

# THE VIGIL

THE  
**VIGIL**

Joe Bergeron

Endurian Press

*The Vigil* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*For the Keller girls—  
Jennifer, Mary Ann, and Ruby  
for support, companionship,  
and affection.*

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## One

### *The Solitary One*

It was time to go home.

The thought came suddenly, unexpectedly, presenting itself as a calm assertion that left little room for uncertainty. Whatever the origin of the thought, whether internal or external, Fomalhaut did not doubt it.

But he need not act upon it immediately. He had work to finish here, work enough to occupy thousands of even such extended life-spans as his. His sense of order would not allow him to withdraw without at least completing his immediate task.

Fomalhaut commanded a slow yaw of his Frame. Dim, distant ovals of light slid through his field of vision as he turned his mind and instruments toward the next target.

The sensors revealed it as an enormous, flattened disk of stars some 135,000 light-years in diameter, containing about 750 billion fusing stars and perhaps ten times as many infrared dwarfs. The nucleus was dense but quiescent; its central black hole had long since consumed all the stars whose orbits brought them within its grasp. Its days of violence and fury, when towers of blistering radiation had poured out the energy of billions of dying suns, were billions of years in the past.

From his home planet, that ancient quasar appeared to be burning still. Such was the distance between Fomalhaut and his home.

The galaxy was surrounded by a dark aura of non-fusing substars and frozen planets. A slight enhancement of the outermost spiral arms gave evidence of an intergalactic collision that had taken place some thirty million years ago.

It was a large system, but typical of the galaxies in this cluster, a common sort among all the many thousands he had examined over the past decades. Most galaxies seemed uniformly bland when studied with non-visual sensors. Their beauty came from their individuality of form. Each was as unique as a snowflake.

But it was mainly the living contents of galaxies that set one apart from another.

He shut down the sensors, powered down the Frame, even deactivated his suit except for its life support functions. After a last glance at the target galaxy, he willed to opacity the bubble field that separated his head from the vacuum. Without sensory input, he was free to concentrate on his real search without the distractions of sight and sound and humming electromagnetic fields.

An hour's meditation served to clear his mind of all irrelevant thoughts, including speculation as to the origin of his recent foresight/insight that his mission of exploration was about to end. Only then did he reach out, imagining a pathway linking him with the great star-system before him, seeking the faint quiverings of the quantum field that were the signature of what he sought.

There. A sentient race, non-technological—their lives and minds heavily regimented—dwelling beneath the ice of a totally glaciated world, in low-ceilinged corridors and warrens kept open by the heat of geothermal hot spots in the crust.

There. A solitary individual, a chance arrangement of superconducting crystals in

the heart of a wandering interstellar planetoid. A being solitary, like himself, but with a much more restricted point of view.

There. In the starry hub itself. A gossamer organism, a communal being of organic film surrounding an ancient sun, like a living Dyson sphere—fearsomely intelligent, suddenly aware—

Fomalhaut sucked in his breath. Heart pounding, he awaited some reaction to what had evidently been a very unwelcome intrusion.

An instant's foresight was warning enough. He activated a rarely used device that dropped him and his Frame into an artificial pocket universe. There he drifted senseless; he'd caught a millisecond of the bolt of quantum organization that had been launched against him.

His suit looked after him as he recovered. Power continued to flow from the Source. The matter synthesizer used it to create the chemicals his body needed for its upkeep. The regenerator, drawing upon the master pattern stored in his belt computer, periodically refreshed his genetic information.

Fully recovered within a month, Fomalhaut nevertheless elected to remain in seclusion. The pocket universe he inhabited had a volume only several times larger than his own, and so offered a certain paucity of stimuli. Luckily, he had the resources of his mind and Frame to call upon. He dropped into a reverie of recollection, a reconsideration of the many intelligences he had discovered in his travels. Most would be of only academic interest to his race. Even the far-flung civilization of ISAF would probably never expand to this frontier, so far from the home galaxy that from here its image was red-shifted almost into invisibility. The thirst for knowledge provided the justification to send the Frameriders on their unprecedented journeys. The need to offer a useful outlet for misfits provided the excuse.

His had been a natural birth—his parents had dismissed genetic synthesis as sterile, too far removed from their biological heritage. Despite this quaint notion, they hadn't presumed to take upon themselves the privilege of naming him. At birth he'd received a designation. When he reached a sufficient age, he'd selected for himself a name which suited him.

He'd chosen Fomalhaut, an archaic Earth name for a star which appeared bright from that planet. The meaning of the word was obscure, but it sounded melodious and so pleased him. The star itself was an ordinary class A subgiant without any outstanding qualities.

He had been attracted to the star during long chilly nights in the hardwood forests of North America. The chief star of autumn evenings, Fomalhaut reigned in peaceful solitude in a star-poor region of the sky that offered no neighbor or competition. It was lonely and serene, its quiet path through the heavens lending it a poetic aspect which had no relationship to its physical nature. It was sometimes called the Solitary One.

As Fomalhaut matured, the tedious affairs of Galactic civilization had held no glamour for him. Yet the Galaxy-wide ideal of Constructive Anarchism wouldn't permit him to simply wile away the centuries in idleness. Seeking a purpose for his mysticism and wanderlust, he had volunteered himself as a Framerider.

After about a year of subjective time, he cautiously bumped himself back into the universe, the Frame commanded to instantly fall back into the pocket at the first sign of scrutiny.

Space was clear. He could see or detect almost nothing. He estimated he'd slid about two hundred and thirty million light years from the infected galaxy during his seclusion. No matter. He'd learned all he could afford to learn about that particular group of galaxies.

The monitoring systems of the Frame told him that a Transsend signal was present. He attuned himself to the receiver and opened contact.

"Fomalhaut? Good of you to finally respond. Are you ready to come in?" asked a thought from a very distant source.

"I should say I am. Let me first report: I urge quarantine for the galaxy cluster at objective Terracentric coordinates 14 hours 36 minutes, 12.5 degrees south, distance 12.21 billion light-years."

"Noted. We will collect details later. We now wish to offer you a part in an unprecedented scientific enterprise."

"One less precedented than being a Framerider?"

"Significantly less. We propose to send a small party to explore the early history of the Universe and the pre-Galactic days of Earth."

"Then the expedition is by definition not unprecedented, in a literal sense."

There was a pause. "In a very narrow, trivial sense."

"Am I to understand that retrograde time travel has been made practical?"

"Don't be silly. You know that time reversal violates causality when applied on a macroscopic scale."

"You baffle me."

"The expedition will travel at high relativistic speeds to a far future period immediately preceding the recollapse of the Universe. A short time before the formation of the singularity, the expedition will quantum jump through the collapse and emerge shortly after the inflation phase of a newborn Universe."

"And how does this equate with the exploration of our own past?"

"We have discovered techniques of mental training and meditation to greatly increase, on a quantum level, the affinity of conscious beings for their own universe. We believe this will result in your translation to a new universe which will be parallel to our own."

"How parallel?"

"If the translation can be effected less than one ten-billionth of a picosecond before the collapse of our own Universe, the two should be identical within the limits of observation."

"Excluding, of course, the divergence produced by the very presence of the expedition."

"Not so. You see, we have historical evidence of just such an expedition in the past of our own Earth. At least one small multispecific group of beings is known to have been present during the waning days of Humanity. They seem to have acted directly on

the affairs of the Humans of the day, who might otherwise have gone on synthesizing radioactive elements and toxic compounds for centuries.”

“These beings restrained the Humans in some way?”

“The details are unclear. We know this was the first era in which extraterrestrial forces had any great influence over the history of Earth. A few names survive, but their exact role in these events is uncertain. Raintree. Perturbare. Cor.”

“My ignorance of these matters illustrates a possible obstacle to my participation. My solitude has been almost unrelieved throughout my life. I know nothing of Earth history.”

“That is precisely why we have chosen you. We would not wish you to have foreknowledge of your own actions. You might find it inhibiting. It might bias and affect your judgement.”

“Very well,” said Fomalhaut. “If my ignorance is of value to the ongoing development of Galactic knowledge, let me not withhold it.”

## Two

### *The Northern Child*

“Benjamin Raintree. If I hear one more whine or whisper about this, I’m going to tape your mouth shut. This isn’t my first choice for a new home either, but we’ll both have to put up with it. It’s only for a few years.”

*A few years?* Ben Raintree bit back the complaints that threatened to bubble out all over again. His mother probably wouldn’t actually tape his mouth, but she could make his life miserable if he didn’t restrain himself, at least for the time being.

*A few years.* Four at least, probably. He’d be ready for high school by the time he escaped this place. And what if they didn’t leave even then? Was there even a high school anywhere around here? Was there *anything* around here—aside from their meager cabin, the huts of the Indians, and the pathetic one-room school? Didn’t his parents care about his education? This was hardly the place to study to become a scientist, unless, he admitted to himself, you wanted to be an anthropologist like his dad.

But he didn’t. He wanted to be a *real* scientist—a chemist, a physicist, maybe even an astronomer like his cousin Leonard. That took equipment, facilities, laboratories. He wondered if he could even get a new Edmund catalog in this desolate place.

He looked out the window, his long face set in an expression of gloom as profound and bleak as the white-and-grey landscape outside. The *cold* of the place! He doubted he’d ever get used to it. It was only late November, yet already winter had all but smothered the pines of the surrounding taiga, while the lake was a plain of featureless white. It wasn’t the kind of winter he was used to. In their old town, winter had been a few months of clouds and chilly rain. If it happened to snow a few inches once or twice a year, the town would come to a halt until the next day’s warmer temperatures melted it off. That was Ben’s idea of winter.

Then his father’s assistantship had expired. Cloud Raintree had immediately cast his gaze North to his native Canada. The Canadian Ministry of Culture hired him to study the Chipewyan Indians of Lake Athabasca. It was an open-ended assignment—Cloud was to collect whatever data he needed to make recommendations about the welfare of the Indians and their future needs.

It was unusual for the Government to take such an interest in its native peoples. But lately, journalists had publicized the squalor in which many Indians lived, with stories about the alcoholism and illiteracy rampant among the tribes. The public, to its credit, had reacted with indignation. Thus a few highly visible efforts were begun to study and reverse the situation. One of these was the assignment of the young Indian anthropologist to one of the most remote and isolated of the Boreal tribes.

Ben didn’t view the situation in these terms. His photograph had appeared in a few Canadian newspapers, and there was even talk of an article in *National Geographic*, but the glamour of these events seemed remote. He saw only that he was stranded here, his friends thousands of miles away. Here were no potential new friends except a lot of ignorant Indians who barely spoke English and who laughed at him behind his back. True, Dad was mostly Indian, which meant he himself was almost half Indian, but he’d

had the advantage of a proper education in a civilized country—until now, that is.

He neither felt nor looked much like an Indian. His eyes were pale green-grey, much the same color as the heavy snow clouds lowering outside the window. His skin was pale as his mother's, while his hair was a peculiar leaden-grey he'd inherited from his grandfather. His face was narrow and usually mournful, never more so than now.

He slammed his open hand on the windowsill, rattling the panes. Turning, he stalked off towards his tiny room, a dingy space that contained his only reminders of more halcyon days.

"Ben—!" called his mother, but he paid no heed. She looked after him with a mixture of pity and anger. Somehow Ben had skipped being ten years old. He'd gone directly from a quiet, lovable five to a sullen, rebellious fifteen. She was proud of his brilliance and precocity, but she also worried that somehow the wonder of childhood had been stripped from him by his very perceptiveness. Bright as he was, his inexperience led him to translate his insights into cynicism. It was very sad. Cynicism was so unbecoming to a small boy with eyes as soft as the shadows that lay beneath the pine boughs.

It looked to be a long four years.

Beneath the burning blue dome of the winter sky, Ben and his mother made their way home from school. Elaine Raintree had volunteered to help with the teaching at the one-room facility, giving her at least the feeling of putting her education to some use. Unfortunately, Alberta presented little scope for the application of her real specialty, tropical rain forest ecology. Her pact with Cloud would see them relocate to the tropics as soon as his task here was completed.

Snowfall had been heavy recently, with fresh drifts banked up against the pines. They shuffled along a path kept mostly clear by the comings and goings of the villagers. The sun was well past the high point of its shallow wintertime arc. Darkness would descend by three.

As always during the past few weeks, Ben was anxious to get home to check the mail. His birthday had come and gone, and he'd used the proceeds to send away for some magnets and a gyroscope set from Edmund. The wait for mail-order goods had always seemed interminable even back home; here the delay was almost unbearable. When he saw the mailman approaching their cabin from the main road, Ben floundered through the snow as best he could to intercept him. He arrived red-faced and out-of-breath. It wasn't easy to run in the cocoon of winter clothing he affected. The locals were often amused by how overdressed the boy was, but he seemed so sensitive that they usually hid their laughter.

"Well, I finally have something for you," said the postman. "Hope it's what you've been waiting for so long."

"Let's see it!" Ben snatched a yellow slip from the man's hand. He read it and his expectations plummeted. "This says my package is still in Fort Chipewyan! Why didn't you bring it?"

“You got to go sign for it. Sorry.”

Ben gave an exaggerated grimace of exasperation and turned away. He turned a look of long suffering on his mother as she caught up and they went inside. “He didn’t bring my package! When can we go get it?”

His mother considered as she stamped the snow from her boots. “We won’t be going to town until Saturday.”

“*Saturday!* This is only Wednesday!”

The creak of the door interrupted his protest. Cloud walked in, home earlier than usual. “Pinky has gone into labor. I asked if I could observe the delivery, and she said fine, as long as you came along,” he said to Elaine. “How about it?”

“Dad, my science things are stuck at the Post Office! Can’t we go get them today?”

Cloud gave his son a look of mild disbelief. “It’s almost sundown. It’ll be twenty below in two hours.”

“Well, do you think we should wait till spring or something?”

Cloud chuckled and shook his head. “Quit whining. It’ll have to wait until Saturday.”

Ben flailed his arms. “Oh, brother...couldn’t I walk?”

“Is this the same boy who worries about catching pneumonia every time he heads for the outhouse? Come on, son. It’s eight miles each way. Besides, it’ll be closed soon.”

“I’ll go with you, Cloud,” said Elaine. “I’m no midwife, but maybe I can keep her kids out of trouble during the birth. Do you want to come along, Ben?”

“No!”

“Suit yourself. We’ll probably be back pretty late, so you’ll have to feed yourself. Don’t forget to stoke the fire before you go to sleep.”

Ben slumped into a chair, ignoring her. Cloud looked at him and sighed.

“See you later, Ben dear,” said his mother. They left, their retreating voices swiftly muffled by the snow.

Ben sat still, sinking into a gloomy reverie. After a while he flung himself to his feet and went to the window. He hadn’t taken off his coat; some fragment of his intention was already present, though it was still unformed and unstated. He stared out the window at the deepening boreal afternoon. No new storm was expected for a couple of days. The sky was stark ultramarine, with a band of gold and mauve in the southwest where the Sun pondered its descent.

Anger welled up hot and bitter in Ben’s throat. He glared at the squalid settlement around him, at the piles of caribou hides stacked like oversized autumn leaves beside every corrugated metal shack and log hut. At the outskirts of the village, beyond rutted streets choked with dirty snow, the great boreal forest rose up, sombre, grim, and endless. Just out of sight beyond the trees was the windswept, frozen nothingness of Lake Athabasca—and beyond that was again the forest, vast in every direction.

The slats between the windowpanes might as well be prison bars. He couldn’t go beyond them for any distance without risking his life. And even if he did, there was nowhere to go but into an appalling void. Millions of square miles of wilderness, great

unknown tracts of wood, lake, and bog. And now, snow and cold. Snow and cold until May. Snow, cold, and darkness. No escape, no comfort here.

He found himself outside without really remembering leaving the house. Heading toward the main road, he vowed to walk all the way to Fort Chipewyan. Not to get his magnets and gyroscope; he didn't care about them anymore. Well, maybe he'd pick them up if the post office was still open when he got to town. He'd need something to occupy him on the trip south. For his plan was to escape, to make his way back to the United States with its warmth and civilization, stowing away on logging trucks if necessary. He didn't know just what he'd do when he got there—maybe some of his old neighbors would take him in. Probably, once his parents found out what he'd done, they'd realize how unfair it was to force him to live in this frozen hellhole, and they'd all move back to a place that made more sense.

With this plan in mind, Ben already felt ten times better than he had five minutes before. Almost happily, he reached the road and began to pick his way over the rutted, frozen surface.

In twenty minutes his nose ached from the cold. His eyes watered and stung. Luckily the wind was light, so he wasn't seriously cold, just cold enough to be uncomfortable, which made him wish for a shortcut. Besides, what if someone he knew came by and saw him? They might tell his parents, or even stop him and bring him back.

Another thing was bothering him. He knew from maps that Fort Chipewyan was due west from his village. Yet, the sun was far to the left of the line taken by the road. He knew the sun always set in the west, which meant the road must be taking a swing to the north before heading towards town. If he cut through the woods in the sun's direction, he'd be concealed and would probably save some time.

Smugly satisfied with this logic, Ben left the road and passed beneath the trees. The snow had a hard crust beneath six inches of powder and was fairly easy to walk on—easier than stumbling over the ruts and ridges of the road. He wasn't worried about darkness either. Twilight lasted for hours at this time of year.

Thus he entered the wintry world of the Boreal woods.

For a while the sounds of the village continued to float by, startlingly clear, like sounds coming from the far side of a lake. They faded only gradually, replaced by nothing but the crunchy squeak of his boots in the snow. Around him was a void of silence and a lack of movement nearly as profound. Apart from his own progress, the only change in the landscape was the slow shift in sky color as the sun made its way toward the horizon. Luckily, the forest was open enough to allow an occasional glimpse of solar gold, enabling him to stay on course with only a few twists and meanderings. If darkness did catch him, he could navigate by the North Star.

He smiled as he thought of the many people who thought the North Star was the brightest star in the sky. If any of them tried to navigate by the stars, they might wind up in the Gulf of Mexico! But he'd been taught to find the Pole Star by a professional astronomer. As long as he could remember which of the stars in the Big Dipper pointed it out, he couldn't go wrong.

His prospects improved even more when the forest thinned out and gave way to a

snow-covered meadow. It was just uneven enough for him to be sure it wasn't really a frozen lake. Clumps of dry grass poked up here and there. He didn't trust the frozen lakes—especially since he'd tried skating on Lake Athabasca and spent so much time on his butt, his ears burning at the laughter of the Indians at their ice-fishing holes.

The sun had just set, but it left a marker glow on the horizon which he followed without even thinking about it. The sun's loss intensified the cold. He wrapped his scarf tighter and pulled his hat down over his ears. The pain in his nose eased as his walking got his blood moving more vigorously. His feet felt fine. Cold feet, he knew, were mainly a problem if you were standing still. Sniffing busily, he waddled along into the deepening night.

It was easy for him to fall into a reverie—they happened often enough in school, and a walk like this was the perfect breeding ground for them. Almost happily, he marched along while his thoughts left mundane concerns behind and went winging among the subtleties of science and nature as he understood them.

Abruptly he realized that the sky was now quite dark, certainly dark enough to reveal the brighter stars. Confidently, he turned his head, expecting to see the Pole Star marking a perfect right angle to his path.

He was disappointed in this expectation. All he saw was an unfamiliar group of stars. He had to turn around and look high in the sky to find Polaris—it was almost directly behind him!

Ben's head spun as he tried to make sense of this. He had faithfully followed the setting sun; how had he ended up walking southwest? The answer came to him suddenly, spurring a burst of self-loathing. He'd never understood this clearly, but the sun didn't always set *exactly* in the west—if fact, as he now recalled, during the winter it set far to the south. For all he knew, the effect was even greater here in the sub arctic. If he was right, not only had the sun led him astray, it hadn't even led him in a straight line, as it would shift slowly toward the north as it moved beneath the horizon.

Hot with shame, castigating himself for his stupidity, Ben tried to figure out where he was relative to Fort Chipewyan. It must be somewhere to his north, but where exactly? Due north? Still northwest? Probably the latter, but how far? Fort Chipewyan wasn't very big—if he missed it by so much as a mile, he'd probably never know it was near.

The sensible thing to do was to cut north and head for the road. He wheeled about and began to almost retrace his steps, furiously trying to remember whether there were any circumstances under which Polaris wouldn't indicate true north. But no, he thought, it was safe to trust the star. He could clearly remember his cousin Leonard pointing it out, telling him about its steadfast refusal to abandon its central place in the firmament. Ben even managed a smile as he remembered Leonard's earnest admiration of the star's unique integrity.

Doggedly, he tramped along as the temperature continued to drop. His anger and embarrassment gradually dissolved as the rhythm of hiking imposed its cooling influence on his mind. He dropped into another reverie, its imagery fed by the dimness of the forest, with its sensory understory of quiet sounds and the pungent scent of the

conifers.

The walking became more difficult as he reached an area where tangled undergrowth was buried in the snow. It got harder to place his feet with the required precision as cold and fatigue took their toll on their alertness. His increasing anxiety put dreams and fantasies into reluctant retreat as he became absorbed in the mechanics of making his way through the woods.

Particularly nerve-wracking was his growing feeling that he wasn't alone. Tantalizing sounds, just at the limits of hearing, convinced him that shadowy shapes were keeping pace with him, just out of sight.

Even worse, he thought he heard fragments of eerie, ghostly singing, sometimes coming from one side, sometimes the other, sighing softly, or laughing a tinkling laugh which held just a touch of ridicule.

Ben darted many a sidelong look into the dark forest, and several times tensed his throat to speak or yell, but something always held him back—probably an aversion to feeling foolish by yelling in what was, after all, probably an empty forest.

A series of deep, booming notes stopped him in his tracks and set him to peering about wildly. He barely recognized a tall, rounded shape in a nearby tree as a huge owl. Ben stared at it while fear and awe ran up and down his spine like an electric charge. This must be some kind of Owl God, he thought. Look how it stares with those unblinking eyes!

The powerful hooting boomed out again, shocking proof of the presence of life in this otherwise silent realm.

Not daring to turn his back on the owl, Ben circled around it and continued on his way on rubbery legs.

The trees began to thin out, abruptly ending altogether. Ben looked out across a blank surface that glowed dimly in the starlight. He saw with dismay that it was Lake Athabasca. The road, he knew, did not run so close to its shore. It must be somewhere behind him, back in the woods. Somehow he'd stumbled over the rutted track without noticing it.

By now the cold held him in a confident grip. Despite his exertion his feet were almost numb, and his nose felt brittle as an icicle. He was nearing exhaustion, and his emotions were very near the surface. His forehead corrugated and a tear rolled down his long, rather homely face, pausing on the angle of his jaw just long enough to freeze in place.

Though unable to frame the thought in words, he was almost convinced that this was a contest Winter was destined to win. He scanned the horizon and found no atom of aid or comfort anywhere in the ghostly landscape. He saw only emptiness and cold, a great uninhabited expanse of ice capped by a dome of uncaring stars. His cabin, with its yellow light in the window, and his warm bed, and the quilt his mother had made—these seemed farther away than any star.

But no, he couldn't afford such thoughts. Dwelling on them for two minutes would leave him a blubbering wreck. He gave his head an angry shake and pondered his next move.

Fort Chipewyan, he knew, lay hard against Lake Athabasca. By following the shore he should eventually reach it. He could only assume he was still to the east of the town—any other possibility guaranteed that he was totally lost.

He renewed his march. Hours passed. The stars wheeled slowly, their bright beacons dropping below the horizon ahead of him. Slowly too his consciousness seemed to blend into the majesty of the winter night. The rhythm of his pace and breath merged with the grand quiet of the land's deep sleep. The sting of the cold gradually faded to seem a balm.

He wouldn't have believed it possible to enter into such intimacy with something as austere as this cold shadow of night. It reminded him of meeting his grandfather for the first time—a forbidding figure, even intimidating; yet once he got to know him, a man full of fascinating secrets.

Still he heard hints and notes of song, a sweet, lulling voice with its hint of mockery. After a while he began to conclude it was nothing more than music generated by his own mind to accompany his trek. Soon he forgot about it almost entirely.

Then he heard the wolves. Their howls filtered through the dark pines; in anything less than complete silence he wouldn't have heard them at all. He did his best to quash his nervousness. No wolf in North America had ever been known to attack a human being, a fact he'd anxiously extracted from his parents on many a spooky evening. Besides, these wolves were miles away.

Yet the wild, drawn-out cries did nothing to lessen his feelings of loneliness.

His eyes were watering; he had to blink frequently to clear them. Sometimes he squeezed them so tightly shut that strange colors and patterns flickered on the backs of his eyelids, and once when he opened them, the colors remained to illuminate the sky.

He looked out over the lake. Far over the world's northern shoulder burned a diffuse dome of red. Ben tried to convince himself it was the light of a settlement, but it was a sorry kind of delusion; no light could have less connection with the world of men than this. He'd seen a dozen auroras since coming to Canada, but the displays had usually been obscured by trees. This was the first time he'd viewed one from such an open vantage point. Although the horizon was wide, and the lights seemed infinitely remote, he felt like a privileged observer, suffered to stand in lonely awe while the spirits of the north ran wild across the sky.

Green shafts of light swayed through the sky, passing through one another or briefly merging into spears of spectral brilliance. A green arc appeared in the north, gradually intensifying while the red glow subsided. At last the arc separated from the horizon and became a blowing curtain of frosty emerald, at times brightening to an intensity that filled him with strange emotions. The auroral radiance was truly unearthly. It was like the light of some magical realm reflected by hands held in the sky.

The singing voice crept closer while he stood there mesmerized, sighing of secrets he suddenly longed to understand.

He looked up and gasped. An angel seemed to be hovering directly overhead, an inhuman winged form of molten silver light. The light flowed down in all directions,

forming a corona that burst forth, pouring out streamers of mystic green radiance. A coral-colored oval, ornamented with two cat's eyes of a particularly luminous green, unfolded like a flower, while around it waved streamers of silver and pale blue. Ben stood entranced by this vision, unable to look away, yet abashed. It was an exquisite agony to stand beneath that gaze, to look full into those eyes of light, transparent enough to show the stars behind them, but in other ways opaque and featureless, seeing him and knowing him absolutely. Wreathed in streamers and draperies, the form threw a bright glow over the snow, casting soft shadows behind every tree. The winter landscape was a perfect setting for this serene glory; indeed, they complimented each other wonderfully.

Ben remained enraptured by the dream image embodied in the aurora; her voice caressed him, and hinted at mysteries embedded in the very makeup of the world, mysteries which even in the many wanderings of his imagination he had never approached.

Gradually, without his even realizing it, the image dispersed into random, fugitive gleams. Suddenly Ben was aware of himself again. The aurora subsided to a few weak flickers in the far north.

Without conscious thought he started walking again, but on a reversed course that took him back east. His mind a fog of feelings and images, he was hardly aware of the passing of time or distance. Even the sight of the wolves that were pacing him on either side did not disturb him. They melted away into the woods as he approached the village. He stumbled inside the cabin just as first light stained the southeastern sky. There he found his parents, exhausted and disheveled, tugging at frozen boot lacings as they prepared to renew their all-night search. His mother gave a cry and sprang up to embrace him.

"Ben! My God, you're frozen solid. Cloud, hand me that blanket!" She draped it around Ben's shoulders as she worked the zipper of his parka and tried to pull it off him. "Oh, look at your hair, it's a mass of ice. Cloud?"

Cloud Raintree stepped up with a towel and rubbed his son's head. His expression grew steadily more perplexed as he worked, until finally he dropped the towel and stared silently into Ben's grey-green eyes. The gaze he got back was candid and untroubled.

"Elaine," said Cloud quietly.

Elaine interrupted her fumbling and looked up at him. "What?"

"His hair's not frozen. It's turned white."

"What?" She turned back to Ben, encountering the hair, and also his serene silence.

"Huh! Ben! Are you all right? Why don't you say anything? I've made up my mind. We're moving back south."

A flicker of dismay passed over Ben's face. "Oh, no," he said dreamily. "Let's not. I love this place. I really do."

## Three

### *Something New Under the Sea*

The creature splashed into the water with a hard slap, startling a nearby school of yellowfin tuna which flashed away into the blue murk. The ship it had come from continued away at an undiminished speed, its screw churning the water.

Veiled at first by a cloud of bubbles, the creature hovered sluggishly, stunned by the impact. The bubbles floated up in strings and streamers, gradually revealing its contours.

Superficially it resembled a ray. With its flattened diamond shape and whiplike tail, it wouldn't have aroused the suspicion of anyone but an astute fisherman or an ichthyologist. These would have noticed some baffling features, especially its breathing apparatus. Instead of gill slits, it had a ventral opening like the blowhole of a dolphin. Yet plainly it was no air-breather, for it made no effort to break the surface. It placidly sucked water into its scooplake mouth and ejected it from the "blowhole", its body rippling with muscular pulsations.

Its eyes were also startling. Placed at the sides of the mouth like the eyes of a manta, they were crystalline blue spheres, bright and clear, unlike the dull, staring goggles of a true ray. Moreover, its pupils were round, not ray-like slits.

In the blue light filtering through the water the creature looked steel-gray, though in full sunlight it would have shown a golden color.

The pseudoray flapped its great pectoral wings and swam a languid circle as its alertness gradually returned. It directed a tentative sonar beam at the receding ship and got back a strong return; it also detected a welter of rumbles, hums, and whirs, a powerful electric field, and a trail of metallic odors.

The whirl of the ship's screw grew fainter, surprising the pseudoray, which had expected to be picked up again. It kept its senses trained on the ship until no trace remained but distant engine noise. It felt some bitterness at being abandoned, even though it had never felt any great affection for the hinged stick-like creatures which had prodded and wired and attempted to dominate it for as long as it could remember.

Then it sensed a distant turbulence: the engine noise raised in pitch, swung onto a new bearing, and grew louder. Apparently, the ship was returning after all. The ray awaited it with neither anticipation nor apprehension. When it reached the ray's vicinity the ship's engine slowed. The ship coasted to a halt. The ray heard voices ringing out through the hull. Although it didn't understand the words, it recognized the voices, their tones conveying strong emotion.

Half a dozen nearby splashes alerted it to the entrance of hinged divers into the water. Unconcerned, the ray flapped about, merely curious about these strange goings on. The divers were excellent sonar targets. He could even "see" which of them had recently eaten and which were hungry. They spread out from the ship to search the waters nearby.

The voices coming from inside the ship grew more urgent. Some sounded angry, others shrill. Abruptly, events grew more alarming. A hissing sound, painfully loud,

screamed into the water from the guts of the ship. Several loud cracks intruded over the general din. The ray turned and fled, anxious to escape the hideous noise. It brushed by one of the divers just as a tremendous concussion struck from behind, sending them both tumbling. The roar quickly subsided into a rush of water and air.

Driven by curiosity, the ray turned around and approached the ship. Its sonar, and even its vision, revealed that much of the keel had been torn out, leaving ragged hull plating and protruding scraps of machinery. The ship was flooding rapidly. In minutes it flipped over and began a terminal dive into waters of unknown depth.

Now the ray was alone in the water with the divers. It approached them casually, noting the slender, cylindrical objects they carried. They paid him scant attention, staring instead at the blank spot in the water where their ship had been. After a moment the ray lost interest in them and flitted away, leaving them to ponder their fate.

Putting its former captors from its mind, the ray found within itself a large fund of apprehension about this new environment. Pinging as loudly as it could in every direction, the only returns it received were from small moving objects in the near distance, out of sight, probably fish. There was no sign of a wall or barrier. If this was a tank, it was far larger than any it had yet inhabited.

The ray began what it foresaw as a lengthy exploration. With a ripple of its wings it cut through the water as smoothly as a hatchet blade. It opened its funnel-like mouth, sweeping in the morsels it savored—tiny fish, shrimp, and plankton. Despite its impressive gape, it lacked the dentition to deal with anything larger.

It wandered thus for some hours until it detected the waterborne vibrations of a large creature. A few moments later it saw a streamlined silhouette passing before it. Staying just within sight, the shark circled the ray. The huge fish registered strongly on all the ray's senses, and the image that built up in its mind wasn't reassuring. Warily, it kept its attention fixed on the predator.

It dogged him for several miles, occasionally reversing the direction of its orbit, but otherwise staying just within visual range. The ray grew irritated.

Suddenly the shark darted in with its mouth agape. Its quarry reflexively fired an electric charge when the toothy snout was only inches away. The shark recoiled and sped off into the haze.

That one shock might have been enough to end the confrontation, but the shark's teeth had grazed the ray's wing, and a little blood was clouding the water. The ray sensed the shark lurking not far off as it worked itself up for another attack. The ray grew angry, its whole surface darkening with battle fury. Slits opened on the underside of each wing, from which pivoted five-inch spines coated with black slime. It banged out a cluster of strident pings to pinpoint its foe and charged. The shark, startled, hesitated a moment, then closed to meet it headlong.

At the last instant before collision the ray fired its full charge, sending the shark into a spasm. It then drove a spine deep into the shark's nose, skimmed over its dorsal fin, and wheeled to bury the other one in its flank. The spines broke off in the wounds and remained deeply embedded. The shark convulsed feebly and died. The ray examined the sinking carcass for a moment, then left the scene before the blood and commotion

could attract others of its kind.

It was unconcerned about the loss of its deadly spines. Even now, new ones coated with fresh black venom were moving into place in the sheaths, and it could grow as many additional sets as need be.

Time passed. The pseudo-ray, accepting the fact that its new domain was effectively limitless, adopted a placid life of simplicity and ease. The waters were warm, and the plankton supply was adequate. It gradually sized up the other creatures which shared its realm. Most were fish, generally harmless and not especially interesting. Other creatures made more enjoyable company, such as the sea turtles which paddled along at an easygoing pace and were quite companionable. The dolphins were more rambunctious, even aggressively friendly, finding the pseudo-ray an irresistible curiosity. Intriguingly, they used a sonar similar to the ray's own. The ray discovered an ability to imitate dolphin tones, which excited any it happened to meet. It also learned a new trick from them, the art of stunning small prey by focusing sudden bursts of sound.

While the ray's world had a distinct boundary just a short distance overhead, it appeared limitless in all other directions. The abyss held an uneasy fascination. Its mystery beckoned the ray, yet it seemed a perilous call into a world of darkness and cold. At night, when even the upper waters were lightless, it might have seemed less intimidating to confront the everlasting darkness below. But somehow, just knowing that there was light to return to made it feel safer to go in the daytime.

Thus, on one particularly sunny morning the ray gave a flap that might have been its version of a shrug and began planing down into the depths. The light quickly faded from deep blue through violet to black. The ray passed through a sharp boundary beneath which the water was much colder, and very quiet. It was also aware of an ever-mounting pressure which squeezed its eyeballs and pressed in on its bones. It used this as an excuse not to go any deeper.

Quietly, not daring to call attention to itself, it rippled through the topmost layer of the great abyss. As it grew accustomed to the profound stillness, it became aware of faint sounds which were unknown in the bright waters above. Eerie dronings wavered up from the deeps, the cries of creatures the ray did not know and could not envision. Great slow howls and rumbles filtered up through the black water, barely audible, but hard to ignore. The ray's other senses began to deliver fugitive flickers of data. It saw motes of dim light in the near distance, sometimes darting about like fish, sometimes flowing in hypnotic colors and patterns, capriciously appearing and disappearing. These fleeting hints of unknown creatures just at the limits of sensibility began to unnerve it.

Suddenly all the tiny lights went out. The ray sensed vibrations which swiftly intensified into pressure waves which could only be produced by a very large swimming animal.

Fear jarred the ray out of passivity. It probed the water with sonar, but whatever was coming was still too far off to detect by that means. A stunning bang lashed out at the ray, rattling it and driving it close to panic. It readied its full electric charge while fresh, deadly spines unsheathed themselves from its wings. Now its sonar revealed

something approaching rapidly. The ray aimed a tight beam of ultrasound at it, probing it like an X-ray, forming a mental image of its shape and internal makeup. It was long and roughly tubular, many times larger than the ray itself, divided into many smaller cylinders at the trailing end. The incongruous scale prevented the ray from recognizing it as a *squid* for several seconds. By the time it had accepted the fact of such a monster, the huge mollusc was upon it, barreling by in a wash of turbulence.

Not knowing what to make of that, the ray was a few moments late in perceiving a second contact just behind the first, this one even larger and far more massive. The ray's sonar gave a picture of gaping jaws in a huge, blunt head. In seconds those jaws would gobble him as an incidental tidbit between them and the giant squid which was their real quarry.

Out of desperation the ray fired its own sonar stun, a puny pop compared to what the whale had produced, followed by the release of every watt of charge it could muster. The whale muttered in surprise and changed its course slightly, sending the ray tumbling as the great wall-like flank rushed by.

BANG! BANG! The whale's sonar stuns disoriented the ray, even though they weren't even directed its way. By the time it had recovered, the tumult of the pursuit had dwindled to a few fading vibrations.

Taking stock of itself, the ray decided it had explored enough for the time being. It flapped its way upward, grateful when it crossed the boundary into warmer surface waters.

Someday, when it was better prepared, it would certainly return to the deeps.

The overworld, that other lair of mystery, interested the pseudo-ray at least as much as the abyss. Underwater, vision was perhaps its least useful sense, but above the waves everything flashed into sharp brilliance. It frequently leaped out of the water for a quick look at the strange world of thin gases and brilliant light. The Sun, only a wavering blur seen from underwater, became a crisp disk which left afterimages on its retina. At night the sky often showed smaller points of light which maintained fixed patterns.

The ray did not migrate or travel purposefully. Its feeding took it on a drunkard's walk, so that it covered a fairly small area in its wanderings. But after two years, when its weight had tripled and its wingspan increased to ten feet, it felt an urge to make its endless swimming count for something besides keeping its gut filled. The waters to the north seemed to beckon, so there went the ray at its relaxed rippling pace. After a week, the taste and smell of the water became richer and more complex, and the waves grew more turbulent. The ray aimed its sonar straight down, and for the first time in its life had proof that the sea did have a bottom. It leaped above the surface and saw a dark mass on the horizon, an island. With added energy it swam on, excited by the novelty. Presently the shoaling bottom became visible, a convoluted surface of coral inhabited by fish more varied, numerous, and colorful than any it had yet seen. Its diamond-shaped shadow flowed and shifted over the bottom as it flapped along. In the distance it could hear the purr and chug of small motorized boats. He could taste the sickening residue of their fuel in the water.

At about the four fathom contour the ray turned parallel to the coast and began to circle the island. The dry land which lay a mile farther on was a challenge for which it knew it wasn't ready. The coral reef below exerted a more urgent interest. Between jutting masses of staghorn coral were shadowy nooks and grottos which looked quite cozy. A strange weariness stole over the ray. Swimming became difficult. Its skin began to exude sheets of mucous, spoiling its streamlining.

The ray became alarmed, overwhelmed by an urge to find cover before its torpor incapacitated it completely. It fluttered weakly into a cave beneath a huge domelike mass of coral. The cave was already occupied by a moray eel, but a small electrical charge convinced it to look for a new hideaway.

The ray's flat body sent up puffs of coral sand as it came to rest on the cave floor. Its skin and mouth continued to exude clots of mucous which threatened to choke it. It spat the stuff out and pushed it away with its wings. There seemed no end to the foul slime, and it was hard to keep it cleared away to preserve some breathing room. The slime quickly hardened on exposure to seawater. The ray's efforts at piling it up around itself became increasingly spasmodic as its consciousness dimmed.

In a few hours the ray lay completely encased in a hardened mass of colorless goo. It must have been vile stuff, for the sharks, crabs, and octopi which came to investigate soon hurried away.

For months the irregular dome sat there, inert and undisturbed.

After a year and a half, the mass broke open from the inside, revealing a creature which resembled the pseudo-ray not at all. In horror he looked down at the weird new form which had been imposed upon him. Once a sleek arrow of the open waters, he now more resembled a clumsy crab with his new protuberances. His head was surrounded by a billowing mass of golden filaments. Flexing his muscles, his body moved in grotesque new ways he'd never imagined.

*He had become hinged.*