## Itself Surprised

Roger Zelazny

I’d never thought Fred Saberhagen would allow anyone else to write a berserker story, so I was surprised when he told me he was going to do just that, with Berserker Base (Tor, 1985), obtaining stories from Foul Anderson, Ed Bryant, Steve Donaldson, Larry Niven, and Connie Willis. Would I do one, too? Sure, I said. I was flattered, honored even. And it would give me an opportunity to try out an interesting notion Fd come up with on reading A Hideous History of Weapons, by Cherney Berg (Crowell-Collier, 1963). In following the development of weaponry from the primitive through the sophisticated Fd noted that weapons and defenses and new weapons really did appear to arise in response to each other with such a chartable predictability that the area might well be viewed as one of the few classic examples of a dialectic doing just what dialectics are supposed to do — thesis, antithesis, synthesis, ad nauseum. All I had to do was consider the berserker as the thesis and apply the formula.

Thanks, Fred; thanks, Cherney; thanks, Hegel....

It was said that a berserker could, if necessity required, assume even a pleasing shape. But there I was no such requirement here. Flashing through the billion-starred silence, the berserker was massive and dark and purely functional in design. It was a planet buster of a machine headed for the world called Corlano, where it would pound cities to rubble—eradicate an entire biosphere. It possessed the ability to do this without exceptional difficulty. No subtlety, no guile, no reliance on fallible goodlife were required. It had its directive; it had its weapons. It never wondered why this should be the way of its kind. It never questioned the directive. It never speculated whether it might be, in its own fashion, itself a life-form, albeit artificial. It was a single-minded killing machine, and if purpose may be considered a virtue, it was to this extent virtuous.

Almost unnecessarily, its receptors scanned far ahead. It knew that Corlano did not possess extraordinary defenses. It anticipated no difficulties.

Who hath drawn the circuits for the lion?

There was something very distant and considerably off course.... A world destroyer on a mission would not normally deviate for anything so tiny, however.

It rushed on toward Corlano, weapon systems ready.

Wade Kelman felt uneasy as soon as he laid eyes on the thing. He shifted his gaze to MacFarland and Dorphy.

“You let me sleep while you chased that junk down, matched orbits, grappled it? You realize how much time that wasted?”

“You needed the rest,” the small, dark man named Dorphy replied, looking away.

“Bullshit! You know I’d have said no!”

“It might be worth something, Wade,” MacFarland observed.

“This is a smuggling run, not a salvage operation. Time is important.”

“Well, we’ve got the thing now,” MacFarland replied. “No sense arguing over what’s done.”

Wade bit off a nasty rejoinder. He could push things only so far. He wasn’t really captain, not in the usual sense. The three of them were in this together—equal investments, equal risk. But he knew how to pilot the small vessel better than either of them. That and their deference to him up to this point had revived command reflexes from both happier and sadder days. Had they awakened him and voted on this bit of salvage, he would obviously have lost. He knew, however, that they would still look to him in an emergency.

He nodded sharply.

“All right, we’ve got it,” he said. “What the hell is it?”

“Damned if I know, Wade,” replied MacFarland, a stocky, light-haired man with pale eyes and a crooked mouth. He looked out through the lock and into the innards of the thing quick-sealed there beside them. “When we spotted it, I thought it was a lifeboat. It’s about the right size—”

“And?”

“We signaled, and there was no reply.”

“You mean you broke radio silence for that piece of junk?”

“If it was a lifeboat, there could be people aboard, in trouble.”

“Not too bloody likely, judging from its condition. Still,” he sighed, “you’re right. Go ahead.”

“No signs of any electrical activity either.”

“You chased it down just for the hell of it, then?”

Dorphy nodded.

“That’s about right,” he said.

“So, it’s full of treasure?”

“I don’t know what it’s full of. It’s not a lifeboat, though.”

“Well, I can see that.”

Wade peered through the opened lock into the interior of the thing. He took the flashlight from Dorphy, moved forward, and shone it about. There was no room for passengers amid the strange machinery.

“Let’s ditch it,” he said. “I don’t know what all that crap in there is, and it’s damaged anyway. I doubt it’s worth its mass to haul anywhere.”

“I’ll bet the professor could figure it out,” Dorphy said.

“Let the poor lady sleep. She’s cargo, not crew, anyway. What’s it to her what this thing is?”

“Suppose—just suppose—that’s a valuable piece of equipment,” Dorphy said. “Say, something experimental. Somebody might be willing to pay for it.”

“And suppose it’s a fancy bomb that never went off?”

Dorphy drew back from the hatch.

“I never thought of that.”

“I say deep-six it.”

“Without even taking a better look?”

“Right. I don’t even think you could squeeze very far in there.”

“Me? You know a lot more about engineering than either of us.”

“That’s why you woke me up, huh?”

“Well, now that you’re here—”

Wade sighed. Then he nodded slowly.

“That would be crazy and risky and totally unproductive.”

He stared through the lock at the exotic array of equipment inside. “Pass me that trouble light.”

He accepted the light and extended it through the lock.

“It’s been holding pressure okay?”

“Yeah. We slapped a patch on the hole in its hull.”

“Well, what the hell.”

He passed through the lock, dropped to his knees, leaned forward. He held the light before him, moved it from side to side. His uneasiness would not go away. There was something very foreign about all those cubes and knobs, their connections.... And that one large housing.... He reached out and tapped upon the hull. Foreign.

“I’ve got a feeling it’s alien,” he said.

He entered the small open area before him. Then he had to duck his head and proceed on his hands and knees. He began to touch things—fittings, switches, connectors, small units of unknown potential. Almost everything seemed designed to swivel, rotate, move along tracks. Finally, he lay flat and crawled forward.

“I believe that a number of these units are weapons,” he called out, after studying them for some time.

He reached the big housing. A panel slid partway open as he passed his fingertips along its surface. He pressed harder, and it opened farther.

“Damn you!” he said then, as the unit began to tick softly.

“What’s wrong?” Dorphy called to him.

“You!” he said, beginning to back away. “And your partner! You’re wrong!”

He turned as soon as he could and made his way back through the lock.

“Ditch it!” he said. “Now!”

Then he saw that Juna, a tall study in gray and paleness, stood leaning against a bulkhead, holding a cup of tea.

“And if we’ve got a bomb, toss it in there before you kick it loose!” he added.

“What did you find?” she asked him in her surprisingly rich voice.

“That’s some kind of fancy thinking device in there,” he told her. “It tried to kick on when I touched it. And I’m. sure a bunch of those gadgets are weapons. Do you know what that means?”

“Tell me,” she said.

“Alien design, weapons, brain. My partners just salvaged a damaged berserker, that’s what. And it’s trying to turn itself back on. It’s got to go—fast.”

“Are you absolutely certain that’s what it is?” she asked him.

“Certain, no. Scared, yes.”

She nodded and set her cup aside. She raised her hand to her mouth and coughed.

“I’d like to take a look at it myself before you get rid of it,” she said softly.

Wade gnawed his lower lip.

“Juna,” he said, “I can understand your professional interest in the computer, but we’re supposed to deliver you to Corlano intact, remember?”

She smiled for the first time since he’d met her some weeks before.

“I really want to see it.”

Her smile hardened. He nodded.

“Make it a quick look.”

“I’ll need my tools. And I want to change into some working clothes.”

She turned and passed through the hatch to her right. He glared at his partners, shrugged, and turned away.

Seated on the edge of his bunk and eating breakfast from a small tray while Dvorak’s Slavonic Dances swirled about him, Wade reflected on berserkers, Dr. Juna Bayel, computers in general, and how they all figured together in the reason for this trip. Berserker scouts had been spotted periodically in this sector during the past few years. By this time the berserkers must be aware that Corlano was not well defended. This made for some nervousness within the segment of Corlano’s population made up of refugees from a berserker attack upon distant Djelbar almost a generation before. A great number had chosen Corlano as a world far removed from earlier patterns of berserker activity. Wade snorted at a certain irony this had engendered. It was those same people who had lobbied so long and so successfully for the highly restrictive legislation Corlano now possessed regarding the manufacture and importation of knowledge-processing machines, a species of group paranoia going back to their berserker trauma.

There was a black market, of course. Machines more complicated than those allowed by law were needed by businesses, some individuals, and even the government itself. People like himself and his partners regularly brought in such machines and components. Officials usually looked the other way. He’d seen this same schizophrenia in a number of places.

He sipped his coffee.

And Juna Bayel... knowledge-systems specialists of her caliber were generally non grata there, too. She might have gone in as a tourist, but then she would have been subjected to scrutiny, making it more difficult to teach the classes she had been hired to set up.

He sighed. He was used to governmental double-thinking. He had been in the service. In fact ... no. Not worth thinking about all that again. Things had actually been looking up lately. A few more runs like this one and he could make the final payments on his divorce settlement and go into legitimate shipping, get respectable, perhaps even prosper—

The intercom buzzed. “Yes?”

“Dr. Bayel wants permission to do some tests on that brain in the derelict,” MacFarland said. “She wants to run some leads and hook it up to the ship’s computer. What do you think?”

“Sounds dangerous.” Wade replied. “Suppose she activates it? Berserkers aren’t very nice, in case you’ve never—”

“She says she can isolate the brain from the weapons systems,” MacFarland replied. “Besides, she says she doesn’t think it’s a berserker.”

“Why not?”

“First, it doesn’t conform to any berserker design configurations in our computer’s records—”

“Hell! That doesn’t prove anything. You know they can customize themselves for different jobs.”

“Second, she’s been on teams that examined wrecked berserkers. She says that this brain is different.”

“Well, it’s her line of work, and I’m sure she’s damned curious, but I don’t know. What do you think?”

“We know she’s good. That’s why they want her on Corlano. Dorphy still thinks that thing could be valuable, and we’ve got salvage rights. It might be worthwhile to let her dig a little. I’m sure she knows what she’s doing.”

“Is she handy now?”

“No. She’s inside the thing.”

“Sounds as if you’ve got me outvoted already. Tell her to go ahead.”

“Okay.”

Maybe it was good that he’d resigned his commission, he mused. Decisions were always a problem. Dvorak’s dance filled his head, and he pushed everything else away while he finished his coffee.

A long-dormant, deep-buried system was activated within the giant berserker’s brain. A flood of data suddenly pulsed through its processing unit. It began preparations to deviate from its course toward Corlano. This was not a fall from virtue but rather a response to a higher purpose.

Who laid the measure of the prey?

With sensitive equipment, Juna tested the compatibilities. She played with transformers and converters to adjust the power levels and cycling, to permit the hookup with the ship’s computer. She had blocked every circuit leading from that peculiar brain to the rest of the strange vessel—except for the one leading to its failed power source. The brain’s power unit was an extremely simple affair, seemingly designed to function on any radioactive material placed within its small chamber. This chamber contained only heavy, inert elements now. She emptied it and cleaned it, then refilled it from the ship’s own stores. She had expected an argument from Wade on this point, but he had only shrugged.

“Just get it over with,” he said, “so we can ditch it.”

4 We won’t be ditching it,” she said. “It’s unique.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re really afraid of it?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve rendered it harmless.”

“I don’t trust alien artifacts!” he snapped.

She brushed back her frosty hair.

“Look, I heard how you lost your commission—taking a berserker-booby-trapped lifeboat aboard ship,” she said. “Probably anyone would have done it. You thought you were saving lives.”

“I didn’t play it by the book,” he said, “and it cost lives. I’d been warned, but I did it anyway. This reminds me—”

“This is not a combat zone,” she interrupted, “and that thing cannot hurt us.”

“So get on with it!”

She closed a circuit and seated herself before a console.

“This will probably take quite a while,” she stated.

“Want some coffee?”

“That would be nice.”

The cup went cold, and he brought her another. She ran query after query, probing in a great variety of ways. There was no response. Finally she sighed, leaned back, and raised the cup.

“It’s badly damaged, isn’t it?” he said.

She nodded.

“I’m afraid so, but I was hoping that I could still get something out of it—some clue, any clue.”

She sipped the coffee.

“Clue?” he said. “To what?”

“What it is and where it came from. The thing’s incredibly old. Any information at all that might have been preserved would be an archaeological treasure.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish you had found something.”

She had swiveled her chair and was looking down into her cup. He saw the movement first.

“Juna! The screen!”

She turned spilling coffee in her lap.

“Damn!”

Row after row of incomprehensible symbols were flowing onto the screen.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

She leaned forward, forgetting him.

He must have stood there, his back against the bulkhead, watching, for over an hour, fascinated by the configurations upon the screen, by the movements of her long-fingered hands working unsuccessful combinations upon the keyboard. Then he noticed something that she had not, with her attention riveted upon the symbols.

A small, telltale light was burning at the left of the console. He had no idea how long it had been lit.

He moved forward. It was the voice-mode indicator.

The thing was trying to communicate at more than one level.

“Let’s try this,” he said.

He reached forward and threw the switch beneath the light.

“What—?”

A genderless voice, talking in clicks and moans, emerged from the speaker. The language was obviously exotic.

“God!” he said. “It is!”

“What is it?” She turned to stare at him. “You understand that language?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t understand it, but I think that I recognize it.”

“What is it?” she repeated.

“I have to be sure. I’m going to need another console to check this out,” he said. “I’m going next door. I’ll be back as soon as I have something.”

“Well, what do you think it is?”

“I think we are violating a tougher law than the smuggling statutes.”

“What?”

“Possession of, and experimentation with, a berserker brain.”

“You’re wrong,” she said.

“We’ll see.”

She watched him depart. She chewed a thumbnail, a thing she had not done in years. If he were right, it would have to be shut down, sealed off, and turned over to military authorities. On the other hand, she did not believe that he was right.

She reached forward and silenced the distracting voice. She had to hurry now, to try something different, to press for a breakthrough before he returned. He seemed too sure of himself. She felt that he might return with something persuasive, even if it were not correct.

So she instructed the ship’s computer to teach the captive brain to communicate in a Solarian tongue. Then she fetched herself a fresh cup of coffee and drank it.

More of its alarm systems came on as it advanced. The giant killing machine activated jets to slow its course. The first order to pass through its processor, once the tentative identification had been made, was, Advance warily.

It maintained the fix on the distant vessel and its smaller companion, but it executed the approach pattern its battle-logic bank indicated. It readied more weapons.

“All right,” Wade said later, entering and taking a seat. “I was wrong. It wasn’t what I thought.”

“Would you at least tell me what you’d suspected?” Juna asked.

He nodded. “I’m no great linguist,” he began, “but I love music. I have a very good memory for sounds of all sorts. I carry symphonies around in my head. I even play several instruments, though it’s been a while. But memory played a trick on me this time. I would have sworn that those sounds were similar to ones I’d heard on those copies of the Carmpan recordings—the fragmentary records we got from them concerning the Builders, the nasty race that made the berserkers. There are copies in the ship’s library, and I just listened to some again. It’d been years. But I was wrong. They sound different. I’m sure it’s not Builder-talk.”

“It was my understanding that the berserkers never had the Builders’ language code, anyhow,” she said.

“I didn’t know that. But for some reason, I was sure I’d heard something like it on those tapes. Funny ... I wonder what language it does talk?”

“Well, now I’ve given it the ability to talk to us. But it’s not too successful at it.”

“You instructed it in a Solarian language code?” he asked.

“Yes, but it just babbles. Sounds like Faulkner on a bad day.”

She threw the voice switch.

“... Prothector vincit damn the torpedoes and flaring suns like eyes three starboard two at zenith—”

She turned it off.

“Does it do that in response to queries, too?” he asked.

“Yes. Still, I’ve got some ideas—”

The intercom buzzed. He rose and thumbed an acknowledgement. It was Dorphy. “Wade, we’re picking up something odd coming this way,” the man said. “I think you’d better have a look.”

“Right.” he answered. “I’m on my way. Excuse me, Juna.”

She did not reply. She was studying new combinations on the screen.

“Moving to intersect our course. Coming fast,” Dorphy said.

Wade studied the screen, punched up data, which appeared as a legend to the lower right.

“Lots of mass there,” he observed.

“What do you think it is?”

“You say it changed course?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Too big to be any regular vessel.”

“Yes,” Wade observed. “All of this talk about berserkers might have made me jumpy, but—”

“Yeah. That’s what I was thinking, too.”

“Looks big enough to grill a continent.”

“Or fry a whole planet. I’ve heard of them in that league.”

“But Dorphy, if that’s what it is, it just doesn’t make any sense. Something like that, on its way to do a job like that—I can’t see it taking time out to chase after us. Must be something else.”

“What?”

“Don’t know.”

Dorphy turned away from the screen and licked his lips, frown lines appearing between his brows.

“I think it is one,” he said. “If it is, what should we do?”

Wade laughed briefly, harshly.

“Nothing,” he said then. “There is absolutely nothing we could do against a thing like that. We can’t outrun it, and we can’t outgun it. We’re dead if that’s what it really is and we’re what it wants. If that’s the case, though, I hope it tells us why it’s taking the trouble, before it destroys us.”

“There’s nothing at all that I should do?”

“You can send a message to Corlano. If it gets through, they’ll at least have a chance to put whatever they’ve got on the line. This close to their system it can’t have any other destination. If you’ve got religion, now might be a good time to go into it a little more deeply.”

“You defeatist son of a bitch! There must be something else!”

“If you think of it, let me know. I’ll be up talking to Juna. In the meantime, get that message sent.”

The berserker fired its maneuvering jets again. How close was too close when you were being wary? It continued to adjust its course. This had to be done just right. New directions kept running through its processor the nearer it got to its goal. It had never encountered a situation such as this before. But then this was an ancient program that had never before been activated. Ordered to train its weapons on the target but forbidden to fire them ... all because of a little electrical activity.

“... Probably come for its little buddy,” Wade finished.

“Berserkers don’t have buddies,” Juna replied.

“I know. I’m just being cynical. You find anything new?”

“I’ve been trying various scans to determine the extent of the damage. I believe that something like nearly half of its memory has been destroyed.”

“Then you’ll never get much out of it.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she said, and she sniffed once.

Wade turned toward her and saw that her eyes were moist.

“Juna—”

“I’m sorry, damn it. It’s not like me. But to be so close to something like this—and then be blasted by an idiot killing machine right before you find some answers. It just isn’t fair. You got a tissue?”

“Yeah. Just a sec.”

The intercom buzzed as he was fumbling with a wall dispenser.

“Patching in transmission,” Dorphy stated.

There was a pause, and then an unfamiliar voice said, “Hello. You are the captain of this vessel?”

“Yes, I am,” Wade replied. “And you are a berserker?”

“You may call me that.”

“What do you want?”

“What are you doing?”

“I am conducting a shipping run to Corlano. What do you want?”

“I observe that you are conveying an unusual piece of equipment. What is it?”

“An air-conditioning unit.”

“Do not lie to me, captain. What is your name?”

“Wade Kelman.”

“Do not lie to me, Captain Wade Kelman. The unit you bear in tandem is not a processor of atmospheric gases. How did you acquire it?”

“Bought it at a flea market,” Wade stated.

“You are lying again, Captain Kelman.”

“Yes, I am. Why not? If you are going to kill us, why should I give you the benefit of a straight answer to anything?”

“I have said nothing about killing you.”

“But that is the only thing you are noted for. Why else would you have come by?”

Wade was surprised at his responses. In any imagined conversation with death, he had never seen himself as being so reckless. It’s all in not having anything more to lose, he decided.

“I detect that the unit is in operation,” the berserker stated.

“So it is.”

“And what function does the unit perform for you?”

“It performs a variety of functions we find useful,” he stated.

“I want you to abandon that piece of equipment,” the berserker said.

“Why should I?” he asked.

“I require it.”

“I take it that this is a threat?”

“Take it as you would.”

“I am not going to abandon it. I repeat, why should I?”

“You are placing yourself in a dangerous situation.”

“I did not create this situation.”

“In a way you did. But I can understand your fear. It is not without justification.”

“If you were simply going to attack us and take it from us, you would already have done so, wouldn’t you?”

“That is correct. I carry only very heavy armaments for the work in which I am engaged. If I were to turn them upon you, you would be reduced to dust. This of course includes the piece of equipment I require.”

“All the more reason for us to hang onto it, as I see it.”

“This is logical, but you possess an incomplete pattern of facts.”

“What am I missing?”

“I have already sent a message requesting the dispatch of smaller units capable of dealing with you.”

“Then why are you even bothering to tell us all this?”

“I tell you this because it will take them some time to reach this place and I would rather be on my way to complete my mission than wait here for them.”

“Thank you. But we would rather die later than die now. We’ll wait.”

“You do not understand. I am offering you a chance to live.”

“What do you propose?”

“I want you to abandon that piece of equipment now. You may then depart.”

“And you will just let us go, unmolested?”

“I have the option of categorizing you as goodlife, if you will serve me. Abandon the unit and you will be serving me. I will categorize you as goodlife. I will then let you go, unmolested.”

“We have no way of knowing whether you will keep that promise.”

“That is true. But the alternative is certain death, and if you will but consider my size and the obvious nature of my mission, you will realize that your few lives are insignificant beside it.”

“You’ve made your point. But I cannot give you an instant answer. We must consider your proposal at some length.”

“Understandable. I will talk to you again in an hour.”

The transmission ended. Wade realized he was shaking. He sought a chair and collapsed into it. Juna was staring at him.

“Know any good voodoo curses?”

She shook her head and smiled fleetingly at him.

“You handled that very well.”

“No. It was like following a script. There was nothing else to do. There still isn’t.”

“At least you got us some time. I wonder why it wants the thing so badly?” Her eyes narrowed then. Her mouth tightened. “Can you get me the scan on that berserker?” she asked suddenly.

“Sure.”

He rose and crossed to the console.

“I’ll just cut over to the other computer and bring it in on this screen.”

Moments later, a view of the killing machine hovered before them. He punched up the legend, displaying all the specs his ship’s scanning equipment had been able to ascertain.

She studied the display for perhaps a minute, scrolling the legend. “It lied.”

“In what respects?” he asked.

“Here, here, and here,” she stated, pointing at features on the face of the berserker. “And here—” She indicated a part of the legend covering arms estimations.

Dorphy and MacFarland entered the cabin while she was talking.

“It lied when it said that it possesses only superior weapons and is in an overkill situation with respect to us. Those look like small-weapon mountings.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“It is probably capable of very selective firing—highly accurate, minimally destructive. It should be capable of destroying us with a high probability of leaving the artifact intact.”

“Why should it lie?” he asked.

“I wonder—” she said, gnawing her thumbnail again.

MacFarland cleared his throat.

“We heard the whole exchange,” he began, “and we’ve been talking it over.”

Wade turned his head and regarded him.

“Yes?”

“We think we ought to give it what it wants and run for it.”

“You believe that goodlife crap? It’ll blast us as we go.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “There’re plenty of precedents. They do have the option of classifying you that way, and they will make a deal if there’s something they really want.”

“Dorphy,” Wade asked, “did you get that message off to Corlano?”

The smaller man nodded.

“Good. If for no other reason, Corlano is why we’re going to wait here. It could take a while for those smaller units it was talking about to get here. Every hour we gain in waiting is another hour for them to bolster their defenses.”

“I can see that—” Dorphy began.

“... But there’s sure death for us at the end of the waiting,” MacFarland continued for him, “and this looks like a genuine way out. I sympathize with Corlano as much as you do, but us dying isn’t going to help. You know the place is not strongly defended. Whether we buy them a little extra time or not, they’ll still go under.”

“You don’t really know that,” Wade said. “Some seemingly weak worlds have beaten off some very heavy attacks in the past. And even the berserker said it—our few lives are insignificant next to an entire inhabited world.”

“Well, I’m talking probabilities, and I didn’t come in on this venture to be a martyr. I was willing to take my chances with criminal justice, but not with death.”

“How do you feel about it, Dorphy?” Wade asked.

Dorphy licked his lips and looked away.

“I’m with MacFarland,” he said softly.

Wade turned to Juna.

“I say we wait,” she said.

“Well, then, that makes two of us,” Wade observed.

“She doesn’t have a vote,” MacFarland stated. “She’s just a passenger.”

“It’s her life, too,” Wade answered. “She has a say.”

“She doesn’t want to give it that damned machine!” MacFarland shot back. “She wants to sit here and play with it while everything goes up in flames! What’s she got to lose? She’s dying anyway and—”

Wade snarled and rose to his feet.

“The discussion is ended. We stay.”

“The vote was a tie—at most.”

“I am assuming full command here, and I say that’s the way it’s going to be.”

MacFarland laughed.

“Full command! This is a lousy smuggling run, not the service you got busted out of, Wade. You can’t command any—”

Wade hit him, twice in the stomach and a left cross to the jaw.

MacFarland went down, doubled forward, and began gasping. Wade regarded him, considered his size. If he gets up within the next ten seconds this is going to be rough, he decided.

But MacFarland raised a hand only to rub his jaw. He said, “Damn!” softly and shook his head to clear it. “You didn’t have to do that, Wade.”

“I thought I did.”

MacFarland shrugged and rose to one knee.

“Okay, you’ve got your command,” he said. “But I still think that you’re making a big mistake.”

“I’ll call you next time there’s something to discuss,” Wade told him.

Dorphy reached to help him to his feet, but the larger man shook off his hand.

Wade glanced at Juna. She looked paler than usual, her eyes brighter. She stood before the hatchway to the opened lock as if to defend the passage.

“I’m going to take a shower and lie down,” MacFarland said.

“Good.”

Juna moved forward as the two men left the room. She took hold of Wade’s arm.

“It lied,” she said again softly. “Do you understand? It could blast us and recover the machine, but it doesn’t want to.”

“No,” Wade said. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s almost as if it’s afraid of the thing.”

“Berserkers do not know fear.”

“All right. I was anthropomorphizing. It’s as if it were under some constraint regarding it. I think we’ve got something very special here, something that creates an unusual problem for the berserker.”

“What could it be?”

“I don’t know. But there may be some way to find out, if you can just get me enough time. Stall for as long as you can.”

He nodded slowly and seated himself. His heart was racing.

“You said that about half of its memory was shot.” “It’s a guess, but yes. And I’m going to try to reconstruct it from what’s there.” “How?”

She crossed to the computer.

“I’m going to program this thing for an ultrahigh-speed form of Wiener analysis of what’s left in there. It’s a powerful nonlinear method for dealing with the very high noise levels we’re facing. But it’s going to have to make some astronomical computations for a system like this. We’ll have to patch in the others, maybe even pull some of the cargo. I don’t know how long this is going to take or even if it will really work.” She began to sound out of breath. “But we might be able to reconstruct what’s missing and restore it. That’s why I need all the time you can get me,” she finished.

“I’ll try. You go ahead. And—” “I know,” she said, coughing. “Thanks.” “I’ll bring you something to eat while you work.” “In my cabin,” she said, “in the top drawer, bedside table—there are three small bottles of pills. Bring them and some water instead.” “Right.”

He departed. On the way, he stopped in his cabin to fetch a handgun he kept in his dresser, the only weapon aboard the ship. He searched the drawers several times but could not locate it. He cursed softly and went to Juna’s cabin for her medicine.

The berserker maintained its distance and speculated while it waited. It had conceded some information in order to explain the proposed trade-off. Still, it could do no harm to remind Captain Kelman of the seriousness of his position. It might even produce a faster decision. Accordingly, the hydraulics hummed, and surface hatches were opened to extrude additional weapon mounts. Firing pieces were shifted to occupy these and were targeted upon the small vessel. Most were too heavy to take out to the ship without damaging its companion. Their mere display, though, might be sufficiently demoralizing.

Wade watched Juna work. While the hatch could be secured, there were several other locations within the ship from which it could be opened remotely. So he had tucked a pry bar behind his belt and kept an eye on the open hatch. It had seemed the most that he could do, short of forcing a confrontation that might go either way.

Periodically, he would throw the voice-mode switch and listen to that thing ramble, sometimes in Solarian, sometimes in the odd alien tongue that still sounded somehow familiar. He mused upon it. Something was trying to surface. She had been right about it, but—

The intercom buzzed. Dorphy.

“Our hour is up. It wants to talk to you again,” he said. “Wade, it’s pointing more weapons at us.”

“Switch it in,” he replied. He paused, then, “Hello?” he said.

“Captain Kelman, the hour has run out,” came the now-familiar voice. “Tell me your decision.”

“We have not reached one yet,” he answered. “We are divided on this matter. We need more time to discuss it further.”

“How much time?”

“I don’t know. Several hours at least.”

“Very well. I will communicate with you every hour for the next three hours. If you have not reached a decision during that time, I will have to reconsider my offer to categorize you as a goodlife.”

“We are hurrying,” Wade said.

“I will call you in an hour.”

“Wade,” Dorphy said at transmission’s end, “all those new weapons are pointed right at us. I think it’s getting ready to blast us if you don’t give it what it wants.”

“I don’t think so,” Wade said. “Anyhow, we’ve got some time now.”

“For what? A few hours isn’t going to change anything.”

“I’ll tell you in a few hours,” Wade said. “How’s MacFarland?”

“He’s okay.”

“Good.”

He broke the connection.

“Hell,” he said then.

He wanted a drink, but he didn’t want to muddy his thinking. He had been close to something.

He returned to Juna and the console.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Everything’s in place, and I’m running it now,” she said.

“How soon till you know whether it’s working?”

“Hard to tell.”

He threw the voice-mode switch again.

“Qwibbian-qwibbian-kel,” it said. “Qwibbian-qwib-bian-kel, maks qwibbian. Qwibbian-qwibbian-kel.”

“I wonder what that could mean,” he said.

“It’s a recurring phrase, or word—or whole sentence. A pattern analysis I ran a while back made me think that it might be its name for itself.”

“It has a certain lilt to it.”

He began humming. Then whistling and tapping his fingers on the side of the console in accompaniment.

“That’s it!” he announced suddenly. “It was the right place, but it was the wrong place.”

“What?” she asked.

“I have to check to be sure,” he said. “Hold the fort. Ill be back.”

He hurried off.

“The right place but the wrong place,” emerged from the speaker. “How can that be? Contradiction.”

“You’re coming together again!” she said.

“I—regain,” came the reply, after a time.

“Let us talk while the process goes on,” she suggested.

“Yes,” it answered, and then it lapsed again into rambling amid bursts of static.

Dr. Juna Bayel crouched in the lavatory cubicle and vomited. Afterward, she ground the heels of her hands into her eye sockets and tried to breathe deeply to overcome the dizziness and the shaking. When her stomach had settled sufficiently, she took a double dose of her medicine. It was a risk, but she had no real choice. She could not afford one of her spells now. A heavy dose might head it off. She clenched her teeth and her fists and waited.

Wade Kelman received the berserker’s call at the end of the hour and talked it into another hour’s grace. The killing machine was much more belligerent this time.

Dorphy radioed the berserker after he heard the latest transmission and offered to make a deal. The berserker accepted immediately.

The berserker retracted all but the four original gun mounts facing the ship. It did not wish to back down even to this extent, but Dorphy’s call had given it an appropriate-seeming reason. Actually, it could not dismiss the possibility that showing the additional weapons might have been responsible for the increased electrical activity it now detected. The directive still cautioned wariness and was now indicating nonprovocation as well.

Who hath drawn the circuit for the lion?

“Qwibbian,” said the artifact.

Juna sat, pale, before the console. The past hour had added years to her face. There was fresh grime on her coveralls. When Wade entered, he halted and stared.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “You look—”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t. I know you’re sick. We’re going to have to—”

“It’s really okay,” she said. “It’s passing. Let it be. I’ll be all right.”

He nodded and advanced again, displaying a small recorder in his left hand.

“I’ve got it,” he said then. “Listen to this.”

He turned on the recorder. A series of clicks and moans emerged. It ran for about a quarter-minute and stopped.

“Play it again, Wade,” she said, and she smiled at him weakly as she threw the voice-mode switch.

He complied.

“Translate,” she said when it was over.

“Take the—untranslatable—to the—untranslatable— and transform it upward,” came the voice of the artifact through the speaker.

“Thanks,” she said. “You were right.”

“You know where I found it?” he asked.

“On the Carmpan tapes.”

“Yes, but it’s not Builder-talk.”

“I know that.”

“And you also know what it is?”

She nodded. “It is the language spoken by the Builders’ enemies—the Red Race—against whom the berserkers were unleashed. There is a little segment showing the round red people shouting a slogan or a prayer or something. Maybe it’s even a Builder propaganda tape. It came from that, didn’t it?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

She patted the console.

“Qwib-qwib here is getting back on his mental feet. He’s even helping now. He’s very good at self-repair, now that the process has been initiated. We have been talking for a while, and I’m finally beginning to understand.”

She coughed, a deep, racking thing that brought tears to her eyes. “Would you get me a glass of water?”

“Sure.”

He crossed the cabin and fetched it.

“We have made an enormously important find,” she said as she sipped it. “It was good that the others kept you from cutting it loose.”

MacFarland and Dorphy entered the cabin. MacFarland held Wade’s pistol and pointed it at him.

“Cut it loose,” he said.

“No,” Wade answered.

“Then Dorphy will do it while I keep you covered. Suit up, Dorphy, and get a torch.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Wade said. “Juna was just telling me—”

MacFarland fired. The projectile ricocheted about the cabin, finally dropping to the floor in the far corner.

“Mac, you’re crazy!” Wade said. “You could just as easily hit yourself if you do that again.”

“Don’t move! Okay. That was stupid, but now I know better. The next one goes into your shoulder or your leg. I mean it. You understand?”

“Yes, damn it! But we can’t just cut that thing loose now. It’s almost repaired, and we know where it’s from, Juna says—”

“I don’t care about any of that. Two-thirds of it belong to Dorphy and me, and we’re jettisoning our share right now. If your third goes along, that’s tough. The berserker assures us that’s all it wants. It’ll let us go then. I believe it.”

“Look, Mac. Anything a berserker wants that badly is something we shouldn’t give it. I think I can talk it into giving us even more time.”

MacFarland shook his head.

Dorphy finished suiting up and took a cutting torch from a rack. As he headed for the open lock, Juna said, “Wait. If you cycle the lock, you’ll cut the cable. It’ll sever the connection to Qwib-qwib’s brain.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor,” MacFarland said. “But we’re in a hurry.”

From the console then came the words: “Our association is to be terminated?”

“I’m afraid so,” she answered. “I am sorry that I could not finish.”

“Do not. The process continues. I have assimilated the program and now use it myself. A most useful process.”

Dorphy entered the lock.

“I have one question, Juna, before good-bye,” it said.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked.

The lock began cycling closed, and Dorphy was already raising the torch to burn through the welds.

“My vocabulary is still incomplete. What does qwibbian mean in your language?”

The cycling lock struck the cable and severed it as she spoke; so she did not know whether it heard her say the word berserker.

Wade and MacFarland both turned.

“What did you say?” Wade asked.

She repeated it.

“You’re not making sense,” he said. “First you said that it wasn’t. Now—”

“Do you want to talk about words or machines?” she asked.

“Go ahead. You talk. I’ll listen.”

She sighed deeply and took another drink of water.

“I got the story from Qwib-qwib in pieces,” she began.

“I had to fill in some gaps with conjectures, but everything seemed to follow. Ages ago, the Builders apparently fought a war with the Red Race, who proved tougher than expected. So the Builders hit them with their ultimate weapon—the self-replicating killing machines we call berserkers.”

“That seems the standard story.”

“The Red Race went under,” she continued. “They were totally destroyed—but only after a terrific struggle. In the final days of the war, they tried all sorts of things, but by then it was a case of too little, too late. They were overwhelmed. They actually even tried something I had always wondered about—something no Solarian world would now dare to attempt, with all the restrictions on research along those lines, with all the paranoia.”

She paused for another sip.

“They built their own berserkers,” she went on then, “but not like the originals. They developed a killing machine that would attack only berserkers—an antiberserker berserker—for the defense of their home planet. But there were too few of them. They put them all on the line, around their world, and apparently they did a creditable job—they had something involving short jumps into and out of other spaces going for them. But they were vastly outnumbered in that last great mass attack. Ultimately, all of them fell.”

The ship gave a shudder. They turned toward the lock.

“He’s cut it loose, whatever it was,” MacFarland stated.

“It shouldn’t shake the whole ship that way,” Wade said.

“It would if it accelerated away the instant it was freed,” said Juna.

“But how could it, with all of its control circuits sealed?” Wade asked.

She glanced at the greasy smears on her coveralls.

“I reestablished its circuits when I learned the truth,” she told him. “I don’t know what percentage of its old efficiency it possesses, but I am certain that it is about to attack the berserker.”

The lock cycled open, and Dorphy emerged, began unfastening his suit as it cycled closed behind him.

“We’ve got to get the hell out of here!” MacFarland cried. “This area is about to become a war zone!”

“You care to do the piloting?” Wade asked him.

“Of course not.”

“Then give me my gun and get out of my way.” He accepted the weapon and headed for the bridge.

For so long as the screens permitted resolution, they watched—the ponderous movements of the giant berserker, the flashes of its energy blasts, the dartings and sudden disappearances and reappearances of its tiny attacker.

Later, some time after the images were lost, a fireball sprang into being against the starry black.

“He got it! He got it! Qwib-qwib got it!” Dorphy cried.

“And it probably got him, too,” MacFarland remarked. “What do you think, Wade?”

“What I think,” Wade replied, “is that I will never have anything to do with either of you again.”

He rose and left to go and sit with Juna. He took along his recorder and some music. She turned from watching the view on her own screen and smiled weakly as he seated himself beside her bed.

“I’m going to take care of you,” he told her, “until you don’t need me.”

“That would be nice,” she said.

Tracking. Tracking. They were coming. Five of them. The big one must have sent for them. Jump behind them and take out the two rear ones before the others realize what is happening. Another jump, hit the port flank and jump again. They’ve never seen these tactics. Dodge. Fire. Jump. Jump again. Fire. The last one is spinning like a top, trying to anticipate. Hit it. Charge right in. There.

The last qwibbian-qwibbian-kel in the universe departed the battle scene, seeking the raw materials for some fresh repair work. Then, of course, it would need still more, for the replications. Who hath drawn the circuits for the lion?