of his tender skin. Docanil laughed, a terrible cackling sound and—abruptly gasped, tried to scream as his victim had been screaming, eyes wide. He staggered two steps, then fell forward onto the sand, quite dead. Protruding from his back was the hilt of a ceremonial knife of the sort Hunters used to cut out and eat certain parts of their victims' bodies. Banalog had taken it from the prepared Hunter's Guild Altar, had brought Docanil to an end he so often distributed to others.

As the others stood transfixed, still not clearly comprehending the magnitude of what they had witnessed, Banalog, moving dreamlike, withdrew the blade and wiped every drop of Hunter blood from it. He then turned the point against his chest and slipped it quietly between two ribs, deep into the eighteen layered muscles of his pulsing heart. He tried not to think of his brood, of his precious family name, of the history he had denied to his children. Instead of crying out in pain, he smiled rather wistfully and collapsed onto Docanil, lying very, very still indeed.

Hulann could not straighten out his emotions. Here, in the moments of disaster, death, and disgrace, they had been salvaged after all. It was nearly like being resurrected. They could go on now, find Haven and try to do something about the misunderstanding between the naoli and the non-spacer Earthmen. Yet Hulann was not a violent creature. He wove forward, somehow managed to lift the traumatist's body as if it weighed only ounces, carried it off several feet so that its precious blood would not mingle with that of the Hunter Docanil.

It was raining lightly again.

The rain diluted the blood.

Hulann returned and scuffed away all traces of what blood had mingled before he had acted.

With that accomplished, the joy of the moment began to gush into him and gain the upper hand of his emotions. They were in California... The ocean roared near them... The tracks paralleled the sea, so they could follow those to search for the Haven. Leo would be safe. He could grow, become a man, have his own brood in his own way. And would not the boy's brood have, as part of its cultural and historical heritage, the history of Hulann the naoli? That thought gave wings to his mind and made him feel even more free and happy with life. He turned to Leo, wanting to lift the boy and dance with him as he might have with one of his own lizards children, and he felt the first bullet sink deep into his side, ripping through vital things and bringing with it a horrible, final darkness...

## Chapter 18

At first the blackness had seemed like the plunge into sleep. But it was very much different, for he became aware of the blackness and was able to speculate on it. In sleep, such speculation would have been impossible for the naoli mind. In time, the blackness began to phase into gray, then soft blue. In the azure expanse that stretched to all sides, there was a gentle white radiance directly before him, pulsating much as the heart does within the chest...

Death: *Hello, Hulann.*

Spirit: *What is this place?*

Death: *This is The Changeover. You have been here before, of course. You do not remember, because memory is not the way of Changeover.*

Spirit: *Where do I go from here?*

Death: *A brood hole. Back into your own family.*

Spirit: *Which I have disgraced.*

Death: *Which you have honored. You will be raised, in your new husk, to revere the memory of Hulann.*

Spirit: *But I left life a failure. I did not achieve the whole purpose.*

Death: *The humans who shot you were from Haven. They thought you molested the boy, though they soon learned their error. They took you to their fortress for surgery. But they knew little of naoli anatomy. They failed to keep you alive. But they will find a means for bringing the truth to the occupying naoli. The war will end soon, before the human race is destroyed.*

Spirit: *That's very good news.* (He ponders the specter of Death a moment, somehow little interested in the past life now that he has been told the result of his role in it.) *You are death?*

Death: *I am.*

Spirit: *And I am to be born again?*

Death: *You are.*

Spirit: *Then you are not permanent.*

Death: *No. Your race long ago programmed me not to be. I operate on the proper laws, recalling your souls at their departure from your temporal husks and remaking you within a new husk. I have all the facilities for that sort of thing.*

Spirit: *You are a machine!*

Death: *Yes.*

Spirit: *The humans...?*

Death: *I know not of their Death; they are of a wholly different cloth. Though I believe they have not thought of the concept of „abstract mechanism“. Sadly, I believe their deaths are permanent. But if you thought the war against men a little justified learning that death was not permanent, you are wrong. Your race has forgotten its abstract mechanisms, forgotten my creation as a restorer of souls. And so it was meant to be—to keep the race at least a little humble. And to help purify the race morally. To that end, we must get on with your reincarnation. By practice,*

*as programmed, I am to ask you what single thing or lesson you wish to remember from your previous life, what Truth.*

*Spirit: (Hesitating.) The Hunter. Docanil. Whatever would a naoli like that want to remember? What would he have to save from his previous life?*

*Death: Surely you jest. A Hunter has no soul.*

*Spirit: (Pondering for a time.) Then that is what I will remember. I wish to carry into my new life the knowledge that a naoli Hunter has no soul.*

*Death: It is an unusual request.*

*Spirit: It is all I will accept; it is the only thing worth remembering.*

*Death: So be it!*

There was an explosion of life into rebirth...

The white-haired man stood in the nook of rock overlooking the blue-green sea that ruffled in toward him, far below and like a liquid dream. He watched the boy named Leo and several of the men from the Haven as they buried the alien body in a grave dug in the beach above the high tideline where the eroding waters could not reach it. In the gloominess, with the rain obscuring details, their electric headlamps looked startlingly like flickering votive candles. As the boy bent over the deep hole and threw the first sand onto the stiffened alien shell, he could have been a wizened little priest in some ancient European cemetery, administering the final rites at the graveside of a good parishioner.

The rain spattered his face, but he did not wipe it off.

The wind howled in the nook, cancelling out whatever was being said below.

He thought that, perhaps, he should have gone with them after all, added his office's prestige to the funeral of one who—apparently—had done so much. But he had not been able to bring himself to that. That was a naoli, one of those who had killed his race, or very nearly had done. He had been trained, almost since birth, to loathe those creatures. He knew now what the situation was. Men had always allowed foreigners to judge the common men of their nation by the personalities and activities of their soldiers and diplomats. That, of course, was a mistake, for soldiers and diplomats were not representative of the common citizens, did not much share his goals, his ideals, or his beliefs. This same age-old error had been made and amplified on a cosmic scale with the spacers. And, at last, it had proved disastrous.

The sand filled the grave quickly.

Grain after grain... Each obscuring more of the dead alien.

The huddled mourners worked swiftly as the rain drove harder upon their shoulders.

The white-haired man thought about going back into the Haven to the pile of work now awaiting him. There was so much to do, so many tiring, tedious things ahead of them—and so much danger. But he would have to wait until he was able to settle his emotions. A leader of men should not be seen in tears...

Elsewhere at that time:

David laid in healing bandages, swathed like a mummy, basking in the warm rays of the speed-heal lamp, attended constantly by machines and men (for a human life was a terribly precious thing now). He could neither move nor speak—

but his mind was active. Another book was in his mind now, the first he had thought about writing in longer than he cared to admit. It would be about Hulann, about the boy Leo, about the war. He thought he might even have to write himself into the end of the story. He had always thought a writer should be detached from his work—but now he thought he was going to be able to write better than ever by playing on his own emotional involvement. He would begin the book in Hulann's room in the occupation tower, with Hulann asleep, tucked into the nether-world pocket, his overmind detached and blank.

Leo stopped walking away from the beach and looked back one last time at the almost invisible grave where Hulann laid beneath the suffocating sand. He felt much as he had when he had first seen the shattered form of his father beneath the grenade launcher. He wondered how Hulann felt about him, how he regarded him. He remembered the naoli putting a protective arm around his shoulders when Docanil had them up against the overturned locomotive. They had postured like father and son. Yet, only a week ago, Hulann would have thought of him as a Beastchild, a primitive. At last, the rain was running down his neck, making him shiver quite badly in his thin and somewhat raggedy suit of clothes. He turned and left the beach, the evening, the rain. Hulann had lived for centuries; he had told Leo so himself. The boy would only have another hundred years or so. He would have to try very hard to make those decades as full as possible, as sort of a monument.

The Spirit entered the flesh of a woman, sank deep into her pouch, settled into the egg as it was fertilized. It had no personality at such an age. It had no thoughts, save one: A Hunter has no soul.

