THE VOICE ON THE PHONE was distinct if faint: “Our call came through.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Although I had wanted this for years, had anticipated it, had worked for it and dreamed of it even when working for other things, it was still hard to believe. And harder still to explain to Janet.

“That was Beth on the phone,” I said.

“And you’re leaving.” It was a statement, not a question.

“We both knew this might happen.”

“Don’t bother coming back.”

“Janet . . .”

But she had already rolled over and was pretending to be asleep. I could almost hear the fabric ripping: the seam of an eight-year marriage that had held us together from small colleges in the Midwest to oceanic exploration centers, to the long winters at Woods Hole.

Once it started to tear, it tore straight and true. I took a cab to the airport.

The flight to San Diego was interminable. As soon as I got off the plane I called Doug at Flying Fish.

“Remember when you said you would drop everything to take me to the island if what we were trying to do came through?”

“I’ll meet you at the hangar,” he said.

Doug’s ancient Cessna was already warming up when I got there. I carried two coffees, the black one for him. We were in the air and heading west over Point Loma before we spoke.

“So the fish finally got through,” he said.

“Dolphins aren’t fish and you know it,” I said.

“I wasn’t talking about them; I was talking about Leonard. He spends so much time underwater he ought to grow gills.”

Doug flew out to the island twice a month to deliver supplies to my partners. As the mainland diminished to a smudge behind us, I thought of the years of research that had brought us to this remote Pacific outpost.

Our funding had been cut off by the Navy when we had refused to allow them to use our data for weapons research. It had been cut off by Stanford when we had refused to publish our preliminary results. Grant after grant had fallen away like leaves; like my marriage, which I now could see was only another leaf hitting the ground. Janet and I had been going in different directions for several years, ever since I had turned down tenure in order to continue my life’s work.

The Project.

“There it is, Doc.”

The island had been loaned to us by Alejandro Martinez, the nitrate millionaire who was even now on his deathbed in Mexico City. It was a mile-long teardrop of rock, inhabited at one end by seals and at the other by the gray (dolphin-colored, I realized for the first time) fiberglass modulars of the Project.

Doug brought the little 172 straight in to the short strip bulldozed out of the side of a hill. I wondered how he managed in a fog or a wind. There were only about ten feet left at the end, when he snubbed the brakes hard to keep the prop out of the rocks.

Beth was waiting in the jeep with the engine running. Seeing the radiant smile on her broad, plain face, I wondered what my life would have been like if I had married not for beauty but for harmony. She and Leonard were partners before anything else.

“Welcome!” she shouted over the wind and crashing surf. “Want to join us, Doug? This is our big day!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said, shutting down the engine. “Where’s the fish?”

“Down in the pool, I imagine,” Beth said. “Comes and goes. What kind of intelligent creature would communicate with us if we kept it confined?”

“He’s pulling your leg,” I told her. “He’s talking about Leonard.”

“So am I,” she laughed.

Expertly, terrifyingly (“This is Mexico, after all!”) Beth raced down the island’s only half mile of road to the lab, which was built out over the rocks. It looked like a gray and pink coral shelf left behind by the tide. The pool it enclosed was open on three sides to the sea.

Leonard was on the sheltered upper deck, dripping in the wet suit he always wore, munching a seaweed sandwich and staring at a computer screen.

“It came?” I asked.

“The message. It came,” he said, looking up at me, his face shining with either seawater or tears.

We embraced, and Beth joined us both. It was a shared triumph. Leonard and I had started The Project twelve years before. He had done the undersea field work, she had designed and built the voice synthesizer, and I had written the program.

While I got into my wet suit, Beth explained to a puzzled Doug what we had done. It had all been top secret until now. “The previous attempts to communicate with dolphins always failed because of the time factor,” she said. “It was Doc who figured out that they think not as individuals but collectively. The first problem was to convince them that we, a race that lives and dies as individuals, is even capable of thought, much less communication. Their feeling was, I think, that all our activity was reactive behavior.”

“What about cities? Ships?” said Doug. “We’ve been active on the sea for centuries.”

“Oh, they know that. But they have seen coral reefs and seashells, all built objects. The Australian Barrier Reef, for example, is a made object, and it’s vaster than all our cities put together. They don’t make things. They don’t put value in things.”

“The work of their civilization is thought,” put in Leonard. “They are building a thought, a concept that they have been working out over the millennia. It’s a grand project beyond anything we could imagine.”

“So they think they’re too good to talk to us,” said Doug.

“Don’t get your fur up,” said Beth, laughing. “They don’t think in words, like we do. Words are an extension of the hand—a grasping mechanism, and they don’t grasp and manipulate ideas in the way we do. So what we’ve been working to do over the years is to try and break their concepts down into words.”

I was almost ready. I had another gulp of coffee. My hand was shaking.

“The main problem was the time frame,” Leonard said. “We talk in bites. Their conversations run in long, centuries-old strings. They are not interested in communicating individual to individual. They communicate with their own developing selves and their descendants. Ready?”

This last was to me. I nodded.

Leonard led me down the stairs to the pool level. Beth and Doug followed. The surf outside was booming like a great heart.

“It still sounds like what you’re saying is that they don’t want to talk to us,” Doug protested.

“Oh, they do, as it turns out,” Leonard said. “They were very glad to hear from us. You see, they know who we are.”

“They remember,” said Beth.

“They have a message for us,” said Leonard.

“It took thirty-one months for them to say it,” said Beth. “It was the work of thousands of individuals.”

“So let’s have it!” said Doug. We all laughed at his impatience, so typically human.

“Doc first,” said Leonard. “The synthesizer only works under the water.” He led me to the end of the pool, where several dolphins, dignified and pearl-gray, waited like envoys in the reception room of an embassy.

I slipped into the water. It was cold but it felt good. The dolphins nuzzled at me, then dove. I felt like diving with them, but I had only my wet suit and no breathing gear.

“Ready?” Leonard asked.

I nodded.

“Put your head under, and listen.”

I floated. A deep, slow voice echoed through my bones, like the voice I remembered from a long-ago dream:

“Come home. All is forgiven.”