

## **The Doors of His Face, The Lamps of His Mouth**

I'm a baitman. No one is born a baitman, except in a French novel where everyone is. (In fact, I think that's the title, *We are All Bait*. Pfft!) How I got that way is barely worth the telling and has nothing to do with neo-exes, but the days of the beast deserve a few words, so here they are.

The Lowlands of Venus lie between the thumb and forefinger of the continent known as Hand. When you break into Cloud Alley it swings its silverblack bowling ball toward you without a warning. You jump then, inside that firetailed tenpin they ride you down in, but the straps keep you from making a fool of yourself. You generally chuckle afterwards, but you always jump first.

Next, you study Hand to lay its illusion and the two middle fingers become dozen-ringed archipelagoes as the outers resolve into greengray peninsulas; the thumb is too short, and curls like the embryo tail of Cape Horn.

You suck pure oxygen, sigh possibly, and begin the long topple back to the Lowlands.

There, you are caught like an infield fly at the Lifeline landing area—so named because of its nearness to the great delta in the Eastern Bay—located between the first peninsula and “thumb.” For a minute it seems as if you're going to miss Lifeline and wind up as canned seafood, but afterwards—shaking off the metaphors—you descend to scorched concrete and present your middle-sized telephone directory of authorizations to the short, fat man in the gray cap. The papers show that you are not subject to mysterious inner rottings and etcetera. He then smiles you a short, fat,

gray smile and motions you toward the bus which hauls you to the Reception Area. At the R.A. you spend three days proving that, indeed, you are not subject to mysterious inner rottings and etcetera.

Boredom, however, is another rot. When your three days are up, you generally hit Lifeline hard, and it returns the compliment as a matter of reflex. The effects of alcohol in variant atmospheres is a subject on which the connoisseurs have written numerous volumes, so I will confine my remarks to noting that a good binge is worthy of at least a week's time and often warrants a lifetime study.

I had been a student of exceptional promise (strictly undergraduate) for going on two years when the *Bright Water* fell through our marble ceiling and poured its people like targets into the city.

Pause. The Worlds Almanac re Lifeline: “. . . Port city on the eastern coast of Hand. Employees of the Agency for Non-terrestrial Research comprise approximately 85% of its 100,000 population (2010 Census). Its other residents are primarily personnel maintained by several industrial corporations engaged in basic research. Independent marine biologists, wealthy fishing enthusiasts, and waterfront entrepreneurs make up the remainder of its inhabitants.”

I turned to Mike Dabis, a fellow entrepreneur, and commented on the lousy state of basic research.

“Not if the mumbled truth be known.”

He paused behind his glass before continuing the slow swallowing process calculated to obtain my interest and a few oaths, before he continued.

“Carl,” he finally observed, poker playing, “they’re shaping Tensquare.”

I could have hit him. I might have refilled his glass with sulfuric acid and looked on with glee as his lips blackened

and cracked. Instead, I grunted a noncommittal.

“Who’s fool enough to shell out fifty grand a day? ANR?”

He shook his head.

“Jean Luharich,” he said, “the girl with the violet contacts and fifty or sixty perfect teeth. I understand her eyes are really brown.”

“Isn’t she selling enough face cream these days?”

He shrugged.

“Publicity makes the wheels go ‘round. Luharich Enterprise jumped sixteen points when she picked up the Sun Trophy. You ever play golf on Mercury?”

I had, but I overlooked it and continued to press.

“So she’s coming here with a blank check and a fishhook?”

“*Bright Water*, today,” he nodded. “Should be down by now. Lots of cameras. She wants an Ikky, bad.”

“Hmm,” I hmmed. “How bad?”

“Sixty day contract. Tensquare. Indefinite extension clause. Million and a half deposit,” he recited.

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“I’m Personnel Recruitment. Luharich Enterprises approached me last month. It helps to drink in the right places.

“Or own them.” He smirked, after a moment.

I looked away, sipping my bitter brew. After awhile I swallowed several things and asked Mike what he expected to be asked, leaving myself open for his monthly temperance lecture.

“They told me to try getting you,” he mentioned. “When’s the last time you sailed?”

“Month and a half ago. *The Corning*.”

“Small stuff,” he snorted. “When have you been under,

yourself?”

“It’s been awhile.”

“It’s been over a year, hasn’t it? That time you got cut by the screw, under the *Dolphin*?”

I turned to him.

“I was in the river last week, up at Angleford where the currents are strong. I can still get around.”

“Sober,” he added.

“I’d stay that way,” I said, “on a job like this.”

A doubting nod.

“Straight union rates. Triple time for extraordinary circumstances,” he narrated. “Be at Hangar Sixteen with your gear, Friday morning, five hundred hours. We push off Saturday, daybreak.”

“You’re sailing?”

“I’m sailing.”

“How come?”

“Money.”

“Ikky guano.”

“The bar isn’t doing so well and baby needs new minks.”

“I repeat—”

“. . . And I want to get away from baby, renew my contract with basics—fresh air, exercise, make cash . . .”

“All right, sorry I asked.”

I poured him a drink, concentrating on H2S04, but it didn’t transmute. Finally I got him soused and went out into the night to walk and think things over.

Around a dozen serious attempts to land *Ichthyform Leviosaurus Levianthus*, generally known as “Ikky,” had been made over the past five years. When Ikky was first sighted, whaling techniques were employed. These proved either fruitless or disastrous, and a new procedure was inaugurated. Tensquare was constructed by a wealthy

sportsman named Michael Jandt, who blew his entire roll on the project.

After a year on the Eastern Ocean, he returned to file bankruptcy. Carlton Davits, a playboy fishing enthusiast, then purchased the huge raft and laid a wake for Ikky's spawning grounds. On the nineteenth day out he had a strike and lost one hundred fifty bills' worth of untested gear, along with one *Ichthyform Levianthus*. Twelve days later, using tripled lines, he hooked, narcotized, and began to hoist the huge beast. It awakened then, destroyed a control tower, killed six men, and worked general hell over five square blocks of Tensquare. Carlton was left with partial hemiplegia and a bankruptcy suit of his own. He faded into water-front atmosphere and Tensquare changed hands four more times, with less spectacular but equally expensive results.

Finally, the big raft, built only for one purpose, was purchased at an auction by ANR for "marine research." Lloyd's still won't insure it, and the only marine research it has ever seen is an occasional rental at fifty bills a day—to people anxious to tell Leviathan fish stories. I've been a baitman on three of the voyages, and I've been close enough to count Ikky's fangs on two occasions. I want one of them to show my grandchildren, for personal reasons.

I faced the direction of the landing area and resolved a resolve.

"You want me for local coloring, gal. It'll look nice on the feature page and all that. But clear this—If anyone gets you an Ikky, it'll be me. I promise."

I stood in the empty Square. The foggy towers of Lifeline shared their mists.

Shoreline a couple eras ago, the western slope above Lifeline stretches as far as forty miles inland in some places.