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# LONG SONG

## J. BRIAN CLARKE

*'My flying eyes have seen new creatures on the land.'*

*'I, too, have seen. Yet we both know that is an impossibility.'*

*'Perhaps not. I think they are from elsewhere.'*

*'Elsewhere? There is no elsewhere.'*

*'There is if it is beyond the sky. I saw a metal fish come down from that direction. I also saw some of the creatures emerge through an opening which appeared in the side of the fish.'*

*'Ah. When I observed, all I saw were many hundreds of the metal fish already clustered on the ground. I thought they were birth shells which the creatures had discarded. But from what you have described, I must now assume they are conveyances.'*

*'That is a remarkable assumption.'*

*'It is a natural assumption made from known facts. Perhaps, after all, there is something to the ancient legend which describes the points in the sky as worlds. If that is true, then we must accept the possibility that the creatures are from one of those worlds, and that they were transported here in the conveyances they constructed for that purpose.'*

*'Friend, that implies the creatures are intelligent. Is it therefore possible the ancient dream of our species is at last about to become reality?'*

*'I believe that is one question we should not ask, at least not yet. When wishes are strong, it is tempting to endow such wishes with a reality which may not exist. And we all know the heartbreak of the truth which inevitably follows.'*

*'Then what must we do?'*

*'Above all we must not abandon that which we have already started. Although the experiments have been in place for many generations and do not yet show promise, still it is too soon to be certain of failure. Meanwhile, we must breed additional flying eyes so that we can observe the new creatures more closely.'*

*'Agreed. And then we hope.'*

*'Oh yes. Always, we must hope.'*

At the time Emma's message was received at Project Alchemy, Gia Mayland and Jase Kurber had already departed for a long sabbatical on Serendipity. Theoretically they could have been recalled, indeed perhaps should have been. But Davakinapwottapellazanzis felt that what humans oddly referred to as "burnout" was too much of a risk for his friends. So instead the old Phuili asked Kel Bannion and Silskin to meet him in his personal quarters.

Silskin was the first to arrive. Gray furred, humanoid and graceful, the Silver bared his fangs in a friendly greeting, "David, I smelled urgency in your summons. Have they found another ark?"

Silskin, his sisters, and the few young Silvers who had been smuggled away from the world called Colony, were the reason for Project Alchemy. The project was the antidote to the virulent disease of anti-life, which was the unholy purpose bred into the minds of hundreds of thousands of fanatical Silvers who were drifting at sublight toward assigned targets among the stars. To vaporize each converted asteroid or "ark" as soon as it was found, seemed a legitimate countermeasure. But because genocide is as psychologically debilitating to its perpetrators as it is physically destructive to its victims, young Silvers—weaned away from their destructive instincts—were being trained by Alchemy as peace ambassadors. So far the score was even. One ark had been destroyed along with the thousands aboard her. But the crew from a second ark, forced to abandon most of their food synthesizers as their gigantic craft plunged into a sun, were painfully rediscovering the ancient necessity of life-originated protein.

"No. Zey have not found anozer ark." A short and stocky humanoid with wise eyes, David twitched his canine-like muzzle with the Phuili equivalent of a smile. "I zink arks can wait short time."

The door opened and Kel Bannion came in. An experienced agent of Expeditors who had been assigned to Alchemy because of his previous background as an educator, the lanky human was liked by his mischievous students despite his dour rare-to-smile exterior. "Inside that man is a child struggling to get out," Gia Mayland had shrewdly observed soon after Bannion arrived at the project. It was obvious the young Silvers were no more fooled by Bannion's glum demeanor than Gia had been. "I hope this will not take long," the man said, "I am scheduled to take a couple of the juniors on a field trip."

"Zat can wait," the Phuili said. "We go to Colony."

"Colony?" The enormous pupils of Silskin's eyes slitted with concern. "My sister—"

"Emma iss well. We go because of weport zat native intelligent life form may conflict wiz settlements of Silver People."

Bannion shook his head. "Not possible."

"You know somezing I not know?" David queried with gentle sarcasm.

"I do know that the only indigenous animals which have been observed to show even the least sign of intelligence, are the local equivalent of whales. David, there is no way creatures in an ocean can affect what goes on on the dry land—which in Colony's case is about as lush as northern Siberia!"

It was a fair comparison. Colony was still in the grip of an ice age, with huge ice caps extending to mid-latitudes. There was a single large continent on which life clung in the form of savannas and subarctic forests. The three Silver settlements were almost on the equator, spaced equidistantly apart on a tableland just south of an enormous river delta. The climate, although severe by most acceptable standards, was the mildest on the planet. Agriculture was still primitive, and would probably remain so until the people could fully accustom themselves to the annual disciplines of cultivation, planting, and harvest. But the synthesizers they had been able to rip out of their doomed ark were rugged machines, and still supplied nearly half of their nutritional needs. The remainder came from the scrubby fields, and occasionally from the lush water-plants of the delta. It was rumored some daring individuals were supplementing their diet with animal protein from the swimming creatures which were plentiful in the delta. But if it was true, the behavior was an aberration rather than a necessity.

Most of the nearly two thousand who died during the first two winters had been the older ones; those who could not adjust to the ultimate obscenity of sustenance based on living matter. They had heard the rationalization; that to continue the holy sterilization of the galaxy they would have to build a new ark to replace the one destroyed in the fires of this system's sun, and that they could not even start the construction unless they were prepared to "use" the planet's life infestation instead of destroying it. Now, six years later, with the population stabilized at around seven thousand, what had once been unthinkable was now merely unpleasant.

Berein was a lesser, one of those unlucky ones who could only communicate with voice and hearing. Nevertheless the other Silvers treated her with respect, even to the extent of accepting that her obvious intelligence was a natural compensation for the unfortunate deficiency of nerve endings which denied her the warmth and absolute honesty of hand-to-hand "secret talk." They also accepted as natural her solitary lifestyle and occasional absences.

So Berein's presence in a valley eighty kilometers inland from the throat of the delta was not unremarkable. Neither was the child in her arms, because it would not be missed. The practice of abandoning unwanted babies was a sad one, but it had already provided several recruits for Alchemy. Including one of Berein's own.

The pinnacle hissed out of a low bank of cloud and landed a few meters from Berein. She walked toward the machine, then with a glad cry began to run as the stocky figure of Davakinapwottapellanzis emerged, followed by her brother Silskin. With her free arm she hugged the old Phuili. Silskin impulsively grasped her hand, then dropped it again at the deadness of the contact. "Sorry," he said, in his embarrassment remembering how she had voluntarily accepted nerve blocks so that she could not betray her undercover role via the wide open two-way of secret-talk. "I keep forgetting."

Tenderly, Berein touched his face. "I have learned to live with it," she told him simply.

David took the child from her. The tiny body was thin and wasted. Breathing was shallow. "Much wong wiz zis one?" he asked.

Berein shrugged. "The usual. Lack of proper care during pregnancy, parents too tired or too unwilling to accept the baby after it was born." She brightened. "But I think we have turned the corner. Last week in Settlement Two, one of the females gave birth to a litter of five. And only

one died!"

Several humans emerged from the pinnacle and began to stack cases on the damp ground. David handed the child to one of the humans. "Please make this young one comfortable for return to ship," he instructed. He turned back to his former student as she asked, "How is little Emma?"

"She best of smallest ones," David replied solemnly. "She also Gia's favorite. But now you answer me question. What means 'turn corner'?"

"It means we are now beyond the point of mere survival," Berein explained. "Work has even started on the distillation plant! Within a year, the engineers think they will have enough reaction fluid to start launching scout missions to the asteroid zone."

That startled Silskin. "To create a new ark? But it's too soon—"

One of the humans came over and put an arm about the male Silver's shoulders. "Come on Silskin," he said seriously. "Have you already forgotten the exercise of rational thought? Even if they can put up enough scouts to coax one of those rocks into Colony orbit, how long do you think it will be before they have the industrial capacity to build and install drives and life stasis equipment?"

Silskin sinuously slid from the human's grasp. "Meet Kel Bannion," he told his sister. "This human is in charge of my continuing education. I like him but sometimes he aggravates me."

Bannion ignored the jibe. He said to Berein, "Ever since Gia Mayland waxed so eloquent about her Emma, I have wanted to meet you." Suddenly, a rare smile. "You are truly an Alchemy success."

"I am Berein now. The name of Emma has been given to my child."

The human inclined his head. "I have worked with that one. You have a right to be proud of her."

Already a bubble hut was being erected. Other humans were assembling the components of a compact heliflyer. David led Bannion and the two Silvers apart from the activity. "For long time we have suspicion of intelligent life," the old Phuili said. "But evidence not sure. Now another report from Bewein. Yet still not sure."

Bannion frowned. "I can understand uncertainty when such reports are from only one source. But now that you have Berein's confirmation—"

David shook his head. "Still confusing. First source is one we all know; reported soon after Silver People come here. Human team found creatures like whales of your planet. Detectors underwater record very complex talk, seems much more than signal sounds. Computers still not understand language, which is why some ask if language at all. I too beginning to ask same question, until message from Bewein."

"Berein—?"

The Silver female nodded. "I found a tribe of humanoids who use fire and build crude shelters." A long double-elbowed arm lifted and pointed. "They live on the coast, about fifty kilometers south from the delta." She groped in her carrying pack and produced a drawing. "They are a small people; about a head shorter than I am."

Bannion examined the drawing and then passed it to David and Silskin. "They remind me of Earth

monkeys. But look at that tiny head! Where do they keep the brains which figured out fire and artificial shelter?"

"Zat is not all," David said.

"Unfortunately not," Berein agreed. "To start with, the humanoids were lighting fires, putting them out, erecting shelters, and then promptly dismantling them—all with no apparent purpose. And also there were whales. There were at least five of them cruising back and forth in the bay, no more than two or three hundred meters from the shore. I watched for two days, and there was no change. The humanoids played with their fires and shelters, and the whales continued to cruise. But on the third day, the whales departed—and this is when it really became strange. Because even as the whales were swimming out of the bay, the humanoids simply stopped what they were doing and wandered off. Less than an hour later there was a rain storm which put out the fires and blew down most of the shelters, but the humanoids did not return."

"And neither did the whales?"

"Not during the few hours I remained. Anyway, I decided it was important enough to signal the watch ship and have them pass the message on to Alchemy."

"You see?" said the Phuili. "Whales may be intelligent. We know zat for long time. Now Bewein find anozer species which also may be intelligent—except intelligent only when whales near. As I say. Iss confusing."

"What about other species?" Bannion asked. The human was looking at two lizard-like creatures with wings and feathers. The creatures were perched on a rock, watching the activity through tiny unwinking eyes. Another was circling low overhead.

"The watchers?" Berein showed her fangs in a grin. "They are always around. They were the first form of animal life the people had to get used to. At first we tried to kill them, but the creatures simply kept coming. Now, they are just part of the scenery."

"And that is all the creatures do? Just watch?"

Berein shrugged. "I suppose they are hatched with a natural curiosity. Momma Gia once told me there are Earth creatures like that."

Bannion walked closer to the rock. The two creatures swiveled their snouted heads and stared at him. Bannion shivered. "No, Berein. Not like that."

*'Observe. There are now three kinds of being.'*

*'I observe. I also observe that since their conveyance returned to the sky, the remaining four—despite their dissimilarities—cooperate with great efficiency.'*

*'One of the two gray-furred ones did not come from the conveyance. It came inland from where the others of its kind are clustered.'*

*'Interesting. The new ones could have come down to the clusters but chose not to. Instead, one individual made an arduous journey to meet the new ones in this separate place.'*

*'Many questions need to be answered. We must speak to them.'*

*'It has been tried. But the processes of their thoughts so far elude me. It will take time.'*

*'Look at that machine they have assembled. I believe it is designed to fly.'*

*'I agree. Those blades at the top, when turned, will bite the air like the wings of our flying eyes. Where will the machine take them?'*

*'Not to the clusters, I think. They have already avoided that place.'*

*'Then they will go to the place where they think there are other thinking beings.'*

*'Of course. And it is there we will wait for them.'*

The helicraft could only carry two. So while David and Silskin stayed at the bubble hut to set up the remaining equipment, Berein flew with Bannion to the bay where she had observed the small humanoids. Each wore a compact headset which contained visual and audio pickups. They landed a few hundred meters from the site, then approached on foot just above the shore, threading their way between trees whose heavy, spade-like leaves constantly dripped moisture, although the sky was cloudless. Bannion shivered. "Gad, what a place. It's a combination of tropical forest and arctic tundra; wet and cold!"

Berein grinned as she shook a cloud of water droplets from her fur. "You will get used to it."

"I do not intend to be here that long," the man grumbled. Suddenly he dropped prone to the sodden ground. "Smell that?"

Berein crouched beside him. "Wood smoke." Cautiously she lifted her head. "I think they have moved from where they were before." She wriggled back down the slope, then ran stooping to another viewpoint. Bannion joined her as she peered from behind a large boulder.

The shore was close, a hundred meters to their right. About the same distance in front of the watching human and Silver, a group of chattering monkey-like creatures were throwing wood on a fire, while further away in the clearing another was busy rotating a pointed stick in a dry log. A few wisps of smoke were already rising. "That one is a regular little boy scout," Bannion whispered. "But why does he bother? They already have a fire."

Berein pointed to where others of the creatures were pulling apart an igloolike structure which had been built with rocks and mud. "When I was here before, they were playing with shelters made from branches and covered with leaves. Now look at them!"

"David, are you getting all of this?" Bannion asked.

'Yess,' Davikinapwottapellazans's sibilant Phiuli voice replied through the headsets. 'I wish to make expiment. Pleese to show yourselves.'

"Why?"

You find out. I zink you be surprwised.'

Slowly, Berein and Bannion rose to their feet and came out from behind their place of concealment. The activity in front of them continued without pause, even although some of the creatures were already faced in their direction.

"I don't get it," Bannion muttered as he and Berein ventured down among the creatures and were still enthusiastically ignored. He took a burning brand from the fire, walked over and touched it to the dry kindling the "boy scout" had placed around his rotating stick. The kindling instantly caught fire. But the diminutive operator kept rotating the stick as if he was either blind or in a trance. Bannion quickly smothered the flames before they burned the stubby three-fingered hands. Then he squatted in front of the creature and studied it. If its eyes saw the man, its brain—or what there was of an organ of thought inside its ridiculously tiny skull—seemed occupied with other considerations.

'Not much wiz which to zink,' David observed quaintly. 'Zerefore must be under contwol. Now please go to water.'

Bannion looked at his Silver companion. Berein shrugged and led the way through the trees to a narrow beach. The air and sea were calm. Small wavelets lapped pleasantly almost to their feet. Bannion felt uncomfortable. His head ached and vague shadows of indistinct thought haunted his mind. Out from the shore a group of three small black islands heaved in a slow swell.

'As I zought would be,' David said. 'Whales.' Suddenly Bannion and Berein heard a strange sound in their headsets, almost a gasp. 'Link unit! Max twansfer—'

At first, Bannion did not know what the old Phuili was trying to tell them. Perhaps the device back in the bubble hut was glowing on all indicators, suggesting a furious rate of information transfer between somewhere and the mother ship *Stapledon*'s data banks. But at that moment, the man did not particularly care. Much more immediate were the dark waves crashing against the inside of his skull like the raging of an internal sea. He dropped to his knees, his pain-confused senses only vaguely informing him that Berein was already down, curled into a fetal position and moaning. Suddenly the pain was gone, and for a few seconds Bannion remained on his knees savoring the glorious relief.

'Kel! Bewein! Please weply!'

The man struggled to his feet. More slowly Berein uncurled and stood erect. She waited a moment, her head tilted to one side as if she was listening to something only she could hear. "I am alright," she said finally.

"So am I," Bannion said, "David, what happened?"

'I want you tell me. Link unit show maximum two-way twansfer of data to *Stapledon*. Headsets you wear are only operwating sensors wizin wange.'

Bannion shook his head. "All I know is that my skull felt as if it was about to explode." He reached up to remove his headset, but Berein restrained him. "It is all right," she said. "It is over."

"How do you know?"

Instead of answering, she pointed out into the bay. "Look. Our friends are leaving."

The three islands were moving, each leaving a slight wake on the dark water. One of them sank out of sight, and for a few seconds there were only two wakes heading toward the open sea.

Suddenly something huge erupted out of the water, twisted in midair, then fell back with an enormous splash and disappeared. As the water calmed, the human and the Silver remembered a fat finless body with a gaping funnel-mouth and a ring of orifices around the tail. "It wanted us to see," Berein said. She was not just suggesting a possibility, Bannion realized. Somehow, Berein *knew*.

The monkey-like creatures were gone. Unattended, the fire still burned. All that remained of the igloo was a scattered pile of rocks. The firemaker's stick lay on the ground below the dry log and the little heap of partly burned kindling. Bannion picked up the stick and felt the point. It was still warm.

As they headed back toward the helicopter, Bannion said, "You did not answer my question. How did you know it was over?"

Berein looked at him. The fierce pug-nosed face was softened by a strange tranquility. "The whales told me," she replied simply.

The conference must have been one of the most unwieldy and expensive ever called. More amazing, was the fact it had been called by a distinguished Phuili who—by Phuili standards at least—had thrown caution aside and acted with almost indecent haste. But David had learned to trust his instincts, and the voices which came into the bubble hut, although powered across the light-years with enough megawatts to heat and light a continent, did not criticize his decision. Instantaneous physical transfer was possible only between the worlds on which a mysterious and long-lost civilization had created the appropriate "gates," and Colony was not one of those. So if not all the participants could be there in body, their tachyon-born opinions carried just as much weight. Especially those of Gia Mayland.

Speaking from half-way around the curve of the galaxy, the director of Project Alchemy underscored the dilemma as she asked, 'But why does it have to be such a bad thing? If the whales had that effect on Berein, is it not possible they can work the same miracle on everyone in the settlements?'

Another voice, this time from Earth. 'Frankly, I believe we can better protect ourselves by concentrating on the negative possibilities,' the science advisor to the World Union Council suggested. He added, 'According to the informed opinion of several reputable psi researchers, the range of mind-to-mind contact has no theoretical limit. If that is true, what is the potential of a whale-Silver combination on Colony? Is it possible for a world to radiate anti-life into the galaxy?'

Berein said hotly, "The Silvers on this world are not like that! Neither are the whales!"

'Unfortunately, conscious behavior is much easier to modify than basic instincts,' the science adviser said. 'If the whales manage to contact the minds of those in the settlements, and if in their innocence they tap into the level which is anti-life, they may release a malevolency which in turn will overwhelm them.'

Kel Bannion snorted. "Sir, don't you think that is a mite overdramatizing?"

"Fact of Silver instincts infecting whales, perhaps iss so," David said. He added, "Or perhaps iss

not so." He was staring at the link unit as if he could see through its dull casing to the faces which belonged to the incredibly distant voices. "But because we not have pwoof, we must decide what must do to pwotect galaxy if worst case is twue. Cannot wait long."

Next, the staccato consonantal speech of one of the ruling Elite on the planet Phuili. David listened, replied in the same language and then translated, "Iss agweed may be gweat danger. But, as Gia say, also possible gweat good."

'Good or bad,' said the science adviser, 'it really does not matter. If there is no proof either way, we will have no choice except to sterilize.'

Gia Mayland was furthest from the bubble hut on Colony. But although her voice was blurred by the tachyon interference from a thousand suns, her concern was not dimmed by the light-years. 'Please! Do not even consider sterilization until we have considered every considerable option. Berein, tell us again. What did the whales say to you?'

"They said they wanted me and my kind to be their friends, Momma Gia. For many generations they have sought a way to implant the seed of intelligence in other species, so that eventually there can be a land-sea partnership which will know and love all of their world. When Kel and I arrived at the site of one of their experiments, they reached through our headsets to the database on the *Stapledon* and so learned our language. The breakthrough was difficult for them. So much so, the three who spoke to me suffered serious dysfunction and may not live many more seasons. And they chose me rather than my human companion, because they know there are already many of the Silver People on Colony. Although they can control, they solemnly promised they never will. They want us as friends and partners."

Bannion said, "I believe Berein is telling the truth, or at least what she knows of it. After all, I was there, although I was not part of the communicating. But let's be honest with ourselves. The possibility of whales controlling all the Silvers on this world, is not in itself what we are afraid of. It is what might happen if there is feedback of that part of the Silver psyche we all so desperately fear! Gia, Berein, can we afford that risk?"

"Please, we must!" Silskin almost shouted. Although the male Silver could not join with his sister in hand-to-hand secret talk, he sensed a choice for his kind beyond that of destruction or isolation. With an effort he controlled his excitement. "Whatever is going to happen, will not happen so quickly that we cannot afford a little more time to determine if it is good or bad! Let Berein contact the whales again. Let *me* try!"

'Yes,' agreed Gia Mayland from across the light-years. 'Surely, we can at least spare a few days for that.'

David said soberly, "Not wise to fix pewiod of time to measure if safe, because we not know if hour, day or year. Instead, Bewein must weturn to settlements so she can observe and weport what happen if whales attempt contact wiz Silvers. Second, Silskin and zis one go in flyer to seek place where perhaps whales talk to Silskin."

'Agreed,' said the man on Earth after a moment's consideration.

'Agreed,' said the Elite on David's home world.

'If it is the best we can do—' Gia Mayland hesitated. Then; 'All right. I agree.'

Nearly thirty thousand kilometers above the bubble hut, the *Stapledon*'s energy-hungry tachyon

generator began to whine down. The star ship's crew relaxed as power returned to the temporarily reduced life-support and hull-shield systems. Within the hut, David turned to his three companions. "First Kel return Bewein in flyer to settlements. When he get back, he wemain here and welay messages from Bewein while I go wiz Silskin to find whales. If she signal zat whales are talking to Silvers in settlements, Kel order down pinnace and wecall us in flyer. We may have to leave planet fast."

Berein shook her head. "I will not leave. Whatever happens, I belong here on Colony."

The Phuili nodded. He did not seem surprised. "If whale-Silver contact fwiendly, pinnace wemain on gwound. If exchange of anti-life, we go."

"How will we know the truth of what Berein signals?" Bannion queried. "She may not be—ah—"

"It will not come to that," the female Silver said firmly. Suddenly she grinned, her fangs gleaming under the hut's glow tubes. "But if you think every Silver on Colony is suddenly going to start foaming at the mouth, why don't you watch Silskin?" Almost wistfully, she patted her brother's gray-furred cheek. "If it is the worst, he will tell you."

"If it is worst," David said, his sad eyes expressing the love he felt for this being he had co-parented, "you will be on planet when we make end of pwblem." He turned away as brother and sister embraced.

David first piloted the heliflyer to the bay where the whales had "spoken" to Berein. As the old Phuili hovered the machine a few meters above the sea's surface, Silskin lowered an underwater sound detector and instantly picked up a cacophony of roars and hoots. It was, they both knew, the open line by which whales communicated across half the planet, and by itself was not an accurate indication of where the beasts were located. But David had a theory. He pointed at a feathered lizard which was orbiting above them.

"Some whales not far. Zey still watch us."

"The lizards? But Berein said—"

"Bewein too close to pwblem. If whales can contwol monkeys, whales can contwol flying creatures. What Silvers zink is part of scenery, is how whales know what Silvers do."

Suddenly the lizard dived in front of the flyer and sped away low over the water. Just before it vanished into the distance, it turned and climbed back above them. Then it repeated the maneuver. And again—

"Silskin, bwing up detector. We follow lizard."

Quickly the small unit was reeled back into the flyer as David locked the image of the lizard on the nav screen and instructed the computer to "follow that target." At a surprisingly fast two hundred kilometers per hour, the lizard led the flyer toward the first of the chain of islands which extended more than two thousand kilometers into the huge ocean which covered eighty percent of the planet's surface. After about fifty kilometers, the lizard dived toward a tiny speck of land which was barely more than a rock. David took one look at the precipitous sides and jagged

summit of the island and quickly assumed manual control. "No good," he said. "We return—"

Silskin pointed. "We don't have to. Look, there is another lizard."

The second lizard was already in front of the flyer and maintaining the same course as its predecessor. The Silver said wonderingly, "One gets tired and another takes over. Do you believe that?"

David, as literal minded as most of his race, nodded his long head. "I see it. Zerefore must believe." Twice more he had to disengage the computer as the lizard relay continued, until finally they were led down to a broad beach on the shore of a low, treeless island. As David and Silskin emerged out of the flyer, the lizard they had been following landed on the sand a few meters away. Silskin went to the creature and squatted in front of it. It watched him incuriously. "Do they only *see* me through those beady eyes?" he wondered aloud. "Or can they also hear through their ears?"

*We do not need its ears, said a voice in his mind. It is not sound which brings your speech to us.*

Although Jase Kurber had reminded his wife they were supposed to be relaxing for a few months, he had the sense to realize her decision to go to Earth was irrevocable. In any case his own dedication to Alchemy was almost as strong as hers. So as the shuttle flew over Serendipity's green-gold mountains toward the sphere of light which was the transfer nexus, he firmly put aside his regrets. As sure as this lovely planet was here, they would return. Meanwhile, there was a small matter of making sure the hawks of two races would not again destroy a world.

The shock of transfer, the brutal sensation of being torn apart and reassembled, was a little more tolerable now that they had done it so many times. But as the shuttle emerged over the endless deserts of the world to which all the gates opened, Jase found himself uttering the usual curses against the long-vanished race which had forced this unpleasantness on those who needed to move around the galaxy in a hurry. He looked at Gia. She was just finishing her ritual of ten deep breaths. She smiled wanly. "I wish you would add one or two new words, dear. A little extra blasphemy would be nice."

Kurber grasped her hand in his. "Believe me, I am thinking about it." He looked through the window at the Shouter's Mars-like landscapes. In the distance, atop an incredibly slender pylon, a horizontal bowl pointed at the sky. Above the bowl, a flickering sphere of radiance. There were more than nineteen thousand similar AA's or "alien artifacts" on the Shouter, each a gate to its own destination among the stars of the Milky Way. About seventy minutes flight time over the curve of the planet was AA 6093, the gate to Earth. And after the gut-wrenching transfer to the nexus on Akimiski Island in Canada's Hudson Bay, there still remained the nearly two hour flight to World Union headquarters in New York. Kurber sighed. It would have been nice to visit a few old friends here on the Shouter. But this was one of those rare flights which had been cleared right through. Gia Mayland still had the power to cut through a lot of bureaucratic red tape.

Zero time to travel across the galaxy. Nearly four hours winging through the atmosphere of three planets. A sense of the ridiculous was needed for this kind of travel, as it was to tolerate the series of security checks through which they had to pass before Gia Mayland and Jase Kurber

were ushered into a small conference room eight levels below ground level in the Expeditors wing of the W.U. Building.

Expeditors's aging director, Peter Digonness, came forward to shake their hands as they entered. Then he introduced the others in the room. Harold Huwang, representing the ailing chairman of the W.U. Council. The portly Jefferson Cranbridge, science adviser to the Council. "Mason," the Phuili ambassador to Earth. And on the center of the circular conference table, the newcomers saw the unmistakable shielded box of a tachyon link unit.

Digonness opened the proceedings. "When Gia Mayland tachyoned me from Serendipity and asked me to convene this meeting, I admit I thought she was overreacting. But when I learned that you, Dr. Cranbridge, had already recommended action to contain the Colony problem, I realized the matter was more serious than perhaps even Gia had suspected. Colleagues, we have been down this road before. And we know what it cost us. Because we believed the Silver People were about to take their anti-life crusade into the galaxy, we deliberately destroyed their solar system and its billions of sentients. Yet despite that terrible act of mass slaughter, we solved nothing. We may, in fact, have triggered a situation which in the long run is much worse! Fifty arks, each carrying thousands of stasis-preserved Silvers, were scattered into the anonymity of interstellar space even as we exploded their sun."

The director paused. He felt a certain comfort from the presence of the two expeditors, although he suspected their connection with Project Alchemy did not sit well with Huwang's notorious need for what the acting chairman had always insisted must be absolute impartiality.

"At least we gained time. It will take years before any ark reaches even the closest star to the original Silvers' system. So far, we have found two of the arks. One, we had to destroy—although out of the particular disaster, we did save the six infants who became the core of Project Alchemy. The second ark we were able to divert to a target system of our own choosing. As of this moment, the survivors of that ark are slowly learning—with the undercover aid of one of our own Silvers from Alchemy—to accommodate themselves to living matter. They are also—"

Cranbridge interrupted with an irritable; "Please, Director Digonness, we know all that. And I admit that what we are accomplishing on Colony is entirely laudable. But that opportunity is now a threat! If a gun is pointed in your direction, do you refrain from counteraction just because there is a possibility the gun is not loaded?"

Huwang said gently, "Ambassador, I understand your people have been in contact with the Phuili representative on Colony. What is the latest information?"

"Not change fwom last time," the Phuili said briefly. "Except zat second Silver fwom Alchemy iss now talking wiz whales. He say whales wepeat message saying zey seek welationship wiz cweatures on land."

Digonness checked the wall clock. "In less than one minute, we will reestablish the tachyon link to Colony. Does anyone wish to say anything before the link is opened?"

"Get our people away from there," Cranbridge said. "One way or another, all hell is going to break loose."

"You are wrong." Practicing a technique she had learned from years of association with the empathetic Phuili, Gia met the unblinking gaze of the science adviser. After a few seconds, he lowered his eyes and stared at his hands. *That man is not what he seems. What is his game?*

She added, "We have found another intelligent race. Must we add them to our guilt?"

The light on top of the link unit began to blink. Dignonness smiled and nodded at Gia Mayland. She said, "Hello. David?"

Davakinapwottapellanzis was grateful his old friend had finally made the choice to get involved. Although he knew he was almost revered on his home planet, and even that humans regarded him with enormous respect (Like all Phuili, David was mildly puzzled by that peculiar human weakness known as modesty), he also knew the volatility of the situation could not be eased by the mere application of patience and restraint. The human Cranbridge had his counterparts among the Elites of Phuili, xenophobes who would "reluctantly" accept sterilization of the Colony system while blaming its necessity on human management. Gia's presence among Earth's decision-makers would be invaluable.

He went outside the bubble hut. Bannion and Silskin put down the power cell they were about to install in the heliflyer. "Have they made a decision?" the man asked.

David shook his head. "Iss postponed. Gia persuade zem to wait. But not know how long. I also spoke wiz ambassador fwom Phuili. He say what humans do, Phuili also do." A strange, almost savage expression fleeted across the canine features. "If stewilization is done, and is found to be wong decision, Phuili can zen blame humans."

Bannion nodded sympathetically. David had told him of the Phuili faction which would stop at nothing to embarrass the *flatfaces* of Earth. "If a decision is to be made by the Council, at least we know Gia is there to counterbalance that idiot Cranbridge."

"She say she lobby ozers of Council. But so will one you call idiot." David's large violet eyes narrowed in concentration. "I zink zat one is twouble."

"What makes you think so?"

"He say pwecautions already taken."

Silskin laughed aloud. "Poppa David, how can he even threaten to turn Colony's sun into a nova without sunseeds? Even if he has the authority—and as you have often told me, no one man or Phuili has that kind of power—it will still take months to ship sunseeds to this system from the nearest gate on Hefron Two. So if that silly human believes Colony's evil Silvers will take over the whales and send a telepathic blast of anti-life into the galaxy, he also knows it is going to happen soon. Even before the seeds reach the Hefron gate!"

Bannion nodded. "My boy has a point."

David's jaws twitched. "I zink what Silskin say is what humans call overkill. Not need sunseeds to kill few zousand Silvers."

The old Phuili did not need to explain. Bannion whispered, "My god, if you are right—" He turned toward the bubble hut, but was stopped by a stentorian "Not do!" from the diminutive alien.

David added quietly. "Iss not good tell people on ship zat we suspect."

"Which leaves us damn few options," Bannion muttered crossly. He gestured at the sky. "They are there and we are here. How can we know if there has been any kind of takeover—or even if a takeover was necessary?"

David turned to the Silver. "Silskin, you good wiz computer. Get complete officer and crew list from *Stapledon* data bank. As long as zey not know we suspect, zey not check normal data transfer."

"Yes Poppa David," the Silver responded as he ducked into the hut. A few minutes later, he called out to them. "I have it stored in the memory. Do you want to see what we've got?"

Bannion followed David into the hemisphere. Silskin had unfolded the fifty centimeter display screen from behind its keyboard. "How do you want to view the information?"

"Political affiliations," Bannion said promptly. "See if anyone is or was associated with the Lecfras Party on Earth or the Human Eaters on Phuili."

Silskin looked up. "Who?"

"Lecfras. Started by a right wing racist, Lector Fraser. The Human Eaters are the Phuili equivalent."

David nodded. "Only ones zey not like more zan humans are Silvers. Or any ozers who are not Phuili."

"All right." Silskin quickly tapped the appropriate keys. Three names appeared on the screen.

Bannion blinked. "First Officer Devries? And Jinette Queegan—" His eyes widened. "She's the Medical Officer!"

David pointed. "Ekafrokopennfrikiziz. One humans call Eka. She Sub Elite twained for what you call exobiology."

For a few moments there was a discouraged silence in the hut. What they had learned was proof of nothing, although it was a strong indicator. If Phuili and human society had anything in common, it was the existence of fringe political groups which took great care to remain within the framework of the law.

"A few facts and a helluva lot of ifs," Bannion commented angrily. "How do we prove anything? Even to our own satisfaction?"

"Iss difficult," David agreed. He thought for a moment. "*Stapledon* have nuclear material for geological blast charges. Easy to make to bombs and drop on settlements from pinnace. Also easy for medical officer to make captain sick so first officer take ship. And because Eka is senior Phuili on board—"

"Just a moment," Bannion interrupted. "If Eka is an exobiologist, shouldn't she be down here with us instead of still on the ship?"

"Remember she say she come down later. Still have study work to complete."

"That is convenient."

"Not zink so," David said, still being literal-minded. "She part of takeover."

"Look, if we call the ship and ask to speak to the captain—"

"Why would we need ask for captain? Zey would ask why we ask." David shook his head. "We need plan—"

*"We have great trouble. The Silver People are flawed."*

*'I know. I have also detected the flaw.'*

*'It is totally illogical and yet it exists. We must take extreme care.'*

*'We withdraw?'*

*'That is the last thing we must do. The sickness will not depart merely because we ignore those who are sick.'*

*'Are they aware they are sick?'*

*'They are aware, although they do not regard it as a sickness. To the Silver People, the only sickness is living matter.'*

*'Yet they partially subsist on such matter.'*

*'Only because it is necessary. I read in them a thing called rationalization.'*

*'There is more than that, I think.'*

*'Indeed. Much more. For instance, the two who are not of the others fear a terrible consequence if we interchange with the 'wild ones' of their kind. They believe we in turn may become infected.'*

*'They are wrong.'*

*'Of course.'*

*'So why do we still restrain from full contact?'*

*'Because an irrationality has happened in the ship beyond the sky. In its ignorance, that irrationality is prepared to destroy before it allows itself time to reason.'*

*'The destruction must not be allowed to happen.'*

*'We must watch.'*

*'We must decide.'*

*'And then we will act.'*

David's illness was not feigned. The manuals clearly described the appearance and toxic nature of the plant with a spike which ejected like a tiny arrow, so it was a simple matter to arrange an "Accident." The old Phuili was almost unconscious when the pinnacle came | down, and the urgency of his condition did not allow time for argument when Silskin insisted on accompanying his beloved mentor back to the *Stapledon's* sick bay.

The *Stapledon* and her sister ships were survivors of the era which existed before the galaxy was opened up by the star gates. Each was designed to carry thousands of colonists on voyages which could last years, and was necessarily of enormous proportions. The great ships had their decades of glory, until they became orbiting white elephants—as those who would have been their passengers began the Great Exodus through portals which brought twenty thousand worlds as close as the next town.

Yet there remained worlds which did not have star gates; backwater planets which for various reasons needed to be accessed. So the old ships were refitted and their phase-shift FTL drive systems returned. The ships were not returned to continuous use; there was not enough demand for that. But they were available when needed, although their cavernous holds and echoing dormitories would never again be filled with the goods and people of colonization.

So it was to be expected that the one-hundred-meter walk from the pinnacle lock to the *Stapledon's* living section would be a lonely one. Nevertheless, as Silskin hurried after the crewman who was pushing David's stretcher, the young Silver sensed an unease in the air which was beyond the sadness of empty corridors. Even the crewman remained remarkably uncommunicative, just as he had been during the fifty minute ride up from Colony's surface. But despite Silskin's fear of a possible coup aboard the ship, as well as for David's deteriorating condition, he bravely continued his role as a frightened student concerned only with his teacher's well-being. Perhaps, also, he was helped a little by the calm presence who was felt but who remained strictly apart.

Doctor Queegan was waiting, the antidote already prepared. She was familiar enough with Phuili anatomy; she did not have to waste time poking around David's alien musculature. She found the proper spot, and the injection gun hissed almost before Silskin was aware it had been done. Instantly the cramps which were wracking the old Phuili's body began to subside, and the large eyes closed in grateful relaxation.

The doctor smiled. "Don't worry. He will be okay."

Silskin was so relieved he almost forgot the real reason he was aboard. But his lapse was only momentary. His eyes widened as he glanced at the other bed in the tiny ward and recognized its occupant. "Captain Skavonian!"

Jinette Queegan turned to her other patient. The captain's face was flushed, but he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. "Rhinehouse swamp fever. The virus must have been dormant within his system for years." She shrugged. "The prognosis is for a complete recovery, but it will be months before he can resume his duties."

"So Mr. Devries is running the ship?"

"Of course." She looked questioningly at the Silver. "Is there any reason why he should not be?"

Silskin quickly changed the subject. "When can I talk to David?"

"Soon, I think. Meanwhile, I suggest you get some rest. I am no expert on a Silver's physical

needs, but I suspect you have been in overdrive more hours than is proper for any being."

She was right of course, and Silskin knew it. But what the doctor probably expected would take hours, he knew his body could accomplish within minutes. The racial ability to "catnap," developed when survival depended on a split-second ability to surge from sleep to flight, could serve him well in the current situation. So he showed his pointed teeth in a wan smile. "Thank you for reminding me. Please tell David I will come and see him in a few hours."

He did not meet anyone as he went to a vacant cabin. Even within the small section of the ship which was occupied, the twenty crewmen and a few passengers could easily lose themselves. So Silskin was grateful for the respite, although he did not doubt he had been closely observed since the moment he came aboard.

*Rhinehouse swamp fever my tail!* he thought with amusement as he mentally paraphrased what he was sure Kel Bannion would say. Again, just before he dropped off to sleep: *so David is right. Now what do I do?*

And then Silskin dreamed.

He saw a ferocious landscape in which clawed and toothed animals competed with carnivorous plants for the limited protein which was nontoxic and relatively defenseless. It was a situation in which "defenseless" was a relative term, because the small group of gray-furred humanoids who were battling toward their cave halfway up a nearby cliff, were fighting back with spears, clubs, and deadly-aimed slingshots. When they finally reached the cave, one of their number was already reduced to a pile of bones under the heaving mound of voracious life which had formed after an armored monster had pounced and instantly removed half its victim with one bite.

Silskin knew he was viewing an incident from the dawn of his species, probably when the genetically programmed instruction to "cooperate with each other and kill everything else" began to lift the proto-Silvers up the brutal road which led to domination and then extinction of all the other life-forms. For a brief moment he saw his world as it must have been just before it was destroyed; its barren landscapes and sterile seas, the pall of perpetual industrial smog. With a sudden and overwhelming sense of shame, Silskin realized the human-Phuili action which caused the Silvers' sun to turn nova was merely the capstone of the eons-long process started by the Silvers themselves.

*"It is why they fear you,"* a voice said in his dream.

*'But we are no longer like that!'* Silskin protested hotly.

*'Perhaps not.'* Then, gently, *'Yet even you fear that which you suspect is slumbering within you and the others of your kind—a malevolency which, perhaps, can be triggered by a mere tendril of alien thought.'*

*'But I am not being changed by your thought—'* A hesitation. *'Am I?'*

*'Look into yourself, young one, and know that is a foolish question. Like most creatures of the id, your monster casts a shadow which is more fearsome than the reality. Face the monster for what it is, not what it appears to be. Only then can you do what must be done.'*

*'Must be done? I do not understand.'*

A sense of impatience. *'We are not omnipotent. Although we are in contact with parts of*

*your conscious and unconscious mind, it is only with great effort. To attempt also to reach those around you, will take time that you and we do not have. Young one, you are still immature. Yet you possess powers which are truly remarkable for one not born within the ocean's serenity. Therefore use what you have to serve those who need what only you can give. Completion needs the land. The land needs the sentient mind.'*

Silskin woke abruptly. He glanced at the clock, and was relieved he had spent less than an hour in the silent cabin. For a moment he considered the dream. Was it real, he wondered? Or merely a rationalization from a wish-fulfilling subconscious? He focused his thoughts and tried to direct them at the planet below the orbiting star ship. Hello? he called tentatively. *Hello?*

There was no reply. Only his own thoughts, confused by doubts.

*Hello?* he repeated.

Still no reply. But suddenly a sense of warmth, of fond reassurance.

Silskin smiled. "Thank you," he whispered into the darkness.

As David struggled to awareness, he found to his discomfort that Ekafrokopennfrikiziz was standing by his bedside and watching him. That she happened to be an attractive female of his species was immaterial; in the inflexible Phuili context, sex never intruded on other matters. But if she was, as he suspected, a conspirator—

She said, "It is evident you are recovering. I am pleased."

"Yes." He held up an arm and it wavered only slightly. "Soon, I think I can return to my work."

"It was a most unusual accident, was it not?" The large violet eyes regarded him solemnly. "The sting plant is well documented and easily avoided."

She knew, of course. As he was equally certain of her own duplicity. The Phuili empathetic sense is a remarkable phenomenon, in its way almost as deception proof as the secret-talk of the Silvers. Nevertheless, the proprieties had to be observed. "Even the most unlikely accidents happen," David remarked blandly.

"That is true," the female agreed. "It is also true that correct and necessary actions are often condemned by one's contemporaries, even though those same actions are later favored by history. Do you not think that is so?" Without waiting for a reply, she turned away and quietly left the room.

David knew exactly what she meant, and felt a sadness at the prospect of another tragedy caused by well-meaning individuals whose ethical sense was unbalanced by ignorance. He cautiously pushed himself up into a sitting position, and then swayed onto his feet. For a moment his stocky body felt strange, as if it belonged to someone else and he was merely an observer. But with an effort of will he focused inward, forcing a resumption of communication from mind through brain to nerves and musculature. It was not a pleasant experience as feeling arrived on pulsating waves of pain, but the old Phuili toughed it out until he could stand and then begin to walk without support.

"What are you in for?" the human in the other bed asked weakly.

"Captain?" David had already become vaguely aware he was sharing the sick bay with a fellow sufferer. But now that he knew the other's identity, he was totally unsurprised.

Ekafrkopennfrikiziz had already confirmed most of his suspicions, so it naturally followed that Captain Skavonian's ailment—whatever it was—was much more than mere coincidence. David went over and grasped the other's wrist. He had made a hobby of human physiology, so it did not take him long to determine that the captain's pulse, although faint, was regular. "I was poisoned by sting plant," he replied as he released the limp hand.

"Ah." The captain smiled. "With me, it's Rhinehouse fever." He sighed. "Seems I must accept the fact I will be out of circulation for a while."

"Iss unfortunate. But doctor tell me pwognosis for you iss complete wecoverwy."

"Unless I end up being bored to death." The captain winced as he took a deep breath. "At least the ship should be okay. Cass Devries is a good man."

"Yess." David was tempted to ask about the *Stapledon's* executive officer. But because logic insisted it was not an accident he had been left alone with John Skavonian, he decided to disappoint whoever was listening. "If you not mind, I leave for while. Want to find my pupil, Silskin."

"The Silver?" The human's tired eyes showed interest. "I liked that one. What brought him up from the planet?"

"He want make sure I get well."

"Now that is interesting." A wheezing chuckle. "Considering he comes from a race of homicidal maniacs."

Had David been human, he would have bristled. But his empathetic sense discerned the compassion camouflaged behind the apparently thoughtless remark, so he did not take offense. Instead, he told the captain seriously, "What we find at Alchemy and now pwove on Colony, is zat pwognosis for Silvers also good. Instinct for anti-life not genetic. Iss social."

"Oh?" The captain tried to lift his head from the pillow, but the effort was too much and his head dropped back. Nevertheless, he managed a smile. "Thanks for telling me. So there is hope for us sinners yet."

David knew that he was referring to the genocidal precedent which had almost wiped out the Silver People. In light of the apparent monomaniacal determination of that race to destroy every form of life other than its own, the decision to turn the Silvers' sun into a short-lived but thoroughly destructive nova had at the time seemed the only one possible. But the legacy of guilt—for both Phuili and humans—was heavy. So the possibility that the surviving Silvers could be reoriented into a small but dynamic segment of the emerging galactic scene, was a desperately needed catharsis which could not come too soon.

But a few minutes later, as David trotted through the corridors of the silent ship and reflected on the tragic irony of a sentence of death being pronounced even before guilt was established, he wondered how the captain would react if he learned of the plans to launch a mini-genocide from his beloved *Stapledon*.

When he entered the enormous vessel's control center, everything seemed to be normal. The duty crew were on station at the various control consoles; some talking among themselves, others reviewing and updating data, and a few performing minor and probably unnecessary adjustments. A ship in natural orbit is a dull place, which perhaps explains the wisdom of rules which specify full duty rosters even when systems are powered down or on automated standby. Pablo Vinder, Nav Specialist, spotted the little Phuili and shouted, "David! Good to see you are still on the right side of death's door!"

Despite his many years of working with humans, David had never been able to fathom the logic of their humor. He said politely, "I well, zank you. You see Silskin?"

"Referring, I suppose, to that furry disciple of yours." Vinder chuckled. "Guess he got tired of bedsitting his teacher. Last I saw of him, he'd grabbed a package of sandwiches and was off to explore the ship."

"The Silver? That *creature* is wandering about without proper escort?" Cass Devries swung his chair around and glared at the N.S. The acting captain was a small man with an aggressive personality which overcompensated for his lack of physical stature. "I should have been told!"

"I did not think it was necessary, sir. After he has wandered through a few dozen empty spaces, I am sure he will be depressed enough to decide the front end provides much better company."

"Hmm." Aware he had overreacted, Devries muttered, "I suppose you are right." He turned to the old Phuili. "Davakinapwottapellanzis. Do you mind accompanying me to my quarters? There are matters you and I should—ah—discuss."

David was not flattered at being addressed by his full title. The human tongue was not adapted to Phuili speech, and sensible humans had long ago given up trying. But there were always a few, for reasons known only to themselves, who persisted with the ignorant grunts which were verbal caricatures of the ancient and honored sounds. Nevertheless the old Phuili inclined his snouted head. "I zink you also ask Ekafrokopennfrikiziz—" He deliberately exploded the consonants in a manner no human could even hope to duplicate. "—and Doctor Queegan to come."

The acting captain's plump features whitened at the clear message; *I know*. He turned away for a moment. Then he turned back to his tormentor and said hoarsely, "Under the circumstances, perhaps such a meeting would be—ah—appropriate."

After being politely escorted to a temporary restraining cell by two embarrassed crewmen, David was later taken to a room where Devries, Eka, and Doctor Queegan were waiting. As if to balance his former display of insecurity before the little alien, Devries launched into an impassioned tirade about the information leak which had obviously alerted those on the planet. The old Phuili listened quietly, his large eyes unwinking and thoughtful. He still did not react when Jinette Queegan pleaded, "David, you must not, you *cannot* stop us! If that horror is allowed to—"

"I zink we not more need fear Davakinapwottapellanzis," Eka observed quietly. "What matter now is tachyon link in next minutes. Zen we know what to be done."

David made a quick decision. What he had already thought was the most likely scenario, he now had to assume was fact. "You will accept the advice of the individual called Cranbridge?" he queried in rapid Phuili. "I am amazed you would trust the word of one who is so obviously of extreme bias."

David empathized the female's surprise, although physically she did not show it. His almost blind shot had obviously hit its mark. "If you are referring to that particular human's desire to preserve the future," she retorted in the same tongue, "then I also am of extreme bias. As is Doctor Queegan and many others."

"Except those others, I think, are not on this human ship of space," David observed. "You are merely three."

She nodded. "It is not so easy to conceal our histories from those who choose to look." Her jaw twitched with the Phuili equivalent of a smile. "I checked the computer log for recent ground links."

That was not unexpected. David would have done the same under similar circumstances. He began to speak, but was interrupted as the acting captain impatiently demanded, "Eka, what does he know?"

"He know enough," the female replied obscurely. With total lack of guile, she added, "But iss expected. He Phuili."

Devries made a strangled sound. Jinette Queegan merely shook her head. "None of us will enjoy what I think we are about to do," the woman said. She gestured at her Phiuli co-conspirator. "David, after reading our files, you must know how difficult it is for Cass and I to work with one who is not of our kind—"

"—and for I to work wiz humans," the female said.

The doctor nodded. "Exactly. But when the Silver problem is settled, I think we can arrange for the proper partitioning of the galaxy."

Had David been human, he would have shivered. Despite the obvious physical differences, it was clear that human and Phuili had a lot in common—even, unfortunately, to the xenophobic streak which threatened to destroy the delicate fabric of cooperation which the progressives of both races had struggled to create. Here and now, in this speck of metal orbiting a planet of a minor sun, the future of a great experiment hung in the balance. For humans, Phuili, and for the Silvers, for the great creatures in Colony's oceans, even perhaps for the mysterious race which eons ago had created the galactic transfer network; events were trembling on a precarious balance between possible futures. For David and his friends of two other races, the choice could only be a continuation of the adventure which had begun with the realization that sentient life is infinitely more than individual philosophy or physical form; that it is in fact a force with the potential to link all things in a glorious web of search and discovery.

But for the conspirators and all those who shared their sincere yet irrational fear of the unknown which lurks in every shadow, the adventure had to be terminated before contamination could occur. Their outlook was myopic, their objectives short-range, the inevitability of a life-linked universe was beyond them. The centuries of stagnation and conflict resulting from their choice would, of course, eventually pass like a cloud before the sun. But as with the aftermath of all dark ages, the scars would not readily heal.

Suddenly the lights dimmed and then brightened again as emergency power cells took over the load lost to the surging demand of the activated tachyon generator. The indicator on the link unit flickered and then steadied as a familiar voice said, "Code eight three. This is Churchill."

"Code A nine-one," Devries replied. "Dracula."

Although David was familiar with the broad outlines of human history, he could hardly be expected to know the details. But he knew enough of the psychology of the humans involved; he would have understood the appropriateness of the code names as well as the paranoia which generated their use. Churchill, for the time when the famous English statesman was literally a voice in the wilderness as he warned his disbelieving contemporaries against the rising threat in central Europe. And the Romanian prince Dracula, otherwise known as Vlad the Impaler. He was chosen not so much for his bloody inclinations (which in any case made him a worthy counterpart to the fictional immortal), as for his inspired leadership against the armies of the alien Turk.

The one called Churchill did not waste time. "Is the plan proceeding?"

"No problem," Dracula/Devries replied. "Skavonian is in the sick bay and I have assumed command."

'What about the Phuili?'

"Ekafrok—" The acting captain flushed. "Eka has been fully supportive. As has Doctor Queegan."

'Is the pinnacle functional?'

"I removed the C.F. scrambler as soon as I assumed command. The cargo is loaded and ready for use."

There were three pinnacles. Number two had been suffering control anomalies to such an extent, Devries had volunteered his services as an "acknowledged expert" and had been working on the problem almost continuously since the *Stapledon* set course for Colony. It was evident, David realized, the executive officer had done considerably more than merely rearrange a few circuits.

Devries asked. "What about Gia Mayland and that consort of hers? Have those two been making any more trouble?"

A sigh. "They suspect of course, although it is obvious they expect some kind of legal move to push through a sterilization order. So they have been lobbying—enough, I might add, that any motion of mine would be overwhelmingly voted down.'

Devries's lips tightened. "That is a great pity."

'In the sense it means we are still on our own, I agree. But that does not change our objective, or our dedication to it. In any case, opinions will change. We will be heroes in our own time.'

David spoke up. "I zink not, Jeferson Cwanbwidge."

Devries cursed, the doctor looked surprised. Eka did not react at all. The long silence from the link unit could have meant anything, although David knew the main mover behind the conspiracy would be of sterner stuff than the ill-tempererd human who had taken over the *Stapledon*.

Finally, 'You are the Phuili they call David?' The voice from across the light years was calm and seemed only slightly curious.

Devries said hurriedly, "He's here because somehow he found out what is going on. I don't know how he got the information, but right now I guarantee there is not a damn thing he is going to do about it!"

"Iss twue," said Eka. "He not decide for Phuili anymore."

Another silence. Then, 'Let David speak. I would like to know what he thinks about this.'

David suspected that anything he could say now would be about as useful as raindrops on an ocean. Nevertheless, not to try would be an abandonment of principles he had held sacrosanct since the distant time of his youth, when the people of Earth were still restricted within their planetary system and even Jefferson Cranbridge's great-grandparents were young. So the old Phuili chose the human words with care. "For Silvers, anti-life iss belief which iss taught. Iss not in genes. We pwove at Alchemy, where we successful to teach young Silvers zat life is necessawy dimension of universe, like time and many dimensions of space. On Colony, we not have to teach. Zere it iss necessawy to know. Or if not to know, to die. And most on planet learn quick enough not to die. Which mean Silvers on Colony have met teacher called expewience. It also mean zere is not sickness to pass to whales. Human called Cwanbwidge, I say you can learn as Silvers learned. Be taught, as wiz young ones. Or by bad expewience, as wiz Silver People on Colony. Iss for you to make choice."

Despite the constant hissing of tachyon interference, Cranbridge's response at first seemed sincerely sympathetic. But as David had expected, the glib words quickly took on the pompous rigidity of a fanatic's absolute conviction. 'David, how I wish it was that simple. But as I believe I previously told you, conscious behavior does not necessarily match the primeval instincts of the id. In other words, I am afraid there is no way you can prove with unequivocal certainty that a menace of galactic proportions is not germinating on that planet. Neither can the Kurbers, although I can tell you now that they came to my office yesterday with almost the same argument. Fortunately they did not know what you know, or I am sure they would have arrived with an escort of security police.' There was the sound of a dry chuckle.

Then, sadly, 'If there was any way out of this tragic dilemma, I would not hesitate. Captain Devries would happily dismantle the devices aboard the pinnacle, and we could all return to our respective lives. But this is a situation in which mere wishes cannot be allowed to stand in the way of a higher purpose. What must be done *will* be done. And the few of us involved will, of course, accept the consequences, which I admit will be quite severe for a period of time. Ultimately however, there is no doubt that most thinking individuals will appreciate the unpleasant necessity of our actions.'

There was a faint sheen of sweat on the acting captain's forehead as he reacted to an intense mix of anticipation, fear and guilt. He licked his lips. "Then we do it?" Devries asked hoarsely.

'I am afraid we must. The fact I arranged this tachyon link without going through channels, will be known within hours. Immediate action will at least allow a little time afterward to—ah—protect ourselves against the inevitable overreaction. Is it agreed?'

"Iss agreed," Ekafrokopennfrikiziz said solemnly.

The doctor's hands clenched until knuckles showed white. "It is for the good of us all," she whispered.

David said nothing. There was no point.

After a short silence, the man on Earth said, 'I am sorry David.' The hiss of tachyon static abruptly increased as transmission was terminated.

The ship's T-generator disconnected and the lights flickered as internal power returned to the

main source. Devries opened the door and waved in the two crewmen who were waiting outside. "We are going to pinnace number two. Please bring the Phuili along."

As he went docilely between the crewmen, David chose to remain silent. Aside from the obvious fact that anything he said to the two humans would be heard by the others as they walked just ahead, none of the crew had any reason to doubt the legitimate nature of even a nuclear strike on Colony. Because it was well known that wild Silvers were anti-life, a simple announcement to the effect that the thousands down on the planet had reverted, would be an easily acceptable rationalization.

For any other individual, Phuili, human, or Silver, this would have been the time to despair. But there was a uniquely mystical side to David's nature which did not always accept what was patently obvious.

Somehow, he knew it was not over. Not yet.

*'How soon?'*

*'Very soon.'*

*'It is difficult to wait for what may be the end.'*

*'Or the beginning. Do not forget that.'*

*'I do not forget. But what we try has never been done before. It is a very slender thread on which we suspend our hopes.'*

*'But I think strong enough. We are at a nexus of futures, in which even a whisper of current can change the world. It is such a tiny thing which must be done, but all our destinies have led us to it. Younger one, those destinies are not blind.'*

*'I want to believe you. Oh, how I want to believe.'*

*'Belief is a creature of patience. Wait with me.'*

*'It is here! Our flying eyes see it sliding through the sky!'*

*'There is death in its belly.'*

*'It is over a cluster.'*

*'Death falls—'*

They had strapped David to a seat three rows back from the control section. Devries was in the left front seat, piloting the vehicle as it shuddered down through the upper atmosphere. The female Phuili was in the copilot's position, her pudgy hand hovering over a small control box which had been attached between the seats. Doctor Queegan had remained aboard the *Stapledon*; a symbolic gesture obviously agreed upon to emphasize the equal partnership of human and Phuili in this action.

The ocean was ending. Ahead, a smudge of coastline evolved into a broad river estuary with rising hills beyond. Devries started the jets, and the pinnacle rumbled over the sea in level flight. "We're getting close. Better arm the charges."

Eka's hand hovered over the box. There was a sound like a gasp back in the cabin. "Charges iss armed," she said.

"OK." Devries turned the pinnacle's nose slightly. There was a tableland, a glimpse of settlements. "Three targets, three charges. The targets are in line and close to each other, so release one-two-three when I shout."

"Weady." A finger rested on the first release button.

"One!" The finger pressed and the pinnacle trembled slightly as a forty-kilo load fell out of the cargo-drop opening.

"Two!" The pinnacle trembled again.

"Three!"

Devries slammed open the throttles and jets roared as the pinnacle soared upward toward the safety of space. Rockets cut in and acceleration increased. "Wish I could see!" Devries shouted over the racket.

"Iss good stwike!" the female Phuili shouted back. "We see when weach ship. None Silvers alive now!"

Finally the thrust eased and the pinnacle began to coast around the curve of the planet toward the distant glint of the big mother ship in its orbit. Devries slackened his seat restraints and turned to look back at the passenger. His jaw dropped. "My God."

David said, "You fail, captain."

Beside the old Phuili, a Silver was huddled almost in a ball. He was shivering and his gray fur was damp with sweat. Slowly, he lifted his head from between his lower limbs and stared at the astonished human. Then Silskin showed his fangs in a broad grin.

Jeferson Cranbridge was not surprised when Gia Mayland and Jase Kurber returned to his office. He was feeding papers into a desk shredder. "Come to gloat?" he asked.

"That would be pointless," the slim woman said as she and her husband sat down. "We are here to explain what happened."

"Very thoughtful of you." The former science adviser leaned back into his chair. "All right. Enlighten me."

"From the start, you and your friends were terrified at the possibility of a marriage between the telepathic ability of the whales and the so-called 'instinct' for anti-life of the Silvers. Is that a reasonable statement of your position?"

Cranbridge nodded. "We made no secret of it. As you know, we tried every legitimate means to promote appropriate action."

"To legalize mass murder!" Kurber said angrily.

The older man shrugged. "I did what I believed was necessary at the time."

"Do you still believe that?"

"I can hardly answer that question until I know the subsequent facts. The only firm knowledge I have is to the effect that the raid failed, and that my status here has become somewhat—ah—untenable."

"Serve you damn right," Kurber muttered. He grimaced when his wife punched him in the side. "Sorry, my love. The floor is yours."

She said, "Doctor Cranbridge, it has turned out that the telepathic link between the whales and any Silver is difficult, severely limited, and definitely does not involve control in either direction. What is unexpected however, is that under certain limited conditions a Silver can exert control on another being. It is an extremely painful process for the Silver, and involves a degree of understanding which can never be possible for a sick mind—" Gia Mayland paused.

Cranbridge interpreted the woman's hesitation as a prompt. "Meaning, I suppose, the mind of a wild Silver. All right, so one of your tame cats learned telepathic control. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Only that the whales somehow discerned the latent talent in one of our Project Alchemy products, a Silver named Silskin, and showed him how to use it. Silskin was concealed in the pinnace when it began its bombing run over the settlements on Colony, and managed to control the physical actions of Devries's co-pilot."

Cranbridge frowned. "That would be the Phuili we call Eka. I suppose with Devries at the controls, she would have been the one to drop the charges. So what did this mind-twisting prodigy do? Stop her from dropping them?"

Gia shook her head. "They were dropped. In any case, that involved three consecutive actions and there was no way Silskin could have handled all three. He acted before that, when your Phuili was supposed to arm the charges. One small button, which she *thought* she pressed—"

At first the scientist was incredulous. But after incredulity came his sense of the ridiculous. "You mean they dropped three duds? No damage?"

"I understand a wall of one hut was caved in and a female Silver received a few cuts and bruises."

"Well I'll be—" Cranbridge started to chuckle. The chuckle became laughter and finally hysterical and painful mirth. His two visitors waited patiently until the paroxysm subsided. He wiped the

tears from his eyes. "All right, you two have had your fun. Now go away and leave me to mine."

"Which is—?" Kurber asked.

"Disgrace. Exile. I will eat, I suppose. Have a roof over my head. What else is there?"

"You still have your talents. A fine mind. Scientific knowledge."

"So?"

"We need a permanent team on Colony. To study the planet, the whales, the developing relationship between whales and Silvers. If you want it, there is a place on that team for Jefferson Cranbridge."

"But I—" Horrified, he stared at the woman. "Do I have an alternative?"

"Of course. You just described it. Exile."

The xenophobe's throat was tight, constricted. He stammered, "You must give me t—time. Please give mm—me time—"

*'The peril is over.'*

*'Now we can begin.'*

*'The beings are receptive, but not always willing.'*

*'So be it. If the final link cannot be joined until the time of generations yet unborn, still we must be glad we are at the beginning. By thought and voice we will sing to our kindred throughout the waters of the Great Mother, so all will know what is past and what is to come.'*

*'What is past is short. But what is to come—'*

*'I know. It will be a long song.'*