

PLANET OF DREAD

By Dwight V. Swain

**Surrounded by its many suns, Lysor scorned
Federation rule and plotted the destruction of our
galaxy. So Craig Nesom came in a starship to this—**

CHAPTER I

Face slack, eyes glazed with terror, the Baemae wench came forward through the gate into the walled ring.

An appreciative murmur ran through the crowd. As one, the assembled Kukzubas barons and their ladies pressed closer about the pit-rail, tense and eager with anticipation.

High on his dais, Lord Zenaor chuckled. "A pretty thing, is she not, Vydys?" he queried of the woman who sat beside him, dark vision of sinister beauty.

Hot with strange passion, the woman's eyes clung to the cringing figure in the pit. The pink tip of her tongue flicked at her lips. "If you can see your way to calling any Baemae woman pretty. For my part, I prefer her in her proper role, as prey here in the games."

"So—?" Lord Zenaor raised a mocking coal-black eyebrow. "No wonder they call you 'Vydys the Cruel' behind your back, my dear! If you had your way, there'd soon be no Baemae left alive to serve us."

Visibly, Vydys stiffened. Her head came round—dark eyes flashing, jet hair ashimmer; and when she spoke her words were edged with fury. "Have a care, Zenaor! I've no taste for taunts, even from the chief of barons."

"The truth is no taunt." Zenaor gave not a fraction. "Because pain is your passion, you drive our serfs to rebellion."

"Rebellion—!" The woman's eyes glinted like crater diamonds. "How many of the Baemae have flown south with their cursed discs already, off to the djevoda ranges? There lies your rebellion—and only torture will stop it!" Her laugh rang gall-bitter. "Or perhaps, like that Narla, you believe we should free them?"

"Keep your tongue off my daughter!" It was a command that brooked no discussion. "As for the free range, the discs, cross them off. They'll soon be no menace."

"Oh?" Vydys' lips twisted, mocking. "No, doubt you have a plan, my lord Zenaor—"

"I have a plan indeed." Zenaor's tone was icy. "One word too many, and you'll die as its first step."

Vydys faltered.

"You see, my dear, our goals are different." Zenaor clipped, smiling thinly. "You lust after pain, I after power. As chief of barons, I mean to have it—and that means holding down the Baemae. But I'll waste no time on half-way measures. When I strike, it will be in my own way, and it will win. And"—now he leaned forward, close to Vydys—"and even one lovely as you shall die if in that moment she plots against me."

Vydys' nostrils flared. But before she could speak, the chief of barons turned away. He raised his voice till it echoed through the great vaulted hall. "Wench! Are you ready?"

Below him, in the ring, the Baemae girl's lips moved in a soundless agony of panic.

A ripple of laughter rose from the crowd. Packed bodies shifted and pressed tighter. Hungrily, mercilessly, a thousand eyes appraised the evening's victim.

Zenaor said, "Wench, tonight you meet the Lady Vydys' roller. If you survive, I'll make a place for you in my own harem. If not...." He shrugged: turned back to Vydys. "My dear—"

Vydys' high, proud breasts rose on a quick-drawn breath. Lithely, she twisted in her seat. "My helm, serf!"

The rawboned Baemae youth who wore her livery lifted the ornate metal headdress from its case; stepped forward. His face was pale, sweat-beaded. His hands trembled.

Vydys' eyes distended. "Why do you shake so, carrion?"

The youth's voice quavered. "She—that girl...." He floundered, groped. "She—she is my sister, Lady Vydys."

"Your sister!" The mask of anger fell away from Vydys' face. "You mean she is of your blood? You love her?"

Mutely, the serfman nodded.

"And you would suffer were she to meet my roller?"

Again, the liveried Baemae's head moved in silent affirmation.

A light gleamed deep in Vydys' eyes, all dark and evil. Once more, she ran the small, pink tongue along her lips, as if savoring the tension of the moment.

"You—you will spare her—?" The youth's words came out a hoarse, cracked whisper.

"Spare her—and spoil the evening's entertainment?" The Lady Vydys' ripe lips curved in a small, slow smile that was straight from hell. "Surely, serf, you would not ask that of me!" And then: "Place my helm upon me."

A new tremor ran through the serving-serf. Wordless, he slid the shining metal casing down over the jet hair, seated it carefully upon the woman's head.

Approvingly, she nodded. "Now, seat yourself before me—here, where I can watch your face."

Stiff-lipped, the youth obeyed.

Vydys laughed softly; turned to Zenaor. "You see, my lord? Down there in the ring will be the wench, pitting herself against my roller; while here close by me sits her brother, suffering with her. It offers a new kind of titillation!"

Zenaor shrugged. "As you will it."

Eyes sparkling, Vydys leaned forward. "Let in the roller!"

An iron gate lifted. A faceted four-foot sphere bowled slowly out of the shadowed passage into the walled ring.

The roller.

A strange creature, in any evolutionary pattern. Its surface was completely covered with leathery, inch-wide octagonal pads, each centered with a third-inch cup that served as combined mouth and mode of movement. For through these cups it both took nourishment and pulled itself in whatever direction it sought to go by applying differential suction to the surface on which it rested.

Now, in the center of the ring, it hesitated; paused there, teetering, like some great ball come to rest.

The Baemae girl caught her breath, the sound rasping over-loud in the sudden hush that had fallen upon the crowd. Eyes wild and wide, she shrank, back against the wall, hands splayed out flat against the polished duroid surface.

Still smiling, Vydys spoke to her victim—gentle, coaxing: "This is a game wench—a game betwixt you and me. Do not fear the roller. In itself it is harmless, a mere ball of flesh with so little brain that it barely knows enough to feed. But through this helm"—she touched her headdress—"my thoughts can project waves that stimulate its nervous system, so that it moves wherever I may will it. You understand?"

The girl below gave no sign that she had even heard.

Vydys pressed on: "So, now, I'll spin the roller at you, while you try to dodge it. That is the game. To win, you have only to leap atop the thing and scale the ring-wall."

Among the barons, someone laughed aloud, harsh and explosive.

The Baemae youth who was the victim's brother buried his face in his hands.

Still the girl in the pit said nothing. She seemed to have eyes only for the roller.

Zenaor's black brows drew together. "Get on with it!"

Vydys murmured, "The game begins...." Her face set in a mask of concentration.

Down in the ring, the roller began to move once more. Slowly at first, then faster, it bowled around in a long curve.

The girl slid along the wall, keeping space between her and the creature.

Vydys' lips parted, peeled back over sharp white teeth. Her fingers wrapped tight around the throne-arm.

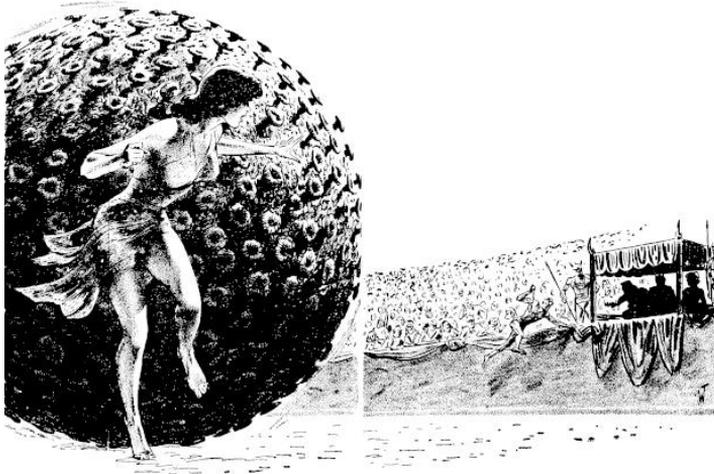
The roller swerved sharply. Gathering speed, it hurtled towards the girl.

She darted sideways.

The roller struck the wall with a meaty thud. Then, rotating so rapidly its pad-facets blurred, it raced along the pitside, close on its victim's heels.

The girl gave a small, shrill cry of panic, and fled across the center of the ring.

Again the roller spun; lanced after her.



The girl threw herself aside barely in time. The roller missed her by scant inches. Racing on, once more it struck the ring-wall, even harder than before ... caromed off like a huge ball bouncing ... hurtled back, straight at the girl.

She stumbled to the left, seeking desperately to dodge it.

The roller veered.

The girl screamed; twisted.

But not quite far enough, nor fast enough. One side of the speeding roller ticked her; knocked her backward. She sprawled in a heap on the ring's floor.

The crowd roared; strained forward.

Up on the dais, the Baemae youth surged to his feet—fists clenched, face working.

Vydys laughed aloud ... a throaty chortle, somehow hideous, more befitting fiend than woman. "Ah, Zenaor! Was that not well turned?" Her features shone with strange, evil radiance.

The chief of barons shrugged, face wooden.

Down in the ring, the roller came to rest. Panting, shaking, the Baemae girl scrambled to her feet.

Vydys' smooth brow furrowed. Slowly, the roller began to move again—in a spiral, this time, circling and converging on its fear-straight prey.

Sobbing, the girl tottered backward.

Swiftly, the roller changed course ... spun towards her.

The girl fled, running off wildly at right angles, not even pausing to look behind her.

Veering once more, the roller raced to intercept her. Too late, the girl threw a mad glance back over her shoulder.

But now the roller was upon her, striking at her legs even as she tried to spring aside. There was the brittle *crack* of a femur snapping. A scream—high, shrill, alive with surging terror.

The crowd shrieked its delight.

Only then a new voice slashed through the uproar: "No—! No!"

The roller thudded against the wall; lay still. Heads came round, searching for the shouter.

They found him on the dais, with Vydys and Zenaor. It was the Baemae youth, the downed girl's brother. "Curse you!" he shouted, face white with fury. "Curse you all, you vermin!"

He turned as he yelled; started towards Vydys.

She went rigid. Beside her, the Lord Zenaor brought up his hand in a quick, tight gesture.

Guards lunged forward, weapons drawn and ready.

The youth whipped a knife from beneath his livery. Slashing, he leaped back, eyes rolling wildly.

But there was no escape ... only the closing circle of hard-faced guards with their leveled fire-guns.

The youth's face set in a sort of feverish desperation. Whirling, he charged down from the dais, straight for the walled ring.

Curses rang from the barons, shrieks from their ladies. Bellowing, trampling, they threw themselves clear of the flashing blade.

The youth reached the ring-wall. For an instant he poised atop it, wavering. Then, tight-lipped, he leaped down into the pit itself and stumbled to the side of his fallen sister.

The crowd breathed again.

On the dais, Vydys tensed and gripped the throne-arms till her knuckles gleamed white as djevoda ivory. The scarlet lips quivered in a grimace of hate.

Below, the roller lurched into motion. A thousand crushing, crippling pounds of flesh and gristle, gaining momentum with every second, it spun across the ring.

The youth leaped to meet it. Savagely, he slashed at the thing's leathery outer hide.

But the pads turned away his blade. Ball-like, not even slowing, the sphere knocked him aside as, moments earlier, it had the girl.

Then, while he still fought for balance, it was past him, hurtling ever faster ... thundering towards the spot where his sister lay in a huddled heap upon the floor.

She tried to rise. Failed.

The rocketing roller cut short her scream.

Then the creature was bowling to a stop on the ring's far side. A hush fell over the great vaulted hall.

Stiffly, the rawboned Baemae youth dragged himself up from the place where he had fallen. Wordless, shambling, he crossed the pit to where the crumpled, broken thing that had been his sister lay; he knelt there beside her for a moment.

Then he arose again and stared up at the packed, engulfing mass of Kukzubas barons and their ladies ... looked on beyond and above them to the dais—to Vydys and to Zenaor.

The silence echoed.

Thick-voiced, he spoke, then: "You've killed her, curse you—you filth that call yourselves Kukzubas barons!"

"True, carrion." This from dark Vydys. "And now you die beside her!"

She concentrated. The roller turned, wending its blood-trailing way out from the wall once more.

But incredibly, the youth who wore Vydys' black-and-silver livery gave the gore-drenched thing no heed. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, his shoulders shook till he burst out in a wild gale of laughter.

"So I die!" It was the mirth of a madman. "Go on, you fools! Kill me! But I die holding a secret that spells your doom, also!"

Up on the dais, Lord Zenaor stiffened. He caught Vydys' arm. "Wait! Hold back the roller!"

The youth raved on: "Our day is coming, you cutthroats—the day of the Baemae! We have summoned one who will sit in judgment on you, a man from the far Federation! Already, this moment, his starship approaches—"

Zenaor surged from his seat. His bull-roar filled the hall: "The night's games are over! I, Zenaor, decree it!" And then, to his guardsmen: "Take that serf to my chambers!"

The crowd swirled in tumult. Dark Vydys turned on him. "You cannot—!"

"I can, and I do!"

For a moment their eyes locked ... a taut, vibrant moment.

Then the woman looked away. "If you will it...." The words came out sullen.

But already Zenaor was turning, striding off through the light-wall that served as backdrop for the dais, away to the force-shift that led to his quarters.

Out again at the seventh level, he stalked into the living-chambers.

His daughter, Narla, seated by an antique scanner unit, looked up as he entered, grey eyes cool and speculative. "What—? Is the evening's butchery over already?" Scorn was in her voice.

Zenaor's fists knotted. "Once too often you'll tempt me to violence, daughter." Pivoting, he stepped to a wall-stand, slopped taxat into a bor-glass, and drank it down.

The girl's brows drew together in the slightest of frowns. Rising in one smooth, graceful motion that set her flaxen hair to shimmering in the caron-light, she followed the chief of barons into the next room. "Is something wrong, father? Were Vydys' tastes more than usually hideous tonight?"

The shaft-bell clanged before Zenaor could answer. Stepping around his daughter, he strode back to the entrance.

Already, guards were dragging in the rawboned Baemae youth from the pit. Blood smeared his right cheek. Shackles hung heavy upon him.

"Good," Zenaor nodded. "Leave the serf with me, and return to your quarters."

The guard in charge stared. "Leave him with you—alone?"

"Alone."

The guard shot the Lord Zenaor a quick, sidelong glance. Then, saluting smartly, he about-faced and left the chambers, followed by his fellows.

Curiosity flickered in Narla's grey eyes. "Father—"

He turned on her, stony-faced. "You, too."

"I—?"

"You go to your chambers—and stay there. I wish to be alone with the prisoner."

The girl opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. Flushing slightly under her father's cold, impassive gaze, she stepped through the light-wall into her own quarters.

Now, at last, Zenaor faced the shackled Baemae.

"You know, of course, that you are doomed to die?"

Mutely, the youth nodded.

"Yet there are ways and ways of dying. Slowly, painfully. Quick, clean, easy."

The serf said nothing.

"There are things I would know—things that have to do with Baemae treason." Zenaor's lips drew thin. The black eyes were never colder. "What is this nonsense of someone coming from across the void, from the Federation? You know there are no grounds—that the Federation holds no jurisdiction!"

All the fire seemed to have gone out of the youth. He shrugged sullenly. "All I know is that a one called Tumek learned of some

new weapon you planned to use against the free Baemae in the djevoda lands to the south. Secretly, then, he sent word to the Federation, saying that if you ever used the thing you planned, it would imperil all other worlds as well as ours."

No flicker of emotion showed in Zenaor's lean, high-boned face. "And do you believe him?"

"Who am I to know or judge? Baemae are only good for dying!" The youth gave vent to a bitter laugh. "But at least the far Federation thought the peril was worth a starship."

"And the man—the one they send to weigh the facts here?"

"His name is Craig Nesom. I know no more than that about him."

Silence. An eddying sort of silence that crept in from the walls and up from the floors and down out of the ceiling.

Then, abruptly, the Lord Zenaor laughed.

"So you'll die," he clipped. "But at least you shall go knowing that you're the only man, Baemae or baron, to learn the truth about my weapon. You shall judge it for me with your dying breath—prove to me that it can truly give me power and strength for conquest...."

He was striding away even as he spoke—striding across the room to a wall set off with a delicate interlay of panels.

One slid aside beneath his hand. Beyond lay a chill, bleak laboratory chamber.

Still smiling, Zenaor led the shackled Baemae forward ... shoved him through a port-like door into a transparent cubicle mounted on a stand.

"Now ... one moment...." With quick efficiency, the chief of barons closed the cubicle's door and sealed it. Then, taking a tiny glass ampule from the nearest bench, he dropped it into a slot atop the cubicle and brought down a crusher valve upon it.

The ampule splintered. For an instant light glinted on sparkling, dust-like grains descending, floating out in lazy spirals through the sealed cubicle's still air.

But only for an instant. For then, suddenly, the grains were growing, uniting, multiplying, melding. In a finger-snap, grey slime began to form on the unit's glistening, sterile floor.

A slime that swirled and crawled and eddied....

The shackled serfman screamed.

Not that anyone could hear it. The cubicle was far too skillfully designed for that.

With grim satisfaction, cold appraisal, the Lord Zenaor watched the slime-tide rippling higher. Carefully, he noted reaction time ... the victim's grimaces and contortions and frantic terror.

So preoccupied was he that he didn't even hear Narla approaching till her voice rang out behind him, raw with sudden shock: "*Ourobos—!*"

Zenaor spun by instinct.

His daughter's lovely face showed stiff with horror. "Father...." She choked; retched.

Cold-eyed he waited till the spasm had passed before he spoke: "So ... you find my secret shocking?"

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