

Leviathon



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TWO MEN STOOD on one side of a thick glass wall. "You'll be airborne." Svetz's beefy red-faced boss was saying. "We made some improvements in the small extension cage while you were in the hospital. You can hover it or fly it at up to fifty miles per hour or let it fly itself: there's a constant-altitude setting. Your field of vision is total. We've made the shell of the extension cage completely transparent."

On the other side of the thick glass, something was trying to kill them. It was 40 feet long from nose to tail and was

equipped with vestigial batlike wings. Otherwise, it was built something like a slender lizard. It screamed and scratched at the glass with murderous claws.

The sign on the glass read:

GILA MONSTER

RETRIEVED FROM THE YEAR 230 ANTE ATOMIC, APPROXIMATELY, FROM THE REGION OF CHINA, EARTH. EXTINCT.

"You'll be well out of his reach," said Ra Chen.

"Yes, sir." Svetz stood with his arms folded about him, as if he had a chill. He

was being sent after the biggest animal that had ever lived; and Svetz was afraid of animals.

"For science' sake! What are you worried about Svetz? It's only a big fish!"

"Yes, sir. You said that about the Gila monster. It's just an extinct lizard, you said."

"We had only a drawing in a children's book to go by. How could we know it would be so big?"

The Gila monster drew back from the glass. It inhaled hugely and took aim. Yellow-and-orange flame spewed from

its nostrils and played across the glass. Svetz squeaked and jumped for cover.

"He can't get through," said Ra Chen.

Svetz picked himself up. He was a slender, small-boned man with pale skin, light-blue eyes and very fine ash-blond hair. "How could we know it would breathe fire?" he mimicked. "That lizard almost cremated me. I spent four months in the hospital, as it was. And what really burns me is, he looks less like the drawing every time I see him. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't get the wrong animal."

"What's the difference, Svetz? The secretary-general loved him. That's what

counts."

"Yes, sir. Speaking of the secretary-general, what does he want with a sperm whale? He's got a horse, he's got a Gila monster-"

"That's a little complicated." Ra Chen grimaced. "Palace politics! It's always complicated. Right now, Svetz, somewhere in the United Nations palace, a hundred different scientists are trying to get support, each for his own project. And every last one of them involves getting the attention of the secretary-general and holding it. Keeping his attention isn't easy."

Svetz nodded. Everybody knew about

the secretary-general.

The family that had ruled the United Nations for 700 years was somewhat inbred.

The secretary-general was 44 years old. He was a happy person; he loved animals and flowers and pictures and people. Pictures of planets and multiple star systems made him clap his hands and coo with delight; so the Institute for Space Research shared amply in the United Nations budget. But he liked extinct animals, too.

"Someone managed to convince the secretary-general that he wants the largest animal on earth. The idea may

have been to take us down a peg or two," said Ra Chen. "Someone may think we're getting too big a share of the budget.

"By the time I got onto it, the secretary-general wanted a Brontosaurus. We'd never have gotten him that. No extension cage will reach that far."

"Was it your idea to get him a whale, sir?"

"Yeah. It wasn't easy to persuade him. Whales have been extinct for so long that we don't even have pictures. All I had to show him was a crystal sculpture from Archaeology-dug out of the Steuben Glass building-and a Bible and a

dictionary. I managed to convince him that Leviathan and the sperm whale were one and the same."

"That's not strictly true." Svetz had read a computer-produced condensation of the Bible. The condensation had ruined the plot, in Svetz's opinion. "Leviathan could be anything big and destructive, even a horde of locusts."

"Thank science you weren't there to help, Svetz! The issue was confused enough. Anyway. I promised the secretary-general the largest animal that ever lived on earth. All the literature says that that animal was a whale. And there were sperm-whale herds all over the oceans as recently as the First

Century Ante-Atomic. You shouldn't have any trouble finding one."

"In twenty minutes?"

Ra Chen looked startled. "What?"

"If I try to keep the big extension cage in the past for more than twenty minutes. I'll never be able to bring it home. The-"

"I know that."

"-uncertainty factor in the energy constants-"

"Svetz-"

"-will blow the institute right off the

map."

"We thought of that, Svetz. You'll go back in the small extension cage. When you find a whale, you'll signal the big extension cage."

"Signal it how?"

"We've found a way to send a simple on-off pulse through time. Let's go back to the institute and I'll show you."

Malevolent golden eyes watched them through the glass as they walked away.

The small extension cage was the part of the time machine that did the moving. Within its transparent shell, Svetz

seemed to ride a flying armchair equipped with an airplane passenger's lunch tray; except that the lunch tray was covered with lights and buttons and knobs and crawling green lines. He was somewhere off the East Coast of North America, in or around the year 100 AnteAtomic or 1845 Anno Domini. The temporal-precession gauge was not particularly accurate.

Svetz skimmed low over water the color of lead, beneath a sky the color of slate. But for the rise and fall of the sea, he might almost have been suspended in an enormous sphere painted half light, half dark. He let the extension cage fly itself, 60 feet above the water, while he

watched the needle on the NAI, the Nervous Activities Indicator.

Hunting Leviathan.

His stomach was uneasy. Svetz had thought he was adjusting to the peculiar gravitational side effects of time travel. But apparently not.

At least he would not be here long.

On this trip, he was not looking for a mere 40-foot Gila monster. Now he hunted the largest animal that had ever lived. A most conspicuous beast. And now he had a life-seeking instrument, the NAI.

The needle twitched violently.

Was it a whale? But the needle was trembling in apparent indecision. A cluster of sources, then. Svetz looked in the direction indicated.

A clipper ship, winged with white sail, long and slender and graceful as hell. Crowded, too, Svetz guessed. Many humans, closely packed, would affect the NAI in just that manner. A sperm whale—a single center of complex nervous activity—would attract the needle as violently, without making it jerk about like that.

The ship would interfere with reception. Svetz turned east and away, but not

without regret. The ship was beautiful.

The uneasiness in Svetz's belly was getting worse, not better.

Endless gray-green water, rising and falling beneath his flying armchair.

Enlightenment came like something clicking in his head. Seasick. On automatic, the extension cage matched its motion to that of the surface over which it flew; and that surface was heaving in great dark swells.

No wonder his stomach was uneasy! Svetz grinned and reached for the manual controls.

The NAI needle suddenly jerked hard over. A bite! thought Svetz, and he looked off to the right. No sign of a ship. And submarines hadn't been invented yet. Had they? No, of course they hadn't.

The needle was rock-steady.

Svetz flipped the call button.

The source of the tremendous NAI signal was off to his right and moving. Svetz turned to follow it. It would be minutes before the call signal reached the Institute for Temporal Research and brought the big extension cage with its weaponry for hooking Leviathan.

Many years ago, Ra Chen had dreamed

of rescuing the library at Alexandria from Caesar's fire. For this purpose, he had built the big extension cage. Its door was a gaping iris, big enough to be loaded while the library was actually burning. Its hold, at a guess, was at least twice large enough to hold all the scrolls in that ancient library.

The big cage had cost a fortune in government money. It had failed to go back beyond 400 A.A., or 1545 A.D. The books burned at Alexandria were still lost to history, or at least to historians.

Such a boondoggle would have broken other men. Somehow, Ra Chen had survived the blow to his reputation.

He had pointed out the changes to Svetz after they returned from the zoo. "We've fitted the cage out with heavy-duty stunners and anti-gravity beams. You'll operate them by remote control. Be careful not to let the stun beam touch you. It would kill even a sperm whale if you held it on him for more than a few seconds and it'd kill a man instantly. Other than that, you should have no problems."

It was at that moment that Svetz's stomach began to hurt.

"Our major change is the call button. It will actually send us a signal through time, so that we can send the big

extension cage back to you. We can land it right beside you, no more than a few minutes off. That took considerable research. Svetz. The treasury raised our budget for this year, so that we could get that whale."

Svetz nodded.

"Just be sure you've got a whale before you call for the big extension cage."

Now, 1200 years earlier, Svetz followed an underwater source of nervous impulse. The signal was intensely powerful. It could not be anything smaller than an adult bull sperm whale.

A shadow formed in the air to his right. Svetz watched it take shape: a great gray-blue sphere floating beside him. Around the rim of the door were anti-gravity beamers and heavy-duty stun guns. The opposite side of the sphere wasn't there; it simply faded away.

To Svetz, that was the most frightening thing about any time machine: the way it seemed to turn a corner that wasn't there.

Svetz was almost over the signal. Now he used the remote controls to swing the anti-gravity beamers around and down.

He had them locked on the source. He switched them on and dials surged.

Leviathan was heavy. More massive than Svetz had expected. He upped the power and watched the NAI needle swing as Leviathan rose invisibly through the water.

Where the surface of the water bulged upward under the attack of the antigravity beams, a shadow formed. Leviathan rising...

Was there something wrong with the shape?

Then a trembling spherical bubble of water rose, shivering, from the ocean, and Leviathan was within it.

Partly within it. He was too big to fit,

though he should not have been.

He was four times as massive as a sperm whale should have been and a dozen times as long. He looked nothing like the crystal Steuben sculpture. Leviathan was a kind of serpent, armored with red-bronze scales as big as a viking's shield, armed with teeth like ivory spears. His triangular jaws gaped wide. As he floated toward Svetz, he writhed, seeking with his bulging yellow eyes for whatever strange enemy had subjected him to this indignity.

Svetz was paralyzed with fear and indecision. Neither then nor later did he doubt that what he saw was the Biblical Leviathan. This had to be the largest

beast that had ever roamed the sea; a beast large enough and fierce enough to be synonymous with anything big and destructive. Yet-if the crystal sculpture was anything like representational, this was not a sperm whale at all.

In any case, he was far too big for the extension cage.

Indecision stayed his hand-and then Svetz stopped thinking entirely, as the great slitted irises found him.

The beast was floating past him. Around its waist was a sphere of weightless water that shrank steadily as gobbets dripped away and rained back to the sea. The beast's nostrils flared-it was

obviously an air breather, though not a cetacean.

It stretched, reaching for Svetz with gaping jaws.

Teeth like scores of elephant's tusks all in a row. Polished and needle-sharp. Svetz saw them close about him from above and below, while he sat frozen in fear.

At the last moment, he shut his eyes tight.

When death did not come, Svetz opened his eyes.

The jaws had not entirely closed on Svetz and his armchair. He heard them

grinding faintly against-against the invisible surface of the extension cage, whose existence Svetz had forgotten entirely.

Svetz resumed breathing. He would return home with an empty extension cage, to face the wrath of Ra Chen-a fate better than death. He moved his fingers to cut the anti-gravity beams from the big extension cage.

Metal whined against metal. Svetz whiffed hot oil, while red lights blinked on all over his lunch-tray control board. He hastily turned the beams on again.

The red lights blinked out, one by reluctant one.

Through the transparent shell, Svetz could hear the grinding of teeth. Leviathan was trying to chew his way into the extension cage.

His released weight had nearly torn the cage loose from the rest of the time machine. Svetz would have been stranded in the past, 100 miles out to sea, in a broken extension cage that probably wouldn't float, with an angry sea monster waiting to snap him up. No, he couldn't turn off the anti-gravity beamers.

But the beamers were on the big extension cage, and he couldn't hold it more than about 15 minutes longer. When the big cage was gone, what

would prevent Leviathan from pulling him to his doom?

"I'll stun him off," said Svetz.

There was dark-red palate above him and red gums and forking tongue beneath, and the long curved fangs all around. But between the two rows of teeth, Svetz could see the big extension cage and the battery of stunners around the door. By eye, he rotated the stunners until they pointed straight toward Leviathan.

"I must be out of my mind," said Svetz, and he spun the stunners away from him. He couldn't fire them at Leviathan without hitting himself.

And Leviathan wouldn't let go.

Trapped.

No, he thought with a burst of relief. He could escape with his life. The go-home lever would send his small extension cage out from between the jaws of Leviathan, back into the time stream. back to the institute. His mission had failed, but that was hardly his fault. Why had Ra Chen been unable to uncover mention of a sea serpent bigger than a sperm whale?

"It's all his fault," said Svetz. And he reached for the go-home lever. But he stayed his hand.

"I can't just tell him so," he said. For Ra Chen terrified him.

The grinding of teeth came through the extension cage.

"Hate to just quit," said Svetz. "Think I'll try something. . .

He could see the anti-gravity beamers by looking between the teeth. He could feel their influence, so nearly were they focused on the extension cage itself. If he focused them just on himself. .

He felt the change; he felt both strong and lightheaded, like a drunken ballet master. And if he now narrowed the focus...

The monster's teeth seemed to grind harder. Svetz looked between them, as best he could.

Leviathan was no longer floating. He was hanging straight down from the extension cage, hanging by his teeth. The antigravity beamers still balanced the pull of his mass, but now they did so by pulling straight up on the extension cage.

The monster was in obvious distress. Naturally. A water beast, he was supporting his own mass for the first time in his life. And by his teeth! His yellow eyes rolled frantically. His tail twitched slightly at the very tip. And still he clung.

"Let go," said Svetz. "Let go, you. . . monster."

The monster's teeth slid, screeching, down the transparent surface, and he fell.

Svetz cut the anti-gravity a fraction of a second late. He smelled burnt oil and there were tiny red lights blinking off one by one on his lunch-tray control board.

Leviathan hit the water with a sound of thunder. His long, sinuous body rolled over and floated to the surface and lay as if dead. But his tail flicked once and Svetz knew that he was alive.

"I could kill you," said Svetz. "Hold the stunners on you until you're dead. There's time."

But he still had ten minutes to search for a sperm whale. It wasn't time enough. It didn't begin to be time enough, but if he used it all...

The sea serpent flicked its tail and began to swim away. Once, he rolled to look at Svetz and his jaws opened wide in fury. He finished his roll and was fleeing again.

"Just a minute." Svetz said thickly. "Just a science-perverting minute, there." And he swung the stunners to focus.

Gravity behaved strangely inside an extension cage. While the cage was moving forward in time, down was all directions outward from the center of the cage. Svetz was plastered against the curved wall. He waited for the trip to end.

Seasickness was nothing compared with the motion sickness of time travel.

Free fall, then normal gravity. Svetz moved unsteadily to the door.

Ra Chen was waiting to help him out. "Did you get it?"

"Leviathan? No, sir." Svetz looked past his boss. "Where's the big extension

cage?"

"We're bringing it back slowly, to minimize the gravitational side effects. But if you don't have the whale-"

"I said I don't have Leviathan."

"Well, just what do you have?" Ra Chen demanded.

Somewhat later, he said. "It wasn't?"

Later yet, he said. "You killed him? Why, Svetz? Pure spite?"

"No. sir. It was the most intelligent thing I did during the entire trip."

"But why? Never mind, Svetz, here's the big extension cage." A gray-blue shadow congealed in the hollow cradle of the time machine. "And there does seem to be something in it. Hi, you idiots, throw an anti-gravity beam inside the cage! Do you want the beast crushed?"

The cage had arrived. Ra Chen waved an arm in signal. The door opened.

Something tremendous hovered within the big extension cage. It looked like a malevolent white mountain in there, peering back at its captors with a single tiny, angry eye. It was trying to get at Ra Chen, but it couldn't swim in air.

Its other eye was only a torn socket. One

of its flippers was ripped along the trailing edge. Rips and ridges and puckers of scar tissue, and a forest of broken wood and broken steel, marked its tremendous expanse of albino skin. Lines trailed from many of the broken harpoons. High up on one flank, bound to the beast by broken and tangled lines, was the corpse of a bearded man with one leg.

"Hardly in mint condition, is he?" Ra Chen observed.

"Be careful, sir. He's a killer. I saw him ram a sailing ship and sink it clean before I could focus the stunners on him."

"What amazes me is that you found him at all in the time you had left. Svetz, I do not understand your luck. Or am I missing something?"

"It wasn't luck, sir. It was the most intelligent thing I did the entire trip."

"You said that before. About killing Leviathan."

Svetz hurried to explain. "The sea serpent was just leaving the vicinity. I wanted to kill him, but I knew I didn't have the time. I was about to leave myself, when he turned back and bared his teeth.

"He was an obvious carnivore. Those

teeth were built strictly for killing, sir. I should have noticed earlier. And I could think of only one animal big enough to feed a carnivore that size."

"Ahhh. Brilliant, Svetz."

"There was corroborative evidence. Our research never found any mention of giant sea serpents. The great geological surveys of the First Century Post-Atomic should have turned up something. Why didn't they?"

"Because the sea serpent quietly died out two centuries earlier, after whalers killed off his food supply."

Svetz colored. "Exactly. So I turned the

stunners on Leviathan before he could swim away and I kept the stunners on him until the NAI said he was dead. I reasoned that if Leviathan was there, there must be whales in the vicinity."

"And Leviathan's nervous output was masking the signal."

"Sure enough, it was. The moment he was dead, the NAI registered another signal. I followed it to"-Svetz jerked his head. They were floating the whale out of the extension cage- "to him."

Days later, two men stood on one side of a thick glass wall.

"We took some clones from him, then

passed him on to the secretary-general's vivarium," said Ra Chen. "Pity you had to settle for an albino." He waved aside Svetz's protest: "I know, I know, you were pressed for time."

Beyond the glass, the one-eyed whale glared at Svetz through murky sea water. Surgeons had removed most of the harpoons, but scars remained along his flanks; and Svetz, awed, wondered how long the beast had been at war with man. Centuries? How long did sperm whales live?

Ra Chen lowered his voice. "We'd all be in trouble if the secretary-general found out that there was once a bigger animal than this. You understand that,

don't you, Svetz?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Ra Chen's gaze swept across another glass wall and a fire-breathing Gila monster. Farther down, a horse looked 'back at him along the dangerous spiral horn in its forehead.

"Always we find the unexpected," said Ra Chen. "Sometimes I wonder."

If you'd do your research better, Svetz thought.

"Did you know that time travel wasn't even a concept until the First Century Ante-Atomic? A writer invented it.

From then until the Fourth Century Post-Atomic, time travel was pure fantasy. It violates everything the scientists thought were natural laws. Logic. Conservation of matter and energy. Momentum, reaction, any law of motion that makes time a part of the statement. Relativity.

"It strikes me," said Ra Chen, "that every time we push an extension cage past that particular five-century period, we shove it into a world that isn't really natural. That's why you keep finding giant sea serpents and fire-breathing-"

"That's nonsense," said Svetz. He was afraid of his boss, yes; but there were limits.

"You're right," Ra Chen said instantly. Almost with relief.

"Take a month's vacation. Svetz, then back to work. The secretary general wants a bird."

"A bird?" Svetz smiled. A bird sounded harmless enough. "I suppose he found it in another children's book?"

"That's right. Ever hear of a roc?"