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# THE LAST DEFENDER

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*A billion kilometers across, the enormous spiral of matter flares incandescent as its substance is inconceivably compressed and energized just before it disappears forever below the event horizon of the black hole. The Ark is already being drawn inexorably inward; subject to nature's relentless laws as surely as every atom within range of the voracious center. The only choice for the thousands aboard the converted asteroid seems to be in the manner of their dying. Quickly, as their bodies become stretched and torn apart by the tidal forces of the hole. Or slowly and without hope, on the cratered surface of a tiny world which eons ago was captured and spun into an elongated orbit about the fearsome primary.*

*Yet even among the doomed, there are optimists—*

*'The theory says it can be done!'*

*'You forget the calculations are impossibly complex. There is not enough time.'*

*'Nevertheless we will depart at the appointed moment. The Giver will guide our steering.'*

*'I wish you luck, brother. Some of us have chosen to go to the planetoid, where time will perhaps grant us a better way.'*

*'Time belongs to the Giver. He will grant you nothing.'*

*'Or everything.'*

*The moment comes. Like a cloud of disturbed locusts thousands of tiny space craft separate from the Ark, rotate, and then spiral toward the primary along a course which leads them high above the ecliptic. Again they rotate, and with drives flaring at full thrust the little ships hurtle suicidally down the lines of force which reach out from the spinning nothingness at the center. The ships vanish.*

*Months later, two hundred more ships rise; this time from the planetoid which has been their temporary base. As those who have gone before, they also spiral above the ecliptic. They rotate. They dive—*

Young Emma was astonished. "Another race of Silvers?"

Gia Mayland shook her head. "Not quite. But a people so closely resembling your own, they could be mistaken as such."

"How is that possible?"

"Who knows? It is a big universe with much room for coincidence. And do not forget we are only talking about physical resemblance. Within their heads, they may be as alien as anything we are likely to find in the galaxy."

Again Emma compared the hologram with her reflection in the mirror. The same lithe, fur-covered body. Similar upright ears, yellow eyes and fanged jaw. But the other being's body fur was a golden brown, not Emma's gray. And the arms were single-elbowed like those of a human; unlike the double-jointed arrangement of Emma's incredibly dexterous upper limbs. And were not those eyes smaller and set deeper into the skull? And that longer forehead—

"No," Emma said firmly. "That is quite definitely not a Silver." She smiled, displaying a fearsome display of natural weaponry. "I know. We will call them Golds!"

The woman smiled. "Not what I would call original. But it will do."

Nine weeks later, the *Mixmaster* emerged above a cratered plain and instantly began to fall as its airfoils found only vacuum. With a brief spurt from steering jets, the nose lifted, the stern thrusters flared, and the shuttle lowered to a gentle tail-first touchdown amid a churning cloud of brown dust.

This was a new facility without the amenities that elsewhere would allow direct disembarkation through a sealed link tube. Here it was done in the old fashioned manner, involving a space-suited walk across a couple of hundred meters of lava rock to the hemisphere of the research station. Beta hung low in the black sky, the lower limb of its cloudy crescent almost touching the jagged horizon of this single small moon of the planet.

Gia glanced up along the soaring column which supported the looming underside of the nexus bowl. From this angle the bowl eclipsed the flickering sphere of light which was the nexus itself—out of which the *Mixmaster* had emerged after an instantaneous jump of almost two thousand light-years. She wondered aloud, "How do the people on the planet explain the point of light on their Moon?"

Henry Sorenson chuckled. "They don't. The nexus works only when this side of the Moon is illuminated, so the—ah—Golds have never seen it against the dark. As far as I know, this is the only photosensitive terminal in the galaxy. Which means the builders must have anticipated that eventually there would be someone up there—" He gestured at the planet in the sky, "—who would be smart enough to figure what belongs and what doesn't. Sort of like planning for the long

haul, huh?"

"Henry, you have a natural gift for understatement," Gia muttered, half to herself. She wondered if there could be any reasonable definition of the kind of intelligence which anticipated and built for events millions of years in the future. On this world and on countless others, their giant machines had not only remained functional, but the towering four-kilometer pylons which supported the nearly-as-wide nexus bowls had remained straight and true, even as eons of geological change shifted landscapes beneath and around them.

Gia and Sorenson moved on. But Emma remained rooted to the spot, her yellow eyes wide behind the bubble front of her helmet. Like most people who had become accustomed to the incredible transport system which linked the galaxy in a web of instantaneous travel, the young Silver had not given much thought to the long-vanished race which had created this technological miracle. But Sorenson's remarks had triggered in her an appreciation of the awesome abilities of the beings. At a time when the ancestral life of her kind was still emerging out of the primeval ooze, the beings had created what the bureaucrats of two worlds unimaginatively listed as Alien Artifacts, or "AAs."

"Emma?"

"Coming, Mamma Gia." As she trotted to catch up with the two humans, Emma could not resist turning in her tracks and gazing once more at what, until now, had only been background in her life. But an hour later, in a small conference room within the station, her sparked interest in the AAs was put aside for something much more immediate.

"You want me to be a—" She blinked. "—Gold?"

"I am sorry I did not tell you earlier, dear. But I needed time to decide if you were ready. If you were not, you would have returned to Alchemy without knowing of the assignment. There are graduates who are a little older than you, with more experie—"

"No way!" Emma was indignant. "Compared to me, the others are twits!"

Sorenson chuckled. Emma was, in human terms, an exuberant teenager with equivalent opinions. In any case, for a "tame" Silver who, with a few dozen others, was being trained by Project Alchemy to deal with those of her own species who were engaged in a mad crusade to destroy all life other than their own, this particular assignment was little more than requiring her to be a tourist. But because it would not be kind to remind Emma that it was only because of her relative lack of experience that she was being offered the job, he silently agreed with Gia to let the youngster continue with her illusions.

"So what do you want me to do on Beta?" Emma asked.

Gia touched a switch. The back wall of the small room illuminated with the image of a large island. A chain of icebound mountains rimmed its heavily indented west coast, and a broad delta emptied the silty contents of a complex river system into the southern ocean. "That island is completely lifeless," the woman said. "Coast to coast, beach to mountain top, lake to prairie. There is nothing which grows, crawls, walks or flies. Not an insect. Not even algae."

Emma frowned. "So?"

Gia adjusted the zoom control. The field broadened and rolled eastward, revealing the western coast line of an enormous continent which girdled two-thirds of the planet. From this angle the

island was a smudge on the horizon, isolated behind a wide ocean strait.

Gia pointed to areas on the main land mass. "Look at that, Emma. Verdant grass lands, forests, and right there—see those smudges? Those are towns. And there, and there—" Her finger traced a pattern of tiny squares surrounding the towns. "—indications of a thriving agricultural economy. But across from the island—" She rolled the image west again, and her hand swept in an arc, down the continent's edge. "Again, null life. Whatever the cause, it was obviously not stopped by a few hundred kilometers of ocean."

Sorenson said, "You should know, young person, that all those lifeless areas are slightly radioactive."

Emma's eyes widened. "A nuclear war?" It was a natural reaction. Emma had, after all, been raised with full knowledge of the ultimate violence. But despite her abhorrence of the subject, she was wise enough to know that nothing unpleasant will go away just because it is ignored.

Gia smiled. "The Golds have not even discovered the steam engine, so I hardly think it is likely they have been throwing nukes at each other. And because it is impossible for any ark of the Silvers to be within a thousand lights, neither can it be the result of a deliberate dusting from space."

"Unless, of course, there are races in this galaxy we do not know about yet," Sorenson suggested seriously. He spread his hands. "Who is to say there is not one perhaps even more hell-bent than our friends in the arks?"

A look of irritation fled across Gia Mayland's middle-aged yet still attractive features. In many ways Sorenson's tendency to remind her of the obvious brought to mind her husband, Jase Kurber, who was presently on assignment on Bueller's World. But what would merely be a loving difference of opinion with Jase (usually resolved in her favor), here it had to be treated more diplomatically. In any case, her colleague had raised a valid point. "At this stage, I favor a less dramatic explanation. A comet-strike, for instance."

The door of the room opened and a head poked inside. "Expediter Mayland? T-call from Alchemy."

She got up. "It's probably David."

"Can I come?" Emma asked eagerly.

Gia chuckled. "You had better. I don't think David would forgive me if I did not let him talk to his star pupil."

The tachyon communicator, that power hungry beast which made interstellar communication possible although still inordinately expensive, was glowing on all indicators as Gia, the young Silver, and Sorenson watched the holographic image of a canine being with wise eyes form in the air before them. From the start, the eyes remained focused on Emma. "She iss to go?"

Gia nodded. "Yes "

"You zink iss wise?"

"I am ready!" Emma declared stoutly. "I love you papa David, but even you cannot keep me off Beta now!"

Davakinapwottapellazanzis twitched his jaw in the Phuili equivalent of a smile. He had also trained the older Emma, and the similarities between that one and her precocious offspring extended far beyond the mere fact that they shared the same name. "Young one, I zink I not dare twy." The image turned to his old friend. "Gia, make sure she do what you say."

Gia respected and in many ways looked up to her Phuili colleague. In fact, it was almost startling to realize there had been a time when she thought of David as "alien." Yet even now, after their years together in Project Alchemy, he could still amaze her with his uncanny ability to penetrate below the innate savagery of his young pupils, to the lively and loving personalities which hundreds of generations of conflict with legions of Silver-hungry predators had failed to completely eradicate. Alchemy's success with the young Silvers was a strong indication that perhaps their implacably anti-life cousins could also be turned, with the consequent corollary that the Project's graduates offered the only chance to save the still precarious Phuili-human alliance from the divisive consequences of completing what had already been started. Genocide is not, after all, a proud accomplishment. Although joint action by Phuili and human ships had destroyed the Silvers's home world, many of that race still survived—preserved in stasis within the hollow cores of fifty or so "arks" which were drifting at sub-light toward neighboring suns. But if the Silvers from the Project could not turn the wild ones aside from their unholy *jihad*, then even the continued existence of the yellow-eyes of Alchemy could hardly atone for the fusion-tipped inevitability that would certainly be launched against the tens of thousands aboard the arks.

"If Emma does not exactly follow instructions," Gia remarked gravely, "there is a strong possibility she will not survive long enough to regret it."

Emma suddenly felt very lonely. For the first time in her young life she was being allowed to make a decision which affected her life, and she knew that Mamma Gia's warning was one of cold, serious possibility. Although, she wondered, what is so terrible on Beta?

"Perhaps nothing," Mamma Gia replied. "And if you remember what we have taught you, I am sure there is little to fear. Nevertheless, there is no place in this universe that is entirely free from risk."

"But Mamma Gia, you still have not told me what I am supposed to do there!"

"Mix with the people. Look around. You will have an implant, so you will not be alone."

"What about language? Customs?"

"Hypno training. A few months ago, we landed a team on Beta and 'borrowed' one of the natives. The poor creature lost a couple of days from her life and probably still has a few bad dreams. But there was no permanent harm, and we did gain sufficient data to make you into a passable imitation."

Emma flexed her arms, bending them like pretzels. "But what about this? Every time I move, they will know I am different."

The image of her old Phuili teacher said, "Not difficult to make one arm joint not to move. What iss difficult iss for you to play pwoper part, so we can know what happen on Beta. Especially what make wadioactive. People pwimitive by our standards, not know technology. But whatever happens, zey will at least have legends. You listen and learn zose legends."

It made sense. Even as David signed off (promising he would call frequently during the mission), Gia was already entering questions into her handcom:

*In what terms does a primitive eyewitness describe a collision from space, for instance? As an act of a vengeful god? A retribution for past sins? Would there be a religious interdict against any discussion of the subject? If so, how does Emma find out facts without exposing herself to the holy wrath of a local equivalent of the Inquisition? And dare we permit her to visit the contaminated areas of the west coast?*

The last question was not entirely theoretical. They had the means to make Emma radiation immune for a period of a week or so, although if the youngster was still in the contaminated area when the treatment wore off, she would be far worse off—perhaps fatally—than if she had not received the treatment in the first place. But even after Emma read Gia's notes, that possibility did not bother the young Silver. "I know I am young, Mamma Gia. But I am not stupid. How often have you told me that half a truth is worse than no truth at all? So how can we learn what happened on Beta without information from the wastelands?"

Gia hesitated. But she had no choice and she knew it. Finally, she said briefly, "I will have the lab set it up."

Emma was landed in a quiet wilderness valley less than a day's hike from a mid-sized market town. She had been given six days (which had to include a trip to the contaminated strip on the west coast) to complete a mission in which the only specific instructions had been to "look, listen and be careful."

The immobilization of her lower elbows was a temporary procedure which would be reversed when her mission was done, and physically there was no discomfort. Nevertheless, Emma felt like a freak as she awkwardly settled the pack over her shoulders and began to walk out of the valley. The Golds would undoubtedly notice the disproportionate length of her lower arms, although it was doubtful they would think it anything more unusual than the aberrations which were already common among the younger folk up to the equivalent of Emma's age. The gentle psychic probing of the captured native had been for no other purpose other than that of revealing language. But a few facts delved from the surface of the slumbering mind, had revealed this one great concern of those who had been parenting since the time of "the lights."

Emma had only been walking for an hour, enjoying the sights and sounds of the landscape and breathing the crisp air, when she met her first Golds. They were squatting by the side of the trail, both still and silent as furry statues. For a moment Emma was tempted to retreat, but held her ground when she sensed the two were fully aware of her presence. So she advanced and stopped before them. "How far is the town?"

Slowly a head turned and a pair of rheumy yellow eyes regarded her curiously. "You not know?"

Emma shrugged. "I explored. I got lost."

"We had one like you," the female said. "Then she died."

"We come here to pray to the ones who sent the lights," the old male explained. "We want to tell them not to take any more of our children." He added, "For a moment, I thought that perhaps you—" He shrugged resignedly.

Emma's heart hammered. Had she found the answer so soon? She took a deep breath. "I am

very ignorant. What lights?"

Grunting with effort, the two Golds got to their feet. All their movements were slow. "You may come with us to Weebharn. It is not far and we can talk."

A voice whispered in Emma's skull. *'An excellent opportunity. Go with them, but do not forget that we still know only a bare minimum of their ethics and customs. In your situation, it is wiser to listen than to talk.'*

Sound advice. But Mama Gia was on the watch ship, in synchronous orbit twenty thousand kilometers above the planet. Although the human could see and hear via Emma's implant, even that miracle of miniaturization could not transmit the empathy with which Emma could sense the sorrow and loneliness of these two beings. Impulsively, Emma grasped the female's hand and then just as swiftly dropped it. The specialized nerve endings in the palms of a Silver's hands were the unique channel by which any two individuals of that species could *secret talk* with absolute security; a rarity in a universe in which sound or visual signals did not possess such exclusivity. For only a moment, Emma had been fooled by the physical similarity of the Golds to her own kind. But the deadness of that brief contact was proof that the natives of Beta were indeed as physically alien to her as humans and Phuili.

"I will come with you," Emma said, wishing for the presence of another Silver with whom she could hand-touch her own loneliness and doubts. Not even Mama Gia or Papa David could fulfill that need, although scientists had developed a computerized glove which helped. But if she was patient and did what she was supposed to do, it would not be long before she could wash this alien color out of her fur and return to her brothers and sisters of Alchemy.

But Emma quickly discovered the difficulty of listening and not talking, as instead of imparting information, the two Golds garrulously plied her with questions. Fortunately, like most oldsters they had a short attention span and seemed to accept Emma's explanation that she and her family had recently moved her from another place; a flat place, she added, which did not have all these confusing hills and valleys. The young Silver also pretended to be a little stupid, which again was accepted as not being particularly abnormal. Only when Emma kept on throwing in a persistent "What lights?" did the male finally turn to her and ask puzzledly, "But I thought everyone in the world knew about the lights."

"I don't. What are they?"

"Things which happened probably before you were born, young one. Lights that flew in the sky, others which fell from the sky to the ground, and still more which rose from the ground into the sky. It all happened in the west, above the lands which later died and grew no crops."

The female nodded. "And when it was over, fools that we were, we thought it was over. But how were we to know that from that time on many of our young would be stillborn? Or if alive, not like the healthy young we have borne since the beginning of time?" Touching Emma on the head, she added sadly, "Too many are like you, young one."

Emma held out an oddly-elbowed arm. "Even like this?"

The male nodded. "Do not be ashamed. There are much worse. I remember a herder who told me about a woman who gave birth to a male child with two heads." He shrugged. "I suppose it is possible the herder was telling a tale. But even so, I am beginning to think such horrors are possible."

Emma was angry. *'Mama?'*

*'I heard, dear. But when we immobilized your lower elbows, we had no idea things were so bad. It was an honest mistake with no other purpose than to ensure your safety. Anyway, it is evident that radiation levels may be higher than originally calculated. So please do not be surprised if we recall you to the rendezvous point earlier than scheduled.'*

Emma muttered an epithet she had overheard from a male human, and ignored Gia Mayland's shocked, *'Emma!'* Of course there had always been a time restraint anyway, so the only change must be to move a little faster and push a little harder. Although there was not much she could do about the shambling pace set by the elderly Golds as they plodded down the narrow path.

Finally, they arrived at the untidy collection of timber-built dwellings and trade houses which was the town called Weebharn. Emma was touched by the old folk's offer of a meal and a bed, but needed no prompting from Sorenson (who had taken over from Mama Gia) to move on. She went on alone down a dirty side street to the river, where hopefully she could get a ride downstream toward the deadlands.

The citizens of Weebharn were a scruffy lot which, presuming they were typical, would seem to further distinguish Golds from the always fastidious Silvers. Emma had let her own once glossy fur become uncombed and dirty; a particular discomfort which in this case did at least have the virtue of necessity. She sat on a crude bench outside a waterfront tavern and gnawed some of the food from her pack as she watched the activity around the boats which were pulled up on the littered shore. There was a lot of haggling going on, especially next to a craft with a wide cargo-carrying deck atop twin hulls. The boatman, a squat Gold wearing a stained loincloth and with what looked like layers of rusty chain slung around his thick neck, had apparently refused to load a heap of sacks and wood boxes without the help of the customer who had brought the load down to the shore. The customer, an individual who was slightly cleaner than most and who apparently thought of himself as superior to all, was refusing with an exaggerated haughtiness that made Emma smile despite herself.

*'It seems some things are universal,'* a voice murmured.

Emma's smile widened, causing her fangs to glitter in the sunlight. *'Are you admitting that humans are also like that, Papa Henry?'*

*'Are you implying that Silvers are not?'* Sorenson retorted good humoredly.

Emma rose to her feet and walked toward the shore. *'I have an idea.'*

*'The same thought has occurred to me. Just be careful what you say.'*

"I am always careful what I say," the young Silver muttered, not entirely honestly. "Excuse me, noble ones. May I be of help?"

The boatman turned his hostile glare on Emma. "Doing what?"

"I am looking for a ride downstream. If I help load the lordship's goods, will you take me with you?"

The "lordship" looked interested. "Young one, there is nothing downstream except deadlands and exiles who will not live long." He gestured at the piled goods. "Although I will sell these for a fat profit, I will be back here soon enough to enjoy a long life and all the good things that wealth can



buy." The yellow eyes narrowed as he noted the apparent deformity of the young female's arms. He pointed. "You are not as bad as most, and indeed you almost sound intelligent. Instead of wasting your life with those who are already wasted, I offer employment in my House of Geriac. Your duties will be few. And, I think—" His jaws opened with an unpleasant grin. "—pleasant."

*'My god, there really is nothing new under the sun! Emma, that one—'*

Emma inwardly cringed. Although this was her first encounter with this type of situation, she was physically mature and recognized the signals. What made it even more unpleasant was her suspicion that the Gold was attracted by the alienness he sensed in her. The human word "kinky" came to mind, and what little knowledge she had of that race's peculiar aberrations sent a chill through her blood. Nevertheless, with a confidence she did not feel; *'I can handle it, Papa Henry. Just stay with me, please.'*

*'Of course. And I have sent for Gia. This is a situation which clearly demands her delicate touch.'*

Emma flashed gratitude to her distant controller as, to the Gold, she said politely, "I thank you for your kind offer, but I must join my family. The One will take care of me."

"The One only takes care of those who take care of themselves," the master of the House of Geriac commented sourly. He nodded at the boatman. "All right Karfahm, you may work this addle-brained female. If she wants to die in the deadlands, that is her stupid business."

Emma set to work with a will, helping the boatman with the larger cases and loading many of the smaller ones on her own. She discovered, both to her and Karfahm's astonishment, that despite her immobilized elbows she could lift with ease what the squat Gold could lift only with considerable effort. As the work progressed, it became evident that Geriac had also noticed—to the extent, at least, that he prudently stayed clear of her. Emma did not mind that at all, especially when he backed away as she deliberately passed close to him. Mama Gia did not approve. *'Don't provoke him,'* she warned after she saw the incident through Emma's implant. *'It is not the time to add unnecessary complications.'*

*'Sorry Mama. But it pleases me to know that he knows what I will do to him if he tries anything.'*

*'Good! leave it at that.'*

Emma fully intended to. When the boatman finally poled his craft away from the shore and then used the big stern-mounted paddle to work into midstream, Geriac sat on one of his boxes and stared rigidly ahead. Emma stayed near the boatman. She did not fully trust that unwashed individual either, but felt reasonably safe as long as he was occupied.

It was a wide, swift river with eddy currents which frequently swung them half around while Karfahm swayed his sturdy body back and forth as he worked the paddle. A steady wind blew inland from the west, raising whitecaps and flapping a stray end of the big sail which was furled around the single mast. It was obvious how the boatman would bring the raft back upriver, although as they shuddered across a particularly choppy section, Emma doubted that anything less than a gale would have the energy to move even dead leaves against the current of this fierce waterway. But when they turned a bend and saw a similar twin-hulled craft close to the far shore, its sail bent rigid as it slowly moved upstream, the young Silver had to revise her opinion.

"Where you want to go?" Karfahm asked. As Emma looked at him blankly, he tucked the shaft

of the steering paddle under one arm and began ticking off on his stubby fingers. "Aggar. People stay the longest there, it's not far into the deadlands. Bith. It isn't much, but it's the only place to shore a boat for nearly fifty klicks. Keesadak. I stop, but I also leave quick. There are bad ones in Keesadak who'd cut off your head just for not saying hello. Beyond that there's Iko. The people there are strange; I suppose because of the sickness. They have a funny sort of religion with a high priest who's sicker than any of 'em. I saw him once. Ranted and raved about life and how sacred it is. Told us not even to step on a grubber, would you believe! Said it has its place as much as a star or a pebble."

Emma subvocalized, *'Comments please?'*

Mama Gia replied, *'The town called Aggar seems the most permanent, so I suspect you will be there at least long enough to look around. With luck, the place may turn out to be a mine of information.'*

Sorenson: *'And don't forget, you are on Beta only to find out why the dead-lands exist. You are not an explorer. So as soon as we judge 'mission accomplished,' you will be pulled out of there.'*

*'I understand, Papa Henry.'* Emma grinned mischievously. *'But it won't hurt if I look around as I go, will it?'*

Looking toward the front of the raft, she noticed Geriac's head was drooping. The noise that came from his direction indicated that snoring was snoring from any racial source. Emma's controller said, *'I know what is on your mind, and I concur. Get as much rest as you can. You will need it.'*

*'But Mama—'*

*'Don't worry. We will watch.'*

Emma did not know much about the technology that enabled someone in orbit thousands of kilometers above the planet to know what was going on around her even as she slept. But if there was a rock in Emma's life, it was her trust in Mama Gia. Nevertheless, the young Silver could not help an uneasy glance in Geriac's direction as she found a pile of loose sacking and curled upon it. They were now on a calmer part of the river, and the motion of the raft and the soft creaking of its timbers combined with the natural wisdom of her body to put her to sleep even as the nictitating membranes slid across her great yellow eyes.

Emma woke suddenly. Geriac and the boatman were struggling near the edge of the raft, with Geriac shouting, "She's a demon! Let me go you stupid peasant, let me go!"

With a sudden jerk of his thick body, Karfahm flung Geriac to the deck and then sat firmly on his chest. "You may be a high and mighty master, *master*, but do you really believe you can swim through that?" He grabbed the other's head and twisted it toward the water, where literally hundreds of heaving black shapes were riding the river shore to shore. One came close to the raft, and its riders came under the cold scrutiny of a single enormous eye atop a fleshy appendage.

Instantly alert, Emma uncoiled and sprang to her feet. "What is happening?"

Karfahm snorted as he released Geriac and went back to the paddle. He released the rope which had held it amidships. "You tell me, young one. While you were asleep he went up to you with something more on his mind, I think, than just to talk. But even before he laid a claw on you, he went crazy! Ran away as if you were all his nightmares in one female package!" The boatman frowned at her. "Are you a witch of some kind?"

His frightened gaze still riveted on the young female, Geriac carefully stood up and then backed away until he bumped into one of his own packing cases. He fell with an undignified spreadeagle. Karfahm laughed. "Not going to swim after all, master?"

"Ju—just keep her away from me. She's a demon!"

*'Mama, did you do it?'*

*'Mostly he did it to himself. We just helped him along with a small program we developed from the data we recorded when we brain-scanned the captured Gold. Transmitted through your implant, it stimulated Geriac's mind to give reality to his basic fears. In his eyes, you turned into—'* The image of a shrug. *'Who knows what he saw? Something, I suspect, from the Gold equivalent of what we humans call hell.'*

Emma shook her head. Geriac was definitely an unpleasant individual who deserved to be taught a severe lesson. But in this case her sense of justice left her with a guilt feeling that the punishment had far outweighed the crime.

*'I don't think so,'* Gia replied understandingly to Emma's expressed doubts. *'He will get over it, although not to the extent that he will continue to regard young females as possible property to be used or abused at will.'*

"Aggar," Karfahm said suddenly. He pointed.

They had rounded a bend in the river. On a narrow ledge of land which backed against a hill, was a low huddle of buildings which, even from this distance, looked more like a dumping ground for scrap than a community. The raft drifted closer, and Emma saw structures made from wood crates, driftwood, tarpaulins, rocks and plastered mud. And then her sensitive nostrils twitched as she realized that Aggar had an odor in keeping with its unprepossessing appearance.

As the twin hulls grated on the shore, the boatman threw a couple of mooring ropes to a pack of filthy youngsters who fought for the chance to receive a tossed coin. Emma moved to help unload the cargo destined for this stop, but Karfahm waved her back. "Too much cheap labor here. They'd not like anyone doing it for free." He nodded toward the town. "You might as well go ashore for a bit. The people here don't have much, but they're honest and won't take what doesn't belong to them. I'll blow the horn when I'm ready to pull out."

"All right." Emma glanced at Geriac, who tried not to show his fear with an obscene gesture which somehow seemed merely pathetic. She shrugged and jumped off the raft.

*'Smells pretty bad, huh?'*

*'Papa Henry, how could you know that?'*

*'I see what you see. Gives my olfactory nerves sympathy pains.'*

*Smart ass*, Emma thought, recollecting a favorite expression of that irritating although likeable human. She gingerly toed her way around reeking piles of garbage toward a large tarpaulin-walled structure outside of which two elderly females were sitting on a large log. She joined them.

The nearest female, a tattered individual with patches of dirty skin showing through the fur of her head and body, gazed with interest at the young stranger. "You from Karfahm's raft?"

Emma nodded. "I'm traveling downriver looking for my family."

"Hmm." The female turned to her friend. "Another in a hurry to get to the next world. Just like the others."

"Others?" Emma asked. "What others?"

The female sighed. "Adventure seekers. Fortune hunters looking for easy loot. Some, like you, just looking for people. But none of you seem smart enough to wonder why the deadlands are dead."

The equally tattered friend leaned forward and scrutinized Emma. "Seem different, you do." She shrugged. "Not that it matters. D'you know where you're going?"

"Only that when the lights came, my family were working the land near Pendo."

Emma had been prompted, and she hoped the story made sense. Pendo was one of the many villages which had been abandoned. For reasons which were probably a combination of superstition and fear, the Golds who returned to the deadlands had refused to reoccupy the almost intact buildings and had chosen instead to build hovel collections like Aggar.

The friend nodded wisely. "I knew Pendo. I also knew many of the families there. Under what name was yours?"

Emma thought in a hurry. "I think you would not know them. They moved there just before the lights."

"Ah."

*'Ask them about the lights. Perhaps those two can add something useful.'*

*'Yes, Mama.'* Sometimes Mama Gia was too much like a real mother; fussing and at the same time forgetting that the young silver was quite capable of thinking for herself. "You saw the lights?" Emma asked.

"We both did," the first female replied. "But I was closer."

The second female bristled. "Not much closer. I was on the Hill of Rappe, so I got a better view!"

"View of what?"

"Out there." A vague wave toward the west. "Lights. Small lights and big lights. Lights which lit up the whole sky. Some going across, some going down and some going up. There were noises, too."

"Which I also heard!" the first female interrupted, continuing what was apparently a never ending

game of one upmanship between the two. "It was like distant thunder."

The second agreed. "If it wasn't for the lights, that's exactly what we'd have thought it was. Thunder. And it went on for hours."

"Through half the night and into the day," the first one added. "And when it was over, it was as if it had never been. At least, that's what we thought."

"You mean it was then the lands began to die?" Emma asked.

"That's right. And plants, and animals, and then people." A patchy arm waved downriver. "Young one, I know we can't stop you from going. But don't say we didn't tell you. The further you go, the worse it'll get."

Emma said, "I have heard that beyond the sea there is another big land. Perhaps it is better there."

The first female snorted. "The other side of the death?" Slowly, painfully, she shook her head. "We have all heard that tale. But no one with sense believes it. I think the fisher folk started it. They were always born liars."

A coarse laugh from the second female. "And if lies are sins, then they sure paid the price. We don't eat much sea fish any more because there's hardly a liar left to catch it!"

There was a horn blast from the shore. Emma politely thanked the oldsters who, as they watched her leave—

"We'll meet again, young'un. But not in this world!"

"Not very subtle, are they?"

"Life in that mess of hovels is hardly likely to breed subtlety, my unsubtle colleague." Gia Mayland yawned, removed the headset and stretched to ease her aching neck and shoulders. "If I did not know any better, I could easily imagine that two opposing sides have been throwing missiles at each other."

Sorenson nodded thoughtfully. "You know, Gia, the bit about lights 'going up' really got to me. Remember? We have heard it before."

She glanced sideways at him. "All right. Who against whom?"

He managed a chuckle. "If it ain't Silvers—"

Gia sighed. "I know. The possibilities are terrifying." She touched a

switch. "Please warm up the T-com. I want a conference call with Alchemy and Expeditors Central."

Gia Mayland had not exaggerated when she described the possibilities as terrifying. Nevertheless there was no need to unnerve the youngster on Beta as she continued the journey downriver; stopping at shore-hugging settlements where haggard, sad-eyed Golds were fighting a losing battle against the insidious killer which they breathed, ate, drank and lived upon—the land itself. Meanwhile, on two worlds hundreds of light-years from Beta and even further from each other, weapons of mass destruction were unsealed from storage vaults, and shipped to a third world on which the xenophobes of two races warily restrained their dislike of each other. In their separate ways, the humans and Phuili of Groombra Four were proud of the fact that they were civilization's secret corps of shock troops; organized for a role their respective masters would never publicly admit was necessary. Yet within hours real time, after Gia Mayland had completed the T-com conference call, a shuttle delivered the weapons through the Groombra gate. Mutual race-oriented antagonisms were immediately put aside as trained crews installed the death-dealing hardware in the weapon bays of an orbiting oddity which was neither shuttle nor starship, yet contained elements of both. As transportation through the gates, or in air or in space, the Starvenger was inelegant and inefficient. But as a machine designed for destruction, it was adequate enough for the cold-eyed fanatics who regarded themselves as the only bulwark against a hostile universe.

When the work was done, humans and Phuili went to their separate sections of the ship. For a while at least, they were prepared to endure this close proximity to each other. Somewhere their services were needed, and when the call came—

Karfahm had not mentioned the tinier places where they stopped for barely minutes. Often the raft did not even touch shore, as small packages of food were thrown into the shallows and picked up by emaciated Golds who staggered and weaved as they dodged the river predators that seemed to be waiting for just this opportunity. "If they want to risk their necks," the boatman explained coldly, "that's their problem. I don't intend to stay around and risk mine."

"What are they doing here? How do they pay you?"

Karfahm jerked his head toward the raft's other passenger. "He pays me. There's loot to be had out there and he gives 'em just enough to keep going. Promises a percentage of whatever they find."

"Does he keep his promise?"

Karfahm shrugged. "Ask him."

Emma did not ask and Geriac did not volunteer. But there seemed less fright in his eyes as he watched the cause of his humiliation.

Another destination came into view, to the eyes and nose the same miserable collection of hovels and decay that was becoming too familiar on this dreary waterway. But about fifty meters from the shore, Karfahm heaved out a stone anchor and the raft swung to a stop in the slow current. A silent line of Golds gathered near the greasy edge of the water and waited. Karfahm also seemed to be waiting.

Emma asked, "Aren't we going in?"

"Depends. That is Keesadak, the bad place I told you about. I have a protection arrangement with one of the chiefs. But if he's someplace else, or has had a knife shoved in his gut, this is as close as I get." The boatman pointed. "Look at 'em. Like a pack of tooth-claws waiting their chance for a jawful of live meat."

"They do not seem any worse than others we have seen. What is so bad about them?"

"The others only scavenge. This bunch scavenges on the scavengers. And even if they don't have to kill to get what they want, that doesn't always mean they don't kill. There are some who enjoy poking iron into a warm body."

Suddenly, an unexpected voice. "Jenteen!" Geriac shouted. "I want Jenteen!"

A shuffling of bodies on the shore. One individual stepped forward. "Geriatic?"

"Where is Prodeff?"

"Where you told me to put him, Geriac. In the river!" There was loud laughter.

Karfahm cursed. "You arranged this?"

"Of course." Geriac sauntered across the raft. He only glanced at Emma, although he carefully stayed clear of her reach. "Prodeff was weak. With him around, my profits were lower and the risks higher." The master of the House of Geriac nodded toward the beach. "So I have made an arrangement with a—ah—more efficient collector. You still have your protection, Karfahm, but with a better profit. No one can get a better bargain than that."

The boatman looked suspiciously at Geriac, then at the crowd on the shore. "The one called Jenteen! Are you still there?"

"I am here, boatman!"

"Is Geriac right? Are you now the protector of me and my raft?"

"Of course he's right! I want profit just as much as he does. Which means I need a sure and regular boatman as my opening to the inlands. You, Karfahm!"

"Hmm." Again, Karfahm looked at Geriac. Then he looked at Emma. "Makes sense," he said tentatively.

Emma did not know if he expected her to say anything, but she said it anyway. "I do not like it."

He snorted and jerked his head in the direction of Geriac. "You mean you do not like *him*, I think." He went to the edge of the raft and hauled on the anchor rope. The raft started to drift inshore.

Emma was scared. Even from this distance she could tell that the scruffy crowd on the shore was composed almost exclusively of males. She touched the boatman on the shoulder. "What happens to me?"

With a final effort, Karfahm heaved the big stone on the deck. "Good question," he puffed as he went to the steering paddle. "What does happen to her, Geriac?"

The master showed his fangs. "Is it a matter that concerns you, boatman?"

A shrug of the heavy shoulders, causing the rusty chains around his neck to rattle. "I suppose not. I'm curious, that's all."

The Silver shrank back from them both. *'Mama!'*

*'I know, child. You must stall for time.'*

*'Use that—that thing on Geriac again.'*

*'Won't work, Emma. Stopping Geriac means stopping the only control you have on those savages.'*

*'But, Mama—'*

*'Beta Base is working on it. For the moment you must stall.'*

Emma glanced at the sky. Beta's moon was a fuzzy patch of light behind a thin layer of cloud. How could those up there help? How could they even advise? Even Mama had just admitted she was helpless. The raft was almost to the shore now, and Emma's fear was heightened as the mob of Golds shuffled forward to the water's edge. She was certain every pair of hungry yellow eyes was focused on her. Then, as a low rumble came from dozens of throats—

"Geriac! Keep them from me and I will serve you!"

Twin hulls crunched on stones. Led by the one called Jenteen, several Golds jumped on the raft. Emma moved close to the master. "Please!"

Geriac held up both arms. "Stay!" He pointed at the cargo. "That is what you are here for. Get it off and then we will talk."

Jenteen was the biggest of the newcomers. An obscene head-dress made from the scalps of several victims was draped down behind his back, and wild daubs of color were spattered on his matted body fur. He barely glanced at the cargo before he returned his yellow glare to the young female. "I want *that*!"

Geriac said, "Be careful Jenteen. She has powers. She's a witch."

"That's right," Karfahm called as he threw a rope around a mooring post. "She turned Geriac into a raving idiot while he was trying to have his way with her." He laughed. "She was asleep at the time!"

Geriac snarled viciously at the boatman. "Keep your jaws locked, stone-head!"

The big Gold joined in the laughter. "Good try, but no good. Don't believe in witches, never have. I'll take her!"

"Look, I'll come ashore and we will negotiate. If you give me a good price for her, perhaps I can find more where she came from."

Some of Jenteen's followers got excited. One of them shouted, "Yes Jenteen, talk. Get us females!"

Jenteen hesitated. Like most who ruled with a combination of brutality and promises, he knew he would follow his predecessor into the river if he did not keep his ragtag collection of bandits reasonably content. Finally, grudgingly, he agreed. "We will talk."



With several well-aimed kicks, and shouting, "This female's safe enough. She's not going anywhere!" Jenteen chivied his followers off the raft. Then he and Geriac disappeared into one of the structures which straggled along the shore.

Emma sagged limply against the mast. *'Mama?'*

*'Look up at the Moon, dear. Is it free of the clouds?'*

The young Silver was so emotionally drained, it did not occur to her to wonder about the strangeness of the question. She looked up. *'Not yet, Mama. But there is a patch of clear sky coming.'*

*'How soon, do you think?'*

Suddenly Emma was angry. What had the weather to do with anything? *'Geriatic's going to sell me, Mama. To that—that—'*

*'Not if I can help it. Now please answer the question. When will the Moon be free of the clouds?'*

Emma took a deep breath of the foul air which was wafting over the raft from Keesadak. *'Within a minute or so. Why do you want to know?'*

*'Listen carefully. When Geriatic and that other one come out, and as soon as the Moon is clear, I want you to point a hand at the sky and threaten them with destruction if they do not leave you alone. I will hear you and will signal action at the proper moment.'*

Emma did not know what to say. Next to Papa David, Mama Gia was the sanest entity she knew. Yet this was sheer madness. Was it a psychological trick, designed to take advantage of some quirk which the natives of this planet had inherited from their even more primitive ancestors? Perhaps more had been learned from the brain-scan of that captured female than either Mama Gia or Papa Sorenson had let on. In any case, what was meant by, "will signal action"?

Again Emma looked at the sky. The cloud was thinning, revealing the Moon as a blurred disk.

Karfahm said, "They're coming back, young one. Wish I could help you more."

Surprised, Emma looked at the boatman. He was right, of course. There was nothing he could do for her now. Nevertheless, she was grateful. "Thank you," she said simply.

The crowd on the shore had parted to let Geriatic and Jenteen through. Somehow, perhaps in the confident manner of their walk, both seemed satisfied.

At last the Moon was emerging from behind the cloud. Emma stepped to the edge of the raft and lifted an arm to the sky. "Stop!" She surprised herself with the strength of her bellow.

The Golds on the shore were even more surprised. The followers muttered and shuffled back, leaving Geriatic and Jenteen standing alone. "I told you, didn't I?" Karfahm said, grinning. "She's a witch!"

After a moment's uncertainty, Geriatic sneered. "Very impressive. Now what are you going to do? Turn us all into vegetables?"

"I warn you, Geriac. If you try to harm me, you will wish you had never been born." Even as she spoke the words, Emma regretted their real-life lack of dramatic impact. She had absorbed too many clichés from ancient human works of fiction.

Jenteen was equally unimpressed, as he spat on the mud of the shore and said viciously, "Perhaps I paid more than you're worth, little savage. But when I am finished with you, the lowest scumdrubber will not want what's left, even if I pay him to take it!"

'Now?' Emma whispered, wishing she knew what she was asking for.

'Now,' echoed Mama Gia.

There was a brilliant flash—

Emma staggered to her feet. Flames and black smoke were everywhere, and other than a few crisped bodies on the steaming shore, there was not a hostile Gold in sight. Karfahm crawled across the deck to her and repeatedly banged his head on the boards before her feet. Between blows he gasped, "Forgive me for thinking you were only a witch, great one. Now I know you are a god, come from beyond the sky to—"

She did not know what else to do, so she stooped and cuffed him. "Get up, idiot."

*'Don't disillusion him, Emma. He's useful that way.'*

"Boatman, what I am is to remain a secret between us. Do you understand?"

He lifted his head and backed away slightly. "Mighty one, anything you say. I will build an altar—"

"You will build nothing of the kind. You will attend to your normal duties as a boatman and treat me like a normal paying passenger. Is that understood?"

"Y—yes."

"Good. I am going ashore for a few minutes. When I return, we will leave." Emma jumped off the raft. *'Mama, what happened?'*

*'Perhaps the greatest laser shot in history, although closer to you than we calculated. It was aimed a few hundred meters to your right; supposedly to create enough of a spectacle to scare away the hostiles.'*

Emma examined what she thought had once been Jenteen. *'I am afraid the shot did much more than scare them, Mama.'* She went to the next body. Amazingly, although there was not much of his lower half left, Geriac was still alive. But even as he looked up and recognized her, the yellow eyes lost their focus and then filmed over in death. *'Why don't I feel anything? All these lives—'*

There was no reply. Emma went back to the raft and helped Karfahm push it into deeper water. There was a splash nearby as something hungry arrowed inshore, but Emma easily sprang to the

deck and watched with disinterest as the frustrated carnivore swam past with a flick of twin tails and disappeared.

"Iko," the boatman said.

Emma blinked at him. "Iko?"

"My last stop before returning upriver. Do you wish to go there?"

"How far? How long?"

The boatman squinted at the sky, then at the river. "Not far. We will be there before nightfall."

"Is Iko a poor place?"

"All places in deadlands are poor. But Iko more poor than most."

Emma gestured at the cargo. "Some of this was for Keesadak."

He bowed. "But you make that place gone, mistress. No point leaving goods there now."

"Exactly. So when we get to Iko, you will give Keesadak's goods to the people of Iko."

"Give? You mean not sell—?"

"It will be your offering to those I serve, Karfahm. Do you object?"

His neck chains rattled as the boatman vigorously shook his head. There was fear in his eyes. "Of course not, mistress. As you and the Great Ones require, it will be done."

"Good. Wake me when we are in sight of Iko."

Emma curled up on her pile of sacking. *'Mama, how am I doing?'*

*'Mama's catching some well-deserved shut-eye,'* Henry Sorenson replied. *'Feeling better, huh?'* When she did not answer, he added sympathetically, *'What you have just been through would have been a rough experience for even a tough old character like me. I was with Gia through the whole thing. Emma, we are proud of you.'*

*'Thank you, Papa Henry.'*

*'It was a good thing you just did, convincing the boatman to leave Keesadak's goods at Iko. But I suggest you take care with that one. He's obviously not too smart, which means he may have a very short memory.'*

*'I will be careful.'*

*'Sweet dreams, princess.'*

Gia Mayland took her seat before the blank screen. "She's still sleeping?"

"Like the babe she is. That boatman's a funny character, but as long as he continues to regard her

as a visitor from his version of Valhalla, he'll guard her with his life."

Gia began to activate the equipment. "I want that child out of there." She clenched a fist and slammed it on the control desk. "Now!"

Sorenson reached over and patted the clenched fist. "It won't be long. We have to get her out within fifty hours, anyway. Remember?"

"I remember." She sighed. "Never thought I would be so selfish as to be grateful for radiation which has probably already killed tens of thousands."

Sorenson swiveled his chair and looked at the big map display on the side wall of the control cubicle. A tiny ruby light gleamed. He tapped a key and read the figures that rolled across the bottom of the display. "Must be a fast river current. She'll be at Iko ahead of schedule."

"By how much?"

"They will be there within an hour."

She nodded. "I think Iko will have to be it. It's as far as the boatman goes anyway, and walking won't get her much further."

"Shall I have the pinnacle readied? The way things are going down there, I doubt we'll get any more information than we already have. Not from Emma, anyway."

Gia pursed her lips, then shook her head. "I know it's a longshot, but Emma will not thank us if we pull her out before all the possibilities are exhausted."

"I understand you tachyoned David about this a couple of hours ago. What did he have to say?"

"What you might expect. He's as concerned about the youngster's safety as any of us. But he is even more concerned about the evidence of high-tech conflict on the planet. By the way, he also told me that the Groombra option is primed and ready to go."

Sorenson grimaced. "I hope like hell it doesn't come to that. Those people give me the creeps."

"Amen to that." Gia Mayland touched a control. "Emma, dear. I think you had better wake up now."

The young Silver stretched. *'Are we there?'*

*'Almost. Iko has to be your last stop before we pull you out, so we want you to be our eyes and ears as much as possible during the time remaining.'*

*'Do you know yet what those lights were all about? What caused the radioactivity?'*

*'We have a few ideas. Meanwhile, just do what you can. Compared to what you have already been through, I doubt you will have any more problems.'*

*'Oh I hope so, Mama.'*

Karfahm bowed politely as Emma went to the edge of the raft and looked at Iko. "It is a poor place," the boatman told her unnecessarily. "They will welcome the extra goods from Keesadak."

There were no structures. Instead, the low sandstone cliff which rose behind the shore was pitted with holes. Rickety ladders made from tattered ropes and pieces of driftwood rose up the cliff, and wisps of smoke rose from tiny fires within some of the caves. "Lot of sick ones here," the boatman said: "But no place else for them, so they stay and get sicker."

The raft grounded. Chattering youngsters, emaciated but still lively, grabbed the tossed mooring rope and wound it around a huge boulder which had been deposited on the shore during some past glacial age. Older Golds clambered stiffly down their ladders and approached the raft. "Welcome Karfahm," one said. He looked hungrily at the piled goods on the raft. "I see you carry more than usual."

Karfahm pointed at a separate, much smaller pile. "These few are yours for normal trade." Then he waved expansively. "The rest are yours for free."

More had gathered. Others were still descending the ladders. "We are beyond jokes, boatman. Take payment for what is ours, and then be on your way."

Emma jumped off the raft. "What Karfahm said is true. Those goods were intended for Keesadak, which is now destroyed. Take them and be grateful."

One of the adults walked right up to her. His tired yellow eyes held a mixture of hope and caution. "Who are you?"

Another came over. It was a female, old and frail. "Look at her, Gessdin. Does she not remind you of the Holy One?"

There was a hesitation. Then the male's eyes widened. "It is so," he whispered. "Indeed, it is so."

*'Mama, what is he talking about?'*

*'Their priest, Emma. Remember the boatman telling you about the people of Iko and their high priest? Tell them you want to meet that Holy One as soon as possible.'*

Already several Golds had clambered aboard the raft and were passing sacks and boxes down to others on the shore. Karfahm was negotiating with two other locals for the small pile which was being conspicuously left until last. He called to her. "Mistress, it goes well. We can begin our return to the inlands at first light tomorrow."

It was evident Karfahm had decided that Emma's story about seeking her family had been subterfuge to conceal her godhood, and he was already basking in anticipated triumph when he returned the Great One upriver. But as Papa Henry had already warned, it would not be good to disillusion the boatman. So Emma merely waved acknowledgement and then turned to the old female. "I would like to meet your Holy One."

The female pointed a trembling arm beyond the cliff. "He lives in a bright cloth house. If you go to that high point and look in the direction of the morning sun, you will see it."

"Is he always there?"

"He is weak and does not travel much anymore. We take what food we can to him and he tells us stories about the world that should be."

"What kind of world is that?"

"One in which living things are one. One in which there are sacred laws which say that to kill, or to take what is not there to be taken, or even to eat a single grass stalk more than is necessary to survive, is a crime whose punishment waits in the afterlife."

*'Ask her how long he has been preaching that doctrine!'* Mama Gia sounded excited.

"When did the Holy One start telling you his stories?"

"When he first came to us."

"When was that?"

"I was younger then, and the land had only just started to die. Iko was a real village, with houses that were not filled with death. Only later did we come to the river and scratch our holes in the cliff."

"I am sorry, old one, but you do not answer my question. When did the Holy One come to you?"

"He came just after the lights. Some of us had felt their heat on our skins and were already becoming sick. It was then he came, up the valley from the west."

Emma felt a turmoil within her. She was not able to pin down any cause, other than a nagging voice in the back of her mind which insisted all the answers were with a half-mad Gold who had apparently emerged out of the heart of the radioactive wilderness.

*'Emma, it is obvious from the survival rate that these people are very radiation tolerant. But it would have been absolutely impossible for a Gold—or any other living thing—to survive unprotected amid whatever happened in the west. Either the oldster is lying, or is confused—'*

*'—Or is telling the truth. Right Mama Gia?'*

Emma was certain the implant in her skull was not supposed to transmit emotion. But she sensed almost a resigned shaking of Mama Gia's head. *'Find that priest, Emma. Talk to him.'*

*'Talk to him about what, Mama? The lights? Anything in particular?'*

*'I will leave that up to you. In this case, we have agreed it would better serve the purpose of the mission if I do not tell you what to say—or how to say it.'*

How to say it? What did that mean? But before she could ask, Emma felt the severing of transmission from the watch ship and knew she was on her own. Her controllers would continue to watch and listen, although for mysterious reasons of their own they had apparently decided the situation demanded her own judgment rather than theirs.

The old female had pointed to a narrow trail which meandered up the cliff beyond the caves, and Emma headed for it. For a while she was followed by a few of the chattering youngsters, but they got tired of the chase as one by one they reluctantly realized she would not talk to them. Half way up she looked back. The raft was now swarming with Golds as more of the inhabitants of Iko removed the precious free cargo. Karfahm waved at her and Emma waved back. She doubted she would see him or the raft again, although she had hardly been long enough in the company of the volatile boatman to have real regrets.

But she wished him well.

The path was crumbly but it was not steep, and in a few minutes she gained the top. It was close to nightfall and a few stars already sprinkled the sky. Beta's moon had set, but Emma knew the approximate location of the watch ship and looked in that direction. It was not visible of course, but it amused her to wonder what *they* were wondering as their screens revealed where she was looking. Then Emma turned her back to the clifftop and to the setting sun and looked east. The land was darkening, but something glittered in the distance. Fortunately this was level prairie, and the straggly mixture of dead and mutated vegetation which covered its surface concealed no animal burrows. So the young Silver made good time toward what she had heard described as a "bright cloth house." As she drew nearer, the glitter became resolved into two components; a camp fire and a tent.

About half a dozen Golds were squatting around the fire. As Emma approached, one scrambled to his feet and met her about fifty meters short of her goal. He was a thin male, with the patches of fur and naked skin which was common to those who tried to live in the deadlands. He peered at her. "You are a stranger. What business do you have with the Holy One?"

Emma hardly heard him. She was gazing with astonishment at the bright reflecting fabric of the tent, which resembled plastic rather than weave.

She straightened. She was as dirty as any, but by local standards she glowed with good health. She hoped that impressed him.

Emma said haughtily, "I come on holy business."

The male nervously backed away a step. "Holy business? That is easy to say. How do I know you say truth?"

She pointed at the tent. "He will know."

"Wait." The male turned and ran to the tent. Emma's hearing was keen and she heard him speak through the open flap. "Master, a strange female is here who claims she comes on holy business." He glanced back over his shoulder. "She is not like others who have come here."

There was a mumbled reply. The male stood aside and the others around the fire scrambled to their feet as the Holy One emerged. He was weak and had to hold on to the tent as he gazed toward the newcomer with fierce eyes which reflected the firelight. There was something strange about him; about the way he was holding himself upright, the peculiar angle of his arm—

Emma gasped and bounded to him, easily thrusting the disciples aside as they tried to restrain her. She said nothing, instead grasped the Holy One's free hand.

*'You are of my kind! You are Silver!'*

The Holy One would have fallen if she had not reached out and steadied him. The delicate system of transmitters and nerve endings in the palm of his hand rippled the ancient language. *'I thought I was the only one left alive. How did you—?'*

*'Old one, I had no part in whatever happened here. I came to this planet less than four days ago.'*

He sighed. It was a long, ragged sound of resignation. *'So there is a new ark and a new generation.'* Suddenly the old Silver jerked his hand free of hers. "Why did you come here,

young one? Surely not merely to tell me that all of this world will soon be a lifeless cinder?"

Emma could hardly believe what she had just heard. She was still staring at the old Silver, even forgetting to call her desperation to Mama Gia as she was elbowed back by eager disciples. "Master, is it true? Is the day of cleansing finally here?"

Tentatively: '*Mama?*'

There was no reaction. Emma was still on her own. She supposed her implant could transmit the nerve signals generated by secret-talk, although—

They knew! Somehow, Mama Gia and the others had known or at least suspected the Holy One would be a Silver. But how could they have imagined such an impossibility? How could an inert mass of rock drifting at sublight—which was an ark of the Silvers—turn up in a star system thousands of lights distant? How could she now accept Papa David's teachings of a rational universe? '*Mama Gia! What do I say? What do I do?*'

Still no reply.

Emma made a decision. Again she shoved aside the disciples and grasped the old Silver's hand. '*I need answers!*'

'*We both need answers, I think. And so do my poor followers.*' He had recovered from his shock and was calm. He smiled at the disciples. "All your questions must and will be heard. But first you must allow me a few minutes of privacy with this holy messenger."

As Emma followed him into the tent, she fingered the material of the opening flap. It was, as she thought, a lightweight sophisticated material that could only have originated offplanet. Inside the tent, there was nothing other than a few blankets on the floor.

They sat, facing each other.

Emma reached out and touched a gray patch of fur amid the brown. "I think you used the wrong dye, Holy One."

He touched her immobilized lower elbow. "My name is Beranahin. After you have told me your name, young one, I would like you to tell me about those who sent you to this world."

Then they touched hands—

"Why did they land on Beta in the first place?"

"They needed certain minerals, Mama, which they could not find on the Moon. It was then they came into contact with the Betans."

"Even so, being so anti-life—."

Sorenson nodded. "It must have been a helluva shock to find beings so much like themselves."

"I think that was only part of it. It also had to do with their struggle to stay alive on the planetoid



of the black sun. Beranahin told me that experience had changed them somehow. And they were rebels to start with, don't forget."

"Or merely smarter."

"That, too." The young Silver shook her head. "I wish I understood the part about the black hole."

Sorenson explained patiently, "It was a spinning black hole, Emma. Scientists have long theorized that if you enter such an object at a certain direction and velocity, you will be instantly rejected elsewhere in the universe through a so-called 'white' hole. Obviously the Silver theorists have gone further than that, postulating rejection points at space-time discontinuities whose locations can be calculated.

"Apparently their theory was not advanced enough for precise calculations. That is why the thousands who left first ended up light-weeks from the target sun. On the other hand, the few who departed later from the planetoid had used the time to refine the calculations. They literally leap-frogged those who had already gone."

Gia Mayland nodded. "And managed to arrive months earlier." She frowned. "Emma, why is it that the Betans you met did not say anything about ships landing from space?"

"The landing was on the big island, Mama, which the continental Golds have not yet discovered. It was there the Silvers mounted the defenses."

*The black hole, itself an antithesis to life, had yet expunged the disease of anti-life from the hearts and souls of the few who stayed, labored and ultimately triumphed within its sterile environs. Now, to preserve life, they were about to sacrifice their own.*

*Nevertheless, their efforts seemed pathetically inadequate considering the weight of the attack they knew was coming. But to meet that attack in space would be to reveal the true nature of the defence and its weakness.*

*So only one small ship lifted into the darkness, to find the fleet and then to divert it over the lesser landmass. The deadly dust would fall, that much was certain. But perhaps—for a while at least—most of the planet would survive while the attackers retreated and prepared for what they would assume was an unexpected and formidable adversary. Inevitably, the fleet would return. And inevitably, the planet would die. But any gain of time would be a victory—*

"And so the lights?"

"That's right, Papa Henry. Thousands of ships came down over the lesser landmass and killed it so thoroughly that nothing will live there for centuries. The weapons which had been

ground-mounted from only two hundred ships did what they were supposed to and caused the attacking commanders to order a retreat before they could dust the main continent. Many Golds died, primitive folk who lived on the island. And all the defending Silvers died, except for the one who diverted the attack to the island."

"The one called Beranahin?"

Emma nodded. "He crash-landed on the continent's west coast just as some of the dust drifted across the strait. He wore a protective garment, but he discarded it after he walked inland and became the Holy One."

"—and preached the sacredness of life." Gia Mayland murmured. She shook her head with wonder. "What a turnaround."

Sorenson asked, "Emma, why wouldn't he return with you? I know we cannot save his life, but he could have spent his last days with his own kind on Alchemy."

Emma shook her head. Her yellow eyes were moist. "We are not his kind anymore, Papa Henry. He made that very clear. Beranahin is a Betan now, and will die there—on his own, or when the world dies."

Gia Mayland smiled grimly. For the second time in her career she was about to issue an order which would destroy thousands of the race to which Emma belonged. This time, however, to preserve the dream of a dying Silver, it would be done with no regrets.

*The Holy One knew he had only hours left to live. They had propped him up outside his tent, facing the part of the sky where the young Silver called Emma had told him it would happen. The small radio, not needed anymore, was half melted amid the cinders of the fire.*

*He was not quite made of stone. He grieved for his many former friends and the thousands of others who had labored for so many years to build a new ark. Even now, the stone mountain with the ships clustered on the surface like stubby bristles on a skin, was falling inward from the system's asteroid belt. The crews were probably already on their ships, confident that with the backing of the space-born fortress they would overwhelm the planet's defenses and complete their holy task of sterilization.*

*They did not know of the nemesis which had already emerged out of the gate on Beta's Moon and which was converging on the asteroid. The dying Silver gazed at the triangular cluster of stars near which the young one had told him it would happen. Any second now.*

*The wink of light was so tiny—*

Jase Kurber had returned to Alchemy two days before, and was now with his wife and the Phuili David as the three of them wandered through the facility. It would be good to get back to

teaching after tedious months of correcting what had turned out to be a mere bureaucratic error. It seemed the Corps of Expeditors was increasingly gaining a reputation as specialists in the unraveling of red tape, and that was sad. But he would wait for a while before firing off his critical—and probably useless—report to head office on Earth.

Finally they entered the class which had been his before he left on the assignment. Most of the familiar gray-furred faces were there. But one, a special one, was missing.

"Where is Emma?"

Gia coughed.

"She iss now full field operwative," David said.

Kurber looked at the little Phuili with astonishment. "That's ridiculous. She has no experience!"