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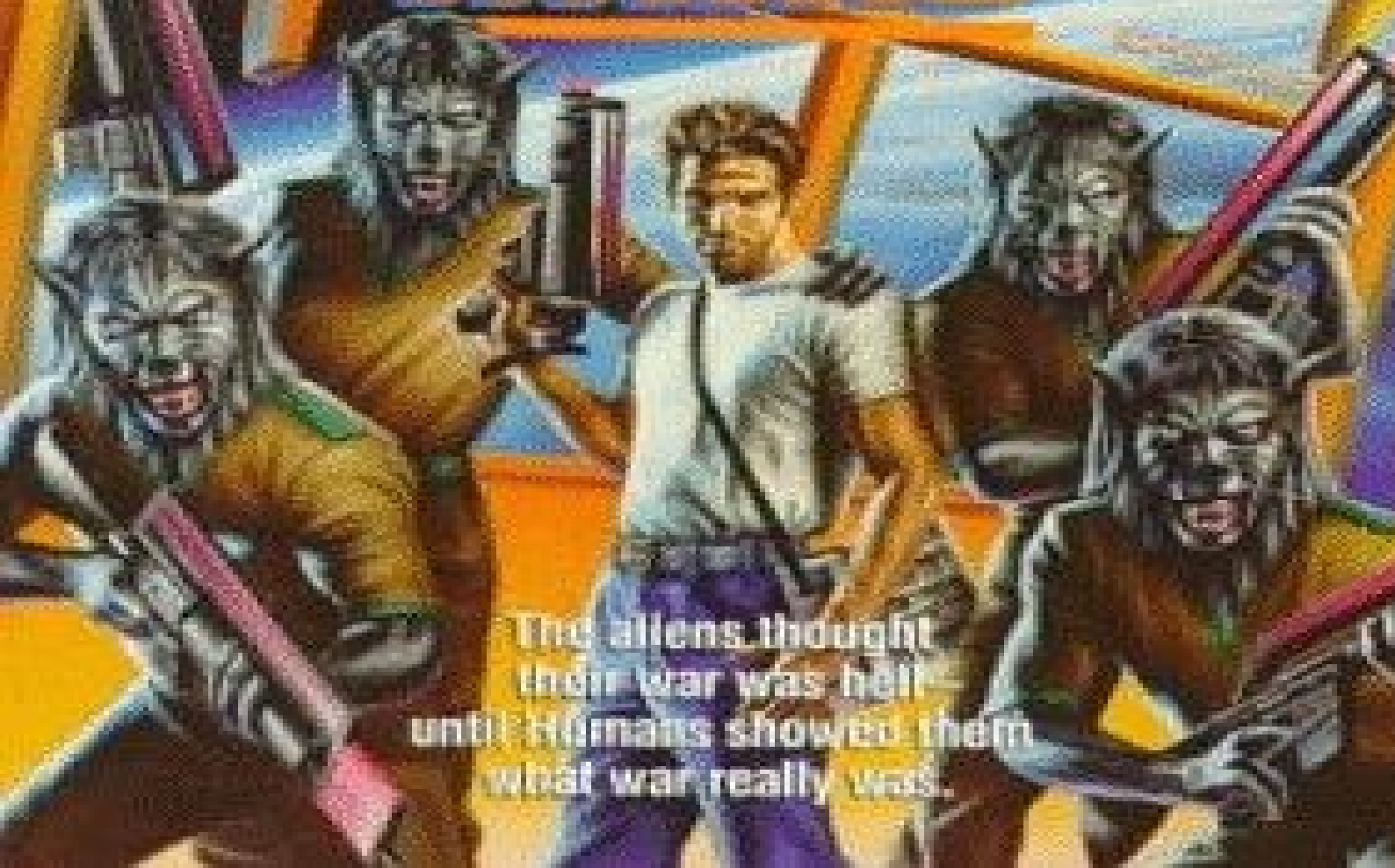
ALAN DEAN FOSTER

BOOK ONE OF *THE DAMNED*

A CALL TO ARMS



Published by DAW
in association with
H. R. L. Books
U.S. \$5.95



The aliens thought
their war was hell—
until humans showed them
what war really was.

A Call to Arms

by Alan Dean Foster

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Chapter One

One-who-Decides lay back on the sickle and relaxed, the curved command lounge suspended high above the floor at the end of its powerful, flexible armature. At a touch it would drift higher or lower, left or right so that the Amplitur could inspect, interview, check on, or give advice to those under its command. It could do the same by means of the communications hook clamped snugly across its head, but it believed strongly in the personal touch.

It lay comfortably on the supportive cushion, straddling it with four short, stumpy legs. This arrangement allowed free movement of the two tentacles that protruded from either side of the head. Each ended in four manipulating digits that rippled and flexed lazily as though conducting an unseen orchestra in a silent waltz.

The globular gold-flecked eyes scanned the vast chamber, the slitted pupils expanding and contracting as they focused on specific sectors, seeking positions where efficiency could be improved. When making such suggestions One-who-Decides spoke always encouragingly, never with the brusqueness that characterized other races. The Amplitur had never been harsh. Once, they had been hesitant, but that was all before the Purpose. Before maturity.

Hard to believe there had been a time before the Purpose. One-who-Decides knew it was so because of history. The very idea was alien, an unbelievable fragment of another time and universe. It was realization of the Purpose that had matured and forever altered the Amplitur.

Now it was changing the galaxy.

Prior to realizing the Purpose, the Amplitur had been content to refine their modest civilization, excelling at certain arts, mastering intricacies peculiar to their species, wishing only to be left in peace to develop at their own pace, desiring only to be themselves. Then had come realization of the Purpose.

One-who-Decides gently nudged a control and the sickle swung left and down toward Navigation. How could the Amplitur have existed prior to the Purpose? Baffling!

Early evolution had been entirely instinct-driven. Amplitur lying quietly in the warm waters of the homeworld, barely able to hunch about on muddy shorelines on as yet undeveloped legs as the sensitive tentacles probed the mud for crustaceans and edible bivalves. Amplitur in which intelligence was still a flickering spark, reproducing through mindless budding, creating offshoots of themselves as they converted vegetable matter and animal protein into energy by means of clever intestines and horny mouthparts.

That much it could comprehend. What was difficult to imagine was the Amplitur civilization that had existed prior to the Purpose. It was there for any to examine: in the histories, in the ruins and records of past triumphs, in the steady march of the unique Amplitur technology.

All meant nothing: technology, art, even life itself was meaningless without the Purpose to give form and substance.

Merely pondering it was enough to bestow strength and confidence on the uncertain. One-who-Decides was honored to be an Amplitur in its service.

Crew and ship hummed softly beneath the hovering sickle and its questing passenger.

Technicians chatted in their multitudinous languages, exchanging gestures and humor. The latter was a concept the Amplitur struggled hard to understand. That they could comprehend that which they did not themselves possess was a tribute to their perseverance.

Not that it mattered. What mattered was that they all served the Purpose. It was the hallmark of civilization.

Of course, there had been one or two species blind to the Purpose. History told of them remorselessly as it spoke of advancement. Races who could not be convinced or biologically altered otherwise persuaded of the truth. The relentlessly hostile and unremittingly insane. Nothing for them but the most reluctant elimination lest they stall the expansion of truth.

This the Amplitur regretted most of all. Not so much because they found the obliteration of an entire species inherently wrong, but because once gone a people could never be integrated into the Purpose. It was a step they had been forced to take only twice in thousands of years. Memory of those isolated catastrophes served to prod the Amplitur and their allies to ever greater efforts.

One-who-Decides was determined that it would never preside over such a failure. Those ancient Deciders had done what was necessary, but the stigma of failure still clung to their bud-lines.

The Amplitur had come far since those times. Many new peoples had joined with them to advance the Purpose, and general knowledge and science had expanded accordingly. Other races contributed mightily to expansion, providing new ways of thinking, new approaches to old problems, each adding its own special abilities to the service of the Purpose.

In this the Amplitur viewed themselves as no better than any other race. All were equal beneath the Purpose. As its discoverers, however, they knew that certain responsibilities accrued to them. These they had not sought and would gladly have surrendered, if a new species capable of assuming the burden had appeared. In the absence of such, the Amplitur continued to serve.

Someone had to make decisions, One-who-Decides knew.

Other peoples contributed in different ways. The Crigolit were fine soldiers who bore the brunt of fighting when that could not be avoided. The Segunians were skillful manufacturers. Multitudes of active T'returi fed many more peoples than themselves. The Molitar, physiologically similar to the Amplitur, supplied brute force and an overawing appearance whenever that was deemed useful. Sometimes an impressive demonstration was enough to convince the recalcitrant to alter their ways.

It was also cost-effective. Combat was wasteful and time-consuming. A life lost in battle was a mind lost to the Purpose.

No reason for such solemnity, One-who-Decides thought. All was going well. Not long ago another intelligence had been brought into the Purpose. Physically powerful but technologically primitive, the Ashregan had resisted only briefly in the face of a technology so far in advance of theirs that they could barely begin to comprehend it. When contacted they were less developed than the Crigolit, more so than the Molitar, and as helpful as any.

Unlike some other peoples, they had wisely chosen not to fight when fighting would have been futile. They had demonstrated unexpected maturity by immediately opening themselves to the beauty and wonder of the Purpose.

That was the inevitable decision of any truly civilized people, One-who-Decides knew as the sickle swung from Navigation toward Internal Engineering. Seeing their commander approach, the staff at that position busied themselves. Their reaction pleased it.

The Commander could not have smiled had it wished to, for its mouthparts were not designed for expression. Light flashed off its mottled orange skin, the gold and silver streaks which identified individual Amplitur highlighting its torso and head.

The entire wall opposite Engineering was transparent: a concession to aesthetics. Screens and long-range detectors were much more useful for locating objects outside the vessel. The transparency was a testament to Amplitur-allied manufacturing techniques. Within certain physical limits they had achieved perfection, of which the wall was one demonstration.

One-who-Decides studied the streaking stars, the staff responsible for safely convoying a craft full of living organisms between them, and abruptly nudged a control. The sickle shot upward. Many Amplitur were afraid of heights, but not One-who-Decides. It was a thing which could be conquered. One responsible for the safety of many ships could not be dominated by psychological weakness.

It had been driven out through introspection and sheer determination, the kind of determination which had raised One-who-Decides to commander. Modest gratification for much hard work.

It was only a matter of having confidence in the supportive technology, in the padded sickle and the woven fiber armature and the motors that enabled it to move freely above the command center. Not everyone could do it, One-who-Decides knew. Slitted eyes regarded the efficient bustle below the hovering perch.

A dozen different races worked side by side in the Command room while others executed vital functions elsewhere on the ship. None felt superior to its neighbor. Tiny Acaria assisted massive Molitar. Spindly Segunians made way graciously for fluid Ashregan. All were united by the Purpose. All save perhaps a few degenerate individuals, for there were individual exceptions in every species. The crew was a tight unit, their thoughts and actions devoted to a single end.

That was all the Purpose was. An end. There was nothing exotic about it, nothing even a simpleminded Vandir could fail to understand. The Purpose was integration: utter and complete physical, cultural, and mental integration.

When a race reached a certain level of technological and sociological sophistication, it either self-destructed or began a long slide leading to complete cultural degeneration. Voices of promise that might have contributed to a great multiracial civilization vanished in mindless orgies of barbaric self-indulgence or atomic immolation. They were forever lost to the Purpose.

When that happened the Amplitur sorrowed, and their allies in the Purpose sorrowed with them. On such occasions something distinct and unique went out of the cosmos, never to be shared or enjoyed by others.

Once, the Amplitur had actually intervened in a desperate attempt to save a psychotic race from itself, so great was its promise. Such had been the fury, the blind hopelessness, and the depth of self-loathing to which that people had sunk that not even the Amplitur with their peculiar abilities had been able to forestall the cataclysm. In spite of all that could be done, the species perished, destroying itself utterly and rendering its exquisite planet uninhabitable.

One-who-Decides raised the front part of its body, aware that the eight tips of its tentacles had been clenched almost painfully during its thoughts. This was an improper time for such musing. There was work of Purpose to be done.

Sometimes logic and reason were not enough. On such occasions it was necessary to employ primitive but graphic methods to demonstrate new realities to the unenlightened. The Amplitur always

regretted this, but not as much as they would have regretted abandoning an intelligent race to the inevitability of self-destruction. As a people, the Amplitur had dedicated their very existence to the prevention of such disasters. As long as they had the will and the strength to help, no species would fail to realize its full potential.

For this sacrifice the Amplitur did not expect even gratitude. Their sole reward lay in the knowledge that by their work they were furthering the Purpose. Merely to *be* Amplitur meant to be ready to sacrifice oneself.

From time to time members of other races and even the occasional Amplitur would question all. What was the Purpose? What might be its end?

With unfailing logic it was pointed out that the Purpose was the end unto itself. When the work was done, when all had been unified, something greater would manifest itself. For now it was enough to do the work, secure in the knowledge that it was the right work to do. Reason was a wonderful thing, One-who-Decides knew.

But when would an end be made to it all? When every intelligent being in the galaxy had been integrated into the service of the Purpose, it was declared with the certitude of obviousness. And, Amplitur science eventually succeeded in finding a way of crossing the intergalactic gulfs, when all other intelligences there had also been brought into the Purpose.

One-who-Decides could not concern itself overmuch with such weighty matters. There were decisions of much more immediate import to make. Everything that happened aboard ship eventually devolved upon the Commander. It was a responsibility to be accepted with honor.

The heavy body shifted irritably on the cushion. Soon would come the time of reproduction which could not be allowed until the present effort on behalf of the Purpose had been satisfactorily concluded. Once there had been a time when such biological functions had been dictated by simple hormonal balances. Only in the time of civilization had the Amplitur learned how to adjust the body's endocrine system... and those of others.

One-who-Decides could not allow decision-making ability to be impaired by the exigencies of reproduction. A tentacle tip made a note to report for testing. If necessary, a pill could be taken.

Golden eyes studied the vast arc of the transparent wall, pondering the expanse of space outside the ship. Much beauty was to be found in the cascade of stars and worlds, in the iridescent wash of nebulae so like the changing gold and silver patterns that highlighted Amplitur skin. Underspace shifting diffused the shapes beyond, reducing great suns to ethereal blurs of color which only added to their loveliness. Only in the full light of the Purpose could such magnificence be truly appreciated.

One-who-Decides did not have eyes capable of making sense of what they saw. Only advanced instrumentation could do that. With a gentle exhalation the Commander turned back to the sickle control panel.

This expedition was to be regretted.

The majority of new races readily accepted the logic of the Purpose and embraced it fully upon their first encounter with Amplitur envoys. Sometimes the Amplitur's presence was not even required and allied peoples could make the presentation themselves, for the delight of the newly persuaded often exceeded that of their instructors. There were even instances when the enthusiasm of allied races had to be restrained lest they give the wrong impression to those very people they were trying to convince.

Yet there remained those times when reason and logic were not enough. On such occasions

display of the nobility of Purpose was usually sufficient to convert the recalcitrant. A small force of, say, thirty warships suddenly materializing from Underspace in orbit around an indecisive world was often enough to persuade the locals to take the requisite next step up the ladder of galactic civilization so that they, too, might bask in its glory.

Only rarely had it been necessary to use actual force. Like now. Such work the Amplitur found emotionally draining, but they could not in good conscience delegate it wholly to their friends. The destiny compelled them to participate in such action against their own wishes.

The power arm hummed in response to a command and the sickle plunged its passenger floorward, until it hung a short distance above the highly reflective surface. A passing Ashregan officer blinked and turned in response to the gentle mental touch from One-who-Decides.

“Ship status, engineer?” One-who-Decides was not ignorant of the condition of the vessel, but would not do for its subordinates to think that their commander spent all its time high above the floor dreaming upon the sickle.

The Ashregan responded. An efficient species, physically strong but not particularly intelligent or imaginative. One-who-Decides thought of them as catchalls, as nonspecialists who could be relied upon to do a little of everything efficiently but nothing especially well. They made good supervisors and good integrators.

The Commander listened to the report and accepted the slight bow which passed for a sign of respect among the Ashregan peoples before dismissing the officer with a slight mental push that was simultaneously reassuring and rewarding. The ability to do that was the other thing which distinguished the Amplitur from all other intelligences. Even from the Korath, who for sheer intellectual capacity exceeded their Amplitur mentors.

Only the Amplitur possessed projective minds. Only they could convey through thinking alone their wishes, desires, and the pure beauty of the Purpose. All other races were receivers, sensitive to a varying degree to Amplitur projections. Those who were naturally deficient could be biologically altered to make them more receptive, and their newfound receptivity passed on to succeeding generations. The Amplitur were deft bioengineers, and the altered races did not object to the procedure. Why should they, when it strengthened their bonds within the Purpose? Furthermore, the Amplitur could only project. They could not truly “read” the minds of their allies. There was no question of invasion of privacy, a basic need which the Amplitur themselves understood.

Talented though they were, the Amplitur had yet to find a way to alter the mind of another being to make it projective. The burden of projection therefore remained heavily and solely their province.

Perhaps that was why the Amplitur had been the race chosen to reveal the Purpose to an ignorant universe, thought One-who-Decides. Other peoples had been given strong legs and muscles to drive them. The invertebrate Amplitur had been compensated for their physical deficiencies with the ability to project. Thanks to their peculiar ability, feelings and actions could be communicated among peoples of antagonistic evolutionary backgrounds, with the Amplitur acting as relays for the demands of the Purpose. There was no loneliness within the Purpose. All worked together to advance it. Perhaps in time another species would achieve projection, or Amplitur scientists would devise a way to modify another mind to project as well as receive. That would be a grand day for all.

And presently one entirely hypothetical, mused One-who-Decides. Enough to be content with the ample work still to be done.

It might not be necessary to use weapons. The Amplitur could project much besides orders and good feelings. Uncertainty, discomfort, and as a last resort and then only to advance the Purpose, pain. If applied selectively to ruling members of a hesitant species, this was sometimes enough to murder their resistance. When it was not, an individual or two might perish. That was still preferable to an armed assault on the surface of an inhabited world.

That was not going to happen here, One-who-Decides thought firmly. War was the last resort of the incompetent. The proper thing to do was not to place oneself in a position where such an outrage was required. The very thought of it sent a subcutaneous ripple down the mottled torso.

Sometimes the Commander wondered what it would be like to have a skeleton instead of a flexible internal webwork of ligaments and tendons. Bones were an evolutionary throwback, of course, restrictive and confining. They compelled the species to concentrate on physical development to the concurrent neglect of the mind. All the higher intelligences were invertebrates, with only a few exceptions, like the Ashregan and Crigolit.

Amplitur bioengineers had managed to free individual Ashregan from their skeletons. But the results, while functional, were considered aesthetically displeasing to the species involved. So there was very little work done in that area anymore. The Ashregan and their biological relations were doomed to haul their calcified innards around with them to the end of time. Still, they were accepted as equals within the Purpose, even if the biologists did tend to regard them as evolutionary freaks. They were to be admired, thought One-who-Decides, for having developed intelligence in spite of such a handicap.

That was the true beauty of the Purpose, that it excluded no one. An Ashregan could stand side by side with a Molitar, while an Amplitur mediated between them.

That was what really mattered, the Commander knew. The meeting of minds, the unity of understanding and Purpose. That was what bound together such a diverse assemblage of peoples. Not insignificances like physical differentiation.

The work ahead filled One-who-Decides with trepidation as worst-case scenarios were anticipated. Nevertheless, it would be pursued with vigor and dedication in the knowledge that the end result would be an important expansion of the Purpose and the greater mystery for which it stood.

Just because they were fighting the Sspari did not mean the commander had to like it, even though it was the work for which it had been trained.

Fighting was a disagreeable business, smelling strongly of uncivilization, as did the need to maintain enormous stocks of war material and the fleets to transport it. One could not even take joy in victory, since achieving it would require the death of large numbers of the enemy... all intelligent minds lost to the Purpose. The only satisfaction lay in knowing that the surviving Sspari would be fully integrated into the delights of the Purpose. And because those Sspari who would perish would never know that pleasure, One-who-Decides regretted their forthcoming deaths even more than those that might occur among its own kind.

There seemed no other way. All avenues of persuasion had been tried. Though a diminutive and physically unimposing race, the Sspari were possessed of a stubbornness and inability to see reason out of all proportion to their size.

All of which meant nothing, One-who-Decides knew. It was intelligence which mattered. That the Sspari had, though not to any great or remarkable degree. Enough, however, to warrant their inclusion

in the Purpose, as soon as they could be taught not to resist their own destiny.

Even the traditional show of force had failed to convince, serving only to warn them of what was to come and allowing them time to prepare. The Amplitur knew that might be the result, but they tried it anyway. The peoples of the Purpose did not attack without first trying persuasion. They were integrators, not conquerors.

Next had come the traditional attempt at subverting the government, through innuendo and bribery carried out by allies who physically resembled the Sspari. The morality of such methods was often questioned, but the Amplitur would do anything to avoid war, that obscene offense against reason.

Unfortunately, the government of the Sspari had not fallen.

The resultant conflict had raged for years, with the Sspari occasionally making advances. Though they fought with a tenacity which was as determined as it was foolish, the overwhelming strength and diversity of the Peoples was slowly pushing them back to their homeworld. When the Amplitur gained ground, they rarely surrendered it back no matter what the cost, while the Sspari could be induced to make orderly retreats.

How could they stand against the peoples, who fought from a position of moral as well as physical and intellectual strength? Racial or planetary sovereignty counted for nothing when ranged against the Purpose. Furthermore, the Amplitur possessed the patience of the ages, and the confidence that victory was inevitable. The only variable was time.

One-who-Decides did not understand how the Sspari could fail to see this. Could they not see that full integration was inevitable? That was the destiny of all intelligences, save those two who extermination had been regrettably required. That would not happen to the Sspari, the Commander vowed. And when the war was over, only a minimum of genetic reengineering would be necessary to insure their eternal happiness.

It was terrible, though, that intelligent beings on both sides had to die to bring that about.

The instrument arc that clung to the Commander's forehead above the eyes provided a steady flow of information about the ongoing battle. Had the flagship been positioned a few more planetary diameters in, it might have been possible to see the small flashes of light which signified the presence of warships dropping troop shuttles to the surface of the Sspari homeworld. Ships of the Purpose would phase out of normal space to be confronted by the Sspari defense forces, there would follow a brief exchange of immensely powerful weaponry, and then one ship or the other would retreat back into Underspace.

The idea of combat in Underspace, at supralight speeds, was naturally absurd. You could hardly do battle when your presumed target outpaced both weapons and tracking devices. So combat took place in orbit around contested worlds, when ships materialized back into real space. If damaged, one could retreat back into Underspace and safety, so long as there was power to do so. Such encounters were a matter of guesswork and seconds.

Real combat took place on the ground, where heavy weapons could not be used lest they fatally damage the very environment an attacker was seeking to control. The trick was to remain safely in real space long enough to land or reinforce troops. It was this that the Sspari were striving so strenuously to prevent. Let the attacking ground forces gain control of the Sspari centers of communication and technology, and there would no longer be reason to fight. The Amplitur had four

they could leave the business of policing any post-cataclysm fanatics to the local people themselves once their allegiance to the Purpose had been secured.

One had to admit that for such an unprepossessing folk, the Sspari had fought long and hard. And for nothing. The fleet of the Peoples had reached the Sspari home system. The Sspari had tried to stop them near an impressive three-ringed gas giant, where the fleet had phased out of Underspace. Now they had been pushed back to their homeworld.

The Commander observed it through the towering transparent wall. A lovely world, all brown and green. Soon the command staff would be able to view it in person.

One-who-Decides was honored to direct this final assault force. Mottled orange hide rippled fluidly. It was always an emotional moment when a new species was brought to the Purpose.

At first there would be sadness among the Sspari for those who had perished. But the Amplitur were the kindest of victors. They required no reparations, desired no vengeance. They wished only that which they had sought from the beginning of the unfortunate conflict: understanding.

Peace would be struck, whereupon the Sspari would find themselves living exactly as they had prior to the war, with the exception that instead of wasting their time striving for individual racial achievement they would now be contributing to the much vaster and more satisfying ends of the Purpose. This often produced an outburst of rage among the population, when they realized that the leaders had led them into battle and sacrifice for nothing.

The Amplitur and their allies would do their best to prevent such a bloodbath from occurring. For now, though, there was a final battle to be won. The information arriving from the ships darting in and out of real space indicated that it should not take much longer.

So it came as something of a shock when Suem of the Korath and Co'oi of the Crigolit swung up in front of the Commander on a sickle of their own.

It was Co'oi who reported through the translator that hung against her thorax that the landing forces were being attacked in strength by an unknown, hitherto unsuspected group of vessels. One-who-Decides did not panic. That was not in the nature of the Amplitur.

The information arc allowed rapid communication with Amplitur on other ships. There were twelve in all: only twelve among thousands of other peoples, scattered throughout the fleet. Twelve to make final decisions and give advice. They were along more to offer moral support than strategy since it had been assumed that the Korath and their allies were more than capable of putting an end to the Sspari resistance.

They were also present to aid in dealing with any unexpected developments, of which there certainly seemed to be one.

Chapter Two

I thought the location and number of all surviving Sspari warships down to the last were well known to us?"

"So was thought it," said Co'oi of the Crigolit, antennae twitching uncontrollably.

"Calm yourself," said One-who-Decides, issuing in addition to the words a projection of soothing reassurance. The Crigolit relaxed visibly.

"Explain the apparent contradiction."

"The attacking vessels are other than Sspari." The Korath's voice was almost inaudible. "The fleet has been forced to cancel the planned landing to deal with the new threat."

"How many attacking vessels?" asked One-who-Decides.

"Uncertain still." The Crigolit paused as she listened to the reports competing for time on her headset. "Real-space conflict time is an approximation at best, but the number large is."

"Capabilities?"

"Some weapons new, not yet analyzed. Explosive plasma. Dangerous and difficult to avoid."

"Artificial intelligence guided?"

The Crigolit was hesitant. "Cannot yet be stated with any certitude."

The Commander shifted on the cushion, wishing for the legs of a Molitar. "Change to defensive mode. Break off the proposed landing and contemplate an englobement."

Suern of the Korath spoke up. "Might that not be premature, Commander? The Sspari will gain hope from it. I would rather deal with a dozen unexpected warships than give an enemy new hope."

"I would rather be thought hesitant than reckless. My first concern must be for our own. We can phase to Underspace only a limited number of times. I would not like to be caught in real space unable to phase out, with an overpowering force waiting for us." One-who-Decides conveyed a mental imperative to the Korath, who blinked. "If this is a clever ploy of the Sspari we will find out soon enough. If not, wisdom dictates caution. We will worry about the psychological effects on the Sspari later. Presently we must do battle with what we can see."

The Crigolit acknowledged with a wave of both antennae while the Korath spread its upper limbs.

One-who-Decides nudged a control and the sickle rose on its flexible arm, shifting to battle control on the far side of the room. Events bode ill. Whence this unexpected assault, the unanticipated reinforcements of a lost cause? Ships of unknown type, new weapons: everything pointed to a space-traversing race other than Ssparian. But the Peoples had been pushing back the Sspari for more than a hundred years. From the moment conflict had been joined to the present day they had no known allies.

Flashing, brightly lit battle predictors gave One-who-Decides more information than had his subordinates. There lay the Sspari, trying to cover the space between their homeworld and the fleet. There the fleet itself was arrayed, ships phasing in and out of Underspace according to tradition.

tactics. And scattered among them were bright pinpoints of red, vessels of unknown origin trying ~~time their emergence into real space properly to engage the ships of the Purpose.~~ Injuries were being suffered. Damage was heavy.

One-who-Decides sorrowed for the losses on both sides. It was not afraid for itself. No Amplitur who had served the Purpose for a lifetime feared mere physical dissolution, except insofar as that might inhibit or slow the advance of the Purpose.

There were decisions to be made, and One-who-Decides proposed them. Its good sense and confidence lent strength to worried officers and technicians. Simultaneously it stayed in contact with its fellow Amplitur throughout the fleet. One-who-Listens and Tall-straight-Walker had assumed personal command of the defense.

It was soul-rending to see a glowing dot—bright green in the case of the Peoples' forces, yellow for the Sspari, intense red for the unknowns—vanish from a screen, indication that it had been impacted by a plasma ball or thermonuclear device or some other terrible weapon which caused the loss of hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives. Lights dancing on a screen were feeble indicators of the issues at stake.

So simple and silent, the vanishing of a light. With it perished offspring, families, clanmates, friends; hopes and dreams and fears. Not to mention the setback to the Purpose.

It was foolish and wasteful. The Amplitur passionately hated both.

There was little time for sleep all the rest of that day and the greater part of the following. As the Amplitur required less than many, One-who-Decides was still alert when the critical moment came.

According to the predictors, circumstances had degenerated to the point where a small group of hostiles might successfully interdict any landing without sufficient support from the fleet. That allowed the Sspari to divert vessels from planetary defense to attack.

Even as this was realized, one of the strange alien vessels materialized into normal space concurrent with the flagship. There was a brief exchange of firepower before the flagship could retreat once more to Underspace. Damage had been sustained though hull integration had been maintained.

But the Korath had planned well. Inspired by temporary success, the Sspari had diverted too much of their effort to attack. Materializing from Underspace on the far side of the planet, ships of the Peoples managed to put substantial landing forces down on the surface before the defenders could react.

Upon learning this, the remaining Sspari vessels broke away in a desperate attempt to deal with the landing. Their new allies, realizing that the battle they had come to aid was lost, retreated permanently to Underspace.

Essentially the contest for Sspari was over. Ground combat, the real fighting, might take another hundred years, but Sspari resistance had been broken. Final victory was something the Crigol, Ashregan, and other combative races would achieve. The Amplitur could go home.

Now was time to consider reproduction as well as the identity of those whose appearance had nearly turned triumph into defeat. Whoever they were, they had fought extremely well. Had they arrived earlier, the commander might now be contemplating disaster.

It was clear the unknowns were technologically advanced. More dangerously, they understood the components of warfare and were capable of employing them. Most races could not, being

psychologically unsuited to the manipulation of the patently mad. Only extensive bioengineering had made the allies of the Amplitur combat-capable. What sort of methods did these unknown assailants use? It was imperative to learn more about them. One-who-Decides issued directives to that effect.

Not all the enemy had succeeded in avoiding or fleeing destruction. One severely damaged vessel was discovered drifting motionless in orbit, unable to move, unable to seek sanctuary in Underspace.

It was a great stroke of luck. The brief but intense moments of spatial combat between ships on infrequently produced survivors. This was due to the types of weapons used and the unforgiving nature of space itself, whose harsh conditions usually finished what complex weapons had begun.

A Segunian-commanded warship had located such a vessel. Whether its internal life-support systems had survived intact and functioning remained to be determined, but One-who-Decides was hopeful.

Time and careful handling eased the captured vessel alongside the much larger flagship. Its shape was different from those used by the Peoples, but not incomprehensibly so. It was possible to divine function from observation.

Its drive was inoperative, but external inspection showed no evidence of implosion. Its builders were skilled.

Analysis revealed that the light which emerged from unbroken ports filled a normal chunk of the spectrum, suggesting that the crew possessed good vision within familiar parameters. The presence of oxygen and nitrogen in common proportions was noted.

Short of confrontation there was little means of judging physical shape, size, or capability. That was shortly to be remedied by a boarding party. They would go in prepared to deal with resistance but admonished above all else to secure live specimens.

Limited resistance there was, stubborn and frustrating. It was overcome by the introduction of a mild soporific into the ship's ventilation system. A short while later it proved possible to extract the survivors one by one, like so many seeds from a pod. It developed that the appearance of the Sspari's unexpected allies was to be but the first of many surprises.

Instead of finding representatives of one race as was normal, the boarders encountered individuals representing several different species. That much was self-evident even to nonspecialists who were used to dealing with races whose types could include miniature workers, multiple sexes, androgynous types like the Amplitur themselves.

That was not the case on board the captured vessel. Its crew was clearly composed of members of half a dozen different species, all working in apparent harmony and cooperation.

It was a discovery fraught with promise as much as threat. For while it meant that the Amplitur and their allies might now have half a dozen new races to battle, it also introduced as many to be integrated into the Purpose.

The Amplitur were overjoyed. For the first time they had encountered a federation of races other than their own. Here was a group of intelligences which had learned to cooperate among themselves without the Purpose to guide them. There was much to be learned from this discovery.

Not all the ships which had come to aid the Sspari had been destroyed. A number had escaped to warn their fellows. That was to be regretted, since it would have been useful to maintain surprise. The Amplitur were not long on regret. It was a waste of protein. They would cope as they had always.

coped.

The diversity of the captured vessel's crew was impressive. There were even non-oxynitric breathers aboard: two methane-suckers and one which extracted oxygen from water. Nor were the captives awed by the force they had encountered. They believed that their own federation rivaled the strength that of the Peoples of the Purpose. The delight of the Amplitur was magnified tenfold.

It called itself the Weave. When joined to what the Amplitur had laboriously constructed, it would effectively double in size the Peoples of the Purpose.

A revelation of great import, which the Amplitur recognized with a conference on board the flagship of the expeditionary force. A few high officers among the allied races spoke out against the meeting, lest the Sspari launch a last, desperate attack and catch all the Amplitur vulnerable on a single ship.

The possibility did not trouble the Amplitur. Given such an unlikely happenstance, a Molitar could take over and finish the resultant battle effectively. The Amplitur regretted the dependence which their allies occasionally displayed. Did they not realize that within the Purpose, all peoples were equal?

Fast-blue-Breeder had requested the meeting. The moment needed to be commemorated.

As they gathered aboard the flagship there was much intertwining of tentacles tips and so husking of mouthparts. Despite the stress of the expedition and attendant combat, two of the Amplitur were reproducing. Following a fifteen-month gestation period, the large buds blossoming from their backs would be carefully removed and placed in nursery environments to mature as new individuals.

Until that time the budding infants would depend on nutrients supplied by their parenting bodies. Though immobile, they were capable of learning, both through observation and the instruction offered via intimate telepathic communion with their parent.

In a cleared recreation chamber the commander of the captured vessel was brought before the gathering. The locale had been selected to reassure, not to impress.

In addition to the Amplitur a number of Crigolit technicians were present, together with some Segunian go-betweens. A single Molitar guarded the doorway, its bulk effectively obscuring it.

The twelve Amplitur rested in a semicircle as the tall, thin alien faced them. He favored one of two legs, obviously injured. Within the fleet which had attempted to aid the Sspari he ranked somewhere in the middle. Not the equivalent of One-who-Decides, but higher than a technician.

The thin frame was covered with fur and the short snout filled with sharp teeth. It was vertebrate and male, which was not as surprising as the fact that all the races of the captured ship were vertebrates.

Preliminary research suggested that the organization to which these diverse species belonged, their "Weave," was as contentious as it was powerful. Arguments and even actual combat between members was endemic.

The Amplitur understood. To be united within the Purpose was very different from being tenuously tied together by feeble treaties and imperfect alliances. The latter bespoke an organization strong only militarily. Offered the beauty and inevitability of the Purpose, the fractious peoples which comprised the Weave would eventually put aside their disagreements and arms to join together with the more mature intelligences of the Purpose.

None of the languages utilized aboard the captured vessel were especially complex, including that of the ship's commander. Mechanical translation was feasible. The Amplitur, of course, had no need of it.

The alien regarded his captors, straining to isolate shapes in the dim reddish light. One of the observers noted his difficulty and ventured a solicitous projection. "Is the illumination too weak for you?"

The alien officer stumbled and clutched reflexively at his head. "Who said that?"

When no reply was forthcoming he took several long strides forward. His long muscular arms and sharp teeth could have inflicted considerable damage on the slow, soft body of an Amplitur, were it not for the gentle restraining field that stopped him. He felt of it hesitantly before backing away.

"Can he see us?" one of the other Amplitur thought generally.

"We have been assured," Fast-blue-Breeder opined, "that his vision is competent within the accepted spectrum, which is to say that it is efficient and like that of the majority of our allies in being shifted further toward the ultraviolet than our own. Nonetheless..." At Fast-blue-Breeder's direction brighter light filled the room.

The alien regarded the twelve silent Amplitur. Tentacles and their manipulative digits wove silent, indecipherable patterns in the air. His mind simmered with uncertainty.

Fast-blue-Breeder raised one tentacle and spread the four digits by way of greeting.

"We mean you no harm."

"You show otherwise," the alien responded.

"You attacked us. We responded as necessary. We are told that your name is Prinac and that you are the ranking surviving officer of the vessel now under our control."

"What are you going to do with us?" the alien asked sharply. Its black nose and ears were in constant motion.

"Brusque and impolite." The thought occurred to all the Amplitur simultaneously. "Indicative of a primitive species not long adventuring."

"You will not be harmed," said Soon-dark-Concerning, a half-mature bud bobbing gently on its back, silent and observing. "You are going to be brought into the Purpose."

"What is this 'Purpose'?" the alien inquired. "That is all we have heard about since you took us to this 'Purpose' thing."

One of the other Amplitur explained.

"And what if we do not want to join your Purpose, like the Sspari who requested our help?"

"There is no choice for an intelligent race. Were we not here speaking with you now, there would still be no choice. Eventually the Purpose would find you. It is what it is."

"Maybe it's not what it is for us," countered Prinac. "What then?"

"You will be persuaded." The Amplitur wondered why this was so, that so many races were slow to see the beauty and wonder of the Purpose.

The alien commander adopted a typical bipedal defensive posture: legs bent, hands extended.

primitive display, thought One-who-Decides, for all that it was backed by apparent intelligence.

“My people can be very hard to ‘persuade.’ As can our Weave allies.”

“You are not truly united,” said one of the other Amplitur. “You argue among yourselves, but rarely resort to combat.”

“We are not by nature inclined to combat,” Prinac shot back, “violence being the hallmark of the uncivilized.”

“On this we are agreed,” thought Fast-blue-Breeder communally.

“But we will fight if necessary to avoid being conquered by anything like you.”

“We do not ‘conquer.’ ” There was exasperation in the thoughts of the Amplitur who replied. “Within the Purpose all are equal. So shall you be with us.”

“From what I have seen and heard,” the alien responded, relaxing a little, “you Amplitur seem to be a little more equal than any of your friends.”

“We were the first to realize the Purpose, the first to understand its implications.” One-who-Decides gestured imploringly. “You must realize that nothing you can say, no objection you can raise is new to us. It has all been said and raised by dozens of races before you.”

“If we were the conquerors you speak of, how is it that in this vast force which has defeated the objections of the Sspari and driven your own allies into thoughtfulness we number only twelve?”

It made the alien hesitate. Double lids blinked.

“That is the truth? This is all of you in the whole fleet?”

“We always tell the truth,” said Fast-blue-Breeder. “When one struggles to serve and understand the Purpose, there is no rationale for prevarication. It is wasteful.”

“We possess no extraordinary physical strength or fighting ability,” said another of the twelve. “The soldiers aboard this one vessel could overpower us easily any time they wished.”

“Why don’t they?” asked Prinac stiffly.

“Understanding the Purpose, they have no wish to.”

“Well, I do not understand, and I do not want to, nor does any of my crew.”

“Understanding takes time. In a universe as vast as ours, revelation is in short supply. It is anyway a better thing when understanding arrives through study and thoughtfulness rather than coercion. Then one *truly* understands.”

The alien hesitated. “You have said that you are not going to harm us. What *are* you going to do with us?”

To the Weave commander it appeared as if those confronting him had suddenly gone comatose. In reality they were conferencing. Nor was it the first time they had done so. His eyes widened in realization, the slit pupils expanding horizontally.

“Telepathy is a fantasy, direct mind-to-mind communication a dream. It violates the laws of conservation of energy as we understand them. But you can do it, can’t you? You really can?”

“It is a survival trait unique to us,” One-who-Decides explained gently. “In its early days our world was an extremely primitive and hostile place. Despite this ability we do not feel that it makes

any better than any other people. Only different.”

For the first time, the alien commander projected fear. “Can you read my mind?”

“No,” said one of the Amplitur quickly. “And remember that we always speak the truth.”

“If you cannot read another mind, how do you...?”

“We project. That is the gift. Anyone can receive. That ability lies dormant in most developed minds. With none to project to you, you do not even realize it is present.”

“If you observe carefully you will see that none of us has been moving our mouthparts, though we are quite capable of communicating by means of modulated sound waves, as you do. We have been projecting to you from the moment you appeared before us. Having never been projected to before, you naturally assumed that we were communicating with you by means of sound waves. That has not been the case.”

“As you will also note, there is nothing in the least detrimental or harmful about the process.”

“That does not answer my question. What are you going to do with us?”

“I think,” replied One-who-Decides, the matter having been already agreed upon, “that we will assist you in repairing your ship.”

“What’s that?” Prinac blinked again.

“We will help you to fix your vessel to the best of our ability. Since the mathematics are unvarying, the means for traveling through Underspace are universally similar. Only materials and design differ.”

“We intend to allow you and your crew to return to your home. Though we had no quarrel with you, your people attacked our ships and killed many. You will serve as messengers, apprising your people of our existence and intent. Hold nothing back, tell everything. We will supply you with additional information and statistics where your own observation is inadequate.”

“I sense your fear. You will not be interrogated or mind-altered or otherwise persuaded against your individual will to do any of this. Should you choose to do so, you may say nothing, or invent your own tales. We cannot prevent that. You will simply be provided with information. It will be your choice as intelligent beings to disseminate or conceal this information as you see fit. Surely you cannot fear ideas!”

“Nothing will be concealed within your ship or implanted upon your physical person, although we could easily do both.”

Long-burdened-Walker moved slightly forward and demonstrated.

The Weave officer suddenly bent double, his hands clasping the sides of his head as he dropped to his knees. It lasted only for an instant but took longer for him to recover. When he rose shakily, his hands were trembling and his tongue was hanging out of the side of his mouth.

“What—what was that? What did you *do!*”

“There are many means of communication.” One-who-Decides projected compassionately. “Are you still in pain? Do you require the attention of a physician?”

“No,” said Prinac weakly. “No, I will be all right.” His expression, such as it was, had changed radically. “Which of you did that?”

“It does not matter.” One-who-Decides gestured with a tentacle. “Any of us are capable of such communication.”

Prinac took a deep shuddering breath. “I begin to understand how twelve of you can control the force of this size.”

One-who-Decides was appalled at the implication. “We do not do so through that type of communication.”

“You do not have to. It is enough for those serving you to know that you *can*. This is how you keep everyone in line.”

“No one is ‘kept in line.’ We are all servants of the Purpose together.” One-who-Decides strove to be patient in the face of such ignorance. “You will come to realize this, and then you will be ashamed of your thoughts.”

“You may choose to resist with force. You know that you would not be the first to do so. It results only in unnecessary suffering on both sides, since in the end all are contentedly integrated into the Purpose. When that day comes you will no longer fight and argue among yourselves, understanding you will the true meaning of existence. Archaic concepts such as interspecies conflict over simple physical differences or mental outlook will disappear.”

“We might beat you, you know. You have no idea how strong the Weave is. And you will not learn more from me, my crew, or our ship’s storage facilities. Because no one knows how big the Weave is, exactly. I do not think you have ever faced anything like it.”

“It matters not. Without a singleness of purpose to unite, there can be no true strength. You live lives of aimlessness and wasted existence and can therefore pose no real threat to us. The Purpose is not the Amplitur, nor is it our allies. It exists exclusive of us, outside and beyond us, the real reason for everything that is. You cannot defeat that.”

“That is to be seen,” replied Prinac even as he sounded less confident of his own power and philosophy.

It might take a little longer, One-who-Decides mused. It was often such to varying degrees with primitive peoples. Gentle persuasion and reassurance almost always worked, though it was true they had never before encountered an organization like this Weave. But what an astoundingly grand opportunity it presented!

Elation flowed between the twelve. Not one, not six, but an unknown number of new intelligences to bring to the Purpose. This was one of the seminal moments of history, and it was a privilege simply to be present.

He felt a great love and affection for this Prinac; representative of an alien species, commander of a hostile warship. The projection rolled out from all and they could see that the Weave officer was affected by it.

“You are mad.” was his response when the wave had subsided. “I do not love you. I do not love your Purpose. I do not love anything about you. Your intentions I find repulsive and your person unpleasant. I especially do not like the way you treat your slave peoples.”

“Slave peoples? What is a slave?” inquired another of the Amplitur.

Prinac explained.

There was some uncertainty among the twelve. "This concept is foreign to us. We do not understand what you mean."

"I will try to clarify."

Still the Amplitur failed to understand.

"There is no slavery, as you call this thing, within the Purpose. How can there be, with all intelligences being equal?"

"But you are not equal. You Amplitur are in control, whether by virtue of the fact that the 'Purpose' is your creation or through your ability to project telepathically. You control and the rest are subject to you. They do not try to rebel because they are afraid."

"You display ignorance, which is understandable." One-who-Decides spoke, resorting to words for the aesthetic effect.

"You there! Scomatt, third officer of the Crigolit. I am One-who-Decides. Are you afraid of me?"

"Of course not," said the Crigolit. "We work within and for the Purpose, and furthermore, we are your friends."

The fleet commander projected satisfaction, which the alien, too, could not fail to feel. "You over there, Aswen of the Segunia. Do you fear me?"

The response was the same from all, even from the huge Molitar who guarded the door and could have crushed every Amplitur in the room before mere weaponry could have reduced it to a pile of disorganized jelly.

Fast-blue-Breeder regarded the prisoner. "We do not understand what you accuse us of."

"Because you are blind to it."

"Are you so certain that it is we who are blind? We offer you cooperation, understanding, empathy, and openness within the Purpose and you respond with fear of domination. Why do you think your vision so much more acute than ours? Why should it not be the other way around?"

"All I can say is that my own people will never be part of your Purpose, no matter what you do. You can hurt me up here," and he tapped the side of his angular skull, "even kill me, but it will not matter."

"We intend no such thing." The Amplitur were shocked at the notion. "We do not wish to kill anyone."

"Tell that to those who crewed the ships you destroyed."

"They attacked us," One-who-Decides reminded the alien. "I say again that we had no quarrel with you and your kind."

"The Sspari came to the Weave. They explained what was happening. Many within the Weave were reluctant to send help because they did not want to get involved, but others saw rightly that you would find us eventually. Better to find out what we might be up against as soon as possible than wait for you to surprise us." The alien's thoughts were awash with obvious pride. "That is what the Weave is about."

"It sounds not so very different from the Purpose," observed another of the Amplitur. "Save the arguing you argue among yourselves to no end."

“We value our independence,” Prinac told them. “Something your ‘allies’ seem to have forgotten.”

“All are free to act as they wish,” said One-who-Decides, “within the Purpose. Daily life differs on all worlds, among all races. Neither we nor anyone else interferes with another race’s culture or arts or traditions. Within that context we all strive toward a greater common goal, one which renders all friends. Not masters and slaves, as you describe it.”

“This is not for my people, nor I think for any others within the Weave.”

“Do you not see,” said a tired Amplitur, “that the very discussion we are now having has occurred many times in the past, and that the end is always the same?”

“Perhaps this time it will be different.”

“No, it will not be different.” One-who-Decides moved forward on short, stumpy legs. “It may happen quickly or it may take much time, but no other outcome is possible. The Purpose is the Purpose. So it has been for thousands of years. This will not change.”

“And in spite of everything I have said, you are still going to help fix my ship and let me go?”

“Have I not said that we speak always the truth? The message must be conveyed. It is horrid that many had to die to allow that. Fortunately many of your ships escaped to safety.”

“Yes, I imagine that surprised you.” The alien did not try to conceal his satisfaction.

“It did not surprise us, and it pleases us. We regret the loss of any individual intelligence in a universe of millions of worlds inhabited by perhaps thousands of intelligences. The death of even one diminishes the Purpose.”

“You really are a strange bunch,” Prinac commented, scratching his long upper lip. “If you were not fanatics you might even be likable.”

“Fanaticism and dedication are terms whose parameters could be argued endlessly. We believe we are dedicated. We already like you; for your forthrightness, your honesty, and your bravery.”

“Don’t like me. I prefer it that way.”

“On this thing we must insist.” One-who-Decides gestured with a tentacle, the manipulative digits lining up to point. “Go back to your vessel, to your own people and to your allies. Tell them of what you have seen. You will be supplied with all the information your storage facilities can accept. What you do with it is your concern.”

“We ask only that you do not censor. Let others judge as freely as we let you judge. Reveal or destroy, but do not modify.”

“We will not be able to monitor your actions or affect them in any way. The range of our abilities to project is short.”

“How can I be sure of that? How do I know you are not telling me that when you could actually influence me or my crew over a considerable distance?”

“If we meant you harm, intended to try and ‘control’ you,” Fast-blue-Breeder pointed out, “why would we tell you otherwise? Why not simply do it?”

“I do not know.” Prinac let out a short, whistling breath. “I am not a philosopher; only an officer on a small ship.”

“Then do not take decisions of great import upon yourself. Let others observe, analyze, decide. Think for yourself. In this be,” and there was something akin to mild amusement in the Amplitur projection, “independent.”

“I admit I do not understand you people.” Prinac started to back away from the twelve, in the direction of the single doorway. No one moved to stop him. “All I can say is that we will never be cog in your Purpose.”

One-who-Decides directed the Molitar to move aside. “ ‘Never’ is a term we understand, I think far better than you.”

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