

LOSING MY APPETITE

I'm sitting in Zillbang's Light Restaurant, an arched stone room thirty feet square and a mile underground, picking at the scales on the back of my left hand. I'm looking for a killer. Shouting and singing in the understreet outside bang words and drums and bells together as another band goes by. Grease from my sandwich drips down the side of my left index finger. When the docs reassembled me they had to replace some missing flesh, so I asked them for lizard in gunmetal blue. I like variety. Every so often it itches and a few scales flake off. Maybe, I think, it'll all flake off someday and I won't be anything underneath. At least it isn't my prick.

The soft heavy whoosh of the constructors across the way rises again as they chew the native stone like putty and spew it out into the start of a fast-hardening concrete colonnade. I watch and feel their waves of heat and vapor wash over me. Abrupt silence, then shouts. The operators scramble from their cabs and run to the front of one machine, to begin prying something free. Then one of them turns and runs past me into the restaurant. She yells to the counterwoman, "We hit a pocket. There's bodies in there. Call the blues."

Bodies. I get up and follow her back to the machines. There's nothing special about finding bodies down here, so I'm curious about the fuss. Others are gathering where the two operators are now freeing the constructor nozzles from the material they penetrated and got stuck in: flesh. The bodies are bloated and look half-eaten. The unique burning shitrot smell of death rises in the steaming heat. Both operators are retching and covering their faces. There are some rags of cloth and chunks of carapiece armor left on the bones. There seem to be five or six bodies, dead about a month. These remains were special service police; I see the insignia on a chewed belt. This is going to bring down major trouble.

"The Lady!" I hear next to me. A bone-and-wire man with near dead-white paper skin is staring at the bodies, unaware of anyone near him. "That's her work. How can this be? They blasted her to bits a year ago." He glances at me and slips away just before his words register. I'm looking for a lady, or something pretending to be one. I look up and down the understreet for him, but he's gone. I go back to Zillbang's and sit.

No appetite now. I set the burger down. I'm wiping grease off my fingers when a tall near-insect with long limbs next to me knocks the spice jars over onto my pants. "Hey!" I yell. Its belly shell is marked with liquid lightnings in a staggered pattern.

It fixes me with a chameleon eye while it chews a spiny thing with legs, maybe a crab. Its buccal palps vibrate. Then it says in a grating soprano, “Have some spice. Ought to help that turd you’re eating.”

It’s carrying a long-barrelled beam gun in a holster, and I’m not. I pick up the spice jars and clean myself off with a napkin. The thing shrills, “What’s the matter? Are you deaf?”

Now its eyes are both aimed at me and it has one hand on its gun. Maybe, I think, it’s going to leave my bones here. But then there’s a bag over its head, and the gun is in two broken pieces. Muffled screeches come from the bag as Zillbang’s bouncer picks it up and heaves it into the understreet outside. He smiles at me with a large number of pointed teeth, displaying bits of greenburger between them. He is as large as the stone pillar next to us. Pinned through his big left nostril, he wears an eight-pointed, wavy-armed titanium star, its arms curling to grasp his nasal contours.

“He shouldn’t have said that about our food. He doesn’t belong here.” The bouncer turns his head and spits.

“You’re right.” I finish my burger. It tastes good just now. I get up to leave.

“The spice, that’ll be twenty-five more.”

“What?? I didn’t...”

“Twenty-five more, or I’ll go get that bug-eyed thing back in here just for you.”

I pay and leave. The thing the bouncer threw out is still trying to get the bag off its head, and two skinny kids with bright green eyes are watching it. One has a long knife and a funny grin. The other one’s hands and wrists are stained red-brown. As I turn the corner I hear a rasping soprano squall. Another food chain.