

Symphony for a Lost Traveler

by Lee Killough

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They walked in a moving band of light, into and out of darkness. The floor and ceiling panels of the corridor brightened as Cimela and the butler-- in formal black-and-silver jumpsuit-- entered each new section; glowing milky white, then dimming out behind them. The passage bored straight through the moon's rock. A glassy sheen of fused stone reflected back at Cimela between the succession of contemporary and classic paintings decorating the walls: abstracts by Tanguy, a Bosch, Seth Koerner's bleak planetscapes, and starships and aliens signed *Herring* and *Whelan*.

Cimela frowned. Kerel Mattias Ashendene's artistic taste ran to the fantastic. Why, then, had he sent expensive shuttle and Moon rocket tickets along with the enigmatic invitation to his lunar retreat-- *I would like to discuss the creation of a truly unique symphony--* to a composer whose work celebrated nature?

She wished she had been able to learn more about the man than public facts: that his Interstellar Mining and Drilling, Inc. issued franchises to more than half the independent miners in the asteroids and Jupiter and Saturn's moons, that he owned controlling interests in numerous other corporations, including those manufacturing pharmaceuticals and computers and contragrav units. Journalist friends could supply only two pieces of tape on him, both eleven years old. One recorded his removal from the twisted wreckage of his sailcar and the other his departure from the hospital months later in a floatchair.

The butler clapped his hands. A section of wall opened to reveal an elevator. "Ask for level four, madam. Mr. Ashendene is waiting."

He was sending her alone into the lion's den? Cimela reflected wryly.

Near-normal gravity returned briefly, but faded again when the car stopped rising. The doors opened.

Cimela gasped in horror. Before her lay the open surface of the Moon, the side and bottom of a crater dropping away in a sharp pattern of light and shadow!

For a moment she did not see distorted smear of her reflection on the inside of a transparent surface... the bittersweet of her jumpsuit a flame beneath her mahogany face and the ebony velvet of her close-cropped hair. Then breath returned in a gasp of relief. A dome! Even so, stepping out of the elevator, she felt for the polyplastic to reassure herself.

"You're quite safe," a deep resonant voice said.

She turned toward the sound and found herself in a large, circular room. An assortment of tables and chairs floated above the glowing floor along with a bed, a computer station, and a desk piled with papers and minidisc files. Cimela barely noticed the furnishings. Above the waist-high cabinets and bookcases around the edge-- filled with genuine printed and bound volumes-- the dome and wire lattice generating its meteor screen rose invisibly, creating the illusion that nothing separated the room from the lunar crater. Earth hung overhead, a brilliant sapphire suspended against midnight velvet studded with diamonds. With difficulty, she dragged her eyes from the view to the man gliding toward her in a floatchair.

He extended a hand. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"And I you." His hand crushed hers. Eyes the color of moon dust slid over her, assessing, dissecting. Where in them, and in the assured voice, craggy features, gray-touched hair, and iridescent jumpsuit was the person who bought those paintings? "Tell me about your proposal."

"Will you join me for tea?" He used the controls on one sweeping armrest to back his chair toward a

table floating above the glowing floor.

Cimela accepted the cup he handed her and folded into a freeform chair. Suddenly, from somewhere, music flooded the dome. She instantly recognized her *Requiem For a Vanishing World*, even without the holo track. It flowed around her, stately bass notes representing whales booming along under the high music of birds and the sinuous rhythms of predators, all intermixed with the sounds of the animals' own voices: twittering, whale songs, howls, snarls.

Ashendene's moondust eyes continued to search her. "I never would have thought one could make music using DNA as the score. Four notes sound so limiting."

She quirked a brow. "Nature manages well enough with them." She expected some reply, but he only continued to stare at her. The scrutiny brought a rush of irritation. "Am I not what you expected?"

The moondust eyes flickered. "Oh, yes... black and all."

She started. Could the man read minds?

"I researched you, of course. Cimela Bediako, thirty-one years old, single, born in Ghana, bioengineer father, music training in Sidney, lead singer and song writer for the Neo-Renaissance band the Rococo Roos until you switched to symphonic music and presented *World Primeval* at the San Francisco Opera House five years ago. If I'm staring, it's in admiration of one not only supremely talented and beautiful, but a veritable Pied Piper as well."

Cimela blinked. "Pied Piper?"

Whale songs cried in counterpoint to the howl of wolves. Ashendene said, "*World Primeval* generated a renewed interest in dinosaurs, I understand, and your wildlife symphonies have inspired a growing conservation movement."

"I hope so!" She glanced up at the luminous sapphire above them, so unflawed at this distance. "We're spreading out across the galaxy, but we're not leaving anything to come home to."

"Not quite across the galaxy. We haven't left the solar system yet."

Cimela shrugged. "Well, there's no practical star drive. Star ships would also take metals away, and we don't even know there's anywhere to go."

The moondust eyes flicked over her. "Those are just the excuses we've concocted for abandoning the stars... all invalid. We do have an efficient drive and there's not only somewhere to go, but someone to meet."

Her breath stuck in her chest. "Someone..."

Ashendene leaned toward her. "Three years ago a miner I franchised found a derelict ship in the asteroids. It's three thousand years old."

Her throat went dry. "We've been in the asteroids for only a century."

"Yes." He sat back. "My scientists have taken the ship apart and learned the principles behind the drive. I want to put that drive in human ships now. That's why I asked you here. I plan to announce my plans at a dinner for potential investors and I want music to celebrate the occasion. In addition to keeping all rights to the music and being my guest while you work, you will, of course, receive monetary remuneration."

He named a figure that any other time would have left Cimela dazzled, but now she could feel only the bitter stab of disappointment. Background music! *This* was his idea of a unique musical work? She stood. "No, thank you. I don't do commercials or waiting room music."

The moondust eyes went chill as the crater outside. "Perhaps you would be polite enough to hear me out. The credit I spent bringing you here entitles me to at least that much of your time."

She sat down again, stiffly, on the edge of the chair.

Ashendene frowned. "I want very special music, a long piece to be performed after dinner by an orchestra, something arranged as only you can do it, on DNA. That ship wasn't empty, Ms. Bediako."

Searing hot and cold shot through Cimela like an electric charge. Every hair on her body raised. "You found... people?" she whispered.

"What remained of them. Now are you interested?"

His sarcasm went unnoticed over the crescendo of her heart. People. Aliens! Life different from any that had ever walked this world! How were they built? Did all life share the same nucleotides, or would

their genetic matter sing a different song? And Ashendene offered her the chance to see first. Breathlessly, she asked, "When may I see a printout of the nucleotide sequence?"

A thin smile crossed his mouth. "Today. I'll have it brought to your room. There's a computer station and synthesizer already there for you, but if you need anything else, just ask for it. Albert will show you the way."

* * *

Her "room" consisted of a large suite, one entire wall of which had been built of the same polyplastic as the dome and looked out into the crater. Neither Earth nor Ashendene's study were visible from it; just moonscape, starkly lifeless in patterns of black and silver, with the crater ringwall rising jaggedly into the velvet-and-diamond canopy of sky.

Staring out, she caught a reflection of the room: the butler entering with an overall-clad young woman pushing a contra-gee cart piled with computer printout. Cimela lost all interest in the crater. Pulse leaping, she spun on the cart and fingered the printout in anticipation. "Did you bring holos of the aliens, too?"

The young woman shook her head. "They didn't give me any."

Cimela frowned. She needed them to pick appropriate instruments and tempi, and to build the holo track. She would have to ask Ashendene for them.

The butler and technician set the printout on the floor while Cimela unpacked her electronic keyboard. After the door slid closed behind them, she arranged the paper in a circle on the carpet, creating her own ringwall. Then she sat cross-legged in the center, keyboard in her lap, and began reading through the nearest stack of printout.

Some corner of her mind remembered a servant serving supper, and that she flung herself on the bed for awhile, but most of her awareness focused on the nucleotide sequences. She saw nothing else and heard only the music they made in her head and on the keyboard.

The computer had not printed out the chemical structure, either as formulas or zigzag diagrams, but the terminology told her the aliens' "DNA" differed from humans': A', G', C', and T' where A, G, C, and T usually stood for the nucleotides, plus two more named PU-3 and PY-3, indicating an addition purine and pyrimidine. Six nucleotides! Their genetics must be very complex... but more than that, this time she had six notes to work with.

Except that a seventh, out of key, kept intruding. She tried to ignore it.

"Ms. Bediako!"

Cimela started with enough force to lift her off the carpet. Turning, she met the keen gaze of moondust eyes regarding her from the doorway.

Ashendene floated his chair into the room. "I came to check on you. Alfred said you didn't touch breakfast or lunch and wouldn't answer the door chime."

Meals? Door chime? Oh... the seventh note. She grimaced. "I should have warned you how engrossed I become when I work."

A brow quirked. "Indeed. However, I didn't bring you here to expire from anorexia. To reassure me of your nutrition, will you have dinner with me this evening?"

Dinner? That would mean losing two or three hours of working time. Still, it might also give her the chance to learn where the steely businessman became the lover of fantasy. "Thank you. What time and where?"

"I take my meals in my room normally. Alfred will be pouring the wine at nineteen hundred hours. It's a house vintage, from grapes in our hydroponics farm. I think you'll like it."

Spinning his chair, Ashendene sailed it out of the room. Only after the door had closed behind him did Cimela remember that she had forgotten to ask him for holos of the aliens. Shrugging, she returned to work.

By eighteen hundred hours she had decided on the length of the symphony, chosen the key, and decided that the notes from *Mi* up to *Do* would comprise her scale. She stood stiffly, stretching, ready for a break before looking for the strand sequences to harmonize with and make a counterpoint to the

main sequence.

* * *

Ashendene greeted her with a nod of approval. "Lovely."

Cimela smiled. Though this was just a break in work, she had dressed carefully, choosing a gauzy gold jumpsuit with the voluminous sleeves and legs, snugly cuffed at wrists and ankles, that the Moon's low gravity inspired in this year's fashions. Sitting down at the round library-type table where dinner had been set, she looked out at the crater and up to the luminous globe of Earth overhead. "Do you like this room best for its view of Earth or the moon?"

"The stars." Ashendene said

The butler poured wine and served dinner, gliding over the glowing floor silent and efficient as a robot. Her *Kings of the Air* played softly around them, a chorus of strings singing the nucleotide sequences of the great raptors.

Ashendene asked, "How did you happen to begin using DNA as a score?"

Cimela sipped her wine. It was delicious, pale and lightly sweet as moonlight. "My father once gave my mother a birthday card that was a sheet of music with notes assigned to nucleotide sequences that resulted in the pigmentation of her hair, skin and eyes. 'The song is you,' I remember him telling her. That fascinated me. I started playing with DNA tunes. Even the music I wrote for the Rococo Roos had DNA sequence themes, and later, when I began writing about life that had vanished or seemed about to, what better than to let the very substance of those animals plead for them? *World Primeval* sounds like any symphony, but even its themes are expanded from nucleotide sequences of the shark, lizard, echidna, and platypus."

Ashendene laughed. "I'm astonished how well it all sounds with such a restricted form, but even more amazed at the profound emotional effect your music has on people."

That always surprised her, too. "A friend once came up with a theory in an inebriated moment. He said the response results from resonance, a recognition on a deeply subconscious level of its similarity to the pattern of our own genetic structure. It's as good as any other explanation I've heard. I'll be interested in seeing how people react to an alien coding."

The moon dust eyes flickered. "I would think they'd feel the same, given that the music uses human instrumentation."

She frowned. Human instrumentation. Could that be wrong? Perhaps aliens deserved new and more exotic sounds. She would play with the synthesizer. Which reminded her-- knowing what they looked like would help her select appropriate sounds. "Mr. Ashendene, I need tapes or holos of the aliens."

He sipped his wine and grimaced. "There aren't any worth seeing."

She shrugged. "I don't care how poor they are; I need something for a basis of the visual track."

"The bodies were too badly damaged to tell much about their appearance. The 'DNA' has been read from a few cells that froze quickly enough to be thawed without destroying the internal structure."

"Even damaged bodies are worth something," she protested. "Are they large or small? How many limbs do they have? What's their clothing like? What about the ship?"

The moon dust eyes stared into her, then went thoughtful. "I see what you mean. We have holos of the ship and you'll have them by morning. We're working on a computer reconstruction of the aliens based on a composite and skeletal structure and you'll have that, too, as soon as it's finished. From what I saw, the aliens are a bit smaller than we are, covered with... bronze or gold feathers."

Golden bird people? She grinned in delight. Perhaps flutes and strings, or chimes, should carry the musical theme. She played with the idea in her head the rest of dinner, and afterward programmed the synthesizer in her room for airy instrumental sounds.

* * *

Cimela kept working with the synthesizer, at the same time deciding on secondary and tertiary musical

lines. During rests she studied the holos of the ship. It appeared strictly utilitarian, without decoration or color. Ceilings pressed low overhead, barely centimeters above the squatly arched doorways. The crew apparently never used furniture except tables and something like low blanket racks with padded bars. Water-filled mats on the floor served as beds. Beyond that the holos told her nothing about the aliens. She set them aside.

Every evening she ate with Ashendene in the domed study. The floor glowed beneath them; Earth shone overhead; moonwine filled their glasses like luminous silver. Ashendene entertained her with stories about his early days mining the asteroids. "IMDI was just me, five buddies, and a patched junk ship in those days."

Cimela smiled at him over her wineglass. "You sound like you enjoyed it. Why did you give it up for a desk?"

He shrugged, looking past her at the sky. "The asteroids are just a way station."

After dinner they took tea in the study, or he showed her through another portion of the house. It had the facilities of a small colony: laboratories, workshops, staff apartments, and a hydroponics farm. Working on the ship here, no wonder he had been able to keep his find a secret. At some point they passed to a first-name basis, and one evening during her second week there she had the chance to learn about his love of fantastic art.

"I respect people who dream," he said, "even if it's nightmares, like Bosch. So few people dream these days. And speaking of dreaming, how is your work coming?"

The question had been inevitable. She sighed. "Slowly, as always. I'm still undecided about the lead instruments. Perhaps I'll use a recorder and a samisen."

He blinked. "A what?"

"The samisen is a three-stringed Japanese guitar with a long neck. The recorder is a very old flute that's played like a clarinet. It went out of common use about the time of Bach, at least until the Neo-Renaissance movement revived interest in it. It has a lovely mellow sound."

A crease appeared between the moon dust eyes. "Don't forget you're writing this for modern ears."

As though modern sound could not come out of old instruments. But that was what came of discussing instruments with a non-musician. "Of course. When do I need to be finished?"

"The dinner will wait for the music. Oh, I almost forgot. Albert." He beckoned to the butler. "Will you bring Cimela the envelope from my desk?"

Her heart went into fortissimo at the sight of the small, square gray envelope.

"The alien construct program?"

Ashendene finished his wine. "Now you can start on the holo track, too, and stop being underworked."

She laughed at his teasing, but could hardly wait to finish eating. Ashendene appeared to read her mind. He said little the remainder of the meal and did not ask her to stay for tea afterward.

Back in her rooms, Cimela slipped the minidisc into her computer and waited curled cross-legged in her chair. The image appeared one line at a time, as though being sketched inside the screen. It pivoted at the same time, the far side of the three-dimensional shape remaining visible through the forming lines of the near side. With every turn, however, more details appeared-- feathers, the facets of compound eyes, fingernails-- followed by textures and finally by color, until the screen held a construction that did not look like a computer drawing but a holophoto of an actual being.

The alien stood on two muscular legs that bent strangely but carried him like coiled springs. He had no wings after all: small arms, also oddly jointed, folded across the golden chest, ending in hands with a thumb and two long, many-jointed fingers. Feather-fringed ears belied out from the sides of the broad head. Faceted opal eyes dreamed placidly above nasal slits and a smiling bow of mouth.

Cimela sighed in satisfaction. He was alien, yes. Completely inhuman-- she could not even identify the tools hanging on his belt-- but utterly fascinating.

She plunged happily into her doubled task and over the next several weeks used the computer to create and store the thousands of images that would be projected as the visual track, while at the same time experimenting with countless nucleotide sequences played against each other in the voices of several

dozen musical instruments... culling, choosing, refining choices. She lived, breathed, and dreamed the symphony, aware of little else. Even at dinner with Ashendene they spoke only of the work.

He did not appear to mind. He listened intently, and once Cimela looked up from the computer to find his chair in the doorway, his expression hungry. How long he had sat there Cimela could not begin to guess, and she eyed him, suddenly aware how isolated the house was, and that leaving would entail more effort than just hailing a cab, if she needed to escape unwanted attentions.

"Is that part of the final thing?" he asked.

She did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed. His passion was for the symphony, not her. "Do you like it?"

The hunger flared brighter in the moon-dust eyes. "It's even better than I dreamed. Have you titled it yet?"

"How about *The Lost Traveler*?"

"Perfect. Will you think I'm impatient if I ask how close you are to being finished?"

"Yes." But she smiled. "I'll answer, though. I'm almost finished. So plan your dinner and give me an orchestra for rehearsals. Do you really plan to bring an entire orchestra all the way from Earth?"

He smiled back. "No, just around the Moon. The Chinese have a very nice orchestra at the Celestial Village complex." His smile broadened. "Maybe the samisen is appropriate after all."

* * *

Now work really began: printing out the score for each instrument, working with the butler to assign rooms to the several dozen musicians who flooded the house. Her days filled with hours of rehearsals, all held where the dinner and performance would be given: the ballroom, a dome like the study but many times larger. How she had missed seeing it before Cimela did not know, for it appeared to sit almost in the center of the crater, the rugged ringwall rising on all sides.

She had little time to admire the view, however. Though she spoke little Chinese and the conductor knew even less English, the two of them argued endlessly over tempi and other details.

Ashendene, attending one of the rounds, murmured, "Maybe we should have settled for a synthesizer."

Cimela shook her head. "I've been through this before. Wu Chien and I will work out our differences or I'll turn him into Peking duck."

Ashendene raised a skeptical brow, but by the day of the dinner she and the conductor were indeed bowing and smiling at one another. He shook his head. "Remarkable talent indeed."

The house filled to bursting. Each of the men and women Ashendene had invited moved in with companions and personal staff. They arrived a shuttle-load at a time from the Americans' Port Heinlein for two days before the dinner, and though one or two did not arrive until the last moment, by seventeen hundred hours on the appointed day all were gathering in the ballroom for cocktails.

Ashendene hovered outside the elevator like a king on a throne, greeting his guests and introducing them to Cimela, who stood beside him in gold velvet.

The group had the glitter of an international opening night, the women wrapped in jewels and expensive fabrics, the men dressed in elegant formal versions of jumpsuits, kimonos, and dashikis... but it was neither that nor their names, most of which Cimela failed to recognize, that kept her heart in allegro tempo. The aura of power curled around them visibly. Without being told, Cimela knew that she shook hands with the men and women who really ran the world, and whose web of influence extended even out to the edge of the solar system.

The scene had the surrealism of one of Ashendene's paintings: the tables, impeccably set with the finest china, crystal, and sterling, arranged in a circle on the milky glow of the floor; and outside the circle the guests, milling together wearing their power as easily and elegantly as their formal clothing, chatting, seemingly unaware or uncaring that they did so in the center of a lunar crater. Light from hidden spotlights flooded the crater. No Earth or Sun shone in the sky, however. The jagged teeth of the ringwall framed a breath-taking vista of stars alone, infinitely vast and far, yet so brilliant that each distant sun-- which one

warmed the world of the golden-feathered people?-- looked close enough for Cimela to reach up and pluck.

She sat at the head table beside Ashendene, completely unable to distinguish what she ate. Instead Cimela stared up at the glorious blaze overhead and wondered how the guests could ignore it for shop talk and gossip. "Don't they ever look up?" she whispered to Ashendene.

"Perhaps after tonight they will." Grasping the edge of the table, he pulled himself upright. "Ladies and gentlemen!" He waited while the roar of conversation died away. When only the occasional clink of a dessert spoon against glass remained, he went on. "I want to thank you all for coming."

As he spoke, Cimela noticed that a square in the center of the floor dropped and slid aside.

"I hope you've enjoyed the food and wine. In a few minutes the Celestial Village Symphony Orchestra will present the new work by Cimela Bediako that I promised you."

"Before that, however, let me relieve your curiosity about the business proposal I used to entice you here. In a word, I am offering you the stars."

Cimela saw several people start to frown, but before they could complete the expression the air swirled above the circle of tables. It solidified into a holo projection of the aliens' battered ship, a blunt cigar shape wrapped in a scaffold-like spiral. Brows arched around the tables, then dipped again speculatively as the guests recognized the strange craft's aged appearance. The eyes widened when Ashendene explained what the ship was and how and where it had been found. Then the ship dissolved and in its place a holo of the alien appeared, just as Cimela had first seen it: a pivoting outline, rapidly filling with detail, texture, and color. A sigh of indrawn breath swept the circle.

"We have learned to duplicate the drive," Ashendene said. "Star travel is now possible in flights of weeks and months instead of enduring for generations. All we need is a company to build the ships."

The physics behind the drive and the talk about bent space did not interest Cimela. The expressions around the tables did, and she bit her lip. She had seen closed faces like those before... on critics who decided even before the conductor raised his baton that her work could not possibly contain real artistic merit, only novelty, gimmickry. These people had no interest in investing money to build star ships.

"...opportunity to establish trade," Ashendene was saying now. "If we'll use this drive, the universe and whatever profit may lie out there are ours. And now, refill your wine glasses and prepare for pleasure." The alien holo dissolved. "I present the Celestial Village Symphony Orchestra playing the most beautiful and talented Cimela Bediako's *The Lost Traveler*." He dropped back into his chair.

Sometime during his speech the orchestra had slipped into its place at the end of the room. Cimela laced her fingers tightly in her lap, her heart thundering like kettledrums, and nodded at Wu Chien.

After the first few bars, however, she forgot her nervousness, and even Ashendene and his guests. Nothing existed but the music. It soared, the main melody carried by a descant recorder, samisen, and harp. Other strings, the brass, and woodwinds sang behind them, playing complementary nucleotide sequences. And in the center of the tables the computer projected the visual track: golden-feathered aliens with faceted opal eyes, stretching upward or striding along on their powerful legs, circling and embracing in a minuet-like dance, all against the backdrop of moonscape and starfields.

Cimela closed her eyes and let the sound possess her, reverberate through her bones and blood, hypnotic. How foolish people were to think that they created music, she mused. Nature did it first, and better, in the voices of wind and water and animals, and even in the very substance of what made all life what it was. The aliens might come from a different sun and a different sea, but in the very center of them their cells sang a song not that different from those of the trees, insects, and men of Earth.

When the music stopped, such absolute silence filled the dome that Cimela heard the sigh of breathing and the beat of her own heart. She opened her eyes hesitantly to find every guest sitting blinking at the empty air in the circle. She swung around to meet Wu Chien's eyes, stomach plunging. Oh. no! They hated it. She tried to look an apology at the orchestra.

Just then the applause began... a single pair of hands, joined by another, then another, the sound swelling until the thunder of it shook the dome. Ashendene grinned and urged her onto her feet. And one by one the guests stood, too. The most powerful men and women in the solar system rose to their feet, their hands still pounding together in approval.

Cimela remembered bowing to the guests and orchestra, remembered the orchestra bowing; then everything blurred into a crowd of people surrounding her with congratulations. She floated on a cloud of euphoria that did not dissipate even when the ballroom emptied and she stood alone with Ashendene and a few servants.

She hugged him in sheer joy, throwing herself into his lap. "Kerel, thank you for giving me the chance to write this symphony."

"I thank *you* for *creating* it. Every one of them has asked to invest in the starship corporation." Then his arms tightened around her.

Somehow, without much surprise, she found herself in his private dome, in his bed; and the lovemaking made a celebration indeed, sweet and deeply satisfying as moonwine and her music together. Ashendene might be crippled, but not disabled, she discovered.

Some long time later she woke beneath the glorious blaze of stars and sat up in the bed, dreamily watching them. What happened next? Her contract with Ashendene gave her all rights to *Lost Traveler*, so she supposed she should take it back to Earth. After news of the alien ship spread, interest ought to run high.

She sat up more, smiling at the room, a place as surreal as the paintings: bookcases and the overburdened desk beneath stars and the lunar ringwall. She would miss the room, and probably Ashendene.

Cimela slid out of bed to pad naked along the bookcases, touching the antique objects and peering at their titles: fairy tales, science fiction, astrophysics, planetology, psychology. One book lay on the desk: another collection of fairy tales with a square of stiff paper marking *The Pied Piper of Hamlyn*. Amused, she started to read the story, then noticed that the other side of the marker held a holophoto. But what *of*? She tilted it to the light of the floor, frowning. The thing looked like a misshapen porpoise... more like a giant slug, except that gray-green feathery-looking scales covered it and one end sprouted three tentacle limbs, two tipped in triple talons, the third ending in a cluster of smaller tentacles, and all situated around a great fang-filled maw. Eyes scattered back along the great body, faceted opals peering through the fronds.

Faceted opals? The hair raised on Cimela's back.

The book of fairy tales dropped forgotten to the desk as she pawed through the rest of the papers piled there. What she wanted lay under where the book had lain: more holos and a lengthy report Cimela studied every holo and read the report, anger boiling up in her. That lying bastard!

"What are you doing, Cimela?"

She slapped the report down on the desk and whirled. "You lying son of a bitch! Golden-feathered aliens? The only similarity between the fraud and these holos is the eyes!"

He sat up. "Yes."

Her hands clenched to keep from spreading into claws. "You let me make *Lost Traveler* a fraud!"

Ashendene frowned. "Only the visuals are... inaccurate."

"*Only!*" He destroyed her artistic integrity and said *only*? "You-- " No pejorative seemed vile enough to describe him. "Why did you do it!"

The moondust eyes regarded her solemnly. "Because I want man to go to the stars, and they won't if they think that the stars are inhabited by fanged slugs."

Angrily Cimela paced, flinging her head. "That's ridiculous. You lied about the age of the ship, too. That report says it's three *million* years old-- and the aliens were chlorine breathers. They could be extinct by now, and even if they aren't, we don't have much chance of contacting or trading with them. It doesn't make any difference if they're out there."

He piled pillows up and leaned back against them. "Most people won't believe that. All they'll pay attention to is what they see-- and you and I, of all people, know how much appearance influences what people think of something or someone."

Anger drained out of Cimela. She bit her lip. Oh yes, she knew. She sighed. "Why tell anyone about the aliens at all? Say you invented the drive."

His mouth twisted wryly. "Do you really think just having a drive will rekindle the star dream? No,

they'll still talk about wilderness and lack of cost effectiveness. Some explorers go into wilderness just because they want to know what's there, but most people need a reason: population pressure, military advantages, trade. Greed is most effective, I think. Promise of profit will goad people into going places they'd never dream of otherwise."

Cimela sat down on the foot of the bed and hugged her knees. "So you invented attractive aliens and used me to dangle a trade carrot in front of your guests," she said bitterly.

"I had no other choice."

"You might have told me what you were trying to do. You could have asked me to help."

"After you parroted the words of every stay-at-home who's scoffed at my dream of the stars?"

That stung, but she saw his point "What happens when they learn the truth?"

To her surprise he grinned, shrugging. "It may not be. That's a big galaxy; no one will expect to find our feathered visitors right away. Even if the truth does eventually leak, we'll be out there; and once people go into wilderness they usually stay."

The man was incorrigible, totally without conscience. In disbelief; she said, "You'd really base a star culture on a lie?"

He looked up at the blaze above them. "If that's what it takes. Babies don't remain in the womb forever. We're crippling mankind's growth by clinging to Earth and the Sun." His gaze dropped to meet hers. "Think of the possibilities. The trip doesn't have to be one-way. *I* can even go, and not have to be content with going by proxy. Think of what we can find. Wouldn't you like to visit a new world and play the music in the cells of the life there?"

Her breath caught at the flood of possibilities.

He leaned toward her. "Let me take you there. All I ask is that you help me bring the rest of Mankind, too."

He never stopped manipulating, did he? She almost regretted admiring his motives.

Cimela eyed the fiery blaze overhead. She ought to redo the holo track and make *Traveler* an honest symphony. And yet... a universe of life to make music on... Longing throbbed in her. Damn the man!

"Cimela? What do you say?" His hand touched her wrist. The heat of it spread up her arm. "Come on. Help me."

Sighing, she yielded to siren call above and within her. "All right. You win. You've bought yourself a Pied Piper."

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