

# Guardians

## Analog

### October, 1981

Haviland Tuf thought the Six Worlds Bio-Agricultural Exhibition a great disappointment.

He had spent a long wearying day on Brazelourn, trooping through the cavernous exhibition halls, pausing now and then to give a cursory inspection to a new grain hybrid or a genetically improved insect. Although the *Ark*'s cell library held cloning material for literally millions of plant and animal species from an uncounted number of worlds, Haviland Tuf was nonetheless always alert for any opportunity to expand his stock-in-trade.

But few of the displays on Brazelourn seemed especially promising, and as the hours passed Tuf grew bored and uncomfortable in the jostling, indifferent crowds. People swarmed everywhere—Vagabonder tunnel-farmers in deep maroon furs, plumed and perfumed Areeni landlords, somber nightsiders and brightly garbed evernoons from New Janus, and a plethora of the native Brazeleen. All of them made excessive noise and favored Tuf with curious stares as he passed among them. Some even brushed up against him, bringing a frown to his long face.

Ultimately, seeking escape from the throngs, Tuf decided he was hungry. He pressed his way through the fairgoers with dignified distaste, and emerged from the vaulting five-story Ptolan Exhibit Hall. Outside, hundreds of vendors had set up booths between the great buildings. The man selling pop-onion pies seemed least busy of those nearby, and Tuf determined that a pop-onion pie was the very thing he craved.

“Sir,” he said to the vendor, “I would have a pie.”

The pieman was round and pink and wore a greasy apron. He opened his hotbox, reached in with a gloved hand, and extracted a hot pie. When he pushed it across the counter at Tuf, he stared. “Oh,” he said, “you’re a big one.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Haviland Tuf. He picked up the pie and bit into it impassively.

“You’re an offworlder,” the pieman observed. “Not from no place nearby, neither.”

Tuf finished his pie in three neat bites, and cleaned his greasy fingers on a napkin. “You belabor the obvious, sir,” he said. He held up a long, callused finger. “Another,” he said.

Rebuffed, the vendor fetched out another pie without further observations, letting Tuf eat in relative peace. As he savored the flaky crust and tartness within, Tuf studied the milling fairgoers, the rows of vendors’ booths, and the five great halls that loomed over the landscape. When he had done eating, he turned back to the pieman, his face as blank as ever. “Sir. If you will, a question.”

“What’s that?” the other said gruffly.

“I see five exhibition halls,” said Haviland Tuf. “I have visited each in turn.” He pointed. “Brazelourn, Vale Areen, New Janus, Vagabond, and here Ptola.” Tuf folded his hands together neatly atop his bulging stomach. “Five, sir. Five halls, five worlds. No doubt, being a stranger as I am, I am unfamiliar with some subtle point of local usage, yet I am perplexed. In those regions where I have heretofore traveled, a gathering calling itself the Six Worlds Bio-Agricultural Exhibition might be expected to include exhibits from six worlds. Plainly that is not the case here. Perhaps you might enlighten me as to why?”

“No one came from Namor.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“On account of the troubles,” the vendor added.

“All is made clear,” said Tuf. “Or, if not all, at least a portion. Perhaps you would care to serve me another pie, and explain to me the nature of these troubles. I am nothing if not curious, sir. It is my great vice, I fear.”

The piaman slipped on his glove again and opened the hotbox. “You know what they say. Curiosity makes you hungry.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “I must admit I have never heard them say that before.”

The man frowned. “No, I got it wrong. Hunger makes you curious, that’s what it is. Don’t matter. My pies will fill you up.”

“Ah,” said Tuf. He took up the pie. “Please proceed.”

So the pie-seller told him, at great rambling length, about the troubles on the world Namor. “So you can see,” he finally concluded, “why they didn’t come, with all this going on. Not much to exhibit.”

“Of course,” said Haviland Tuf, dabbing his lips. “Sea monsters can be most vexing.”

Namor was a dark green world, moonless and solitary, banded by wispy golden clouds. The *Ark* shuddered out of drive and settled ponderously into orbit around it. In the long, narrow communications room, Haviland Tuf moved from seat to seat, studying the planet on a dozen of the room’s hundred viewscreens. Three small grey kittens kept him company, bounding across the consoles, pausing only to slap at each other. Tuf paid them no mind.

A water world, Namor had only one landmass decently large enough to be seen from orbit, and that none too large. But magnification revealed thousands of islands scattered in long, crescent-shaped archipelagoes across the deep green seas, earthen jewels strewn throughout the oceans. Other screens showed the lights of dozens of cities and towns on the night side, and pulsing dots of energy outlay where settlements sat in sunlight.

Tuf looked at it all, and then seated himself, flicked on another console, and began to play a war game with the computer. A kitten bounded up into his lap and went to sleep. He was careful not to disturb it. Some time later, a second kitten vaulted up and pounced on it, and they began to tussle. Tuf brushed them to the floor.

It took longer than even Tuf had anticipated, but finally the challenge came, as he had known it would. “*Ship in orbit*,” came the demand, “ship in orbit, this is Namor Control. State your name and business. State your name and business, please. Interceptors have been dispatched. State your name and business.”

The transmission was coming from the chief land-mass. The *Ark* tapped into it. At the same time, it found the ship that was moving toward them—there was only one—and flashed it on another screen.

“I am the *Ark*,” Haviland Tuf told Namor Control.

Namor Control was a round-faced woman with close-cropped brown hair, sitting at a console and wearing a deep green uniform with golden piping. She frowned, her eyes flicking to the side, no doubt to a superior or another console. “*Ark*,” she said, “state your homeworld. State your homeworld and your business, please.”

The other ship had opened communications with the planet, the computer indicated. Two more viewscreens lit up. One showed a slender young woman with a large, crooked nose on a ship’s bridge, the other an elderly man before a console. They both wore green uniforms, and they were conversing animatedly in code. It took the computer less than a minute to break it, so Tuf could listen in. “...damned if I know what it is,” the woman on the ship was saying. “There’s never been a ship that big. My God, just look at it. Are you getting all this? Has it answered?”

“*Ark*,” the round-faced woman was still saying, “state your homeworld and your business, please. This is Namor Control.”

Haviland Tuf cut into the other conversation, to talk to all three of them simultaneously. “This is the *Ark*,” he said. “I have no homeworld, sirs. My intentions are purely peaceful—trade and consultation. I learned of your tragic difficulties, and moved by your plight, I have come to offer you my services.”

The woman on the ship looked startled. “What are *you*...” she started. The man was equally nonplussed, but he said nothing, only gaped open-mouthed at Tuf’s blank white visage.

“This is Namor Control, *Ark*,” said the round-faced woman. “We are closed to trade. Repeat, we are closed to trade. We are under martial law here.”

By then the slender woman on the ship had composed herself. “*Ark*, this is Guardian Kefira Qay, commanding NGS *Sunrazor*. We are armed, *Ark*. Explain yourself. You are a thousand times larger than any trader I have ever seen, *Ark*. Explain yourself or be fired upon.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Threats will avail you little, Guardian. I am most sorely vexed. I have come all this long way from Braelourn to offer you my aid and solace, and you meet me with threats and hostility.” A kitten leapt up into his lap. Tuf scooped it up with a huge white hand, and deposited it on the console in front of him, where the viewer would pick it up. He gazed down at it sorrowfully. “There is no trust left in humanity,” he said to the kitten.

“Hold your fire, *Sunrazor*,” said the elderly man. “*Ark*, if your intentions are truly peaceful, explain yourself. What are you? We are hard-pressed here, *Ark*, and Namor is a small, undeveloped world. We have never seen your like before. Explain yourself.”

Haviland Tuf stroked the kitten. “Always I must truckle to suspicion,” he told it. “They are fortunate that I am so kind-hearted, or else I would simply depart and leave them to their fate.” He looked up, straight into the viewer. “Sir,” he said. “I am the *Ark*. I am Haviland Tuf, captain and master here, crew entire. You are troubled by great monsters from the depths of your seas, I have been told. Very well. I shall rid you of them.”

“*Ark*, this is *Sunrazor*. How do you propose doing that?”

“The *Ark* is a seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps,” said Haviland Tuf with stiff formality. “I am an ecological engineer and a specialist in biological warfare.”

“Impossible,” said the old man. “The EEC was wiped out a thousand years ago, along with the Federal Empire. None of their seedships remain.”

“How distressing,” said Haviland Tuf. “Here I sit in an illusion. No doubt, now that you have told me my ship does not exist, I shall sink right through it and plunge into your atmosphere, where I shall burn up as I fall.”

“Guardian,” said Kefira Qay from the *Sunrazor*, “these seedships may indeed no longer exist, but I am fast closing on something that my scopes tell me is almost thirty kilometers long. It does not appear to be an illusion.”

“I am not yet falling,” admitted Haviland Tuf.

“Can you truly help us?” asked the round-faced woman at Namor Control.

“Why must I always be doubted?” Tuf asked the small grey kitten.

“Lord Guardian, we must give him the chance to prove what he says,” insisted Namor Control.

Tuf looked up. “Threatened, insulted, and doubted as I have been, nonetheless my empathy for your situation bids me to persist. Perhaps I might suggest that *Sunrazor* dock with me, so to speak. Guardian Qay may come aboard and join me for an evening meal, while we converse. Surely your suspicions cannot extend to mere conversation, that most civilized of human pastimes.”

The three Guardians conferred hurriedly with each other and with a person or persons offscreen, while Haviland Tuf sat back and toyed with the kitten. "I shall name you Suspicion," he said to it, "to commemorate my reception here. Your siblings shall be Doubt, Hostility, Ingratitude and Foolishness."

"We accept your proposal, Haviland Tuf," said Guardian Kefira Qay from the bridge of the *Sunrazor*. "Prepare to be boarded."

"Indeed," said Tuf. "Do you like mushrooms?"

The shuttle deck of the *Ark* was as large as the landing field of a major starport, and seemed almost a junkyard for derelict spacecraft. The *Ark*'s own shuttles stood trim in their launch berths, five identical black ships with rakish lines and stubby triangular wings angling back, designed for atmospheric flight and still in good repair. Other craft were less impressive. A teardrop-shaped trading vessel from Avalon squatted wearily on three extended landing legs, next to a driveshift courier scored by battle, and a Karaleo lionboat whose ornate trim was largely gone. Elsewhere stood vessels of stranger, more alien design.

Above, the great dome cracked into a hundred pie-wedge segments, and drew back to reveal a small yellow sun surrounded by stars, and a dull green manta-shaped ship of about the same size as one of Tuf's shuttles. The *Sunrazor* settled, and the dome closed behind it. When the stars had been blotted out again, atmosphere came swirling back in to the deck, and Haviland Tuf arrived soon after.

Kefira Qay emerged from her ship with her lips set sternly beneath her big, crooked nose, but no amount of control could quite conceal the awe in her eyes. Two armed men in golden coveralls trimmed with green followed her.

Haviland Tuf drove up to them in an open three-wheeled cart. "I am afraid that my dinner invitation was only for one, Guardian Qay," he said when he saw her escort. "I regret any misunderstanding, yet I must insist."

"Very well," she said. She turned to her guard. "Wait with the others. You have your orders." When she got in next to Tuf she told him, "The *Sunrazor* will tear your ship apart if I am not returned safely within two standard hours."

Haviland Tuf blinked at her. "Dreadful," he said. "Everywhere my warmth and hospitality is met with mistrust and violence." He set the vehicle into motion.

They drove in silence through a maze of interconnected rooms and corridors, and finally entered a huge shadowy shaft that seemed to extend the full length of the ship in both directions. Transparent vats of a hundred different sizes covered walls and ceiling as far as the eye could see, most empty and dusty, a few filled with colored liquids in which half-seen shapes stirred feebly. There was no sound but a wet, viscous dripping somewhere off behind them. Kefira Qay studied everything and said nothing. They went at least three kilometers down the great shaft, until Tuf veered off into a blank wall that dilated before them. Shortly thereafter they parked and dismounted.

A sumptuous meal had been laid out in the small, spartan dining chamber to which Tuf escorted the Guardian Kefira Qay. They began with iced soup, sweet and piquant and black as coal, followed by neograss salads with a gingery topping. The main course was a breaded mushroom top full as large as the plate on which it was served, surrounded by a dozen different sorts of vegetables in individual sauces. The Guardian ate with great relish.

"It would appear you find my humble fare to your taste," observed Haviland Tuf.

"I haven't had a good meal in longer than I care to admit," replied Kefira Qay. "On Namor, we have always depended on the sea for our sustenance. Normally it is bountiful, but since our troubles began..." She lifted a forkful of dark, misshapen vegetables in a yellow-brown sauce. "What am I eating? It's

delightful.”

“Rhiannese sinners’ root, in a mustard sauce,” Haviland Tuf said.

Qay swallowed and set down her fork. “But Rhiannon is so far, how do you...” She stopped.

“Of course,” Tuf said, steepling his fingers beneath his chin as he watched her face. “All this provender derives from the *Ark*, though originally it might be traced back to a dozen different worlds. Would you like more spiced milk?”

“No,” she muttered. She gazed at the empty plates. “You weren’t lying, then. You are what you claim, and this is a seedship of the...what did you call them?”

“The Ecological Engineering Corps, of the long-defunct Federal Empire. Their ships were few in number, and all but one destroyed by the vicissitudes of war. The *Ark* alone survived, derelict for a millennium. The details need not concern you. Suffice it to say that I found it, and made it functional.”

“You *found* it?”

“I believe I just said as much, in those very same words. Kindly pay attention. I am not partial to repeating myself. Before finding the *Ark*, I made a humble living from trade. My former ship is still on the landing deck. Perhaps you chanced to see it.”

“Then you’re really just a trader.”

“Please!” said Tuf with indignation. “I am an ecological engineer. The *Ark* can remake whole planets, Guardian. True, I am but one man, alone, when once this ship was crewed by two hundred, and I do lack the extensive formal training such as was given centuries ago to those who wore the golden theta, the sigil of the Ecological Engineers. Yet, in my own small way, I contrive to muddle through. If Namor would care to avail itself of my services, I have no doubt that I can help you.”

“Why?” the slender Guardian asked warily. “Why are you so anxious to help us?”

Haviland Tuf spread his big white hands helplessly. “I know, I might appear a fool. I cannot help myself. I am a humanitarian by nature, much moved by hardship and suffering. I could no more abandon your people, beset as they are, than I could harm one of my cats. The Ecological Engineers were made of sterner stuff, I fear, but I am helpless to change my sentimental nature. So here I sit before you, prepared to do my best.”

“You want nothing?”

“I shall labor without recompense,” said Tuf. “Of course, I will have operating expenses. I must charge a small fee to offset them. Say, three million standards. Do you think that fair?”

“Fair,” she said sarcastically. “Fairly high, I’d say. There have been others like you, Tuf—arms merchants and soldiers of fortune who have come to grow rich off our misery.”

“Guardian,” said Tuf, reproachfully, “you do me grievous wrong. I take little for myself. The *Ark* is so large, so costly. Perhaps two million standards would suffice? I cannot believe you would grudge me this pittance. Is your world worth less?”

Kefira Qay sighed, a tired look etched on her narrow face. “No,” she admitted. “Not if you can do all you promise. Of course, we are not a rich world. I will have to consult my superiors. This is not my decision alone.” She stood up abruptly. “Your communications facilities?”

“Through the door and left down the blue corridor. The fifth door on the right.” Tuf rose with ponderous dignity, and began cleaning up as she left.

When the Guardian returned he had opened a decanter of liquor, vividly scarlet, and was stroking a black-and-white cat who had made herself at home on the table. “You’re hired, Tuf,” said Kefira Qay, seating herself. “Two million standards. *After* you win this war.”

“Agreed,” said Tuf. “Let us discuss your situation over glasses of this delightful beverage.”

“Alcoholic?”

“Mildly narcotic.”

“A Guardian uses no stimulants or depressants. We are a fighting guild. Substances like that pollute the body and slow the reflexes. A Guardian must be vigilant. We guard and protect.”

“Laudable,” said Haviland Tuf. He filled his own glass.

“*Sunrazor* is wasted here. It has been recalled by Namor Control. We need its combat capabilities below.”

“I shall expedite its departure, then. And yourself?”

“I have been detached,” she said, wrinkling up her face. “We are standing by with data on the situation below. I am to help brief you, and act as your liaison officer.”

The water was calm, a tranquil green mirror from horizon to horizon.

It was a hot day. Bright yellow sunlight poured down through a thin bank of gilded clouds. The ship rested still on the water, its metallic sides flashing silver-blue, its open deck a small island of activity in an ocean of peace. Men and women small as insects worked the dredges and nets, bare-chested in the heat. A great claw full of mud and weeds emerged from the water, dripping, and was sluiced down an open hatchway. Elsewhere bins of huge milky jellyfish baked in the sun.

Suddenly there was agitation. For no apparent reason, people began to run. Others stopped what they were doing and looked around, confused. Still others worked on, oblivious. The great metal claw, open and empty now, swung back out over the water and submerged again, even as another one rose on the far side of the ship. More people were running. Two men collided and went down.

Then the first tentacle came curling up from beneath the ship.

It rose and rose. It was longer than the dredging claws. Where it emerged from the dark green sea, it looked as thick as a big man’s torso. It tapered to the size of an arm. The tentacle was white, a soft slimy sort of white. All along its underside were vivid pink circles big as dinner plates, circles that writhed and pulsed as the tentacle curled over and about the huge farming ship. The end of the tentacle split into a rat’s nest of smaller tentacles, dark and restless as snakes.

Up and up it went, and then over and down, pinioning the ship. Something moved on the other side, something pale stirring beneath all that green, and the second tentacle emerged. Then a third, and a fourth. One wrestled with a dredging claw. Another had the remains of a net draped all about it, like a veil, which didn’t seem to hinder it. Now all the people were running—all but those the tentacles had found. One of them had curled itself around a woman with an axe. She hacked at it wildly, thrashing in the pale embrace, until her back arched and suddenly she fell still. The tentacle dropped her, white fluid pulsing feebly from the gashes she had left, and seized someone else.

Twenty tentacles had attached themselves when the ship abruptly listed to starboard. Survivors slid across the deck and into the sea. The ship tilted more and more. Something was pushing it over, pulling it down. Water sloshed across the side, and into the open hatchways. Then the ship began to break up.

Haviland Tuf stopped the projection, and held the image on the large viewscreen: the green sea and golden sun, the shattered vessel, the pale embracing tentacles. “This was the first attack?” he asked.

“Yes and no,” replied Kefira Qay. “Prior to this, one other harvester and two passenger hydrofoils had vanished mysteriously. We were investigating, but we did not know the cause. In this case, a news crew happened to be on the site, making a recording for an educational broadcast. They got more than they bargained for.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“They were airborne, in a skimmer. The broadcast that night almost caused a panic. But it was not until the next ship went down that things began to get truly serious. That was when the Guardians began to realize the full extent of the problem.”

Haviland Tuf stared up at the viewscreen, his heavy face impassive, expressionless, his hands resting on the console. A black-and-white kitten began to bat at his fingers. “Away, Foolishness,” he said, depositing the kitten gently on the floor.

“Enlarge a section of one of the tentacles,” suggested the Guardian beside him.

Silently, Tuf did as she bid him. A second screen lit up, showing a grainy close-up of a great pale rope of tissue arching over the deck.

“Take a good look at one of the suckers,” said Qay. “The pink areas, there, you see?”

“The third one from the end is dark within. And it appears to have teeth.”

“Yes,” said Kefira Qay. “All of them do. The outer lips of those suckers are a kind of hard, fleshy flange. Slapped down, they spread and create a vacuum seal of sorts, virtually impossible to tear loose. But each of them is a mouth, too. Within the flange is a soft pink flap that falls back, and then the teeth come sliding out—a triple row of them, serrated, and sharper than you’d think. Now move down to the tendrils at the end, if you would.”

Tuf touched the console, and put another magnification up on a third screen, bringing the twisting snakes into easy view.

“Eyes,” said Kefira Qay. “At the end of every one of those tendrils. Twenty eyes. The tentacles don’t need to grope around blindly. They can *see* what they are doing.”

“Fascinating,” said Haviland Tuf. “What lies beneath the water? The source of these terrible arms?”

“There are cross-sections and photographs of dead specimens later on, as well as some computer simulations. Most of the specimens we took were quite badly mangled. The main body of the thing is sort of an inverted cup, like a half-inflated bladder, surrounded by a great ring of bone and muscle that anchors these tentacles. The bladder fills and empties with water to enable the creature to rise to the surface, or descend far below—the submarine principle. By itself it doesn’t weigh much, although it is amazingly strong. What it does, it empties its bladder to rise to the surface, grabs hold, and then begins to fill again. The capacity of the bladder is astounding, and as you can see, the creature is *huge*. If need be, it can even force water *up* those tentacles and out of its mouths, in order to flood the vessel and speed things along. So those tentacles are arms, mouths, eyes, and living hoses all at once.”

“And you say that your people had no knowledge of such creatures until this attack?”

“Right. A cousin of this thing, the Namorian man-of-war, was well-known in the early days of colonization. It was sort of a cross between a jellyfish and an octopus, with twenty arms. Many native species are built along the same lines—a central bladder, or body, or shell, or what have you, with twenty legs or tendrils or tentacles in a ring around it. The men-of-war were carnivores, much like this monster, although they had a ring of eyes on the central body instead of at the end of the tentacles. The arms couldn’t function as hoses, either. And they were much smaller—about the size of a human. They bobbed about on the surface above the continental shelves, particularly above mud-pot beds, where fish were thick. Fish were their usual prey, although a few unwary swimmers met a bloody awful death in their embrace.”

“Might I ask what became of them?” said Tuf.

“They were a nuisance. Their hunting grounds were the same areas we needed—shallows rich with fish and seagrass and waterfruit, over mud-pot beds and scabbler runs full of chameleon-clams and bobbing freddies. Before we could harvest or farm safely, we had to pretty much clean out the men-of-war. We

did. Oh, there are still a few around, but they are rare now.”

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “And this most formidable creature, this living submarine and ship-eater that plagues you so dreadfully, does it have a name?”

“The Namorian dreadnaught,” said Kefira Qay. “When it first appeared, we theorized it was an inhabitant of the great deeps that had somehow wandered to the surface. Namor has been inhabited for barely a hundred standard years, after all. We have scarcely begun to explore the deeper regions of the seas, and we have little knowledge of the things that might live down there. But as more and more ships were attacked and sunk, it became obvious that we had an army of dreadnaughts to contend with.”

“A navy,” corrected Haviland Tuf.

Kefira Qay scowled. “Whatever. A *lot* of them, not one lost specimen. At that point the theory was that some unimaginable catastrophe had taken place deep under the ocean, driving forth this entire species.”

“You give no credit to this theory,” Tuf said.

“No one does. It’s been disproved. The dreadnaughts wouldn’t be able to withstand the pressures at those depths. So now we don’t know where they came from.” She made a face. “Only that they are here.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “No doubt you fought back.”

“Certainly. A game but losing fight. Namor is a young planet, with neither the population nor the resources for the sort of struggle we have been plunged into. Three million Namorians are scattered across our seas, on more than seventeen thousand small islands. Another million huddle on New Atlantis, our single small continent. Most of our people are fisherfolk and sea-farmers. When this all began, the Guardians numbered barely fifty thousand. Our guild is descended from the crews of the ships who brought the colonists from Old Poseidon and Aquarius here to Namor. We have always protected them, but before the coming of the dreadnaughts our task was simple. Our world was peaceful, with little real conflict. There was some ethnic rivalry between Poseidonites and Aquarians, but it was good-natured. The Guardians provided planetary defense, with *Sunrazor* and two similar craft, but most of our work was in fire and flood control, disaster relief, police work, that sort of thing. We had about a hundred armed hydrofoil patrol boats, and we used them for escort duty for a while, and inflicted some casualties, but they were really no match for the dreadnaughts. It soon became clear that there were more dreadnaughts than patrol boats, anyway.”

“Nor do patrol boats reproduce, as I must assume these dreadnaughts do,” Tuf said. Foolishness and Doubt were tussling in his lap.

“Exactly. Still, we tried. We dropped depth charges on them when we detected them below the sea, we torpedoed them when they came to the surface. We killed hundreds. But there were hundreds more, and every boat we lost was irreplaceable. Namor has no technological base to speak of. In better days, we imported what we needed from Brazelourn and Vale Areen. Our people believed in a simple life. The planet couldn’t support industry anyway. It is poor in heavy metals and has almost no fossil fuel.”

“How many Guardian patrol boats remain to you?” asked Haviland Tuf.

“Perhaps thirty. We dare not use them anymore. Within a year of the first attack, the dreadnaughts were in complete command of our sea lanes. All of the great harvesters were lost, hundreds of sea-farms had been abandoned or destroyed, half of the small fisherfolk were dead, and the other half huddled fearfully in port. Nothing human dared move on the seas of Namor.”

“Your islands were isolated from one another?”

“Not quite,” Kefira Qay replied. “The Guardians had twenty armed skimmers, and there were another hundred-odd skimmers and aircars in private hands. We commandeered them, armed them. We also had our airships. Skimmers and aircars are difficult and expensive to maintain here. Parts are hard to come



by, and we have few trained techs, so most of the air traffic before the troubles was carried by airships—solar-powered, helium-filled, large. There was quite a sizable fleet, as many as a thousand. The airships took over the provisioning of some of the small islands, where starvation was a very real threat. Other airships, as well as the Guardian skimmers, carried on the fight. We dumped chemicals, poisons, explosives and such from the safety of the air and destroyed thousands of dreadnaughts, although the cost was frightful. They clustered thickest about our best fishing grounds and mud-pot beds, so we were forced to blow up and poison the very areas we needed most. Still, we had no choice. For a time, we thought we were winning the fight. A few fishing boats even put out and returned safely, with a Guardian skimmer flying escort.”

“Obviously, this was not the ultimate result of the conflict,” said Haviland Tuf, “or we would not be sitting here talking.” Doubt batted Foolishness soundly across the head, and the smaller kitten fell off Tuf’s knee to the floor. Tuf bent and scooped him up. “Here,” he said, handing him to Kefira Qay, “hold him, if you please. Their small war is distracting me from your larger one.”

“I—why, of course.” The Guardian took the small black-and-white kitten in hand gingerly. He fit snugly into her palm. “What is it?” she asked.

“A cat,” said Tuf. “He will jump out of your hand if you continue to hold him as if he were a diseased fruit. Kindly put him in your lap. I assure you he is harmless.”

Kefira Qay, appearing very uncertain, shook the kitten out of her hand onto her knees. Foolishness yowled, almost tumbling to the floor again before sinking his small claws into the fabric of her uniform. “*Oh,*” said Kefira Qay. “It has talons.”

“Claws,” corrected Tuf. “Tiny and harmless.”

“They aren’t poisoned, are they?”

“I think not,” said Tuf. “Stroke him, front to back. It will make him less agitated.”

Kefira Qay touched the kitten’s head uncertainly.

“Please,” said Tuf. “I said *stroke*, not pat.”

The Guardian began to pet the kitten. Instantly, Foolishness began to purr. She stopped and looked up in horror. “It’s trembling,” she said, “and making a noise.”

“Such a response is considered favorable,” Tuf assured her. “I beg you to continue your ministrations, and your briefing. If you will.”

“Of course,” said Qay. She resumed petting Foolishness, who settled down comfortably on her knee. “If you would go on to the next tape,” she prompted.

Tuf wiped the stricken ship and the dreadnaught off the main screen. Another scene took their place—a winter’s day, windy and chilly by the look of it. The water below was dark and choppy, flecked with white foam as the wind pushed against it. A dreadnaught was afloat the unruly sea, its huge white tentacles extended all around it, giving it the look of some vast swollen flower bobbing on the waves. It reached up as they passed overhead, two arms with their writhing snakes lifting feebly from the water, but they were too far above to be in danger. They appeared to be in the gondola of some long silver airship, looking down through a glass-bottomed viewport, and as Tuf watched, the vantage point shifted and he saw that they were part of a convoy of three immense airships, cruising with stately indifference above the war-torn waters.

“The *Spirit of Aquarius*, the *Lyle D.*, and the *Skyshadow*,” said Kefira Qay, “on a relief mission to a small island grouping in the north where famine had been raging. They were going to evacuate the survivors and take them back to New Atlantis.” Her voice was grim. “This record was made by a news crew on the *Skyshadow*, the only airship to survive. Watch.”

On and on the airships sailed, invincible and serene. Then, just ahead of the silver-blue *Spirit of*

*Aquarius*, there was motion in the water, something stirring beneath that dark green veil. Something big, but not a dreadnaught. It was dark, not pale. The water grew black and blacker in a great swelling patch, then bulged upward. A great ebony dome heaved into view and grew, like an island emerging from the depths, black and leathery and immense, and surrounded by twenty long black tentacles. Larger and higher it swelled, second by second, until it burst from the sea entirely. Its tentacles hung below it, dripping water, as it rose. Then they began to lift and spread. The thing was fully as large as the airship moving toward it. When they met, it was as if two vast leviathans of the sky had come together to mate. The black immensity settled atop the long silver-blue dirigible, its arms curling about in a deadly embrace. They watched the airship's outer skin tear asunder, and the helium cells rip and crumple. The *Spirit of Aquarius* twisted and buckled like a living thing, and shriveled in the black embrace of its lover. When it was over, the dark creature dropped the remains into the sea.

Tuf froze the image, staring with solemn regard at the small figures leaping from the doomed gondola.

"Another one got the *Lyle D.* on the way home," said Kefira Qay. "The *Skyshadow* survived to tell the story, but it never returned from its next mission. More than a hundred airships and twelve skimmers were lost in the first week the fire-balloons emerged."

"Fire-balloons?" queried Haviland Tuf. He stroked Doubt, who was sitting on his console. "I saw no fire."

"The name was coined the first time we destroyed one of the accursed things. A Guardian skimmer put a round of explosive shot into it, and it went up like a bomb, then sank, burning into the sea. They are extremely flammable. One laser burst, and they go up spectacularly."

"Hydrogen," said Haviland Tuf.

"Exactly," the Guardian confirmed. "We've never taken one whole, but we've puzzled them out from bits and pieces. The creatures can generate an electric current internally. They take on water, and perform a sort of biological electrolysis. The oxygen is vented into the water or the air, and helps push the things around. Air jets, so to speak. The hydrogen fills the balloon sacs and gives them lift. When they want to retreat to the water, they open a flap on top—see, up there—and all the gas escapes, so the fire-balloon drops back into the sea. The outer skin is leathery, very tough. They're slow, but clever. At times they hide in cloud banks and snatch unwary skimmers flying below. And we soon discovered, to our dismay, that they breed just as fast as the dreadnaughts."

"Most intriguing," said Haviland Tuf. "So, I might venture to suggest, with the emergence of these fire-balloons, you lost the sky as well as the sea."

"More or less," admitted Kefira Qay. "Our airships were simply too slow to risk. We tried to keep things going by sending them out in convoys, escorted by Guardian skimmers and aircars, but even that failed. The morning of the Fire Dawn...I was there, commanding a nine-gun skimmer...it was terrible..."

"Continue," said Tuf.

"The Fire Dawn," she muttered bleakly. "We were...we had thirty airships, *thirty*, a great convoy, protected by a dozen armed skimmers. A long trip, from New Atlantis to the Broken Hand, a major island grouping. Near dawn on the second day, just as the east was turning red, the sea beneath us began to...seethe. Like a pot of soup that has begun to boil. It was *them*, venting oxygen and water, rising. Thousands of them, Tuf, thousands. The waters churned madly, and they rose, all those vast black shadows coming up at us, as far as the eye could see in all directions. We attacked with lasers, with explosive shells, with everything we had. It was like the sky itself was ablaze. All those things were bulging with hydrogen, and the air was rich and giddy with the oxygen they had vented. The Fire Dawn, we call it. It was terrible. Screaming everywhere, balloons burning, our airships crushed and falling around us, bodies afire. There were dreadnaughts waiting below, too. I saw them snatching swimmers who had fallen from the airships, those pale tentacles coiling around them and yanking them under. Four skimmers escaped from that battle. Four. Every airship was lost, with all hands."

“A grim tale,” said Tuf.

Kefira Qay had a haunted look in her eyes. She was petting Foolishness with a blind rhythm, her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes fixed on the screen, where the first fire-balloon floated above the tumbling corpse of the *Spirit of Aquarius*. “Since then,” she said at last, “life has been a continuing nightmare. We have lost our seas. On three-fourths of Namor, hunger and even starvation hold sway. Only New Atlantis still has surplus food, since only there is land-farming practiced extensively. The Guardians have continued to fight. The *Sunrazor* and our two other spacecraft have been pressed into service—bombing runs, dumping poison, evacuating some of the smaller islands. With aircars and fast skimmers, we have maintained a loose web of contact with the outer islands. And we have radio, of course. But we are barely hanging on. Within the last year, more than twenty islands have fallen silent. We sent patrols out to investigate in a half-dozen of those cases. Those that returned all reported the same things. Bodies everywhere, rotting in the sun. Buildings crushed and ruined. Scrabblers and crawling maggots feasting on the corpses. And on one island they found something else, something even more frightful. The island was Seastar. Almost forty thousand people lived there, and it was a major spaceport as well, before trade was cut off. It was a terrible shock when Seastar suddenly stopped broadcasting. Go to the next exhibit, Tuf. Go on.”

Tuf pressed a series of lights on the console.

A dead thing was lying on a beach, rotting on indigo sands.

It was a still picture, this one, not a tape. Haviland Tuf and Guardian Kefira Qay had a long time to study the dead thing where it sprawled, rich and rotten. Around and about it was a litter of human corpses, lending it scale by their proximity. The dead thing was shaped like an inverted bowl, and it was as big as a house. Its leathery flesh, cracked and oozing pustulence now, was a mottled grey-green. Spread on the sand around it, like spokes from a central wheel, were the thing’s appendages—ten twisted green tentacles, puckered with pinkish-white mouths and, alternately, ten limbs that looked stiff and hard and black, and were obviously jointed.

“*Legs,*” said Kefira Qay bitterly. “It was a walker, Tuf, before they killed it. We have only found that one specimen, but it was enough. We know why our islands fall silent now. They come from out of the sea, Tuf. Things like that. Larger, smaller, walking on ten legs like spiders and grabbing and eating with the other ten, the tentacles. The carapace is thick and tough. A single explosive shell or laser burst won’t kill one of these the way it would a fire-balloon. So now you understand. First the sea, then the air, and now it has begun on the land as well. The *land*. They burst from the water in thousands, striding up onto the sand like some terrible tide. Two islands were overrun last week alone. They mean to wipe us from this planet. No doubt a few of us will survive on New Atlantis, in the high inland mountains, but it will be a cruel life and a short one. Until Namor throws something new at us, some new thing out of nightmare.” Her voice had a wild edge of hysteria.

Haviland Tuf turned off his console, and the telescreens all went black. “Calm yourself, Guardian,” he said, turning to face her. “Your fears are understandable but unnecessary. I appreciate your plight more fully now. A tragic one indeed, yet not hopeless.”

“You still think you can help?” she said. “Alone? You and this ship? Oh, I’m not discouraging you, by any means. We’ll grasp at any straw. But...”

“But you do not believe,” Tuf said. A small sigh escaped his lips. “Doubt,” he said to the grey kitten, hoisting him up in a huge white hand, “you are indeed well named.” He shifted his gaze back to Kefira Qay. “I am a forgiving man, and you have been through many cruel hardships, so I shall take no notice of the casual way you belittle me and my abilities. Now, if you might excuse me, I have work to do. Your people have sent up a great many more detailed reports on these creatures, and on Namorian ecology in general. It is vital that I peruse these, in order to understand and analyze the situation. Thank you for your briefing.”

Kefira Qay frowned, lifted Foolishness from her knee and set him on the ground, and stood up. "Very well," she said. "How soon will you be ready?"

"I cannot ascertain that with any degree of accuracy," Tuf replied, "until I have had a chance to run some simulations. Perhaps a day and we shall begin. Perhaps a month. Perhaps longer."

"If you take too long, you'll find it difficult to collect your two million," she snapped. "We'll all be dead."

"Indeed," said Tuf. "I shall strive to avoid that scenario. Now, if you would let me work. We shall converse again at dinner. I shall serve vegetable stew in the fashion of Arion, with plates of Thorite fire mushrooms to whet our appetites."

Qay sighed loudly. "Mushrooms again?" she complained. "We had stir-fried mushrooms and peppers for lunch, and crisped mushrooms in bitter cream for breakfast."

"I am fond of mushrooms," said Haviland Tuf.

"I am weary of mushrooms," said Kefira Qay. Foolishness rubbed up against her leg, and she frowned down at him. "Might I suggest some meat? Or seafood?" She looked wistful. "It has been years since I've had a mud-pot. I dream of it sometimes. Crack it open and pour butter inside, and spoon out the soft meat...you can't imagine how fine it was. Or sabrefin. Ah, I'd kill for a sabrefin on a bed of seagrass!"

Haviland Tuf looked stern. "We do not eat animals here," he said. He set to work, ignoring her, and Kefira Qay took her leave. Foolishness went bounding after her. "Appropriate," muttered Tuf, "indeed."

Four days and many mushrooms later, Kefira Qay began to pressure Haviland Tuf for results. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded over dinner. "When are you going to act? Every day you seclude yourself and every day conditions on Namor worsen. I spoke to Lord Guardian Harvan an hour ago, while you were off with your computers. Little Aquarius and the Dancing Sisters have been lost while you and I are up here dithering, Tuf."

"Dithering?" said Haviland Tuf. "Guardian, I do not dither. I have never dithered, nor do I intend to begin dithering now. I work. There is a great mass of information to digest."

Kefira Qay snorted. "A great mass of mushrooms to digest, you mean," she said. She stood up, tipping Foolishness from her lap. The kitten and she had become boon companions of late. "Twelve thousand people lived on Little Aquarius," she said; "and almost as many on the Dancing Sisters. Think of that while you're digesting, Tuf." She spun and stalked out of the room.

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. He returned his attention to his sweet-flower pie.

A week passed before they clashed again. "Well?" the Guardian demanded one day in the corridor, stepping in front of Tuf as he lumbered with great dignity down to his work room.

"Well," he repeated. "Good day, Guardian Qay."

"It is not a good day," she said querulously. "Namor Control tells me the Sunrise Islands are gone. Overrun. And a dozen skimmers lost defending them, along with all the ships drawn up in those harbors. What do you say to that?"

"Most tragic," replied Tuf. "Regrettable."

"When are you going to be ready?"

He gave a great shrug. "I cannot say. This is no simple task you have set me. A most complex problem. Complex. Yes, indeed, that is the very word. Perhaps I might even say mystifying. I assure you that Namor's sad plight has fully engaged my sympathies, however, and this problem has similarly engaged my intellect."

“That’s all it is to you, Tuf, isn’t it? A problem?”

Haviland Tuf frowned slightly, and folded his hands before him, resting them atop his bulging stomach. “A problem indeed,” he said.

“No. It is not just a problem. This is no game we are playing. Real people are dying down there. Dying because the Guardians are not equal to their trust, and because you do nothing. *Nothing.*”

“Calm yourself. You have my assurance that I am laboring ceaselessly on your behalf. You must consider that my task is not so simple as yours. It is all very well and good to drop bombs on a dreadnaught, or fire shells into a fire-balloon and watch it burn. Yet these simple, quaint methods have availed you little, Guardian. Ecological engineering is a far more demanding business. I study the reports of your leaders, your marine biologists, your historians. I reflect and analyze. I devise various approaches, and run simulations on the *Ark*’s great computers. Sooner or later I shall find your answer.”

“Sooner,” said Kefira Qay, in a hard voice. “Namor wants results, and I agree. The Council of Guardians is impatient. Sooner, Tuf. Not later. I warn you.” She stepped aside, and let him pass.

Kefira Qay spent the next week and a half avoiding Tuf as much as possible. She skipped dinner and scowled when she saw him in the corridors. Each day she repaired to the communications room, where she had long discussions with her superiors below, and kept up on all the latest news. It was bad. All the news was bad.

Finally, things came to a head. Pale-faced and furious, she stalked into the darkened chamber Tuf called his “war room,” where she found him sitting before a bank of computer screens, watching red and blue lines chase each other across a grid. “*Tuf!*” she roared. He turned off the screen and swung to face her, batting away Ingratitude. Shrouded by shadows, he regarded her impassively. “The Council of Guardians has given me an order,” she said.

“How fortunate for you,” Tuf replied. “I know you have been growing restless of late from inactivity.”

“The Council wants immediate action, Tuf. *Immediate.* Today. Do you understand?”

Tuf steepled his hands beneath his chin, almost in an attitude of prayer. “Must I tolerate not only hostility and impatience, but slurs on my intelligence as well? I understand all that needs understanding about your Guardians, I assure you. It is only the peculiar and perverse ecology of Namor that I do not understand. Until I have acquired that understanding, I cannot act.”

“You *will* act,” said Kefira Qay. Suddenly a laser pistol was in her hand, aimed at Tuf’s broad paunch. “You will act now.”

Haviland Tuf reacted not at all. “Violence,” he said, in a voice of mild reproach. “Perhaps, before you burn a hole in me and thereby doom yourself and your world, you might give me the opportunity to explain?”

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll listen. For a little while.”

“Excellent,” said Haviland Tuf. “Guardian, something very odd is happening on Namor.”

“You’ve noticed,” she said drily. The laser did not move.

“Indeed. You are being destroyed by an infestation of creatures that we must, for want of a better term, collectively dub *sea monsters*. Three species have appeared, in less than half a dozen standard years. Each of these species is apparently new, or at least unknown. This strikes me as unlikely in the extreme. Your people have been on Namor for one hundred years, yet not until recently have you had any knowledge of these things you call dreadnaughts, fire-balloons, and walkers. It is almost as if some dark analogue of my *Ark* were waging biowar upon you, yet obviously that is not the case. New or old, these sea monsters are native to Namor, a product of local evolution. Their close relatives fill your seas—the

mud-pots, the bobbing freddies, the jellydancers and men-of-war. So. Where does that leave us?"

"I don't know," said Kefira Qay.

"Nor do I," Tuf said. "Consider further. These sea monsters breed in vast numbers. The sea teems with them, they fill the air, they overrun populous islands. They kill. Yet they do not kill each other, nor do they seem to have any other natural enemies. The cruel checks of a normal ecosystem do not apply. I have studied the reports of your scientists with great interest. Much about these sea monsters is fascinating, but perhaps most intriguing is the fact that you know nothing about them except in their full adult form. Vast dreadnaughts prowl the seas and sink ships, monstrous fire-balloons swirl across your skies. Where, might I ask, are the little dreadnaughts, the baby balloons? Where indeed."

"Deep under the sea."

"Perhaps, Guardian, perhaps. You cannot say for certain, nor can I. These monsters are most formidable creatures, yet I have seen equally formidable predators on other worlds. They do not number in hundreds or thousands. Why? Ah, because the young, or the eggs, or the hatchlings, they are less formidable than the parents, and most die long before reaching their terrible maturity. This does not appear to happen on Namor. It does not appear to happen at all. What can it all mean? What indeed." Tuf shrugged. "I cannot say, but I work on, I think, I endeavor to solve the riddle of your overabundant sea."

Kefira Qay grimaced. "And meanwhile, we die. We die, and you don't care."

"I protest!" Tuf began.

"Silence!" she said, waving the laser. "I'll talk now, you've given your speech. Today we lost contact with the Broken Hand. Forty-three islands, Tuf. I'm afraid to even think how many people. All gone now, in a single day. A few garbled radio transmissions, hysteria, and silence. And you sit and talk about riddles. No more. You *will* take action now. I insist. Or threaten, if you prefer. Later, we will solve the whys and hows of these things. For the moment, we will kill them, without pausing for questions."

"Once," said Haviland Tuf, "there was a world idyllic but for a single flaw—an insect the size of a dust mote. It was a harmless creature, but it was everywhere. It fed on the microscopic spores of a floating fungus. The folk of this world hated the tiny insect, which sometimes flew about in clouds so thick they obscured the sun. When citizens went outdoors, the insects would land on them by the thousands, covering their bodies with a living shroud. So a would-be ecological engineer proposed to solve their problem. From a distant world, he introduced another insect, larger, to prey on the living dust motes. The scheme worked admirably. The new insects multiplied and multiplied, having no natural enemies in this ecosystem, until they had entirely wiped out the native species. It was a great triumph. Unfortunately, there were unforeseen side effects. The invader, having destroyed one form of life, moved on to other, more beneficial sorts. Many native insects became extinct. The local analogue of bird life, deprived of its customary prey and unable to digest the alien bug, also suffered grievously. Plants were not pollinated as before. Whole forests and jungles changed and withered. And the spores of the fungus that had been the food of the original nuisance were left unchecked. The fungus grew everywhere—on buildings, on food crops, even on living animals. In short, the ecosystem was wrenched entirely askew. Today, should you visit, you would find a planet dead but for a terrible fungus. Such are the fruits of hasty action, with insufficient study. There are grave risks should one move without understanding."

"And certain destruction if one fails to move at all," Kefira Qay said stubbornly. "No, Tuf. You tell frightening tales, but we are a desperate people. The Guardians accept whatever risks there may be. I have my orders. Unless you do as I bid, I will use this." She nodded at her laser.

Haviland Tuf folded his arms. "If you use that," he said, "you will be very foolish. No doubt you could learn to operate the *Ark*. In time. The task would take years, which by your own admission you do not have. I shall work on in your behalf, and forgive you your crude bluster and your threats, but I shall move only when I deem myself ready. I am an ecological engineer. I have my personal and professional integrity. And I must point out that, without my services, you are utterly without hope. Utterly. So, since

you know this and I know this, let us dispense with further drama. You will not use that laser.”

For a moment, Kefira Qay’s face looked stricken. “You...” she said in confusion; the laser wavered just a bit. Then her look hardened once again. “You’re wrong, Tuf,” she said. “I *will* use it.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Not on you,” she said. “On your cats. I will kill one of them every day, until you take action.” Her wrist moved slightly, so the laser was trained not on Tuf, but on the small form of Ingratitude, who was prowling hither and yon about the room, poking at shadows. “I will start with this one,” the Guardian said. “On the count of three.”

Tuf’s face was utterly without emotion. He stared.

“One,” said Kefira Qay.

Tuf sat immobile.

“Two,” she said.

Tuf frowned, and there were wrinkles in his chalk-white brow.

“Three,” Qay blurted.

“No,” Tuf said quickly. “Do not fire. I shall do as you insist. I can begin cloning within the hour.”

The Guardian bolstered her laser.

So Haviland Tuf went reluctantly to war.

On the first day he sat in his war room before his great console, tight-lipped and quiet, turning dials and pressing glowing buttons and phantom holographic keys. Elsewhere on the *Ark*, murky liquids of many shades and colors spilled and gurgled into the empty vats along the shadowy main shaft, while specimens from the great cell library were shifted and sprayed and manipulated by tiny waldoes as sensitive as the hands of a master surgeon. Tuf saw none of it. He remained at his post, starting one clone after another.

On the second day he did the same.

On the third day he rose and strolled slowly down the kilometers-long shaft where his creations had begun to grow, indistinct forms that stirred feebly or not at all in the tanks of translucent liquid. Some tanks were fully as large as the *Ark*’s shuttle deck, others as small as a fingernail. Haviland Tuf paused by each one, studied the dials and meters and glowing spyscopes with quiet intensity, and sometimes made small adjustments. By the end of the day he had progressed, only half the length of the long, echoing row.

On the fourth day he completed his rounds.

On the fifth day he threw in the chronowarp. “Time is its slave,” he told Kefira Qay when she asked him. “It can hold it slow, or bid it hurry. We shall make it run, so the warriors I breed can reach maturity more quickly than in nature.”

On the sixth day he busied himself on the shuttle deck, modifying two of his shuttles to carry the creatures he was fashioning, adding tanks great and small and filling them with water.

On the morning of the seventh day he joined Kefira Qay for breakfast and said, “Guardian, we are ready to begin.”

She was surprised. “So soon?”

“Not all of my beasts have reached full maturity, but that is as it should be. Some are monstrous large, and must be transshipped before they have attained adult growth. The cloning shall continue, of course. We must establish our creatures in sufficient numbers so they will remain viable. Nonetheless, we are now at the stage where it is possible to begin seeding the seas of Namor.”

“What is your strategy?” asked Kefira Qay.

Haviland Tuf pushed aside his plate and pursed his lips. “Such strategy as I have is crude and premature, Guardian, and based on insufficient knowledge. I take no responsibility for its success or failure. Your cruel threats have impelled me to unseemly haste.”

“Nonetheless,” she snapped. “What are you doing?”

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach. “Biological weaponry, like other sorts of armament, comes in many forms and sizes. The best way to slay a human enemy is a single laser burst planted square in the center of the forehead. In biological terms, the analogue might be a suitable natural enemy or predator, or a species-specific pestilence. Lacking time, I have had no opportunity to devise such an economical solution.

“Other approaches are less satisfactory. I might introduce a disease that would cleanse your world of dreadnaughts, fire-balloons, and walkers, for example. Several likely candidates exist. Yet your sea monsters are close relatives of many other kinds of marine life, and those cousins and uncles would also suffer. My projections indicate that fully three-quarters of Namor’s oceangoing life would be vulnerable to such an attack. Alternatively, I have at my disposal fast-breeding fungi and microscopic animals who would literally fill your seas and crowd out all other life. That choice too is unsatisfactory. Ultimately it would make Namor incapable of sustaining human life. To pursue my analogy of a moment ago, these methods are the biological equivalent of killing a single human enemy by exploding a low-yield thermonuclear device in the city in which he happens to reside. So I have ruled them out.

“Instead, I have opted for what might be termed a scattershot strategy, introducing many new species into your Namorian ecology in the hopes that some of them will prove effective natural enemies capable of winnowing the ranks of your sea monsters. Some of my warriors are great deadly beasts, formidable enough to prey even on your terrible dreadnaughts. Others are small and fleet, semi-social pack hunters who breed quickly. Still others are tiny things. I have hope that they will find and feed on your nightmare creatures in their younger, less potent stages, and thereby thin them out. So you see, I pursue many strategies. I toss down the entire deck rather than playing a single card. Given your bitter ultimatum, it is the only way to proceed.” Tuf nodded at her. “I trust you will be satisfied, Guardian Qay.”

She frowned and said nothing.

“If you are finished with that delightful sweet-mushroom porridge,” Tuf said, “we might begin. I would not have you think that I was dragging my feet. You are a trained pilot, of course?”

“Yes,” she snapped.

“Excellent!” Tuf exclaimed. “I shall instruct you in the peculiar idiosyncracies of my shuttle craft, then. By this hour, they are already fully stocked for our first run. We shall make long low runs across your seas, and discharge our cargoes into your troubled waters. I shall fly the *Basilisk* above your northern hemisphere. You shall take the *Manticore* to the south. If this plan is acceptable, let us go over the routes I have planned for us.” He rose with great dignity.

For the next twenty days, Haviland Tuf and Kefira Qay crisscrossed the dangerous skies of Namor in a painstaking grid pattern, seeding the seas. The Guardian flew her runs with elan. It felt good to be in action again, and she was filled with hope as well. The dreadnaughts and fire-balloons and walkers would have their own nightmares to contend with now—nightmares from half-a-hundred scattered worlds.

From Old Poseidon came vampire eels and nesses and floating tangles of web-weed, transparent and razor-sharp and deadly.

From Aquarius Tuf cloned black ravengers, the swifter scarlet ravengers, poisonous puff-puppies, and fragrant, carnivorous lady’s bane.

From Jamison’s World the vats summoned sand-dragons and dreerhants and a dozen kinds of brightly



colored water snakes, large and small.

From Old Earth itself the cell library provided great white sharks, barracuda, giant squid, and clever semi-sentinent orcas.

They seeded Namor with the monstrous grey kraken of Lissador and the smaller blue kraken of Ance, with water-jelly colonies from Noborn, Daronnian spinner-whips, and bloodlace out of Cathaday, with swimmers as large as the fortress-fish of Dam Tullian, the mock-whale of Gulliver, and the ghrin'da of Hruun-2, or as small as the blisterfins of Avalon, the parasitical caesni from Ananda, and the deadly nest-building, egg-laying Deirdran waterwasps. To hunt the drifting fire-balloons they brought forth countless fliers: lashtail mantas, bright red razorwings, flocks of scorn, semi-aquatic howlers, and a terrible pale blue thing—half-plant and half-animal and all but weightless—that drifted with the wind and lurked inside clouds like a living, hungry spiderweb. Tuf called it the-weed-that-weeps-and-whispers, and advised Kefira Qay not to fly through clouds.

Plants and animals and things that were both and neither, predators and parasites, creatures dark as night or bright and gorgeous or entirely colorless, things strange and beautiful beyond words or too hideous even for thought, from worlds whose names burned bright in human history and from others seldom heard of. And more, and more. Day after day the *Basilisk* and the *Manticore* flashed above the seas of Namor, too swift and deadly for the fire-balloons that drifted up to attack them, dropping their living weapons with impunity.

After each day's run they would repair to the *Ark*, where Haviland Tuf and one or more of his cats would seek solitude, while Kefira Qay habitually took Foolishness with her to the communications room so she could listen to the reports.

"Guardian Smitt reports the sighting of strange creatures in the Orange Strait. No sign of dreadnaughts."

"A dreadnaught has been seen off Batthern, locked in terrible combat with some huge tentacled thing twice its size. A grey kraken, you say? Very well. We shall have to learn these names, Guardian Qay."

"Mullidor Strand reports that a family of lashtail mantas has taken up residence on the offshore rocks. Guardian Horn says they slice through fire-balloons like living knives—that the balloons flail and deflate and fall helplessly. Wonderful!"

"Today we heard from Indigo Beach, Guardian Qay. A strange story. Three walkers came rushing out of the water, but it was no attack. They were crazed, staggering about as if in great pain, and ropes of some pale scummy substance dangled from every joint and gap. What is it?"

"A dead dreadnaught washed up on New Atlantis today. Another corpse was sighted by the *Sunrazor* on its western patrol, rotting atop the water. Various strange fishes were picking it to pieces."

"*Starsword* swung out to Fire Heights yesterday, and sighted less than a half-dozen fire-balloons. The Council of Guardians is thinking of resuming short airship flights to the Mud-Pot Pearls, on a trial basis. What do you think, Guardian Qay? Would you advise that we risk it, or is it premature?"

Each day the reports flooded in, and each day Kefira Qay smiled more broadly as she made her runs in the *Manticore*. But Haviland Tuf remained silent and impassive.

Thirty-four days into the war, Lord Guardian Lysan told her, "Well, another dead dreadnaught was found today. It must have put up quite a battle. Our scientists have been analyzing the contents of its stomachs, and it appears to have fed exclusively on orcas and blue kraken." Kefira Qay frowned slightly, then shrugged it off.

"A grey kraken washed up on Boreen today," Lord Guardian Moen told her a few days later. "The residents are complaining of the stink. It has gigantic round bite-marks, they report. Obviously a dreadnaught, but even larger than the usual kind." Guardian Qay shifted uncomfortably.

"All the sharks seem to have vanished from the Amber Sea. The biologists can't account for it. What do

you think? Ask Tuf about it, will you?" She listened, and felt a faint trickle of alarm.

"Here's a strange one for you two. Something has been sighted moving back and forth across the Coherine Deep. We've had reports from both *Sunrazor* and *Skyknife*, and various confirmations from skimmer patrols. A huge thing, they say, a veritable living island, sweeping up everything in its path. Is that one of yours? If it is, you may have miscalculated. They say it is eating barracuda and blisterfins and lander's needles by the thousands." Kefira Qay scowled.

"Fire-balloons sighted again off Mullidor Strand—hundreds of them. I can hardly give credence to these reports, but they say the lashtail mantas just carom off them now. Do you..."

"Men-of-war again, can you believe it? We thought they were all nearly gone. So many of them, and they are gobbling up Tuf's smaller fish like nobody's business. You have to..."

"Dreadnaughts spraying water to knock howlers from the sky..."

"Something new, Kefira, a *flyer*, or a glider rather, swarms of them launch from the tops of these fire-balloons. They've gotten three skimmers already, and the mantas are no match for them..."

"...all over, I tell you, that thing that hides in the clouds...the balloons just rip them loose, the acid doesn't bother them anymore, they fling them down..."

"...more dead waterwasps, hundreds of them, thousands, where are they all..."

"...walkers again. Castle Dawn has fallen silent, must be overrun. We can't understand it. The island was ringed by bloodlace and water-jelly colonies. It ought to have been safe, unless..."

"...no word from Indigo Beach in a week..."

"...thirty, forty fire-balloons seen just off Cabben. The Council fears..."

"...nothing from Lobbadoon..."

"...dead fortress-fish, half as big as the island itself..."

"...dreadnaughts came right into the harbor..."

"...walkers..."

"...Guardian Qay, the *Starsword* is lost, gone down over the Polar Sea. The last transmission was garbled, but we think..."

Kefira Qay pushed herself up, trembling, and turned to rush out of the communications room, where all the screens were babbling news of death, destruction, defeat. Haviland Tuf was standing behind her, his pale white face impassive, Ingratitude sitting calmly on his broad left shoulder.

"What is *happening*?" the Guardian demanded.

"I should think that would be obvious, Guardian, to any person of normal intelligence. We are losing. Perhaps we have lost already."

Kefira Qay fought to keep from shrieking. "Aren't you going to *do* anything? Fight back? This is all your fault, Tuf. You aren't an ecological engineer—you're a trader who doesn't know what he's doing. That's why this is..."

Haviland Tuf raised up a hand for silence. "Please," he said. "You have already caused me considerable vexation. Insult me no further. I am a gentle man, of kindly and benevolent disposition, but even one such as myself can be provoked to anger. You press close to that point now. Guardian, I take no responsibility for this unfortunate course of events. This hasty biowar we have waged was none of my idea. Your uncivilized ultimatum forced me to unwise action in order to placate you. Fortunately, while you have spent your nights gloating over transient and illusory victories, I have continued with my work. I have mapped out your world on my computers and watched the course of your war shudder and flow across it in all its manifold stages. I've duplicated your biosphere in one of my great tanks and seeded it

with samples of Namorian life cloned from dead specimens—a bit of tentacle here, a piece of carapace there. I have observed and analyzed and at last I have come to conclusions. Tentative, to be sure, although this late sequence of events on Namor tends to confirm my hypothesis. So defame me no further, Guardian. After a refreshing night's sleep I shall descend to Namor and attempt to end this war of yours."

Kefira Qay stared at him, hardly daring to believe, her dread turning to hope once again. "You have the answer, then?"

"Indeed. Did I not just say as much?"

"What is it?" she demanded. "Some new creatures? That's it—you've cloned something else, haven't you? Some plague? Some monster?"

Haviland Tuf held up his hand. "Patience. First I must be certain. You have mocked me and derided me with such unflagging vigor that I hesitate to open myself to further ridicule by confiding my plans to you. I shall prove them valid first. Now, let us discuss tomorrow. You shall fly no war run with the *Manticore*, Instead, I would have you take it to New Atlantis and convene a full meeting of the Council of Guardians. Fetch those who require fetching from outlying islands, please."

"And you?" Kefira Qay asked.

"I shall meet with the council when it is time. Prior to that, I shall take my plans and my creature to Namor on a mission of our own. We shall descend in the *Phoenix*, I believe. Yes. I do think the *Phoenix* most appropriate, to commemorate your world rising from its ashes. Markedly wet ashes, but ashes nonetheless."

Kefira Qay met Haviland Tuf on the shuttle deck just prior to their scheduled departure. *Manticore* and *Phoenix* stood ready in their launch berths amidst the scatter of derelict spacecraft. Haviland Tuf was punching numbers into a mini-computer strapped to the inside of his wrist. He wore a long gray vinyl greatcoat with copious pockets and flaring shoulderboards. A green and brown duck-billed cap decorated with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers perched rakishly atop his bald head.

"I have notified Namor Control and Guardian Headquarters," Qay said. "The Council is assembling. I will provide transportation for a half-dozen Lords Guardian from outlying districts, so all of them will be on hand. How about you, Tuf? Are you ready? Is your mystery creature on board?"

"Soon," said Haviland Tuf, blinking at her.

But Kefira Qay was not looking at his face. Her gaze had gone lower. "Tuf," she said, "there is something in your pocket. Moving." Incredulous, she watched the ripple creep along beneath the vinyl.

"Ah," said Tuf. "Indeed." And then the head emerged from his pocket, and peered around curiously. It belonged to a kitten, a tiny jet-black kitten with lambent yellow eyes.

"A cat," muttered Kefira Qay sourly.

"Your perception is uncanny," said Haviland Tuf. He lifted the kitten out gently, and held it cupped in one great white hand while scratching behind its ear with a finger from the other. "This is Dax," he said solemnly. Dax was scarcely half the size of the older kittens who frisked about the *Ark*. He looked like nothing but a ball of black fur, curiously limp and indolent.

"Wonderful," the Guardian replied. "Dax, eh? Where did this one come from? No, don't answer that. I can guess. Tuf, don't we have more important things to do than play with cats?"

"I think not," said Haviland Tuf. "You do not appreciate cats sufficiently, Guardian. They are the most civilized of creatures. No world can be considered truly cultured without cats. Are you aware that all cats, from time immemorial, have had a touch of psi? Do you know that some ancient societies of Old Earth worshipped cats as gods? It is true."

“Please,” said Kefira Qay irritably. “We don’t have time for a discourse on cats. Are you going to bring that poor little thing down to Namor with you?”

Tuf blinked. “Indeed. This poor little thing, as you so contemptuously call him, is the salvation of Namor. Respect might be in order. “

She stared at him as if he had gone mad. “What? That? Him? I mean, Dax? Are you serious. What are you talking about? You’re joking, aren’t you? This is some kind of insane jest. You’ve got some thing loaded aboard the *Phoenix*, some huge leviathan that will cleanse the sea of those dreadnaughts—something, anything, I don’t know. But you can’t mean...you can’t...not that.”

“Him,” said Haviland Tuf. “Guardian, it is so wearisome to have to state the obvious, not once but again and again. I have given you raveners and krakens and lashtail mantas, at your insistence. They have not been efficacious. Accordingly, I have done much hard thinking, and I have cloned Dax.”

“A kitten,” she said. “You’re going to use a *kitten* against the dreadnaughts and the fire-balloons and the walkers. One. Small. *Kitten*.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He frowned down at her, slid Dax back into the roomy confines of his great pocket, and turned smartly toward the waiting *Phoenix*.

Kefira Qay was growing very nervous. In the council chambers high atop Breakwater Tower on New Atlantis, the twenty-five Lords Guardian who commanded the defense of all Namor were restive. All of them had been waiting for hours. Some had been there all day. The long conference table was littered with personal communicators and computer, printouts and empty water glasses. Two meals had already been served and cleared away. By the wide curving window that dominated the far wall, portly Lord Guardian Alis was talking in low urgent tones to Lord Guardian Lysan, thin and stern, and both of them were giving meaningful glances to Kefira Qay from time to time. Behind them the sun was going down, and the great bay was turning a lovely shade of scarlet. It was such a beautiful scene that one scarcely noticed the small bright dots that were Guardian skimmers, flying patrol.

Dusk was almost upon them, the council members were grumbling and stirring impatiently in their big cushioned chairs, and Haviland Tuf had still failed to make an appearance. “When did he say he would be here?” asked Lord Guardian Khem, for the fifth time.

“He wasn’t very precise, Lord Guardian,” Kefira Qay replied uneasily, for the fifth time.

Khem frowned and cleared his throat.

Then one of the communicators began to beep, and Lord Guardian Lysan strode over briskly and snatched it up. “Yes?” he said. “I see. Quite good. Escort him in.” He set down the communicator and rapped its edge on the table for order. The others shuffled to their seats, or broke off their conversations, or straightened. The council chamber grew silent. “That was the patrol. Tuf’s shuttle has been sighted. He is on his way, I am pleased to report.” Lysan glanced at Kefira Qay. “At last.”

The Guardian felt even more uneasy then. It was bad enough that Tuf had kept them waiting, but she was dreading the moment when he came lumbering in, Dax peering out of his pocket. Qay had been unable to find the words to tell her superiors that Tuf proposed to save Namor with a small black kitten. She fidgeted in her seat and plucked at her large, crooked nose. This was going to be bad, she feared.

It was worse than anything she could have dreamed.

All of the Lords Guardian were waiting, stiff and silent and attentive, when the doors opened and Haviland Tuf walked in, escorted by four armed guards in golden coveralls. He was a mess. His boots made a squishing sound as he walked, and his greatcoat was smeared with mud. Dax was visible in his left pocket all right, paws hooked over its edge and large eyes intent. But the Lords Guardian weren’t looking at the kitten. Beneath his other arm, Haviland Tuf was carrying a muddy rock the size of a big

man's head. A thick coating of green-brown slime covered it, and it was dripping water onto the plush carpet.

Without so much as a word, Tuf went directly to the conference table and set the rock down in the center of it. That was when Kefira Qay saw the fringe of tentacles, pale and fine as threads, and realized that it wasn't a rock after all. "A mud-pot," she said aloud in surprise. No wonder she hadn't recognized it. She had seen many a mud-pot in her time, but not until after they had been washed and boiled and the tendrils trimmed away. Normally they were served with a hammer and chisel to crack the bony carapace, and a dish of melted butter and spices on the side.

The Lords Guardian looked on in astonishment, and then all twenty-five began talking at once, and the council chamber became a blur of overlapping voices.

"...it is a mud-pot, I don't understand..."

"What is the meaning of this?"

"He makes us wait all day and then comes to council as filthy as a mudgrubber. The dignity of the council is..."

"...haven't eaten a mud-pot in, oh, two, three..."

"...can't be the man who is supposed to save..."

"...insane, why just look at..."

"...what is that thing in his pocket? Look at it! My God, it *moved!* It's alive, I tell you, I saw it..."

"*Silence!*" Lysan's voice was like a knife cutting through the hubbub. The room quieted as, one by one, the Lords Guardian turned toward him. "We have come together at your beck and call," Lysan said acidly to Tuf. "We expected you to bring us an answer. Instead you appear to have brought us dinner."

Someone snickered.

Haviland Tuf frowned down at his muddy hands, and wiped them primly on his greatcoat. Taking Dax from his pocket, Tuf deposited the lethargic black kitten on the table. Dax yawned and stretched, and ambled toward the nearest of the Lords Guardian, who stared in horror and hurriedly inched her chair back a bit. Shrugging out of his wet, muddy greatcoat, Tuf looked about for a place to put it, and finally hung it from the laser rifle of one of his escort. Only then did he turn back to the Lords Guardian. "Esteemed Lords Guardian," he said, "this is not dinner you see before you. In that very attitude lies the root of all your problems. This is the ambassador of the race that shares Namor with you, whose name, regrettably, is far beyond my small capabilities. His people will take it quite badly if you eat him."

Eventually someone brought Lysan a gavel, and he rapped it long and loud enough to attract everyone's attention, and the furor slowly ebbed away. Haviland Tuf had stood impassively through all of it, his face without expression, his arms folded against his chest. Only when silence was restored did he say, "Perhaps I should explain."

"You are mad," Lord Guardian Harvan said, looking from Tuf to the mud-pot and back again. "Utterly mad."

Haviland Tuf scooped up Dax from the table, cradled him in one arm, and began to pet him. "Even in our moment of victory, we are mocked and insulted," he said to the kitten.

"Tuf," said Lysan from the head of the long table, "what you suggest is impossible. We have explored Namor quite sufficiently in the century we have been here so as to be certain that no sentient races dwell upon it. There are no cities, no roads, no signs of any prior civilization or technology, no ruins or artifacts—*nothing*, neither above nor below the sea."

"Moreover," said another councillor, a beefy woman with a red face, "the mud-pots cannot possibly be

sentient. Agreed, they have brains the size of a human brain. But that is about *all* they have. They have no eyes, ears, noses, almost no sensory equipment whatever except for touch. They have only those feeble tendrils as manipulative organs, scarcely strong enough to lift a pebble. And in fact, the tendrils are only used to anchor them to their spot on the seabed. They are hermaphroditic and downright primitive, mobile only in the first month of life, before the shell hardens and grows heavy. Once they root on the bottom and cover themselves with mud, they never move again. They stay there for hundreds of years.”

“Thousands,” said Haviland Tuf. “They are remarkably long-lived creatures. All that you say is undoubtedly correct. Nonetheless, your conclusions are in error. You have allowed yourself to be blinded by belligerence and fear. If you had removed yourself from the situation and paused long enough to think about it in depth, as I did, no doubt it would become obvious even to the military mind that your plight was no natural catastrophe. Only the machinations of some enemy intelligence could sufficiently explain the tragic course of events on Namor.”

“You don’t expect us to believe—” someone began.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I expect you to listen. If you will refrain from interrupting me, I will explain all. Then you may choose to believe or not, as suits your peculiar fancy. I shall take my fee and depart.” Tuf looked at Dax. “Idiots, Dax. Everywhere we are beset by idiots.” Turning his attention back to the Lords Guardian, he continued, “As I have stated, intelligence was clearly at work here. The difficulty was in finding that intelligence. I perused the work of your Namorian biologists, living and dead, read much about your flora and fauna, recreated many of the native lifeforms aboard the *Ark*. No likely candidate for sentience was immediately forthcoming. The traditional hallmarks of intelligent life include a large brain, sophisticated biological sensors, mobility, and some sort of manipulative organ, such as an opposable thumb. Nowhere on Namor could I find a creature with all of these attributes. My hypothesis, however, was still correct. Therefore I must needs move on to unlikely candidates, as there were no likely ones.

“To this end I studied the history of your plight, and at once some things suggested themselves. You believed that your sea monsters emerged from the dark oceanic depths, but where did they first appear? In the offshore shallows—the areas where you practiced fishing and sea-farming. What did all these areas have in common? Certainly an abundance of life, that must be admitted. Yet not the *same* life. The fish that habituated the waters off New Atlantis did not frequent those of the Broken Hand. Yet I found two interesting exceptions, two species found virtually everywhere—the mud-pots, lying immobile in their great soft beds through the long slow centuries and, originally, the things you called Namorian men-of-war. The ancient native race has another term for those. They call them guardians.

“Once I had come this far, it was only a matter of working out the details and confirming my suspicions. I might have arrived at my conclusion much earlier, but for the rude interruptions of liaison officer Qay, who continually shattered my concentration and finally, most cruelly, forced me to waste much time sending forth grey krakens and razorwings and sundry other such creatures. In the future I shall spare myself such liaisons.

“Yet, in a way, the experiment was useful, since it confirmed my theory as to the true situation on Namor. Accordingly I pressed on. Geographic studies showed that all of the monsters were thickest near mud-pot beds. The heaviest fighting had been in those selfsame areas, my Lords Guardian. Clearly, these mud-pots you find so eminently edible were your mysterious foes. Yet how could that be? These creatures had large brains, to be sure, but lacked all the other traits we have come to associate with sentience, as we know it. And that was the very heart of it! Clearly they were sentient as we do not know it. What sort of intelligent being could live deep under the sea, immobile, blind, deaf, bereft of all input? I pondered that question. The answer, sirs, is obvious. Such an intelligence must interact with the world in ways we cannot, must have its own modes of sensing and communicating. Such an intelligence must be telepathic. Indeed. The more I considered it, the more obvious it became.

“Thereupon it was only a matter of testing my conclusions. To that end, I brought forth Dax. All cats have

some small psionic ability, Lords Guardian. Yet long centuries ago, in the days of the Great War, the soldiers of the Federal Empire struggled against enemies with terrible psi powers: Hrangan Minds and *githyanki* soulsucks. To combat such formidable foes, the genetic engineers worked with felines, and vastly heightened and sharpened their psionic abilities, so they could esp in unison with mere humans. Dax is such a special animal.”

“You mean that thing is reading our minds?” Lysan said sharply.

“Insofar as you have minds to read,” said Haviland Tuf, “yes. But more importantly, through Dax, I was able to reach that ancient people you have so ignominiously dubbed *mud-pots*. For they, you see, are entirely telepathic.

“For millennia beyond counting they have dwelled in tranquility and peace beneath the seas of this world. They are a slow, thoughtful, philosophic race, and they lived side by side in the billions, each linked with all the others, each an individual and each a part of the great racial whole. In a sense they were deathless, for all shared the experiences of each, and the death of one was as nothing. Experiences were few in the unchanging sea, however. For the most part their long lives are given over to abstract thought, to philosophy, to strange green dreams that neither you nor I can truly comprehend. They are silent musicians, one might say. Together they have woven great symphonies of dreams, and those songs go on and on.

“Before humanity came to Namor, they had had no real enemies for millions of years. Yet that had not always been the case. In the primordial beginnings of this wet world, the oceans teemed with creatures who relished the taste of the dreamers as much as you do. Even then, the race understood genetics, understood evolution. With their vast web of interwoven minds, they were able to manipulate the very stuff of life itself, more skillfully than any genetic engineers. And so they evolved their guardians, formidable predators with a biological imperative to protect those you call mud-pots. These were your men-of-war. From that time to this they guarded the beds, while the dreamers went back to their symphony of thought.

“Then you came, from Aquarius and Old Poseidon. Indeed you did. Lost in the reverie, the dreamers hardly noticed for many years, while you farmed and fished and discovered the taste of mud-pots. You must consider the shock you gave them, Lords Guardian. Each time you plunged one of them into boiling water, all of them shared the sensations. To the dreamers, it seemed as though some terrible new predator had evolved upon the landmass, a place of little interest to them. They had no inkling that you might be sentient, since they could no more conceive of a nontelepathic sentience than you could conceive of one blind, deaf, immobile, and edible. To them, things that moved and manipulated and ate flesh were animals, and could be nothing else.

“The rest you know, or can surmise. The dreamers are a slow people lost in their vast songs, and they were slow to respond. First they simply ignored you, in the belief that the ecosystem itself would shortly check your ravages. This did not appear to happen. To them it seemed you had no natural enemies. You bred and expanded constantly, and many thousands of minds fell silent. Finally they returned to the ancient, almost-forgotten ways of their dim past, and woke to protect themselves. They sped up the reproduction of their guardians until the seas above their beds teemed with their protectors, but the creatures that had once sufficed admirably against other enemies proved to be no match for you. Finally they were driven to new measures. Their minds broke off the great symphony and ranged out, and they sensed and understood. At last they began to fashion new guardians, guardians formidable enough to protect them against this great new nemesis. Thus it went. When I arrived upon the *Ark*, and Kefira Qay forced me to unleash many new threats to their peaceful dominion, the dreamers were initially taken aback.

“But the struggle had sharpened them and they responded more quickly now, and in only a very short time they were dreaming newer guardians still, and sending them forth to battle to oppose the creatures I had loosed upon them. Even as I speak to you in this most imposing tower of yours, many a terrible new

lifeform is stirring beneath the waves, and soon will emerge to trouble your sleep in years to come—unless, of course, you come to a peace. That is entirely your decision. I am only a humble ecological engineer. I would not dream of dictating such matters to the likes of you. Yet I do suggest it, in the strongest possible terms. So here is the ambassador plucked from the sea—at great personal discomfort to myself, I might add. The dreamers are now in much turmoil, for when they felt Dax among them and through him touched me, their world increased a millionfold. They learned of the stars today, and learned moreover that they are not alone in this cosmos. I believe they will be reasonable, as they have no use for the land, nor any taste for fish. Here is Dax as well, and myself. Perhaps we might commence to talk?”

But when Haviland Tuf fell silent at last, no one spoke for quite a long time. The Lords Guardian were all ashen and numb. One by one they looked away from Tuf’s impassive features, to the muddy shell on the table.

Finally Kefira Qay found her voice. “What do they *want*?” she asked nervously.

“Chiefly,” said Haviland Tuf, “they want you to stop eating them. This strikes me as an eminently sensible proposal. What is your reply?”

“Two million standards is insufficient,” Haviland Tuf said some time later, sitting in the communications room of the *Ark*. Dax rested calmly in his lap, having little of the frenetic energy of the other kittens. Elsewhere in the room Suspicion and Hostility were chasing each other hither and yon.

Up on the telescreen, Kefira Qay’s features broke into a suspicious scowl. “What do you mean? This was the price we agreed upon, Tuf. If you are trying to cheat us...”

“Cheat?” Tuf sighed. “Did you hear her, Dax? After all we have done, such grim accusations are still flung at us willy-nilly. Yes. Willy-nilly indeed. An odd phrase, when one stops to mull on it.” He looked back at the telescreen. “Guardian Qay, I am fully aware of the agreed-on price. For two million standards, I solved your difficulties. I analyzed and pondered and provided the insight and the translator you so sorely needed. I have even left you with twenty-five telepathic cats, each linked to one of your Lords Guardian, to facilitate further communications after my departure. That too is included within the terms of our initial agreement, since it was necessary to the solution of your problem. And, being at heart more a philanthropist than a businessman, and deeply sentimental as well, I have even allowed you to retain Foolishness, who took a liking to you for some reason that I am entirely unable to fathom. For that, too, there is no charge.”

“Then why are you demanding an additional three million standards?” demanded Kefira Qay.

“For unnecessary work which I was cruelly compelled to do,” Tuf replied. “Would you care for an itemized accounting?”

“Yes, I would,” she said.

“Very well. For sharks. For barracuda. For giant squid. For orcas. For grey kraken. For blue kraken. For bloodlace. For water jellies. Twenty thousand standards per item. For fortress-fish, fifty thousand standards. For the-weed-that-weeps-and-whispers, eight...” He went on for a long, long time.

When he was done, Kefira Qay set her lips sternly. “I will submit your bill to the Council of Guardians,” she said. “But I will tell you straight out that your demands are unfair and exorbitant, and our balance of trade is not sufficient to allow for such an outflow of hard standards. You can wait in orbit for a hundred years, Tuf, but you won’t get any five million standards.”

Haviland Tuf raised his hands in surrender. “Ah,” he said. “So, because of my trusting nature, I must take a loss. I will not be paid, then?”

“Two million standards,” said the Guardian. “As we agreed.”



“I suppose I might accept this cruel and unethical decision, and take it as one of life’s hard lessons. Very well then. So be it.” He stroked Dax. “It has been said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I can only blame myself for this wretched turn of events. Why, it was only a few scant months past that I chanced to view a historical drama on this very sort of situation. It was about a seedship such as my own that rid one small world of an annoying pest, only to have the ungrateful planetary government refuse payment. Had I been wiser, that would have taught me to demand my payment in advance.” He sighed. “But I was not wise, and now I must suffer.” Tuf stroked Dax again, and paused. “Perhaps your Council of Guardians might be interested in viewing this particular tape, purely for recreational purposes. It is holographic, fully dramatized, and well-acted, and moreover, it gives a fascinating insight into the workings and capabilities of a ship such as this one. Highly educational. The title is *Seedship of Hamelin*.”

They paid him, of course.