

NATURE OF THE BEAST

By Roland Keller

Sample chapter

1 Lab

The hum of the fluorescent lights was the only sound until the laboratory assistant switched on the tape recorder and started to speak.

“October thirty-one, seven pee em, defense-aggression response test number one-oh-oh-four.”

He spoke softly, mostly out of fatigue, but partly because he always felt conspicuous and slightly vulnerable when he was all alone in the research facility, assuming he really was alone, which was not something on which he would have bet the ranch. As clinically antiseptic as the place was, it always gave him the creeps when he was alone there.

But no matter how loudly or softly he spoke, he was not going to be sensed by the two test animals, a large brown toad he recognized as the common *Bufo americanus*, and an even larger hognose snake of the genus *Heterodon*. Robert Einstadt could never remember the assorted species and subspecies of *Heterodon*, and fleetingly, he wished some other type of snake that he could precisely identify were being used.

Einstadt was seated in front of four TV monitors and a table microphone. Two of the screens showed the toad, two the snake. Each of the animals was in a separate, uniformly white, windowless chamber, one cubic foot in size, with a removable partition between them. By remote control, Einstadt removed the partition.

He would have liked a cup of coffee and one of those sticky sugar doughnuts going stale in his six-by-eight foot office down the hall. But he was barely on schedule as it was, and food and drink were strictly forbidden anywhere near the lab or the equipment. It was one of Doctor Steen's rules. One of many.

Doctor Phyllis Steen, Ph.D. in biotechnical engineering and half a dozen other ultra-modern specialties, had a lot of rules for her underlings, immutable, unyielding rules that were bent or broken at

the peril of employment in her private research facility, United States Research and Technology Services, quietly and disparagingly acronymed USRATS by some of its more menial help.

Einstadt, until last spring a lowly lab gofer, was only conducting this set of tests because his predecessor had dared bend one of those rules. He couldn't afford to make the same kind of blunder, so he ignored the rumbling in his stomach and forced his attention back to the screens. If anyone were giving odds, Einstadt would have bet that this test was going to follow the same pattern as numbers one through one-oh-oh-three.

"Safety partition removed," he said, checking the digital clock, "at seven-oh-one pee em."

It took a full ten minutes of uninterrupted boredom before anything moved. Then the snake stuck out its tongue.

"*Heterodon*..." He hesitated, still unable to remember exactly which kind of hognose snake it was, although his best guess was that it was probably *Heterodon platyrhinos*, the eastern hognose. He was tempted to say "Hognose-ius snake-ius," but that was the kind of joke that made the humorless Dr. Steen absolutely brittle. He decided to go with what he knew, cleared his throat and said, "*Heterodon* ingesting air samples beginning at seven-eleven. Movement toward adjoining chamber begun almost simultaneously."

Hardly a surprise, Einstadt thought. Toads are what hognose snakes eat. Science at its finest.

Einstadt knew what was to come: hognose snake enters other chamber, hognose snake senses toad, toad senses snake and tries to climb the wall of the box, snake strikes toad, wrapping itself around the struggling toad, then snake eats toad alive, always head first.

It did a lot to quell his appetite, if not the grumbling of his gut.

Einstadt was tempted to shut off the monitors and just fake the recorded observations. Having watched umpteen snakes scarf down umpteen frogs and toads made watching this particular event less than scintillating. The doomed *Bufo* was already trying to climb the walls of its death trap.

With a sort of mental detachment that always sounded like professional objectivity when he listened to his own recorded narrative, Einstadt watched the snake swallow the toad. As far as

Einstadt could tell, USRATS had very little to show for all these defense-aggression response tests except proof positive that snakes eat toads and frogs. Personally, he believed it after the first test, but, of course, all he ever got to see of the highly secret, highly compartmentalized research on defense-aggression response was the snake feeding sessions. In a funk, he watched the peristaltic forward flow of the snake's mouth over the stubby, bumpy body of the toad, mindlessly narrating the scene for future generations of underpaid researchers.

As far as he knew, which was damned little, only Dr. Steen herself had the full set of data. Nobody else at the lab seemed to know what the object of the research really was, or if they did, they certainly weren't about to tell him. Einstadt didn't even know what he was supposed to be seeking in these tests. What he did know, from his graduate education, was that the defense-aggression response syndrome is that set of actions, either conscious or reflexive, performed by an organism when confronted with a perceptible danger, taking on all the observable characteristics of overt aggression but only until the danger ceased. Defense-aggression responses included such things as herbivores—like horses—biting people, bees stinging, and Ronald Reagan invading Grenada.

But it didn't seem to have diddly to do with watching hognose snakes swallow toads.

He was about to switch off and put the snake back into its holding tank when he saw it suddenly shudder and twitch. "Damn," he thought, "it's going to upchuck."

From his experience, Einstadt knew that about one in five snakes regurgitated and either abandoned the dead toad or re-ate it if it were still alive. The first time he'd seen it, he about tossed his own cookies. But he knew that if he bothered the snake now, it might gag on the toad and die, and he'd be responsible. From behind half-closed eyelids that helped at least blur what he was watching, Einstadt resumed his narrative.

"Seven thirty-two pee em, *Heterodon* commencing regurgitation..."

With the calm only a true scientist could impart to such a totally disgusting display, Einstadt continued his blow-by-blow until the toad, blinking and gulping, sat eyeball to eyeball with its former host. Einstadt knew it was anthropomorphic projection, but he could have sworn the snake looked surprised.

Then the impossible happened.

Einstadt almost forgot to speak when the toad first attacked the snake. In the first seconds of the toad's onslaught, Einstadt thought that the *Bufo* was simply experiencing a spasm and hurling itself at the snake reflexively. Apparently, so did the snake because it barely reacted, still recovering from its indigestion.

But the toad didn't stop. With growing ferocity, the toad lunged at the snake, slapping the snake's head with its fore pads.

Having recoiled, the snake struck at the toad, taking hold of it again as if to re-ingest it. But this time, the toad wasn't having any of it.

Einstadt had never seen anything like it. Wide-eyed, he watched the toad grab the snake's jaws and, like a lion tamer in a circus, force the jaws apart. Free again of the snake's jaws, the toad lunged, its own mouth agape.

The toad now had hold of the snake just behind the serpent's head. Like a terrier with a rat, the toad whipped the snake violently back and forth, bouncing the two of them off the white sides of the arena. Unabated, the violent outburst continued until, limp and lifeless, the snake hung from the toad's mouth.

Then the toad began to ingest the snake.

By the time Einstadt had gotten from the console to the room where the test arena was set up, the toad was dead, too, having choked on the first inch and a half of the hognose.

As he dialed Dr. Steen's private number, following his laboratory manual's instructions in case of unusual laboratory events, Einstadt kept repeating to himself, "The toad ate the snake. The toad ate the snake."

He was still saying that when Dr. Steen answered her phone.

"Well, it's about time," she said. "Don't touch anything. I'm on my way over."