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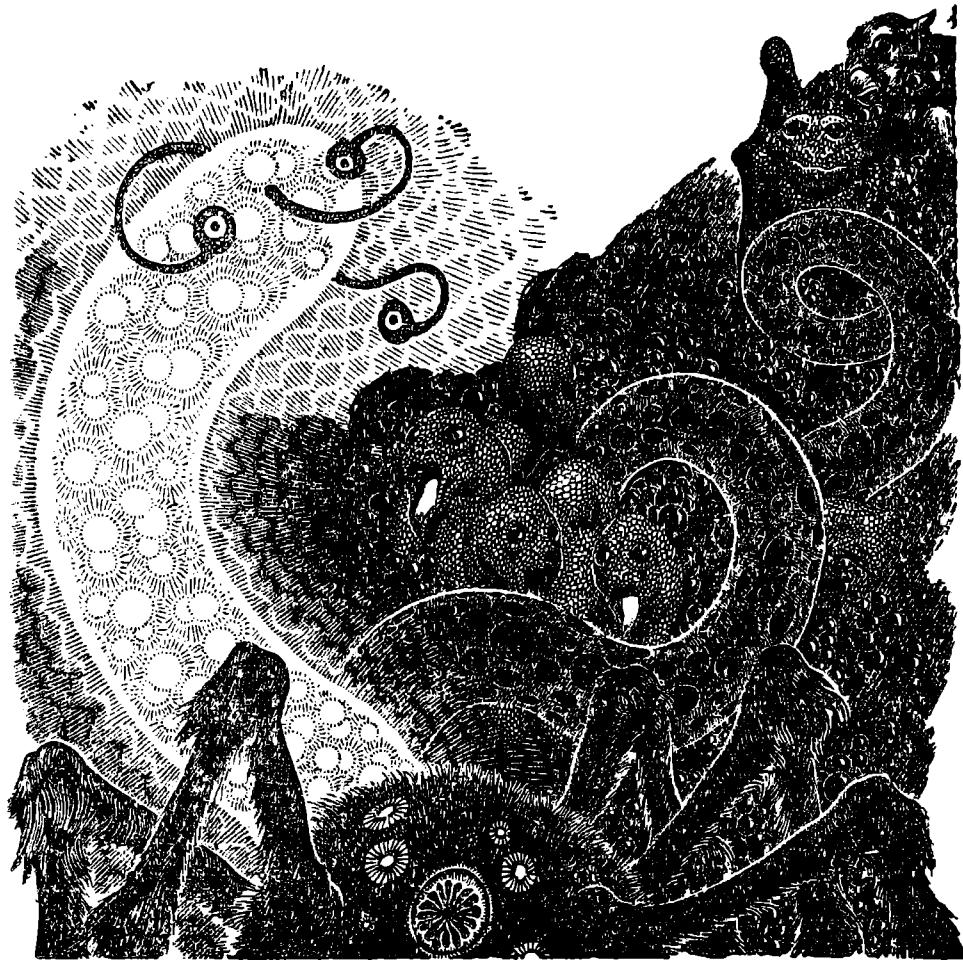
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*Pursued by all the nightmarish horrors of Creation,
mankind humbled itself at last before the only power
which could save it — the Evolutionary Ultimate, a
creature whose sole desire was death!*

THE DANCE of the Moonworm is a thing of beauty and a joy to behold; it has the sinuous grace of a dancing-woman, yet is of spirit and pure flame. But woe betide the man who beholds it for the Moonworm is a creature of evil doing much harm to all who come near. — *Chronicles of the Early (Martin) Spacemen.*

Accounts of this fabulous creature (the Moonworm) vary greatly. It is said that of all living organisms it most nearly approached pure mind and spirit. We know that at one time such monsters existed and were quite common among the outer planets. As described by the old chroniclers, who seem to



A Novelette by Stanley Mullen



Monsters like incredible figments of nightmare roamed the ship.

MOONWORM'S DANCE

have stood in great superstitious awe of them. The Moonworms stood six or seven feet high, were composed mainly of unstable protoplasm covered by a light, elastic skin which in colder climates was known to sprout a kind of silvery grey fur. Such body-structure, not based upon vertebrate stability, made for odd grace of movement and gives the clue to the monster's gift of mimicry and its amazing talent for camouflage. These animals had no natural weapons of any kind, neither claws, nor teeth, nor structural limbs although upon occasion some were said to put forth pseudopod limbs, probably of very temporary nature. It was only by using its greater intelligence, and its unique powers for blending almost invisibly with its environment, that such ill-adapted beings lasted as long as they did in the evolutionary struggle for survival. Reports that some isolated members of the species still exist among the ghost-haunted moons of Saturn are not given much credence by reliable authorities. —J. Betworth's "Life on the Outer Planets" Hawkill, Ltd., London, 2117.

CHAPTER ONE

The Caged Terror

THE Zoological Expedition's spaceship *Akra*, homeward bound with a full cargo of freaks and monsters from all inhabited worlds of the solar system, was still a million miles from Earth when the trouble broke.

The long journey back to home-planet seemed endless, both to "Black Jack" Talbot and to Cliff Jarnett. They stood before the specially-built cage housing the prize catch, each wondering what the future held and speculating upon the results of their amazing luck.

"I'll be greatly relieved when we get that thing safely to the museum," Cliff Jarnett said, shuddering.

Inside the cage, the strange and baffling entity called "the Moonworm" studied the two men, not with idle curiosity, but with grim and purposeful intent. A tall featureless column of translucent grey-green protoplasm, it reared seven feet above the floor of the cage, and its three tendril-mounted eyes vibrated soundlessly. Within the murky depths of its slimy translucence cores of vivid color burned like points of fire, and whatever eerie thought-processes wandered through its alien mind moved in deep mystery beyond the furthest conjecture of mankind. Its utter alienness was its greatest defense.

Talbot boisterously slapped his assistant on the back. "Not getting jumpy, are you?" he roared.

Jarnett answered soberly. "I'm not getting jumpy. I am jumpy. I'm scared stiff of that thing in there."

Talbot's laugh was too loud. He had been drinking and loved to show off. "Oh, come now, Cliff! What's to

fear? The thing's perfectly harmless.

Why, it hasn't even any natural weapons. No claws, no teeth, nothing."

"Nothing but the greatest natural weapon of all — intelligence. It's smarter than we are. Don't you feel that?"

"Speak for yourself, Johnny," Talbot guffawed. "I'm smarter than any brute that ever lived. D'jever hear of Black Jack Talbot? That's me. I bring 'em back alive. That's the trick, you've got to be smarter than they are."

Jarnett shrugged. It irritated him to have Talbot call him "Johnny" as if he were some immature puppy, but he decided that arguing would not help. "You can say what you like, Talbot," he replied quietly. "That creature makes me want to get down on my hands and knees and crawl into a corner. I feel the way a cur dog must around humans. Why, I even find myself halfway worshipping it. It scares me, I tell you."

Talbot's cruel laughter echoed through the midship galleries of the space cruiser. "You've lost your nerve, kid. Just like that time on Ganymede. You'd have been fired then if your uncle wasn't the Director. Brace up, Johnny."

Jarnett flushed angrily, but remained silent. That incident on Ganymede was a sore point with him, but he refused irritably to explain what had really happened. Excuses and alibis were not in his line; besides, he would rather they thought he had lost his nerve than tell them the truth and hear their laughter.

"I've read a lot about the Moonworms," he said defensively. "A lot of strange things. The oldtimers had a healthy respect for them, don't forget that. The chronicles say they could even change their form at will, imitat-

ing perfectly for a short while any living organism they had seen. They can even read your mind and imitate the thought processes. Besides a lot of other powers so strange and outré we don't even dream what they are. Sure, it's just a lot of stuff in old books. I don't believe everything I read, but I do know when I'm scared. I've been disturbed and as restless as a Martian sandcat ever since we got that thing aboard."

Talbot frowned. "You've read too many of those pokey fairytales you call folk-lore. Get hep, Johnny. Put a little whisky under your belt. Get yourself a woman once in a while, then you'll dream of something besides those pipe-dream monsters."

BROODING silence fell between them. Talbot stood gloating over his good fortune, making vague plans in anticipation of the wild acclaim awaiting his return to earth. He was wildly impatient to turn his find over to the Zoological Foundation and claim his well-earned reward . . . most of which he would waste in prodigal living, boasting of his adventures in all the wine-shops from Canal City 4, on Mars, to Castarona, by the Yellow Sea of Venus. After this, he could dictate his own terms to any scientific society on the three planets. He had shown them. This would be the making of his career. Until now, there had been just legends, occasional reports of such things, half-seen, vaguely described, unauthenticated.

Other hunters had all been scoffed at by the wisacres and ritually pooh-poohed by the pompous scientific fraternity. What a laugh he'd have on all of them! He, Black Jack Talbot, had brought back a live, full-grown specimen of the rarest of all creatures in

the organic universe. A Moonworm, a real one this time, not one of those imbecilic furred jellyfish often exhibited in third-class sideshows as "The Fabled Moonworm — Captured on the Moons of Saturn."

The fiery liquor was beginning to foam in his brain. What an exhibit that thing would make, what an exhibit! It would really bring in the money, too. There was a big reward offered even for authenticated evidence of the actual existence of the Moonworm. No more crumby errands for Black Jack to run, no more greybeards fussing about with their carping criticisms of his rough and ready methods. This capture would give him money, position, he would be a big shot, and could name his own price for doing even the things he liked most to do . . .

Rumors and vague reports of the fabulous Moonworms had begun to drift in from the Outer Planets some years before, but all previous expeditions had proved a fruitless waste of time and money. None of the other parties had even seen one. Under pressure of the Society, the directors had called in Talbot and commissioned him to take out an expedition for the main purpose of establishing once and for all whether the Moonworm actually did exist.

Young Jarnett (who was a sniveling whelp if Talbot had ever seen one) had been sent along as folklore consultant and official historian, but the major responsibility of the show was really Talbot's. For all his noisy cameraderie, Talbot was a shrewd, practical man, and he meant to make sure that no one (least of all that sneaky little assistant curator) was going to horn in on the glory and prestige that was rightfully his own.

The story of the expedition would

make a small epic in itself—the long voyage, the search through ruined cities of eons-dead civilizations, the quest in deep fern forests, eternally shadowed, explorations of volcanic caverns far beneath the surfaces of Rhea, Titan, and Iapetus, the heart-breaking series of failures as clue after clue led up blind alleys on the other moons—until that final clue which led to triumph when all the possibilities of the major satellites had been exhausted. True, the clue itself had come from Jarnett's stock of folk-tales: some age-old account of the finding, the patient stalking, the eventual surprise and capture of a full-grown specimen by a group of hardbitten Martian prospectors. Only one of them had come back at all, and his story had been transcribed from records kept in the sanitarium where he had spent the remaining tortured months of his life. But then they had been so inadequately equipped for dealing with dangerous animals of any kind—

TALBOT had found his Moonworm in the icy interior of a tiny asteroid of the outer Saturnian ring. Curled up into a ball of furry protoplasm, the creature had lain dormant for centuries, hibernating after the manner of its kind. How long ago it had taken refuge there from some unwholesome or dangerous inhabitant of Titan, only the Moonworm and ageless Saturn knew.

Jarnett shook himself, determined to free his mind from the obsession of the Moonworm. He was no less eager than Talbot to get back to Earth, but for quite different reasons. He was no boaster, and the wine-shops of the three planets knew him less than did their libraries, museums, and universities. Jarnett was a young man, with

prematurely thinning hair. He wore thick glasses which gave him an owlish expression and an inferiority complex. He was a competent anthropologist, and from the little taste he had already known of fame, had found it bitter.

There was no lust in him for glory; he wished only to get back to the peace and quiet of his study where he might once more barricade himself behind his learning. But most of all, he wished to be free of Black Jack Talbot, whose brash self-assurance and rowdy wit lashed Jarnett's latent sense of inferiority like an acid-dipped whip. His nerves were in a constant state of rawness, as much from Talbot's clumsy pleasantries as from the nagging responsibility for the welfare of the priceless Moonworm.

Jarnett went sulkily to his cabin and tried to read. He gave it up, threw the book into a corner and began pacing up and down as restlessly as the three Martian sand-leopards in the forward hold.

Talbot went into the lower hold and amused himself by going over the banks of cages which contained more horrors than a dozen years of nightmare. On the whole, the trip had been very successful, even aside from the capture of the Moonworm. Mentally he catalogued the monsters. The more frightful the creatures were, the more money he figured he could get for them. It was a pleasant pastime, but one which quickly palled, since he had done it so often before. He ended by retiring for another pull at his beloved bottle.

Jarnett was oppressed by the vague sensation that something had gone wrong, but he could not imagine what it was, nor where. Certainly everything seemed to be going smoothly.

The expedition had been triumph enough to satisfy even the vainglorious Talbot. The Moonworm was safely caged. All the other animals seemed quiet, all save the Martian sand leopards.

Perhaps it was just that subdued quality of all those other eerie creatures which was the base of his uneasiness. They were too quiet, unnaturally quiet.

An odd, inhuman wail of anguish brought him out of his chair. In the next instant he found himself out the door and running down the corridor.

The scene that met him in the hold made his eyes bulge. In the Moonworm's cage stood Talbot, whip in hand. Roaring drunk, he was flicking the tall shadow with his tufted lash while he mumbled brokenly, "Wanna see it dance . . . read it's somthin' to see . . . I wanna see it dance. Dance, damn you, dance . . . "

The amorphous eye-tipped tendrils were quivering so rapidly they could hardly be seen.

Angrily, Jarnett snatched the whip from Talbot's hand and hurled him roughly into the corridor. He slammed and bolted the cage door.

"Come away from here, you fool," he roared.

Talbot's face flamed with alcoholic

fury. He lunged at Jarnett and swung heavily. A fist like walnut burl crashed on Jarnett's chin with all Talbot's weight behind it. Jarnett went down like a felled ox, and out.

The cook was dabbing ineffectually at his temples with a wet cloth when he revived. He lay on the bunk in his own cabin.

"Where's Talbot?" he asked, thrusting himself up on his elbows.

"Talbot's mad as hops," the cook told him. "You'd better stay out of his way. He's been at the worm again with his whip. Tope and Ferris are standing by with guns."

Jarnett leaped out of his bunk and clawed open a drawer. His gun was not there. The cook nodded. "Talbot's orders. Tope took it for safekeeping."

Jarnett raged. "If he's injured that Moonworm, I won't need a gun. I'll tear him apart with my bare hands." As he started out the door the cook called after him:

"Take it easy, son. Talbot's a bad man to tangle with."

CHAPTER TWO

Beast Ship

APPARENTLY Talbot had tired of his amusement for the moment, for he was not in the corridor outside

the Moonworm's cage. Tope stood guard, pacing the corridor with gun in hand. He grinned, exposing a row of crooked teeth.

"It threw a scare into the Boss," Tope said savagely. "Must've snapped at him somehow, though I don't see how it could. It's got no mouth and no teeth. He told me to keep an eye on it."

Jarnett started into the cage. The Worm's eye tendrils had stopped vibrating, but deep inside its head-like appendage burned those eerie points of fire. It did not seem injured, and Jarnett breathed a sigh of profound relief.

"Did you take my gun, Tope?" he asked coolly.

"Yeah. Boss's orders."

"If I thought you'd be safe here without it, I'd take yours away and spank you with it. Talbot in his cabin? I'm going to tell him off."

The moronic Tope, who for some reason was a favorite of Talbot's, cackled wildly. "That I'd like to see," he said. "You'd better watch yourself. Talbot's a lot tougher than that thing in there."

"I wish I could be sure of that," Jarnett said grimly. "Don't get careless, Tope, you might not even have a chance to regret it."

Outside Talbot's door, Jarnett paused. What he had to say was not going to be easy. Talbot's reputation for drinking was only too well-known to the Society; the Directors had given Jarnett carte-blanche to relieve him of his duties if such a step seemed necessary. It seemed necessary now.

He knocked and went in. Talbot sat on the edge of his bed, a wet cloth draped over his forehead. He seemed shaken.

"Sit down, kid," he said, grinning

faintly. "Sorry I lost my head. But let that be a lesson to you. Never pick on a bigger guy when he's lit up."

"I hope you're sober now," Jarnett said steadily. He braced himself, but the words he intended to utter died in his throat.

From down the corridor in the direction of the Moonworm's cage, came a hideous shriek. It was followed by a fusillade of shots.

There was no sign of Tope when they reached the cage. The corridor was empty and the cage door closed, but something beat heavily against the wire mesh and armor plate from the inside. Through the heavy steel mesh, they could see Tope, battered and bloody, his clothes in rags. He hammered feebly at the bars, raving, half-delirious from shock, and the words came thickly from his foam-flecked mouth. His face was twisted with hysteria.

"It's out. It's loose," Tope murmured over and over, his eyes rolling and staring. There was no getting any sense out of him. Talbot got the cage door open, dragged Tope out and slapped him roughly. It did no good. Suddenly the man collapsed in Talbot's arms.

Between them, Talbot and Jarnett carried the limp, twitching body to the sick bay and laid it carefully on the bed.

"We've got to get that thing back in its cage before it does any more damage," Talbot said explosively. "God, how my head throbs! I can't even think straight. Round up some men, take guns, and search the ship. When you find it, yell for me. I've got to get something to clear this fog out of my head."

Jarnett collected five men, armed them, and instituted a thorough search, going through the holds and bunkers, ransacking cabins, opening lockers and turning out tool closets.

Even the tiered banks of animal cages, with their miscellany of horrors, were explored carefully.

A hundred feet from the Moonworm's empty cage was a tiny locker, in which were kept tools for grooming the more orthodox animals. An oddly regular thumping sound came from inside this compartment. Gun ready, Jarnett unlocked the door and flung it open, stepping nimbly aside. Inside was Tope, naked, his body kinked up to fit the narrow space. He was nearly suffocated from the airless confinement.

"How'd you get in there?" Jarnett demanded. I thought I just left you in sick bay."

Tope gasped and choked, then swore luridly. "I ain't been in sick bay," he said, stooping to rub his cramped knees.

Realization exploded like a bomb in Jarnett's mind. That hadn't been Tope in the cage. It was the Worm!

He set off at a dead run for the sick bay. The others stared after him blankly, then followed. The door of the hospital room was closed, but they crashed through it in a body. There was no sign of the false Tope, but Talbot lay sprawled across the bed.

He had fainted...

HOURLS later.

Delirium reigned in the Akra. The Moonworm had got to the banked cages and released most of the captives. Monsters like the incredible figments of nightmare roamed the ship. Swampsugs out of the Venusian jungles hunched their ugly way along the

corridors, sucking hungrily at the closed doors. Grull-cats from Callisto stalked the embattled humans; the hellish Morbau-spawn of Triton whined and grubbed viciously after their human prey. Needle-flies hummed through the cabins, stabbing, blinding. Seven-limbed Batnoses from the twilight zone of Mercury battered at barricaded cabins, scenting blood and driven mad by the presence of live human food.

Tracked down singly in their natural habitats, the animals were difficult and dangerous enough to deal with — even when their hunters had all the strategical advantages of mechanical traps, paralysis-guns, and other preparations that scientific knowledge and foresight could provide.

But now, when the expedition had been taken by surprise and forced into hasty defensive measures, the situation complicated by the already cramped and hazardous conditions of space-flight, it was patently impossible for the men to contend with the horde of brutes. Free, frightened, hungry, with a natural ferocity heightened by kind-hatred, and upset by the abnormal surroundings in which they found themselves, the wild cargo ran amok. Death in a hundred hideous forms, stalked the galleries and catwalks of the Akra.

All efforts to round up the beasts ended in bloody failure. The Moonworm had done its job too well. It was impossible to snare them individually, or herd them into some isolated part of the ship where they could be imprisoned and released into their cages one at a time. It was equally impossible to hunt them down and kill them, for as the hunters stalked one monster, another of a still more deadly species fell upon them.

In the end, the staff took refuge in the cabins aft, where they could at least hold off the besieging horrors. To all appearances, the Moonworm had distributed his forces in scattered units throughout the whole ship, but had kept in touch with all of them, and directed the brief but bloody battle with the detached brilliance of a military genius. It was painfully clear that he had outgeneraled his tormentors.

Nine of the hunters were dead, and in the control room forward three gouts of dripping pulp, partially eaten, bore mute witness to the fate of those crewmen who had dared not leave their stations.

The Akra drove silently on through the eternal void, engines humming, her automatic course correction relays clicking interminably, and the space-log steadily reeling off the mileage in five figures every hour.

Through a day and a night, the grim comedy of reversals went on. On the morning of the second day, Jarnett made a desperate sally from the shelter of the staff-cabins in a vain effort to set up a series of mechanical traps along the midship catwalks. His efforts ended disastrously when a spate of Wrigglers, from the mercury mines of Callisto, issued forth from the dimly lighted cargo holds to cut off his retreat. In growing panic, he sawed back and forth across the midship section, trying to elude them and circle back to his lost refuge. From cabin to cabin, down the spiraled companion-stairs, through the engine rooms, back again in a wide circle, he sought vainly to baffle the pursuit. But he found himself outmaneuvered; they were ever before, behind, and all about him.

A thirty-foot Bandu snake from

Venus joined the pursuit. Rills of eerie chattering followed him wherever he went, and ugly suspicion grew in his mind that the Wrigglers were enjoying the chase. A note of sparkling gaiety ran through the idiotic piping of their voices. The sport went on, and cold sweat poured in streams from Jarnett's forehead, stinging his eyes. In frantic effort to evade the deadly rush of the Bandu, Jarnett swung himself into the maze of support beams in the lofts above the engine room. There, at least, he would be safe from the Wrigglers and the snake.

Echoes of imbecilic tittering drifted up to him as he moved cautiously along the catwalk. Then a rustle of wings in the surrounding murk drove him down in a series of panicky slides along grease-encrusted beams. In the lowest tier of beams he met disaster. His foot trod on something which squirmed away. He lost his balance, tottered, and plunged into nightmare depths. It would be all over in seconds now. At least this was a clean way to die. One shock, then—

The floor rushed up at him and he fell heavily upon the body of a Wriggler, which crunched unpleasantly beneath him. A long, mailed tentacle reached out from the febrile darkness, snatched him off the shrieking, maimed horror of the Wriggler, and flung him bodily across the room. He struck the armored side of an atomic "stewpot" with such force that the breath was knocked out of him.

Stunned, he lay gasping. The knowledge of imminent death was cold in his brain. From somewhere close at hand came the slapping drag of slimy bulks moving toward him. He groaned. Anything but this! Anything but those grinning Jovian otopods. A

tentacle-end brushed his face, exploring, the suckers playing over his skin. He was tormented by the memory of certain revolting habits of the octopods. Another tentacle. Another —

Jarnett fainted.

HIS first awareness was of a strangely mechanical clicking. Remembrance of where he was and what had happened to him drained him of all impulse to fight his way back to full consciousness. The sound continued. Why couldn't he have died without regaining consciousness? That sound again. What was it? It was too mechanical to be anything but—the spacelog. He was in the control room. But how had he got here? Who, or what had brought him? And why?

Jarnett tried to restrain his curiosity. Perhaps it would be better not to know. But anything would be better than this waiting. Best yet it over with, at once. He opened his eyes . . .

Automatically, he glanced at the chronos and the spacelog. The Akra, operating on overdrive, must be dangerously close to Earth. The disk-image of Earth was expanding rapidly in the visiplate.

Jarnett closed his eyes, opened them again, and looked around him. Yes, it was true, all true. He had hoped briefly that he had gone mad from horror and was imagining everything. It was as if some brilliant but unbalanced artist had laid out a familiar scene and then sketched in a masterpiece of group caricature, recasting into the human roles a fantastic assortment of picturesque horrors from all of the ten planets. All monsters, done with hideous realism, the very manlike gestures of the creatures as they bent over their tasks enhanced the revolting character of the bestial

inhabitants of the control room.

Crouching over the controls in an attitude of intelligent awareness was one of the frightful man-spiders of Ceres. To each of the horrors had been allotted a task particularly suited to its natural endowments. The monsters had not only taken over the ship, but were running it! . . .

Hours later, Jarnett still could not convince himself that it was actually happening.

Ever closer and closer, in the exact center of the visiplate, loomed the disk-image of Earth, now a bright crescent larger than the moon had ever looked from Earth. At any moment, the radar proximity switches would mesh, flash briefly, and contact the automatic relays operating negative acceleration.

Jarnett wiped icy sweat from his eyes. Perhaps, after all, the shock had cracked his reason. His eyes wandered and his mind reeled as the distressing certainty beat through him that he was still awake, still sane.

The Moonworm roved about the control cabin with sinuous grace, studying the controls, analyzing the complex of intricate mechanisms, graphing the course on the automatic spacelog with its array of detailed skycharts, directing the less intelligent brutes in their simpler tasks, organizing the operations of half a dozen of the semi-intelligent ones into a coherent whole.

The Worm paused beside the bank of bars and relay switches which was the Paldar ecomatic pilot. He opened the boards and ran an agile pseudopod over the intricate wiring arrangement, caressing the compact grouping of coils and tubes which performed electronic functions still imperfectly understood by the very engineers who de-

signed them. Momentarily baffled, the Moonworm stiffened into an attitude grotesquely reminiscent of certain abstract sculptures symbolizing deep thought. It seemed to make some delicate readjustment in its mental processes, then, satisfied, passed on to another unit of the controls.

With a rasp of blue fire, the switches made power contact as the relays closed. A soft jar, followed by exquisite ripples of nausea, wrenched Jarnett. The forward tubes had let go their energy blasts to slow the Akra as it thrust into the dangerous outer zone of Earth's astronomical influences.

The Moonworm glided swiftly and soundlessly across to Jarnett. It stood before him, towering, and the eyetendrils dipped, curled, paused for three disturbingly amorphous eyes to stare into Jarnett's staring two. Jarnett braced himself. The first shock of hearing the monstrous being speak in intelligible English had long since worn off, but Jarnett cringed in acute discomfort at memory of the sound.

"You will have no need to fear us, Earthman. Help us to land the ship safely, and all will be well."

The tones were unreal, more like the verbal caricature of a mechanical voice than anything else, and certain alien overtones grated acidly upon human nerves. "You must direct us," the Worm went on slowly, as if speech were both difficult and painful. "We do not yet understand all that is necessary about your vessel."

Jarnett raged. "I told you before. I won't help you land! I'd rather smash the Akra in a million pieces than turn you and your mob of senseless monsters loose on Earth!"

"The death or injury of any living creature on your planet is no part of my plan," the Moonworm said grave-

ly. "Much will depend upon our reception there. It is not always easy to avoid violence in the defense of one's life and liberty. That is one reason I have asked your help. It will be best if you leave before us and tell your people that we come unwillingly, but in peace."

Jarnett tried to stall for time to think. "I still can't get used to hearing you speak in English," he said. "My own language."

"What other language should I use?" the Worm replied seriously. "I read the words I wish to use in your own mind and create the necessary articulating mechanism from my own body substance. But you are trying to distract me from my purpose. Whether you wish it or not, you will help me to land the ship. After that, if you wish to prepare your people, well and good. Otherwise, I am afraid there will be unpleasantness."

"Suppose I refuse?" Jarnett snapped. "I don't trust you. And what about these freaks and monsters you've released? Do you expect me to believe they'll come in peace to a human city?"

THE Moonworm sighed.

"My associates are not of my own choosing. If you help me, I will do all in my power to control them. However, I will not permit them to be returned to their cages. You were the aggressors. You came to our homes and seized us by violence. You, not we, have caused this meeting of the species. If the animals have killed, it is only because they were afraid. Animals rarely kill for sport. For food, perhaps, for the security of their mates and little ones, in defense of their lives and liberties, even for fear, but rarely do they kill for sport. They are not men."

There was an awkward silence. Jarnett accepted the fairness of the Moonworm's indictment, but could go no farther. He was an intelligent man—but a man.

The Worm broke the silence. "Will you accept my guarantee of our peaceful intentions, Earthman? Will you help us?"

"No. Whatever your intentions, there'll be blood spilled when this ship docks with such a crew."

"But you cannot refuse," the Worm said with quiet assurance.

Still weak from shock, Jarnett felt himself propelled across to the seats at the control panel. The man-spider made room for him. Jarnett made an abortive attempt at resistance, but was no match for the Moonworm's strength. A pseudopod thrust from the glistening body-plasm and circled his arm so tightly that the veins swelled and blood pounded close to the skin. "Your blood pressure alters when you try to lie or deceive," the Worm said. "I will know if that happens. Do not attempt to hinder our passage or destroy the ship. Now, tell us what to do." Another pseudopod formed and gripped the alternate controls. Rivers of pain coursed through Jarnett's arm, and the commands were literally wrung out of him.

At level 12,000, the communicator plate buzzed and flashed red. Customs inspection. The Moonworm touched a button which signalled the **Akra's** credentials. A fat face appeared briefly on the screen, and a bored voice mumbled, "Zoo ship, eh? Pass on. I don't feel like mauling a bunch of stinking animals."

Jarnett rose in his seat to cry out a warning, but the face was gone. In desperation he struck out at the con-

trols. He felt a stunning blow on the back of his neck, and the universe dissolved in showering splinters of fire . . .

The **Akra** skillfully threaded the traffic tangles at level 2,000 and headed for its berth. Jarnett knew nothing about it. He lay in a pool of blood on the floor of the control room.

CHAPTER THREE

The Afternoon of the Worm

IT WAS sheer butchery at the space-port.

Gay and excited crowds had gathered to welcome back the intrepid hunters. Word had preceded the spaceship that Talbot and Jarnett were bringing back the greatest capture of all time, including a live and full-grown Moonworm. Even the pompous dignitaries of public life and all of the grey-bearded scientific prelates turned out in force, as did hordes of the little people who thrive on spectacle and melodrama, vicariously experienced. All hoped for sight of the fabulous Moonworm, or at least for a close view of some of the lesser horrors reported to be aboard the **Akra**. Word flashed in from the Customs station that the **Akra** had passed, homebound. Then the huge torpedo-shaped bulk eased smoothly down from the upper traffic levels and slid into its berth beside the Interplanetary Dock. Crowds surged around impatiently, eager for a sight of the hunters or their captives. Policemen's nerves stretched to the breaking point as they tried vainly to handle the crowds.

Something, it was not clear just what, had poked a completely un-human head from the forward escape hatch. A nervous policeman shot and killed it. Then—

Holocaust: All hatches burst open at once. Streams of the nightmare dwellers of far planets poured out of the ship upon massed humanity. Bloody furrows marked the paths of their departures. There were numerous casualties among the monsters, but these were far exceeded by the human death-toll in that first of many similar blood-carnivals. It was as if someone, or some thing, had organized the beast-world into intelligent concerted action against humanity. Even the domesticated animals, long inured to the service and companionship of mankind, seemed suddenly to go mad and attack their masters.

News spread like wildfire. Examination of the *Akra* turned up the surviving hunters and a few remaining crewmen who had sought safe refuge in inaccessible sanctuaries aboard the craft. The whole story had come out. Twenty-four hour newscasts had talked of nothing but the incredible saga of the *Akra*. The public was assured nervously that the hordes of beasts and monsters would be quickly rounded up or killed.

The monsters spread rapidly to the far corners of the Earth, and were quickly joined by the beasts of the fields and forests. Accounts began to drift in of bloody massacres and fearsome debauches in some isolated villages and farm communities. At first, all such items were relayed with ghoulish delight by avid news broadcasters. Then suddenly officialdom clamped down a veil of silence. The general feeling of insecurity burst into public panic, for the sudden censorship did more to frighten an already panicky public than had all the gruesome details of slaughter. Riots broke out. Country people fled their defenseless

towns and farms, but even the cities were attacked. City people ran helter-skelter to the country. Food ran short as transportation facilities broke down.

Starvation was the final blow. As death and horror swept like scythes across a devastated world, governments were tottering. For brief moments, the grim basics of life and death drove all thoughts of political maneuvering and rumors of war out of the men's minds.

Civilization was at the end of its short tether . . .

Cliff Jarnett opened his eyes in the hospital. His uncle, David Jarnett, the Museum's Director, sat beside the bed, studying his young nephew grimly. Cliff blinked his eyes as the bleak background of the room swam into focus.

"The doctor said it would be quite safe to give you the necessary stimulants," his uncle said. "You're quite fortunate to be alive at all, you know? A half-inch difference in that fracture would have been too much. We had to risk snapping you out of it in time for the emergency meeting at the Museum."

"What meeting?"

David Jarnett went on soberly. "Who would have thought one ship-load of wild animals could cause such havoc in that time? Of course, they wouldn't have, without the leadership of a warped and brilliant mind to lead and advise them."

Cliff Jarnett sat up so violently his head spun. "Don't tell me those things escaped!"

The Director gripped his nephew's arm. "Don't excite yourself too much, just yet. But we do need your help, your advice, and we need it badly. Talbot's succeeded in killing nineteen of them but that's just a drop in the

bucket. There are hundreds loose, all of them dangerous. And some of our own animals have joined them—it's a nightmare."

An emergency council of scientists and government officials had been called. It was already in session at the museum when Cliff Jarnett and his uncle reached the building.

A chastened Talbot spoke first. He wasted no time in going over past events, but plunged directly into his subject. "I have killed nineteen of the monsters," he said grimly. "On the surface, this seems a small victory compared to the thousands who have fallen victims to them and the thousands more who will die because of the panic. But I have a plan, which is a very simple one. Behind all this is the Worm. Without his brain, the rest would fall into confusion, and it would be comparatively simple to hunt them down and exterminate them. This cannot be done while the Moonworm lives.

"I mean to get that Worm. That's the reason I killed those others when I could have captured some of them. For some foul reasons of his own, he wants to keep all of them alive. If I make headway in killing them, he will try to hunt me down. He will probably even get word to me where he is, so

I'll go there and fall into his trap. You must realize that this Moonworm is no ordinary animal. As Cliff Jarnett once pointed out, he's as smart as we are—but he'll slip somewhere. I trust myself, Black Jack Talbot, to outsmart any brute that ever lived. When that Worm lets me know where he is, I'll go to him. But I'll go prepared, and I'll get him again—just as I did before. But this time I'll fix him for keeps."

The President of the Society took the floor. "There is some logic in what you say, Talbot. But we cannot wait for the Moonworm to send you a clue as to his whereabouts. If something is not done, and done quickly, these runagate animals will no longer matter. A few more days of the present worldwide panic, and government, society as we know it, will cease to exist."

There was more talk, but as usually happens in such emergencies, the meeting degenerated into a mere hashing-over of the situation, with no solutions offered, and hardly even a concrete discussion of ways and means of dealing with the problem. Talbot sought out Cliff Jarnett and drew him aside.

"Let's get away from these mouthy long-hairs, kid," he said impatiently.

"I want someone I can depend on to help me hunt down that Worm. How about it, Cliff? Feel strong enough for a ride?"

"You know something you haven't told," Jarnett charged, "but I'm with you. I can stand it, if it will get us somewhere. What's on your mind?"

Talbot nodded and chuckled. "You're smart. I didn't want to tell those old windbags, but I have a hot lead. I think that damned Worm sent it to me, but I know where it is. It wants me to come in after it, so it can kill me and get on with its show. I'm going after it. How about coming along to back me up?"

"Let's go," Jarnett said grimly.

IN THE high country west of the town was a region of bare rocks and sheer overhanging cliffs. Talbot and Jarnett, guns ready, went up a steep crack in the gaunt face of a precipice, following the tortuous ragged ledge which climbed into the jaws of night. Rounding a spill of rotten limestone, they paused. Their flashbeams probed the darkness of a cave-mouth.

"This is it," Talbot whispered. "I'm going in alone, kid. You're still weak and you'd just be in my way. If I call out, come a-running, and if you can't tell us apart, shoot both of us. Get that, shoot both. We can't take any chance of that gob of slime getting away to cause more trouble. Shoot both—and no nonsense."

Jarnett nodded, and in the darkness he reached out and clasped Talbot's hand. "You're a better man than I am, Jack. I'm scared."

Talbot slapped his shoulder. "Hell, I've been scared all my life. So long, kid." The scuff of his boots on wet

rock was the only sound as he vanished into the cave.

Minutes went by like small eternities. Jarnett moved restlessly and checked his gun for the nth time. He sucked in his breath. What was that?

The darkness was split by a scream of mortal terror. Talbot came hurtling from the cave mouth as if all the fiends of hell were at his heels. Jarnett caught him and held tight, to keep him from plunging off the ledge into the abyss of darkness below. Talbot was gibbering, sobbing. The flashbeam showed his staring eyes. He broke away and started down the ledge at full speed. A rock turned under his foot.

His shriek died far below.

Trembling, Jarnett faced the cave mouth. Icy calm flowed over him. It was there! His gun was ready, but he knew that he would never use it. In a shaking voice, he addressed the darkness. "Can you hear me, Moonworm? Are you there?"

Silence grew more profound as the moments passed, then a voice made soft answer from the darkness.

"I hear you, Earthling. I am here."

"I've come to ask your help, Moonworm. Please help us now. What do you want of us? Why don't you go and leave us alone? Haven't we suffered enough? Talbot is dead. If you want further revenge for the wrongs we did you, come and kill me now, and be satisfied. Will that be enough? What more do you want?"

A sound that was like an eerie laugh came from within the cave.

"Gun in hand, you come to ask favors, Earthling . . ."

Jarnett threw the gun from him. "I am ready, Moonworm," he said jerkily.

Within the cave was a stirring phantom of sound which warned of the Moonworm's nearness. A shaft of glistening shadow stood out from the black maw of the cave-mouth.

"You do me greater wrong in your thoughts than in your deeds, Earthman. At every turn you twist and distort my intentions. When have I ever harmed you or your kind, except in self-defense? Did I seek you out? You dare to ask what I want of you! What have I ever asked of you? The death of your companion was incidental, and of no interest to me. I carry on no war with humanity. The death of all these people is not of my doing. Do not call them innocent. They, not you alone, have disturbed my dreams, have torn me away from the rhythms of my life dance. They, not you alone, prevent my return. Innocent individually, perhaps, but not collectively. And do not blame me for the dooms their blindness, their stupidities, their fatal curiosities have brought upon them. They deserve such fates.

"Even your companion would have had no harm from me. I sent for him, and meant to offer him my terms. But, in the end, he was too clever for me again. He was too clever for himself. He came before I was prepared and he disturbed me at my meditations. Before I could correct the visual impressions he received from my thoughts, he had already gone mad and destroyed himself.

"I would not wantonly injure any creature—not even man.... You have disposed of your gun. That is better. Such weapons are a confession of weakness and futility. I will not bargain with you, Earthling. I knew that you, or someone like you, would come to me eventually. Without my help,

you would be months, perhaps years, in capturing or killing these poor brutes who were to be your victims. Go to your people and tell them my terms. They will have no choice but to agree. Provide me with a spaceship built to my design, with adequate supplies and the proper charts to reach our destinations—and I will do all in my power to save you from the consequences of your own rashness. Not only will I leave, but I will take them with me and return each to his home. Now go—go quickly—for the memory of the brutalities and violence you have forced upon me sickens my soul. When you are done, come back, for I will need your help to seek out the lost ones."

Jarnett bowed his head, and went quickly. He was glad when the darkness had swallowed him.

A COMPLETE account of the assembling of the fugitive brutes would take more time and space than can be devoted to it. It is sufficient to record that it was done, under the Moonworm's direction, with efficiency, dispatch, and a minimum of bloodshed. Such a feat was well within the unearthly powers of the Moonworm. The more intelligent of the monsters simply came in at his call and were installed aboard the curiously designed spaceship in quarters perfectly adjusted to their needs. Others, of lesser intelligence, were one after the other lured within the sphere of his influence by artless-seeming devices, such as the use of his amazing gift for mimicry to seek them out in their own forms, decoying some of the recalcitrant and brainless horrors with the mating calls of their own species.

Whatever the means, in nearly every

case it proved effective. Only the partially gaseous creatures from equatorial Jupiter and the three Martian sand-leopards had to be hunted down and destroyed. Standing above the carcass of the last of the leopards, who had died in some strange fashion beyond the knowledge of man, the Moonworm called out to Jarnett.

"You see, my kind are not without weapons of their own," the Worm said soberly. "The time is at hand when I will leave you, and I wish you to record this in the annals of your people. You must guarantee never again to molest the least of these living beings in their homes. This is for your own protection. You were most fortunate that I was in a state of suspended animation when you found and 'captured' me."

A strange, half-mystical companionship had grown between Jarnett and the Moonworm. The Earthman realized with a shock of horror that he would view the creature's departure with a sense of personal loss, of poignant regret and sadness.

The day came when Jarnett stood beside the open hatch of the spaceship and took final leave of the weird, un-human being whose "life-dance" had been interrupted. For the last time, the Moonworm constructed of its elastic body-plasm a mouth orifice, and spoke to him.

"Contact of truly alien minds such

as ours must always be disturbing to both of them. Ours was a chance meeting, and one which will, fortunately, not be repeated often in the ladder of the eons. Mysteries pile upon mysteries over the whole of the universe. Delve as deeply as you may, Earthling—study and gain knowledge, for it is only by the improvement of the senses and the growth of understanding that a race grows great.

"You have come far from the primal slime, but you will return to it. I know, for my people followed the same route as yours, and we are now within a few generations of the end. Who can say whether the end of ladder of eons is the 'bottom' or the 'top'?

"No," do not touch me. The very contact of your flesh is exquisite pain to my spirit. Farewell, Earthling. Guard your heritage well, for when we are gone, you will inherit the stars. Be happy, and try to grow great enough to understand them . . . when they are yours."

The Moonworm said one thing more, and then just before the main hatch-cover slammed shut, the retracting pseudopod made a vague gesture, oddly suggestive of emotion.

"You are fortunate," were the last words of the Moonworm, "that I do not take one of you back with me as a souvenir."

The hatch-cover clanged down, and Earth's strangest chapter ended upon a note of cosmic laughter.