

Part one

A Certain Predicament

It was a very small planet, orbiting an obscure star, somewhere in an uncharted part of the galaxy. He did not want to explore it. He wanted to be elsewhere. But, he was stranded.

The computer was still operative, but when he questioned it about the planet, the computer drew a blank. Then he decided that it didn't matter whether or not it was charted: the communications system was dead and he was too far out in new space to use telepathy. He should have given the planet a name, but that did not matter. If he got back to Central or Earth he could name it something. What did matter was that he was stranded, angry, very tired and just a little frightened, a condition which experience in his late life had taught him to ignore. He climbed into his capsule-console and went to sleep. It seemed a reasonable thing to do.

He dreamed, for the fifth night in a row, not at all.

The next day he reviewed his predicament: a crippled ship, an uncharted planet in new space, no communications, a limited supply of life-support materials and a certain numbness that crept over his body everytime he had difficulty coping with the significance of the situation. He knew what was required of him he had been well-trained for every eventuality - but he did not want to cope. He wanted to sleep, to put an end to the pain. He took a barbiturate, stretched his arms and, for a fleeting moment, observed his moving body on the telescreen monitor. Something seemed to be alive in him, he felt, but he turned his mind to other things. He ordered breakfast: toast, coffee, eggs and bacon. The efficiency of the computer bothered him for the first time he could remember. Soon, with the coffee in his hand and the ultrasonics bathing him, he decided to confront what he had scrupulously avoided since he had awakened: his predicament.

He wanted to think about boxing. He had done a minor thesis on the ancient sport once and it had remained of obsessive interest to him. Anything, however, except for the facts of the present would have interested him.

Now, however, confronted by the reality of the present situation, he had to face facts and cope with the present. The computer had, the night before, reported certain breakdowns in the ship that needed equipment for repair which was lightyears away.

After breakfast, he laid back in the lounge chair and tried to enjoy a massage, but it didn't stop the numbness.

He ordered a soma, thinking he might as well escape it all for awhile, then decided against it. He ordered the computer to begin sending out distress signals on the auxiliary, and was informed that it had begun signals upon landing. He was also informed that there was little chance anyone would pick him up. He was in new space. What then? Expletives, as foul as years of isolation could make them. But that helped only as a relief to his anger and frustration. The numbness was worse than ever. He placed an eroticon over his lower abdomen and laid back, trying to enjoy a manual masturbation. Even with visual images, he didn't enjoy it. He reached a climax without really feeling it.

Then an awareness of a fact that he had attempted to avoid: suddenly, as realities come after sex, he was faced with the problem which was undeniable: his survival. Or

death. There were only limited life-support materials in the ship. So, the answers to his survival lay, paradoxically, outside the ship. On that little, lethal planet that should not have been there.

There was oxygen in the planet's atmosphere, but it was not adequate and the air was filled with alien bioforms. However, it might be extracted and purified. Fortunately, the ship's mechanisms, except for the propulsion and communications systems, were operational. He donned a sterisuit and helmet and prepared to go outside, but first he scanned the terrain with holographic video. It was a pleasant, dream-like place, belying the deadliness of its bioforms. The colors were iridescent, shimmering, changing. Because of the airborne bioforms, everything moved, swayed, heaved in a way that gave the appearance of a planet breathing. Yet, there was little wind. He climbed into a transit capsule, a clear plastic globe, and asked the computer to place him outside. He disliked the experience of dematerializing, but awoke to find himself, moments later, floating above the sparkling surface of what seemed to be a lake. It was pearl white and silver. It seemed to gurgle, as if it were thick and boiling. He activated recording apparatus and began sending out bioprobes to collect specimens. He had to find a source of food and, perhaps, energy.

The place was saturated with bioforms, thick with them. That was the source of the movement: Life. All of it absurdly stupid. All of it microscopically tiny. These bioforms seemed to swarm collectively in order to project shape and form, but that shape and form never gained any definition. It constantly changed. Nothing stopped moving. Nothing stopped changing.

Tiny bioprobes reached out into the swarming masses and collected specimens for analysis. Gradually, the sample tubes beneath the globe were filling. In the recesses of his mind a hopelessly negative attitude was formulating: there is nothing here. But . . . but . . . ! At least there was his own intelligent life and that, among the known planets, was a rarity. And where there were living bioforms he felt a certain comfort, an affinity toward that life, no matter how strange it might be, that he too shared the force that moved through them. Form and shape varied, there were no duplications in the universe. But all shared a single, similar basis for being: Life. The energy that made possible shape and form, wherever it was found in the universe, was the same. He had often wondered about the source, the common ancestor of life in the universe, but that was hopeless. Such an ancestor was lost to the vast recesses of time. No life, after all, is complete without death, and time kills all things. Somewhere, at the beginning, when everything began from a single mass of matter, when that matter exploded outward, that ancestor began to move about the expanding universe in clouds of molecules which contained the keys of life. But that was too long ago and now all that man could do was theorize, and learn all he could about those lifeforms which existed. And discover new life which inhabited his matrix, analyze it and, as man was apt to do, marvel at what he found. Or, like himself, record it as art.

For he was an artist. A space artist financed by galactic grants. But this was more than research or art. This was a game with deadly consequences to him. Out of these swarms of lifeforms he had to discover some source of life for himself. For it is axiomatic that when life exists, as it did in him, it must consume other life in order to continue its

existence. It cannot exist on matter which had never possessed life. And that life to be consumed could not act against him. For millions of years, locked on planet Earth, man had evolved immunities from most known Earth diseases. But, confronted with alien life

forms, man had little immunity. And most of these live forms were, in fact, deadly for him. Some of them could be processed, broken down into their chemical constituents and reassembled, purified and transmitted into edible substances. But the mass of known extraterrestrial life forms were simply beyond the capabilities of his ship's equipment.

After an hour or so he returned to the ship, which was enveloped in a cloud of swarming bioforms. It was already dusk on the small planet, its day being only three hours and forty eight minutes long (Earth time). As darkness devoured the planet, the bioforms swarmed more outerly, expanding until the atmosphere appeared as heavy as water moving, constantly moving. He was glad to get inside where space was less oppressive. The computer, after sterilizing the globe, removed the tubes of samples to its laboratory for testing. He removed his sterisuit and went to the lounge, asked the computer to let him know the results of the tests as soon as possible, and decided to take a short soma. He took it with coffee and stretched out, naked, on the soft floor, switching on some lightplay and music. He thought of a man whose image had remained with him for years, but whom he had never understood, as the soma hit him, and he watched as the video forms, dancing three-dimensionally, moved through the room, altering themselves into the forms of his mind. The man walked through the images, as remembered in his mind, altering the man's shape to the images and patterns of his own art. He closed his eyes and the images remained in his mind exploding, novaesque, into a rainbow and then into the antique forms of his sexual species: fire, water, weapons and caves. He had difficulty concentrating until he suddenly remembered a night, years before, before he had entered the service, before his years of celibacy. Before he had become an old, celestial artist, zen-like in his search for alien forms, colors, shapes, ideas.

He was young again, in the old-young, hunky body of his youth, before the old art had worn off. When he had been in pursuit of pleasure and pain.

Earth, when winter had come hard on the East Coast, but in San Francisco was only gentle, cool with sometimes rains.

His lover was in New York in pursuit of storms, and he had stayed behind to work on what remained of his series of pencil drawings on the South of Market fantasy his mind had constructed. In this fantasy was a great building, dark, old brick, with rounded windows and filled with areas dedicated to particular fetishes - torture chambers, gyms, western erotica, baths, leather shops, motorcycles, whatever the fantasies or the South of Market demanded.

This place of his fantasy was a stark and cruel place, if one wished it to look that way, out of fear and hunger; or, it was a warm and loving place, filled with men satisfying each other's, as well as their own, hungers and needs.

On that night, as he slipped into the real places South of Market, and mixed them, in his mind, with the fantasies, he was suddenly engulfed with a sense of horror and excitement converging into a nexus of sexual participation. A killer had been roaming

the area and, strangely, he wanted this man. It had become an obsession with him - the danger of such sex, the possibility of an ultimate climax. Semen had been found in the asses of all the victims, and each of the victims had climaxed.

He went home with someone who fit the description the police had broadcast: dark-haired, muscular, hirsute, much like himself. The man had a scar on his upper lip which gave him a cruel leer, which the police never mentioned, which gave him doubts about this man being the killer. But, even so, he was a sexy number, tall, thick and masterful.

The sex had been good. There was bondage and fear, enough cruelty to make the loving meaningful to him, enough of the dungeon in his mind's fantasy to excite him to spend the night with this strange and powerful man, to end up loving him, in his way, by his means.

He couldn't remember, after he had blacked out, near the morning, how it had ended. He only remembered finding himself walking down Fulsom Street, turning a corner, and seeing the place he had been drawing for the past year. The same bricks, windows, entrances, even shadows and lights. But it was no S&M palace. A small sign in front proclaimed it to be the "More Plastic Company." He sat for an hour across the street from the building, as the sun arose and lit the building in its golden rays, its towers and tin roofs standing tall against

the fading fog. He remembered the good times: how the man had bound and beat him, taken his self-respect from him and humiliated him and then, when he had felt himself reduced to pulp, had fucked him: that moment, when, after hours of degradation, of humiliation and defeat, struggling against the master, he had succumbed to defeat, he had given in, in order to get what he wanted, and had blacked out.

The leather straps, the restraints, the torture and blood running down his abdominals into the hairs of his groin where his hands picked it up out of his pubic hairs as he jerked off; the feeling that his legs had been torn off and destroyed that he had been emasculated, enfeebled and brought to climax beyond his control: the truly diabolical horror of his body not being his own, but the property of another, the torment of this other feeling, of passions unbridled before this steed, this stud: that he had cared!

Before the Christ of the old world, the old art, before Michaelangelo and Carravaggio, into the recesses of human history, cave men struggling against the greater gods of their environment, cries of terror in the darkness of an absolute night, he had screamed out: I am not of their kind, I am not of their kind.

But he was. He loved the pain, the helplessness of bondage, of allowing a masterful man to overwhelm him, of being all that was weak and cowardly, passive and womanly, the victim, not the prick, the cross and not the Christ. He could never rise above this humiliation, this degradation of his human soul: no need. He was fulfilled and hated every moment of it. The cock in his ass; the nail in the cross. The loss of his manhood. He saw the Chronicle man put the papers in a box at the corner and went over and deposited twenty cents in the slots. On page two he saw an item, with a photo, that made his blood curdle. It was the man he had spent the night with: "S & M Killer Stalks Again," the headlines read. And, in smaller type, "Another Gay Victim Slain - Killer Unknown."

The soma wore off. He heard the computer call him again, and he answered, yes?

"I have preliminary results of the tests." "Well . "

"There is an algae-like bioform which, at present, is lethal. But it has hopeful characteristics."

"Which are ...?"

"It reproduces rapidly and has a relatively long life span. Its DNA can be easily manipulated and perhaps can be made safe for consumption."

"Positive results will not be ready for an hour or so. It is the only possibility among the specimens collected."

"Damn. Well, get to work on it. We've got to find something."

"Right."

He switched on the outer video monitor, illuminated the immediate area around his ship and watched the swarms moving about. It didn't make sense, none of it, not his being here, not the break-down, not this small planet which should not have been here. Something was terribly wrong, beyond cybernetic understanding, something outside logic, or technological failure, or even miscalculation. Something else. Something beyond his experience or understanding. And there was no way of knowing what was wrong. It was just a feeling, and instinct, perhaps, nothing he could put his finger on. A chill, a sudden terror.

The computer reported failure. But it did not matter. He knew what was wrong.

When a man dies his machines die. It is strange how one can face the unknown without ever being aware of what is so obvious. It is because it seems to be familiar and, even so, wrong. How many times to come, how many times before? It all moves full circle to the source. There is no answer to the question, there is no final resolution to the game. It, quite simply, is. And, the last reality is the first. He was aware of that much. But now there was nothing left to do. He didn't need them, so he switched off the computer and the life-support systems. Dead men have other needs. And he had been dead a long time, picture in the paper, obituary columns, strangled in his own blood and caught in the cross-currents of time: victim of his own imagination, having never let go.