

PART ONE

1. Into The Void

A dream so full of miracle and mystery that it propelled him on a flight, rare even for him, who dreamed so imaginatively and in such abundant variety. In the ecstasy of that dream he might even for a moment have forgotten himself: he who otherwise never forgot himself. Turbulent was the dream: implausible images swirling round him from dimensions invisible. No words could have expressed it. Yet it filled him, until he wished the dream real. And then he awoke.

Awoke, one lonely, sleepy Sunday afternoon, stretched out on a sofa in California, recalling the wonder of that dream. Would give it to the son. Who at a nearby table stopped drawing and listened to his enthusiastic father. Who proposed something extraordinary and he talked it until the son too soon believed they could do it. Yes, so what if they'd never been out on the ocean? Why not take a little boat out there, just the two of them, and go after the big one?

So all that week they planned it and talked it up like schoolboys, this father and son. Saturday they drove to the rental yard and picked out a two-man aluminum boat, powered by an eighty-horse Seahorse outboard, all of it mounted on a trailer. This they bolted to their Bronco four-by-four, then drove beneath a gray, discouraging December sky, oblivious to all discouragement, to the perfect spot they'd already scouted, a secluded, placid, beginner's cove on the Sonoma coast. They maneuvered the boat awkwardly off the trailer and into the surf, and so launched their frail craft onto this fringe of the mighty Pacific Ocean.

Yet four hours later they were still without a bite. Still they kept their wool jackets zipped to the collar against the cold, for the Sun at midday showed itself only as a disc dimly seen through the dense gray overcast. They faced each other, but had spoken little the last hour as the diminished waves of the cove rocked them gently, pleasantly, fifty yards from shore. The boy wore no hat and his brown hair curled over ears and collar. Stubbornly, he wouldn't be the one to say let's give up and go home; though he'd begun glancing at his father recently, that he might hear him speak the welcome words.

However, the father seemed content to stare out into that infinite ocean, where nothing but swells and a few seagulls moved, his pole up and the line tugging shoreward, forgotten, the gold spinner out there spinning for nothing. He wore a Giants baseball cap. Only two months before, father and son had fished both for the first time ever off a pier at a Monterey wharf with Uncle Jay, and the boy had enjoyed it so much, and that had pleased his father so much, that the two had gone fishing every weekend since. But they were still as novice and unlucky as any fishermen could be.

Then, as if faraway worlds suddenly called to them, the dense, obscuring overcast parted, revealing the hidden sun, suddenly, which then flashed brilliantly upon them in their boat. "I'll be," said his father, squinting into the unexpected blaze of sunshine. "What a difference that makes—huh? Think this means our luck'll change?"

The boy remained silent, not wanting to encourage any optimism.

His father understood the silence. He laughed and said, "Or maybe not. Here—you take this caster a while. That hole in the sky just might stay open a bit. I think I'll just sit back here and enjoy some of that beautiful sun—probably won't last long." He reeled in the spinner and handed the pole to his son. Then he reclined against a cushion he'd set

against the Seahorse outboard motor and tilted back his cap bill to let the sudden sun warm his face.

The son reeled in his own line and laid that pole in the boat. He preferred the casting pole. He heaved out a long one and slowly retrieved it. Then several times again. But he saw it was still the same bad luck, so he settled back and let the spinner hold taut in the shoreward swells, the poletip slightly bowed, gently quivering.

The father opened one eye and saw his son's boredom. He pushed up his cap bill and opened the other eye. "Hey-I really liked all your drawings yesterday from anatomy class-what's your friend Martin think of you drawing all those beautiful, shapely women?"

The son laughed. "He's jealous! He said he'd love to trade places." Then he became more serious. "But that's a joke. He actually has dates. I've never had one." He laughed again, though this time it pained him.

The father almost equally, who said, "You're nuts-you could have one tomorrow if you wanted. Look at you."

The son frowned. "No, Dad, it's not like that. Girls aren't interested in me."

"Well maybe not the girls at the art college-you're barely sixteen-but I know the girls at Tam High must like you."

"They still see me as the fat kid. Nothing's changed."

The father shook his head, dubious. "That's nuts, you lost seventy pounds, you look like a model. I can't believe the kids at school even recognize you now."

"Well they do. And I feel like the same guy, that's the main thing. I just don't have any confidence when I see a girl I like. I get all stupid and can't talk to her."

The father paused; he knew too well this was true. "Well, Kirk said that would happen. I mean, that you'd change physically first, then it would take a little while for you to catch up to that psychologically. And you *will*. But I hope you can appreciate what a transformation you've already done on yourself."

No pride was in the son's voice. "Kirk did it to me. *You* did it."

"No! *You* did it! Kirk gave you a workout, told you what to eat, what not to eat—but you had to do the work, and it was a heckuva lot of work—and you *did* it. *You* did it. Don't ever forget that. Or underestimate it."

The son looked away to the dreary sky, letting the silence hang between them; till finally he said, "Let's change the subject—OK?"

"Fine with me," his father said cheerfully. "Tell me about your new character."

This roused a smile. "Oh yea. I told you the other day I found this old Submariner comic. It was drawn by my favorite artist, John Byrne."

"Sure I remember you showing me Byrne. But Submariner's way older than that. I read him when I was a kid. So John Byrne's drawing him again, huh?"

"Yeah, and I really like the way he does all the underwater stuff." The boy settled himself into the hollow of the bow: for the first time that day his shadow lay in the boat between them. "Well anyway, I've been thinking about a character of my own like that, and I've been trying out a few things." He reached with one hand into the backpack lying between his silver Nikes and he withdrew a drawing pad of Bristol. He found the page he wanted and held it up so only he could look at it; approved; then held it up for his father to see. Who saw a sleek muscled superhero speeding serenely through the depths of ocean, arms outspread, silver-masked, shoulder fins extended, hands webbed, a silver body suit so tight it could have been skin. A smiling dolphin swam as serenely beside him.

The father showed delight. "Very nice. What's his name?"

"Aquaman." But the son frowned. "It's not very original, but, like they say, it's a work in progress." The boy took back the drawing and reinserted it in his backpack, reset that again between his Nikes; then continued. "He's

not really right yet. He should be as cool as Submariner, but different—you know?” His father nodded that he did know. “Submariner has a really great origin. He was a prince in Atlantis, but he got kicked out and went away to fight the bad guys, and he teamed up with some other superheroes. But he’s different—sometimes he’s heroic, and sometimes he goes nuts and destroys stuff and fights against the good guys. He’s pretty neat.”

Agreeable as only a parent can be, the father said, “I can see that.” And then again his father’s eyes drifted to the far immense distances.

But his son pursued him. “What I really need, Dad, is a good story for my character. You know—an origin, and some really cool adventures. I’ve thought a lot about it, and I come up with a lot of ideas, but when I tell them to Martin he says I’m just rehashing stories I read in other comics. And he’s right, I never come up with anything *really* original. I need some help. Professional help.”

His father seemed to be considering this. He pulled the cap bill down to cover his eyes. “Well, son, I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve never been much good at original stories either. All my writing’s historical, or personal.”

“Yea, but you’ve done a lot of it. You’ve written novels.”

Hidden by the cap bill, his father smiled bleakly. “Yea, for all the good it did me.” Then he truly smiled, saying, “So you think I’d be a good collaborator—huh?” The father uncovered his eyes slightly, blinking at the sun, pretending optimism.

The boy leaned forward, wanting this, saying, “Well, why not? You told me yourself that you’ve had to make up *some* characters. *And* stories.”

His father smiled more. “Well I suppose I have. But making up a story for a superhero’s something else again. I imagine that would take...well...a lot of imagination. Not my strong point. And what do I know anyway about what goes on in the ocean?”

But the boy wouldn't accept that. He shook his head, even as he grinned. "We could find out what goes on in the ocean. We can *do* it, Dad—come on, let's make a comic together. Write me a story."

A shudder of release passed through the father and he let his fingers slip from his grip on the gunwales into his lap. He sat forward, pushing the cap bill high again. The boy's enthusiasm lightened him; he savored it, thought perhaps it might even rouse him from a great long lethargy. But it could not. "Maybe a few years ago, son. I'm just not in writing shape anymore—you know what I mean?"

The boy studied him. "I know. You mean you haven't written in a few years. So what?"

The father laughed, with little pleasure. "Well it's not that easy to get started again. I feel kinda worn out."

"I don't believe you. The rejections wore you out. And maybe something else wore you out too. But you always liked the writing, I know you did. That was always when you were happiest. It's sad, I don't see that side of you anymore."

The father began feebly, "Well..." But he had little energy for rebuttal. "There's more to it than you realize."

Unconvinced, the boy smiled brighter than before; he had energy enough for both of them. "Or maybe not. I know you, I see you all the time. In fact, that's our problem—we're like a coupla old duffs who sit around home and don't see much of anybody but each other." Then he grinned devilishly and said, "So why don't you date—huh? Talk about me being timid!"

The father's face showed mock outrage. "Date? I'm a little old for dating, young man. And not interested, if you really want to know."

"Hah! You're not even fifty, Dad. And I've seen you with Karen Carter, I know you like her."

Truly shocked, the father blurted: "*Hey there!*"

The boy struggled not to laugh, but said, "OK, I won't press you. But if I can admit I was in a shell and I'm trying

to get out—so can you. Anyway, it’s the same shell. We both climbed in it when we lost Mom. I got fat and hated everyone, you stopped writing and became a hermit. We’re both hermits. Still. But I’m coming back. Thanks to Kirk. And thanks to you. Why can’t it be your turn now?”

The memory of their shared misery and consolation threatened the father again. There had been enough of that. He tried to shut it down. “So you think inventing you a story would get me out of this shell you think I’m in?”

The son glowed. “Maybe. Maybe not. But it would be fun—no matter what.”

The father searched his son’s bright face with tired eyes. “You think it’s not too late for me—huh?” He felt the boy’s light penetrate him. “Well maybe. I’ll think about it. If you don’t make me date Karen Carter.”

The boy continued to hold him to it. “Come on, let’s do it! It’ll be fun! A great underwater adventure. Created by you and me.”

His father smiled, feeling his son’s light filling him. He leaned back, his eyes closed. He felt again the precious Sun on his face. “OK, OK, I’m thinking about it. The old dog might learn new tricks. But it won’t be easy. And all this story would be underwater? All of it?”

Energized, the boy again took up his casting pole. “Yeah, all underwater. And whatever ideas you come up with, I can sketch out little thumbnails and story boards, like they do in the big time. It’ll be fun. Then we’ll sell it to Marvel Comics.”

The boy cast again. The lure penetrated water and drifted, and he began retrieving it. But suddenly he felt a hard pull on the line; then it slackened.

Breathless, he stared at the limp line, his heart beating fast. Was that something? Or not. He waited, watching the still quivering line, thinking perhaps he had snagged. But another strong pull bent the poletip, the chrome reel biting his knuckles. He braced his feet, and leaned back, straining

the pole. His father bolted upright, reaching forward as if to take the pole: but careful to maintain balance in the boat.

“No!” the boy yelled, eyes wide and wild with the thrill of it. “Let me try! I can hardly turn the handle!” The pole bowed still more, tip quivering.

The boy glanced only long enough to see his father wild eyed too, remembering that this was his first big fish as well. His father shouted again. “Yeah-well don’t let it pull you in! If it pulls too hard-let go for godsake!”

But this was his, this was what he’d dreamed about. Even so, as he struggled with all his energy against the mighty fish, his leg cramped and he wanted to shift his weight, but he didn’t dare. He could barely control the pole as the line swept back and forth near the boat. Sometimes he wound a few turns; but then the next moment he could not; or he cried out, helpless as the line spun away furiously.

Still he battled, and the fish battled; until finally the fish wearied and could fight no more, but merely resisted stubbornly, twenty feet from the boat. His father with a gloved hand grabbed filament a foot from the poletip and pulled to gain slack; but even pulling together they only slowly retrieved line. Till at last they drew the fish beside the boat; then must pull harder to bring it out of water.

Both gasped: seeing a three-foot long, silver and blue-black steelhead emerge from ocean, pink glistening along its side, powerful tail thrashing. The boy reached down to grasp the spinner in the fish lip and he alone hauled the big fish into the boat, onto his lap.

The father sat forward, pushing back his Giants cap, astounded. “My God! That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen!” Speechless, the boy stared at his prize: so alive in his lap, brilliant colors gleaming, tail thumping now without panic, feathered gills fluttering in vain. So courageously dying, the boy thought. A beautiful thing I’m killing.

Then he perceived something else, though the how of it was beyond his understanding: something inside this fish *throbbing-throbbing*. He knew it was no heartbeat—no—something else, something somehow part of this incredible moment...*a wonder of wonders*. And though he knew he was staring into the incomprehensible, he also profoundly understood that he could *not* kill this fish.

Carefully he removed the treble hook from the fish lip, his own heart still pounding. His eyes never moved from this dying creature as he said to his father, “I wanna throw him back,” and as quickly as he spoke he heaved the steelhead over the side.

His father yelled, “*Omygod—NO!*” and he lurched forward, reaching for the prize that was even then falling into water.

This sudden desperate movement tipped the frail craft radically, throwing them both off balance, before the boy could grab the gunwales: his feet slipping away behind him, pitching the boy forward, so that his forehead struck the bow as he fell overboard into ocean. The father toppled face down, cracking his skull loudly on the seat boards, slumping there unconscious.

Stunned and disoriented, the boy sank several feet under water, struggling to hold his breath, feeling waves, turbulence above him: when suddenly he saw before him the steelhead he had only moments before thrown overboard.

In that instant that should have been his death, eye to eye with the steelhead, besieged by terror and panic, the boy perceived in an instant of perfect clarity and wonder their positions now bizarrely reversed: the fish alive and himself dying. Even as he sensed again the *throbbing-throbbing* inside the fish that he knew was not its heartbeat and that he would forever after know was the essence of the wonder of all that wonder.

But terror and panic seized him. Desperate for air, he opened his mouth to suck in the fatal swallow of water that

would burst his lungs; but in that moment a convulsion passed through the steelhead: face to face: and the boy saw from within dark folds of steelhead mouth: a pearlescent jewel of another world and another time emerge glistening white and iridescent: glowing: *throbbing-throbbing*: unearthly power passing serenely toward him: mouth to mouth: wonder of wonders: heat and power of the brilliant jewel glowing on his lips, hotter on his tongue: *throbbing-throbbing*: into his throat lodging high in his chest: then suddenly accelerating its pulsebeat to explosion.

White light blinded him. Power of suns erupting quaked through him, dissolving body and mind, consuming his cry for mercy unheard.

He expected to die, yet he wasn't dying, for his consciousness perceived it all—bone and muscle, blood and skin, senses, organs, brain all burning in the white electric fire. Not dying, something else. Disintegration and reintegration. His old being destroyed. A new being arising from this power raging through him.

His clothes split and fell away.

Beyond pain: bones wrenched to new shapes, spine elongating, legbones fusing and retracting into hip sockets as feet flared into broad flukes at the spinetip. Arms withdrew into body, hands webbing into flippers at the shoulders. Forehead flattened and facebones reformed a long, thick jawbone. Pale skin fattened and darkened gray, stretching silky and taut over expanding, distorting muscles.

A dorsal fin ruptured erect from his spine.

Swelling in his forehead pulsed with new sounds never heard before, in high frequencies unimagined. In the crown of his head an airhole emerged, and instantly he craved air. He rose to the surface he knew not how and gasped air into his lungs: bringing into him new life and new being. Then he sank beneath the surface again, returned to a world of chaos and terror.

He knew not what he was, nor what had consumed him. He would scream, but no sound was possible. Even

the water around him still swirled and bubbled with the chaos of it all. Panic again choked him: he couldn't breathe. His flippers in his new madness took still to be arms and he beat them frantically, regaining the surface; felt his new air flap open and suck breath three times, then close; and he, neither alive nor dead, sank again.

Weakened to exhaustion, he felt even so a wild energy pulsing through him that seemed the life force of this something so terrible inside him. All his attention was within, mad to know what had happened, terrified to know.

He opened his eyes only when he must, and he saw then ghostly bluegreen depths folding into eerier darknesses below, all of it terrible, without as well as within. He closed his eyes again, not wanting to see more, refusing to believe this impossible madness, shivering and helpless against the terror that raged inside him.

Numb, confused, struggling to keep alive, he drifted lifelessly out the cove and into deeper ocean, breathing awkwardly in panic whenever his lungs burned. Understanding nothing. Until at last even his terror and panic were exhausted, and quieted; and finally only the many bewildering sounds of the sea filled his awareness. Chaotic nightmare sounds.

But soon—for what else could he do?—he surrendered to the nightmare, drifting, barely alive, bobbing like cork in water. Lost. Fever burning in his brain. And one question he sounded, and re-sounded: *What's happening? What? What?*

Eventually he sensed something near him. He opened his strange eyes. Not sure if he was dreaming what he saw, or if, in the distortion of undulating green water he saw a mirage of the sea: but he saw two gray dolphins hovering at the surface a few body-lengths in front of him, flukes hanging, rippled light through water casting lightwebs over their bodies. They were looking at him.

2. Mystery

He looked at them and he felt fear and panic again rousing his blood to madness. But he couldn't do it, for he was exhausted, wanting only sleep and oblivion. Thus the fear and panic subsided, and then there was only the fluttering of his flippers, which seemed beyond his control.

What was he? He tried to look at himself, but his neck was rigid, inflexible: he saw only the tip of a flipper moving. He felt flukes; he could move them, but not move them as feet moved, and moving them pushed him toward the surface. He stopped that, and he sank back.

The nightmare engulfed him.

High piercing sound entered him. He was sure it came from the dolphins as they moved closer. The sound whined higher, then stopped. Then a slower burst of whistles. One dolphin wagged its beak side to side, clicking so fast the notes of it ran together and seemed to vibrate the mysterious thing in the middle of his chest. His fear might have seized him again, but as the clicking continued he suddenly felt a wonderful warmth spreading in his body, relaxing him. He realized that somehow these dolphins could ease his misery when he in no way comprehended or could help himself. A wave of peace from dimensions unknown swept over him, and he surrendered to it, to them, for what more could he do? The faces of the dolphins faded as he descended into the sleep and oblivion that was everything he wanted.

As he did so, the dolphin nearest him, Koa, third-order Guardian and a healer, whistled in Lilliaba, the many-voiced

language of dolphins, to her companion in singwave, their talk-frequency. “A strange one. Responds to nothing.”

Rimi, the youngest Guardian, singwaved in reply a burst of whistles, “Seems barely alive. Perhaps injured.”

“Perhaps,” voiced Koa. “He seems in shock, can’t swim. Could drown, should be with our colony.”

“A young one,” voiced Nania, Koa’s apprentice healer, who circled their discovery. “Barely floats. And why no body marks?”

“A mystery,” answered Koa, finally drawing back from the curiosity. “Likely lost. What puzzles me most is his silence. As if he hears not, nor understands. Gives no identity signal. Seems lifeless. Nothing’s what it looks to be. I wonder even this extreme—is this truly dolphin? When I scanned, I saw something small, round, dense in his chest—look yourself—near the lung opening. Like a pearl. But radiates, quite unstable. Yet no tumor—highest frequency, no subsonic drone of cancer.”

“I see it,” whistled Nania, transmitting an ultra-high burst of seeker-rays into this confounded dolphin’s chest: echoes returning to Nania through her jaw and through the melon of her forehead, and these echoes formed a picture within her mind’s eye that revealed to her the tiny pearlshape within that body.

“So dense,” singwaved Rimi, who also scanned it. “What?”

“How know?” answered Koa. “But alien to dolphins. Perhaps even alien to Oceanus. Scanning his brain base I saw seeker-rays not active. So—dolphin—perhaps—in emergency. Who responds not, though half-conscious. In peril of drowning. Brain half shut down, yet not damaged. Or has it ever worked? A Language Master will know more.”

Rimi asked, “The strange steelhead who drew us here?”

Koa remembered. The steelhead had been swimming erratically near them when she’d discovered the fish. She’d scanned it and detected minute traces of powerful radiation within the steelhead. The first mystery. When the strange

fish had sped away, Koa and Rimi had followed easily, continuing to read the unusual radiation in this creature. They'd pursued him until he'd led them to this cove. Here they'd found something even stranger than the steelhead—this puzzling, helpless dolphin.

And where was the steelhead now?

Koa scanned with seeker-rays the nearby waters, but the fish was gone. She voiced, "The steelhead radiates the same pulse as the power object in this dolphin's chest. How so?"

"And what to do with this one?" singwaved Rimi, all three now facing the pseudo-dolphin, their flukes at rest, hearing the labored breathing whenever their helpless discovery rose awkwardly for air.

"First," responded Koa, turning southwest toward the faraway colony, "we report position, conclusions. Call a Language Master. Make a support group." She transmitted a series of low-frequency distance singwaves, giving her information. In moments this message traversed the thirty-seven miles of ocean to their dolphin colony, swimming south in shelf-waters among migrating gray whales. Soon Koa and her companions heard the return signal: *Understood. Bring your mystery.*

Immediately, Koa called her two sons, Opono and Oponino, who'd been hunting nearby, and they joined them. Nania and Opono maneuvered into support position beneath the unfortunate dolphin's flippers. Koa and Rimi swam one on each side in second support, to replace them every thirty or forty breaths; Oponino swam foremost, navigator, projecting seeker-rays ahead and below. This support group then bore the helpless one away at half-travel speed southwest toward the dropoff, the edge of the continental shelf, and toward their colony.

But of all this the unconscious boy-dolphin knew nothing. Eventually he awoke from his sleep. The little memory he possessed, hours old only, filtered back to him—recalling the eruption and chaos; recalling all his fear and panic, which had now subsided, though fear and panic both

yet lurked in the darkness of him. Recalling also these dolphins. He could now only trust in his surrender: to the ocean that surrounded him, that rushed over him and under him; and to those dolphins that sustained him at this rapid pace, one beneath each arm.

Though he also remembered that arms they were not, that the being he had been, he was not.

They swam on, he knew not how far or how long, until this boy become dolphin sensed them stopping, and he opened his eyes. He saw both above and below the lapping swells many dolphins swimming toward him, some making little breath leaps approaching; and he heard as well clicks and whistles all at once converging in eccentric harmonies, compounding his confusion.

Koa slowed the support group to wait for the Language Master, and they maintained at the surface, that their burden might breathe whenever he would. Atia the Language Master swam among them and halted before the miracle dolphin. She began a fast clicking into him.

He drew back, frightened, but the probe was brief. He wanted to will himself to the oblivion of sleep again, but he could not, for all the continual, quick movement of dolphins and the confusing sounds in the waters around him.

When Atia completed her examination, she paused a moment to look at the lifeless face and body: seeing an impossible young dolphin, no distinguishing marks on his face—none on his body, not a scratch, as if the body had never been in ocean.

The Language Master singwaved to Koa beside her. “I see what you see. Responds to nothing Lilliaba, no frequency. No response to rescue signals, yet no brain or hearing damage. And—however possible—responds not to the Eternal Family keys that’re part of every dolphin of Oceanus. I say—he’s never known Lilliaba, and understands nothing. I truly doubt he’s dolphin. Astonishing. May not even be lifeform. And this further doubt—voiceworks not

functioning. Nor seeker-rays. How can this be lifeform? Vlorio must see him. This'll be his newest incomprehensible. Strangest of all—that object in his chest—so dense, such pulse, such powerful radiation. Like nothing I've seen. He *must* be machine.”

From a short distance behind them they heard in singwave a voice they all knew. “Sacred Profanities! What've you found?” And moments later, Vlorio, ninth-order Guardian, glided into their water and settled beside Atia, peering closely at the barely-conscious mystery. Vlorio continued. “All amazing, but I fear this creature. I've listened all the last mile.”

He scanned with ultra-seekers the power-object in the mystery's chest. Then singwaved, “Yes, fearful. Perceive the object's erratic pulse? Possible?—what Atia's proposed—The Child's created a perverse machine?—an exploder inside this perfect image of dolphin?”

“But we know,” insisted Koa, “The Child kills by impulse, in anger. From higher impulses The Child kills not at all. Yet if this be truly an exploder meant to harm us—The Child's long planned this cruelty. Can that be?” Koa paused, but quickly understood she was alone in her opinion, and appealed more strongly. “I urge more thought. Speak to this creature, be that possible. Has voiceworks. Atia can give them ultra-shock. Force upon him speech in basic forms”

Atia was reluctant. “You assume lifeform. Not I. This must be machine. Even if lifeform—must also *desire* to speak. Any see desire in this machine? We waste time. This thing that seems dolphin—but isn't—must be abandoned. Let it destroy itself.”

Others whistled agreement.

But Koa persisted. “We're too cautious. This power truly uncontrollable? Abandon this creature? Without knowing more?”

Vlorio peered closely again at the somnolent danger, then singwaved to the others, “Enough danger in Oceanus

without inviting more. But I'll risk one more probe." He scanned with ultra seeker-rays this body that so worried them.

The transformation at first was unaware of this probing. Yet when Vlorio switched to lower frequency, the boy-dolphin easily felt the object inside his chest vibrate: a soft hum that wound higher the longer Vlorio probed, until this sound began to frighten its carrier; and then the power began to shake; and his prior lethargy suddenly dissolved as his heart raced and all his former fear and panic rose up again. As it did, he felt the object that so troubled him amplifying its unearthly power again to something unimaginable, that could only destroy him. He wanted to scream, though again no sound was possible, and so he shook uncontrollably with the horror that again had seized him.

Vlorio saw everything. "Listen! Look! Vibrating more, heat increases! Now *more!* Read it!"

The other dolphins did read, and quickly moved away, ready to flee at a signal from Vlorio.

Koa, healer before she was a Guardian, dared another idea. She transmitted into this dangerous being's solar plexus her strongest healing ray: the octave-counter-octave; and within moments the object in his chest slowed its vibration till it was barely perceptible.

But even though the expansive energy so quickly subsided, it left the victim drained and shaking. Vaguely he perceived the dolphins somehow could control this terrible thing in him; but not enough; nor rid him of it.

Koa in singwave whistled to Vlorio, "Look—healing rays quiet him. No machine responds to healing rays."

Vlorio was slow to voice opinion. "Shadows in Darkness! A deadly mystery. You may speak true, Koa. But as the body shook—it no way resembled lifeform. Perhaps The Child now creates machines to respond to healing rays as if lifeforms. The Child in our lifetime's ingenious."

“Koa’s not alone,” interposed Rimi, “I suspect lifeform also.”

“Accepted, Rimi,” responded Vlorio. “Though I doubt, however much I wish. Yes, I long to study this...whatever.”

Atia whistled, “We risk it?—when so many are destroyed if Koa, Rimi are wrong?”

“Yes, we’ve seen too much death,” answered Vlorio. “Can’t risk it. This creature’s *not* dolphin. We see no intelligence, no emotion. It’s likely machine. But...such puzzle. What could this *be*? Stars in Oceans!—*imagine!*”

“Vlorio!” urged Atia, “All are frightened. I beg you act. Before this kills us. Abandon it!”

“Wait,” interrupted Koa. “I say we make a grave mistake. It’s quiet now. Call Kreonks to probe the mystery.”

“That could not be soon. Your rays may not again save us,” answered Vlorio. “Dangerous to delay. Many could die. This one requires so much help—to swim, feed, protect. Colony can’t do it. I say this—support group must take him to a place of outcasts, without escape. Abandon him, move everyone far away. My own mission takes me elsewhere, no more time for this, nor has the colony time. Take him away. This must be done.”

As twilight spread slowly through the sun-waters, and while the boy now dolphin struggled to recover sanity and strength, most dolphins cruised well below the limit of light in barrel-rolls and upside-downs, already seeing with seeker-rays instead of eyes. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he barely perceived these dolphins swimming near him and below him. He was also aware of being still supported at the surface, ignorant of the fate that awaited him, ignorantly feeling a spark of hope that these benevolent creatures could rescue him from his nightmare.

He drowsed when he could; he awoke when he must; Koa remained always close. Three fast notes of high-frequency from faraway caused him to open again his eyes.

He saw Koa turn that way and make her own identity signal in reply. Moments later Haoli glided to a stop beside her, father of half her six children.

The aggrieved and helpless boy-dolphin watched these two caress body to body, flukes slapping flukes, watched as together they barrel-rolled away from him eight or ten body-lengths, then dove, disappearing into dark waters: reappearing moments later body still pressed to body, powering for the surface, flukes pumping in unison: bursting the surface and blowing water and spray high into air: then falling as if one body back into water. As this can't-be-dolphin watched them, listless though he was, he felt the grace and joy of them, and this displaced for the moment, and for the first time in the ocean, his own grim apprehensions.

These dolphin mates resettled near him, but their speech was incomprehensible. Haoli singwaved, "I heard talk the last miles—what's this mystery?"

"None understand. Dolphin. Not dolphin. Potent, dangerous something in its chest-origin beyond Oceanus I believe. Vlorio, others, fear a trick of The Child's, an exploder that'll kill many unless he's taken to a place of outcasts. I believe it no explosive, believe its power affects only the carrier." Haoli was amazed and silent. Koa continued, "This journey I regret. Deepest awareness tells me this creature's lifeform. However strange."

Haoli circled the mystery, scanning it, then whistled, "If Vlorio's decided, it's beyond challenging."

"Yes. Only the unforeseeable alters it. This dangerous dolphin worries him. Too much. Why not make time to study him, prevent this mistake?"

"Mistake? So sure?"

"No. But I'd accept the danger, to probe deeper this mystery."

Both then heard the departure signal. Koa voiced, "I must go, for all my regret. You come too. Hope we attract some unforeseeable."

Moments later the escort group arrived, and Opono and Oponino resumed support beneath the boy-dolphin's flippers. Nania and Haoli flanked both sides of them in second support, and Koa and Rimi followed as the group swam away at half-travel speed southeast toward their desperate destination.

The sky darkened to twilight, and second supports projected seeker-clicks into all their water ahead and below: reading in the echoes anchovies near the edge of the dropoff; schooling squid in a rising cloud a whalebody wide, up from deeper colder realms now that the Sun was going; and these dolphins read the kelp beds heaving and twisting at the surface in their path, and they circled wide of these.

Soon on this journey the consciousness of their unsuspecting burden began to rouse again. Dark of night had settled over them, and in the fleeting instant when he was lifted to the surface to breathe, he saw stars already setting their fire into the cold sky; and when he was descended and carried ahead he saw only the impenetrable black night of ocean everywhere, and the sound of seeker-clicks and echoes all around him. Miles and more miles of monotonous black ocean they traveled, and each time he looked above, his hope seemed to be as small as these points of starlight in an ever darkening, engulfing firmament.

He struggled against despair, struggled to reach back into that inconceivable *before*, to remember-*anything*. But for all his desperation and longing, his memory gave him nothing; so he willed himself again to the oblivion of sleep, akin to death. But before he slept he heard sounds, in low frequency, words, but not dolphin words. Words in a language unknown...or forgotten...but familiar. And he understood these words: *I just can't accept it that you're gone. They can't find your body. I'll come back, every day, and look for you...and wait for you...and hope.*

Dim sparks ignited in the memory cells of his brain. His heart raced. Not that he fully understood the meaning of these words, or who was speaking, but he understood that

these words were for him, that there was longing in those words that was the same as his own longing into the world he could no longer remember. And he knew he had *known* that voice, that it was part of his *before*.

As the escort group swam on he repeated to himself these words of longing from a source unknown, trying to awaken further his memory. But there was nothing more. So he had only those words; but he clung to them as if they were all his life, certain that the invisible voice spoke to *him*...that he was the one *gone*, that he had *known* that voice...who *waited*. And that voice also knew he might be dead, or that he might still be, hoping within its own longing, alive.

Which was he—dead or alive? How could he be sure?

But eventually his mind exhausted itself, and he had to let it all go. And then he heard around him again only the sounds of dolphins, their incomprehensible seeker-rays and their echoes. So again he let himself be drawn into sleep, but this one, unlike before, not akin to death.

They were still an hour to the river's mouth, their destination. The sandy shelf a hundred twenty meters below them rose gradually. An ebbing three-quarter Moon shimmered above them, shedding a soft light into their upper ocean.

Suddenly the escort group heard loud methodical thrashing to their right. The boy-dolphin awoke, hearing it too. Koa projected ultra-seeker-rays that direction: detecting shark-shapes, four of them, all closing at high speed directly for the dolphins, the killers' agitation in their crescent tails and gaping jaws.

Koa's skri-alarm alerted them all. Every dolphin, except the two supporting the outcast-to-be, stopped swimming and scanned the onrushing sharks. Quickly alert himself, the transformation sensed the dolphins' alarm and he watched with panic rising as the sharks loomed distinctly in the moonlit water.

Koa signaled again in skri, "No time to stun! Strike!"

Haoli, Rimi, Koa and Opono separated from the supports and their burden and all four instantly accelerated to such speed that the shocked outcast saw only gray rocket-bodies flash away in furious turbulence. He saw them explode heads and beaks like battering rams into the bellies and gillworks of the attacking sharks, several body-lengths in front of him. He heard violent tearing of flesh, organs bursting, cartilage shattering. He saw the four dolphins draw back from the cloud of blood and torn flesh, so suddenly afloat in the waters around them, and he saw four shark-shapes sink lifelessly into the darker water below.

He shook with terror, and Koa turned him away, calming him with her octave-counter-octave healing ray: for the object within his chest had once again accelerated wildly. Koa continued transmitting longer and more intensely than before, and Nania doubled that effort with her own projection of octave-counter-octave: until the dangerous pulsation slowed, and then diminished so rapidly that it seemed to cease pulsing altogether.

Both stopped transmitting and scanned the power-object with ultra-seeker rays, seeing the strange object now, for the first time since they had encountered the mystery dolphin, completely inert.

The boy-dolphin realized that the terrible danger had again been averted, but he also sensed within a further, intensifying amazement, for where the volatile, fearful object lodged in his chest, a pleasant warmth now began to glow. And expand. Suddenly a new vitality began filling his lungs: this strange sudden quickening gave life to the singwave whistle-voice in his blowhole: so that all his repressed, agonized thoughts became words, which he uttered in singwave basic forms, a wonder to all present, as much as to himself. *“Help! What’s happened? Take it away! Help!”*

Instantly Rimi propelled to him, beak-to-beak, and singwaved. *“Speech from the Dead! Or is it the far distant voice of a great unknown power, taunting our little world,*

through the body of this almost-dolphin? Speak again! Tell your secrets! What more do you know?"

In awe, the other dolphins gathered around him.

Again, amazing himself as well as them, the transformation expressed his mind in urgent basic forms. *"The thing in me makes me speak. What is it? Take it away! No more sharks! I remember nothing."*

Rimi singwaved to him, and all his companions heard, and understood the great import. *"Alive, you are lifeform, we'll not let you die! Not machine. Who is it that speaks within you?"*

But he who had been so violently thrust into their world knew only that he was in a body not his own, and terrified. He could only utter this, "I know nothing."

Koa, amazed, looked to Rimi and voiced, "What can this be?"

Rimi, amazed as any, spoke a sudden dawning awareness. "Is it possible?—this unknown being in dolphin-body we transport—a gift, a mystery to unpuzzle? This creature—force for life, not death? Despite Vlorio's fears."

"So I want to believe," singwaved Koa, "but we appeal too late." Wanting it desperately not to be too late.

All these dolphins circled this one so unlike them, and now so suddenly vocal. Black night was above and below them, and each one was uncertain of their course.

So it was that Nania, the apprentice healer, had also been born a visionary, so that she sometimes saw beyond the veils of time and space. And so it was that moment: for she saw a trembling of light in the impenetrable darkness beyond their circle, where no light should have been, and she knew it was a light that she alone could see: she saw within that exquisite light an immense rolling sea and no living thing visible upon it. Faraway in the distance a sparkling tide rolled out upon that rolling sea. This overwhelming tide of phosphorescence glowed and sparked as it came forth upon the rolling sea and soon visible was a dolphin leaping continually into the glowing tide of

phosphorescence, not traveling through this gossamer medium, but being carried onward by this ever-shining tide that spread across these oceans. The leaping dolphin thus was borne all the way onward until both the sparkling tide and the fortunate and favored dolphin came face to face with Nania, hovering, flukes at rest, his beak straight at her, his radiant eyes staring straight at her, seeing her, seeing into her. This dolphin seemed suspended within a cloud of shimmering iridescence that now flowed all around Nania in her visionary seeing.

Contrary emotions rose suddenly in her, causing her to shiver. The vision dissolved.

Nania turned to Koa, wanting to tell her...but what?

Koa stared at her apprentice, suspecting she'd seen what the others could not see. Nania singwaved to her. "I believe I just visioned our mystery dolphin. Floated along, borne by phosphorescent tide like fog upon the ocean. Shining. Flowing like a greatest river. Foremost, my visionary mind tells me these two mystery dolphins, one beside us, one visioned, are the same. This creature we've found-I understand it not, but yes, I say we must keep him, must comprehend him. This also makes me wonder-can this power inside him be of Oceanus?"

"But Vlorio won't accept your vision," urged Rimi, gliding to face her, "even if we do."

"Then only for us to know, now," Nania responded, struggling to comprehend. "This warns us our mistake abandoning him. I feel certain."

"I too," voiced Koa, elated also.

Rimi pushed his beak between the other two. "I say too we must keep him, make him dolphin."

Koa saw the wonder of it, felt a sudden exhilaration and she breath-leaped into moonlight, and then submerged and settled beside them again. Their mystery dolphin pressed close to her. Even so, she struggled with her loyalties and apprehension. "Yes, I too want to keep him. But how not honor Vlorio's order? As well my bond as Guardian?"

But Rimi already anticipated, confident, fluttering flukes as he offered what no other would have dared to speak. “Let’s hide our helpless lifeform, prove Vlorio wrong. We *make* this helpless one a dolphin—so he swims, feeds, survives. Till we see him more. Know what he is, why he hosts this great power. Then Vlorio will forgive us all.”

Nania scanned the tiny jewel in his chest and singwaved, “It seems we’ve drained the object’s power, Koa. Look yourself, no pulsebeat. So perhaps all danger gone.”

Even so, Koa worried, considering the disobedience Rimi proposed; but more certain each moment they must end disobeying. She scanned again the creature’s chest, saw the object inert, apparently impotent. “I think so too. Earlier, the power pulsed after octave-counter-octave diminished it. Now it seems lifeless.”

“Even so,” Rimi continued, “caution. Some one must be with him always.”

Nania, daughter as well as a visionary and healer apprentice, was ready. “Lirias my father could be that one. For now.”

“Why Lirias?” voiced Koa, who knew him well. “His interests are all private.”

Nania answered. “Yes, private, but Father’s a Language Master. This creature foremost requires that. My father will want to study this deep mystery. He wants to be useful, though it seems not so.”

Koa knew she herself must decide. “So you think it possible to teach this one survival in time? Only one Moon till we meet Vlorio again.”

“It must be enough,” answered Rimi, always ready for the unthinkable. And these other young ones agreed, excited and emboldened by the youngest Guardian. And Koa too, not for novelty or excitement, but because her heart demanded it.

She singwaved, “Then yes—let’s hide him, and *make* him a dolphin.”

3. Lirias The Half-Blind

Lirias the half-blind in recent years had assumed that all the momentous events of his life had already either exalted him or else gripped and shaken him, and that he would live the rest of his years anticlimactically. He would remain what he was, a dolphin without significant purpose, freed of his former high obligations, and living out his life only indulging his personal whims and curiosities, none of them of much consequence to the colony he had so diligently served, until his great misfortune. Though he knew, more than most, that monumentous events may come to anyone at any time, and that they very often come in innocent, unassuming forms.

So in time he would remember this otherwise dreary overcast afternoon in which he swam the surface near two rubber zodiacs a mile from the Pacific shore. Eight passengers were in each boat, all well clothed against the chill of December, but each of them now oblivious of weather since Lirias had swum among them. His dorsal rose conspicuously out of water, and he made little breath leaps when he passed between boats, delighting these humans who had ventured out seeking migrating gray whales, but who instead had found this dolphin who seemed to enjoy entertaining them.

No such purpose animated Lirias. He was attracted to humans for his own peculiar reasons, often useful to the colony but also, as his daughter Nania thought, satisfying extreme, dark moods that, even so, no one in the colony would ever blame him for.

The sea was calm for all the overcast, and Lirias rode the easy waves now, perpendicularly, head out of water, a steady

fluke-stroke below maintaining him, rising and falling as the swell rose and fell. But always his eyes on them, these creatures that were his obsession. They reached out for him. Several took photographs and they chattered among themselves like children. They squealed and laughed. This face of theirs Lirias knew well. He heard a human sound he knew well also, their word for what he was—*dolphin*—the word he'd first comprehended in his captivity. In time he'd comprehended so many other words there as well.

Lirias eased himself below water, passed under one boat and surfaced at its backside. All the passengers were looking for him where he'd been, only their backs now visible to him. With his flukes he tossed a frigid spray of water at them. Several screamed, and then he bumped the boat with his flank, causing two or three to fall helplessly back into the boat. These made more screaming and some swearing.

Lirias again lifted his head out of water and watched these humans, no longer delighted children, but suddenly angry at each other and unconcerned for dolphin or whale. A large human tried to stand in the boat and he pushed another one. The boat rocked dangerously. The man at the motor shouted, then grabbed the arm of the angriest man and ordered him to sit down. He did. Still others continued yelling and two women began crying. These faces, much more interesting than the former, Lirias also knew well.

He remained within a few meters of the boat as it drifted in the swells, eyes out of water, seeing all of it. The shouting and anger subsided. The man at the motor yelled a last time for everyone to sit and be quiet, and he revved the motor slowly and maneuvered them back in the direction of shore. Lirias followed at his small distance. His attention remained on them, all much sobered; until he heard a dolphin voice approaching far south, singwaving his name.

He recognized Koa's voice. "We bring a mystery. And Nania."

Immediately Lirias abandoned the two boats, but he swam only leisurely toward the approaching dolphins, for he no longer believed there could be mysteries to interest him. As he swam, his seeker-rays told him the rocky bottom was ninety meters below and that multitudes of red snapper were feeding among the rocks a few hundred meters ahead of him, where six small thresher sharks also hunted. A mile and more to his right three adult gray whales chuffed at the surface on their way to Mexico lagoons.

Still a mile from Lirias, Koa singwaved to him again. "Most unusual this helpless one we carry. Can't swim, but possesses a power unimaginable, Lirias. We knew you'd be curious."

Nearer, Lirias scanned all these oncoming with seeker-rays and detected the apparently lifeless dolphin borne by the support pair. Moments later they all met and settled together, facing, flukes at rest. Nania and Haoli flanked Opono and Koa, while the support pair and the mystery dolphin rested beside Nania.

Lirias singwaved to Koa. "If it be such importance, why bring him to me, who have no importance?" Too quickly Lirias scanned the curiosity's body, and therefore detected nothing unusual.

Koa singwaved to Lirias. "This creature is...we know not what. Doubtfully dolphin, so Atia claims. I agree. But in its chest, some object, great potency, though origin unknown, like its carrier." Lirias scanned with his limited seeker function the creature's chest and detected the object so spoken.

"I hear it, but hear no potency," Lirias singwaved. "Hear only something dormant."

"Fortunate for us," responded Koa. "I found this creature drowning; a tiny object within it unstable. In crisis it pulsed erratically, then alarmed us amplifying. We thought it might explode. I stopped it with healing rays. As you see, all potency's extinguished. We hope forever."

“Yet the creature still lives,” observed Lirias, circling it, perhaps more curious than he would admit.

“Yes, still lives,” continued Koa. “But more that’s strange. Though we believed it no dolphin, pulses of its power caused the creature to speak in basic forms, verifying its lifeform. Though which? Inhabiting dolphin body. We thought you might help us, observe it, tell us what you learn.”

Lirias scanned again the inert power within the phenomenon. “So...now he’s powerless, he’s mine.”

Koa blew away a long fine string of bubbles. “Not even then, Lirias. Yours *only* now, and *only* if you wish it, until we see better what to do with him. Full truth-Vlorio ordered the creature outcast, abandoned. Too dangerous he thinks, and burden on the colony. But since he’s lifeform, we’ll hide him, teach him survival, so we may convince Vlorio. We see him again in one Moon.”

“You’d hide him with me?”

“Who better?” intervened his daughter.

Lirias rose to the surface, blew spray, breathed, and re-settled before Koa. He knew her Guardian’s loyalty. “You’d defy Vlorio?”

Koa’s confidence had increased, and she singwaved, “Vlorio will see his mistake. This creature’s a marvel. But only time will prove Vlorio wrong.”

“I help him swim?”

“Yes,” voiced Koa. “Nania assisting. Creature lacks most functions. No one comprehends. Who knows what in him lies latent?”

“So you make me his nurse.”

Koa breath-leaped a moment, to dampen her irritation; she needed Lirias allied. Resubmerged, she singwaved, “More here than anyone yet knows. You surely see that, Lirias. How many care for such mysteries? Few like you. You know you’re fortunate I offer him. You only pretend not to care.”

Lirias paused a moment, resisting the impulse to scan again the power object. Then he singwaved, "What caused it to accelerate?"

Koa answered, "Sharks. Fear. Terror. No doubt another strong emotion also."

"What countered it?"

Koa directed the octave-counter-octave into Lirias. He felt its force.

He approached the docile carrier, considered the creature; then singwaved, "What's the object's origin?"

"Unknown. Not Oceanus, I believe. Thus a rarest mystery. May we leave him?"

Lirias knew it for the rare mystery it was, and he could only make his honest reply. "Of course, Koa. Though most tragic the object's lost its power."

Parted from the others, Lirias and Nania followed the support pair Opono and Oponino, and their burden toward a sheltered cove an hour's swim away. This one who so fascinated them had taken refuge in semi-sleep and resolved to remain there. Even so he heard them speaking, but their words were not the words he'd understood and spoken earlier; these were much too fast. He wanted to comprehend, to grasp something that might defend him from the horrors of his own imagination, which threatened him with bizarre next moments, with terrible endings, whenever his consciousness emerged from the sanctuary of sleep to consider once again this bizarre incarnation.

But only the unintelligible singwave of Lirias' conversation rippled in his hearing as these two carried him along, merely another meaningless sound of the ocean, like the burbled songs of gray whales passing nearby, or the high-frequency crackle of shrimp colonies scuttling across the sandy bottom below them. His only certainty was that as long as he remained in this ocean that had swallowed him, he was beyond any deliverance, and only sleep could comfort him.

Nania swam to the side of her father's good eye. Since leaving the others, Lirias had been silent, contemplating the mysterious dolphin whose powerless flukes a few meters ahead of him were tossed arrhythmically, like something broken, whenever the support pair surfaced with him to breathe. Despite his hesitations, Nania knew her father was already enchanted by this creature that was now his to examine. She was happy for him. Nothing since his release from captivity had so engaged him.

He voiced, "The power still interests me. So foolish to deaden it." She welcomed the resumption of her father's talk.

"There's more to him than anyone yet sees," she singwaved.

"You vision that? Or only try to bond me to him?"

"Yes, visioned it. Vividly. Light, power, shining, inside a dolphin. I saw that—just after sharks attacked. Not only the power—the carrier too, something rare. No accident he's here. Nor insignificant. Our gift from faraway powers."

"Perhaps. What more you've visioned?"

"My vision's limited."

He was silent several moments. Then, "It's my curse that I disbelieve all your truest visions. But what value this creature?"

"I know only what I visioned, what I told you."

"You told Vlorio what you saw?"

"No. My vision came after he left. But we'll know our mystery dolphin, even if I vision nothing more. Vlorio can know everything in time."

When these four with their burden arrived at Lirias' cove, the feeble gray of winterlight had extinguished upon the far horizon of the ocean, and the cold darkness through the dense gray overcast swept over them. The cove was a natural harbor among tall and seaworn rocks, twenty meters front to back, where many imperiled dolphins might comfortably shelter from danger behind the one enormous

boulder, big as a whale, that blockaded half the cove mouth from relentless waves.

The four sustained comfortably at the surface beside the semi-conscious pseudo-dolphin, still supported beneath each flipper. The depth in the cove was five meters and the water heaved forward into the cove and rose and slapped at the rocks with each big surge of waves, then pulled back and sank a half meter as the surge withdrew.

“Creature’s less helpless than it seems,” Lirias singwaved. “Release support. Watch.” The support pair withdrew from his flippers, and Nania watched the transformation first sink a half meter before suddenly his flukes down-stroked, lifting him back to the surface. His flippers pumped several times in alarm, but not in unison. He nonetheless stabilized and blew spray from his blowhole into air, and then inhaled rapidly twice before resubmerging beside them, and stabilizing himself.

“Already you understand him,” she singwaved. “May he swim as easily.”

Her father answered, “He will. Whatever the being within, the body’s dolphin, built to swim.”

Father and daughter maintained their vigilant sleep circle through the night, their helpless one sleeping and breathing safely at their center of their circling. Both father and daughter slept little, each awakening continually to private and new speculations. The Sun was well up before their mystery awakened, and as they awaited him they shared ideas.

“You scanned the power often last night,” she singwaved to her father.

“It’s rare, not he.”

“Was rare,” she countered, testing him. “Power’s gone. Still—not curious to know the creature?”

Momentarily suspending their conversation, they turned downward and away from the still sleeping boy-dolphin, and they glided toward the rock-strewn bottom, where feeble

winter sunrays barely penetrated. As they dove into this semidark, they turned a slow spiral near but opposite each other, as if an invisible sun held them to their perfect distance apart, orbiting. When Lirias singwaved again, a stream of bubbles drifted in elegant curvature away from his blowhole toward the surface, toward the sleeping wonder above them. At last they settled again beside him.

Lirias again: “The creature—easy to unpuzzle. Consider—since we know it be lifeform—likely not higher order possession—such transformation wouldn’t have so exhausted its consciousness. Whatever it be is disoriented by its dolphin body, thus it’s been brutally surprised. So the inhabitant’s a lower, likely common order, and of Oceanus. Surely you follow me.”

“Impressive, father. No wonder they want you in Guardian councils.”

“They want me no more. But you slept no more than I.”

“No. Several hours in trance I opened to the transformation. But very little new I saw. Mostly his distress.”

“My theories, your insights only show the creature not important. Loss of the power’s tragic. What remains, barely interesting.”

She halted before him, still a body-length beneath the shining surface, her flukes relaxing, But no relaxing the look she made him, an intensity rare for her with him. “Be not fooled, Father. Think beyond that idea. Why here?—this transformation. Why at all? There are answers—*I* believe. No accident. You’re given this opportunity with him—underestimate it not.”

“So. Twice I’m warned—once by Koa, now by you. Perhaps both right. But now I’ll leave you our prize, I’ll bring back food. Then I leave to consider all this, and give *you* time to make him more dolphin.”

This boy become dolphin awoke to see the fury of bubbles that was Lirias’ wake as that dolphin accelerated and swam through the cove mouth, seaward and away. This

sudden burst of life recalled to him all the alarming memories of the prior day. He was still a captive of the ocean. He saw only one dolphin with him in this shelter, floating at the surface in swim-position, looking at him. He didn't remember coming to the cove or remember the other dolphins leaving him. It was not Koa, that much he knew, but the one with Koa.

He the nameless continued to rise by himself to the surface to breathe, fluidly, always in time, and that gave him a small confidence of survival, sufficient to hold off the panic energy that sparked and spread in his chest like loosed electricity whenever he realized again what he had become. The nearby dolphin approached slowly, till their beaks nearly touched.

She singwaved to him in the basic forms he'd comprehended the day before, and this miracle of comprehension recurred today again as he heard her tell him, "My name's Nania, here to help you. Understand?"

He did, and, as before, he allowed his thoughts and will to activate the blowhole mechanism that produced his own words. "I understand. What's happening? I hate this thing in me." The effort to say even so little tired him quickly.

Subduing her amazement at this communication, she responded, "To help I must know more. You're mystery. To us, to yourself. Still no memory?"

"No. I fear what's inside me." Remembering acutely, as he spoke, the object's terrible acceleration.

"No danger, its power's spent. I protect you. But you must learn much. To swim, to talk. In time we'll know. We'll solve your mystery."

This abated nothing of his misery. He wanted only the escape of sleep; he knew the talking would not relieve him. He singwaved basic forms. "Nothing helps me. Only sleep."

Nania made a little breath-leap out of water, startling him, and she resubmerged a meter down, confronting him as before. "You understand dying?" she asked him.

A burst of adrenalin instantly dispersed his lethargy; he refocused his eyes, looking directly into hers. “Dying? Yes. What I fear.”

She answered, “This retreat to sleep you crave. This leads to death. Understand?”

This logic congealed until he saw it well. She didn’t wait for his answer. “You survive by living. Hear me. I direct, you obey. Or die.”

He heard her well. Something warm and pacific arose in his body, and it displaced for a moment some of his fear and despair.

She commanded him. “Move flukes as I do.” She pumped her flukes slowly and propelled ahead several meters. He watched her, but hesitated. She nodded her beak at him, insisting. He tried what he thought she wanted. His flukes moved, and his body jerked forward several body-lengths. He was surprised. He pumped flukes again and moved forward faster than before. “Again,” she urged him. He pumped and swam ahead more smoothly yet.

“Yes, built to swim. We’ll swim. Till you’re confident. Then swim outside the cove.”

At that moment Lirias re-entered their shelter and stopped to watch the anomaly swim straight, but jerk to his stop. “A beginning,” Lirias voiced to them in basic forms. “Soon you’ll have him ready for me.” Her father then opened his beak and spewed forth many herring, still whole though limp and lifeless, and these floated to the surface between the three dolphins. Without further comment Lirias turned and swam away, disappearing.

“Who’s he?” the newest dolphin asked her, watching the dead fish drift at the surface near them.

“My father. But eat. Then we’ll talk more.”

For the first time in his new body he realized his hunger. It had been there since waking. Nania took a fishtail in her beak and offered it to his mouth. He felt uncertain; but his beak opened despite himself, and he snapped the fish from

her and felt it slide into his throat. There his muscles contracted powerfully, crushing the fish: he felt its juices slide deliciously further into his stomach. A shiver of deep satisfaction passed through him. He opened his beak again for another; she passed it to him. The third, fourth and fifth he grabbed from the water without her help, all fabulous, as were the delicate waves of life energy he felt moments later passing from his stomach into his body.

As his second day of dolphin life, and further days, continued in more sustained trials of swimming, and in more conversation with Nania, she told him that her father would be his real teacher and would train him, and in doing so help them all begin to understand this puzzle that he was. That second day she told him only the simplest things, but as his curiosity roused, and his competence with basic forms grew, he questioned her more, and eventually she told him of her father.

How from earliest years Lirias had been precocious, had understood the social complexities of tribal colonies not his own, of why and in what ways sperm whales were indifferent to the gregariousness of the baleenas, or why orcas could not so easily as all others had done relinquish their dependence on Rite of the Sea. Her father's foremost skill was his ability to penetrate the subtlest frequencies of language, be it the inter-tribal Barraba-mode or the sperm whale Tabeez, the Abiolo of belugas and unicorn dolphins, or any of the myriad forms of Lilliaba spoken by the various tribes of Oceanus' dolphins. At seven years he had mastered Vlana, the ancient dolphin language that had not been widespread for twelve million years, yet from which all dolphin names to this moment derive. Though any Language Master, and all the Guardians, comprehended Vlana.

So it was expected of Lirias that in time he would become, first, a Language Master, and then a Guardian. In that same year he mated with Chloria, and a year later Nania was born; and in the next year he became a Language

Master. There was no doubt among dolphins that Lirias would master in his lifetime all twelve degrees of the Guardian, a rare accomplishment.

Yet this glory for him was not to be, for fate, or a bizarre counterfate, intervened and made of that future something profoundly otherwise.

For Lirias and Chloria one twilight summer evening cruised the warm oceans a few miles from the island of Oahu, when a sleek large powerboat approached them. Not suspecting danger, these two dolphins swam near it, to mount and ride its bow-wave. But before they had ridden a hundred meters a net dropped over them; the boat slowed, its engines suddenly silent. They were both carefully drawn from great Oceanus and hoisted on board, where they were disentangled from the nets, and then cradled separately into canvas carriers. Finally they were placed in two shallow tubs of water on the boat's deck.

A day later Lirias was delivered by truck, still in the prison of his tub, to an aquatic park in Honolulu, where his captors freed him into a seven-meter deep tank with six other dolphins, all of these seven having been imprisoned long ago. What happened to Chloria he never knew.

The other prisoners helped Lirias adjust to the regime of public performances, seclusion in the tank and the wonder of close contact with the eccentric species that all dolphins call The Child. For once he'd accepted his captivity and had learned to execute his performance obligations like his companions, Lirias became fascinated with his proximity to the strange creatures that before he had only seen at great distances, and then only briefly. In particular, though he had at first resisted cooperating, he came to enjoy the daily communication with his trainer. It's possible that in time he even loved him.

That Lirias hated the confinement, the monotony and pointless repetition of his life there, and that he came to despair of ever seeing his mate and child and Guardian friends of the colony again—was certain. Yet the blond

trainer was kind, sincere and devoted to communicating with him. And this communion stirred something unimagined in Lirias, for he had never believed The Child to possess the emotional and spiritual depths his trainer revealed to him daily. Equally stimulating was the opportunity to study the language of The Child, as he listened to the trainer. Eventually he comprehended single words, and understood emotion that communicated through voice tone and pitch.

This study expanded for him in his second year of captivity when they placed him several days a week in a shallow tank where multitudes of The Child came and touched him when he was near the perimeter. At these times he heard distinctly individuals speaking words both to him and to each other in a variety of emotions. It was during this time that he began to see how varied were the possible emotional responses of these creatures, and how easily these responses could be changed by apparently trivial circumstances.

None of the other captive dolphins liked being in the small tank among the humans. But to Lirias it became an anticipated pleasure. He disliked the unexpected poking and pinching; but the novelty of seeing new human behavior and the opportunity to hear words and emotions that he would never see in his training or performances amply compensated.

But even so much intellectual stimulation was not enough to prevent a despondency from growing and accumulating, until the malaise had poisoned his mind and heart even against so much that was positive and inspiring. Late in the third year of his captivity he passed from despondency to despair to anticipating suicide. Other captive dolphins had killed themselves, as his companions had told him. As they had also told him that from their own prison no dolphin had ever been released unless it had become too old or incapable of performing.

One morning of a brilliant clear summer day Lirias propelled himself at extreme speed across the longest diameter of the tank and crashed his skull into the wall, at the last instant moving his beak downward and slightly left so the impact would be as much as possible to his brain.

Unfortunately, as he ever afterward believed, he did not die. The trainer found him floating, apparently lifeless but still breathing, and the doctor moved him quickly to a shallow tank where they could examine and then treat him. He regained clarity that evening. By the next day his examiners had concluded that he had merely fractured his skull but had otherwise done no damage to the brain.

It was another two days before these examiners realized he had blinded his right eye, not with damage to the orbit itself, but to the nerve endings that connected it to the brain. Lirias of course knew this immediately. He had also discovered that same day something his examiners would never know: that he had severely damaged that part of his neo-cortex which operated his ultra-high seeker functioning, which gives all dolphins the transcendent ability to send out and receive the finest pulsebeats of sonar, whose subtle echoes reassemble to their mind's eye in pictures, even in darkest night, letting them not only hear what they are scanning, but also see it, as with the eyes humans and dolphins may see objects in daylight.

A week later Lirias' human captors released him to great Oceanus, his old home. Within a second week he had found his daughter Nania and his former colony. But he found none of his former life as a Guardian, for the damage to his ultra-seeker function made it impossible to perform many of the basic Guardian functions, many even of the basic dolphin functions, since no longer could he see anything with his mind's eye, nor could he store in his memory any of such data that the Guardians constantly exchanged and compared and discussed among themselves.

In this crippled condition Lirias in time created a solitary life for himself, spending little time with the colony

and seeming only to enjoy the company of Nania. But even her company he would not permit when he thought her moved by pity. Eventually he developed a predictable routine, and even he perceived the irony of it.

He sought out humans, in groups or alone, near piers, in boats, in certain safe beaches, and he attempted to interact with them in more and more imaginative ways. For that curiosity he'd developed in captivity seemed to be all that was left for him. He listened to and recorded in memory and analyzed their words. He watched their behavior with each other, and when he could, he stimulated their behavior, and the more extreme their reaction, the more he enjoyed it.