

SHEILA FINCH

THE NAKED FACE OF GOD

Merik Quintana vaulted over the net, a long, two-handled bat in his hand. "My game, Excellent One." Ozal's sun nestled low in rosy clouds on the horizon, and a flower-scented breeze touched the xenolinguist's damp brow. At his feet, a flock of tiny, rainbow-feathered tilitili birds fluttered up from the lawn surrounding the gaming court, only to be pulled back by silken cords around their legs.

"Terrans have too much magic for me." Jheru, Excellent One of Ozal, answered languidly, but the tall alien's narrow, golden eyes were mistrustful.

Assignment as lingster to Jheru's court didn't include deliberately losing games to him, in Merik's view. Ozal was a small planet, hardly important in the affairs of the Orion Arm, but since Jheru didn't know that, it wasn't wise to allow his dislike to show. He said lightly, "Luck, not magic, Excellency."

Jheru, nude and hairless, built like a child's stick-figure drawing with the unblinking gaze of a starved hawk, dropped his own bat carelessly on the ground and held out a hand. Tilitilis scattered anxiously out of the way. Merik wiped a sweaty palm on his hip, then touched the Excellent One's hand briefly with the tip of a finger as this world's courtesy dictated.

Jheru stared at something. Following the direction of the Excellent One's gaze, Merik saw a small male alien in coarse and shapeless clothing draw back into a thicket of scarlet shrubs that lined the perimeter of the garden. Even at a distance the physical differences between this male and the Excellent One were apparent. Jheru, like most of the inhabitants of Ozal, made six-foot Merik appear short; the lurker, who seemed to be from a race Merik had not seen before, appeared a little over five feet tall, thick-bodied with abundant head hair.

"Guard!" Jheru said.

Two bald Ozalians with emerald fringes across their naked shoulders to signify rank had been lounging watchfully nearby. They loped toward the bushes where the small male had been. Even after three years on Ozal, Merik still expected Ozalians to fall when they ran, pitching themselves precipitously forward on over-long, skinny legs, but somehow, they always managed to avoid calamity. Jheru strode toward the palace. One of the guards immediately returned and followed him; the other had disappeared.

Merik grabbed his own thin tunic off a bench and pulled it on, still not comfortable with the Ozalian habit of nudity. He retrieved Jheru's bat and tucked it under his arm with his own, then sprinted after the Excellent One. Behind him he heard shouting, and he turned to watch a line of guards run past.

Just as they reached the edge of the gaming court, an infant -- probably one of the palace servants' offspring -- ambled out of a flowerbed directly into their path. The guards didn't swerve.

The dust they'd kicked up settled slowly, and Merik stared at the fallen child, the flowers it had been picking scattered across the grass. The frightened tilitilis panicked and tangled their silk cords; bright feathers drifted down on the little body. Very few people's lives were worth worrying about in Jheru's beautiful city; Merik could be the one the guards trampled next time.

Lingsters were under Guild injunction not to become involved in a society's moral or ethical issues. He retrieved the posies and laid them gently on the infant's thin chest as a female Ozalian came screeching down the path.

This was not what he'd imagined he'd be doing when he'd first apprenticed as a youth to the Guild of Xenolinguists. He'd idealized the lingster's role as sacred mediary between the varied races of the Arm, dedicating his life to the holiness of words wherever they arose. "First was the Word and I am its carrier," the Guild taught its apprentices. "Through me flows the meaning of the universe." As a young man, he'd believed in the purity of the lingster's mission.

But the reality he found once he left the Mother House was grittier. A lingster's work was often dangerous, frequently undervalued by those who benefited from it most, and if there was any meaning in the universe, Merik had yet to find it.

A flight of milk-white stone steps, delicate as the legs of the Ozalians who mounted it, soared gracefully up from the gaming courts to the palace. Everything the Ozalians built had this same ethereal beauty, fragile-seeming as crystal. And just as transparent, he thought; he found no heart in anything.

Two more weeks, and a Terran ship that called on Ozal once in three years would return and take him away to another assignment that would in turn be little better than this one. One day soon he'd leave the Guild. Right now, he'd be grateful just to leave Jheru.

The Excellent One had already vanished up the steps. Merik hesitated. Twilight settled over the lush gardens; he could hear the drowsy murmur of the tethered birds on the lawn. Soon, the palace cooks would serve the third of four feasts each day that Ozalians with their faster metabolism required. He decided to wait until the last meal and turned away from the steps.

Immediately, the world went dark around him. Something thick and foul-smelling dropped over his head and shoulders, tightening against him as his arms were bound to his sides. The bats slid uselessly out of his fingers. Under the sack it was totally dark. He felt himself yanked off his feet and carried bent at the waist over a shoulder. He kicked hard and was rewarded for his trouble by a sharp slash on his bare calves.

"Insha dya," a gruff voice said.

"Ny'e' dya, tol" another replied.

"I demand to be released!"

Not recognizing the language of his kidnappers, he used the High Tongue of Jheru's people. Most races on Ozal spoke it as a second language if not a first. There was no reaction from whoever carried him so urgently away. They were moving fast now; he was aware of the swift passage of cool air over his legs.

"Dya, dya, n'tik!" the gruff voice said.

"If you'd wanted a lingster, you could've tried asking!"

He choked as his mouth filled with stinking fibers from the sack over his head. He kicked angrily against his kidnapper again. For the second time the stick slashed painfully across his calves. He didn't try it again.

Pain engulfed him. His legs were numb, his arms burned, his head ached from the bouncing it endured in this upside down position. They seemed to be moving uphill over rough terrain; he felt the sting of wiry branches against his legs, the scrape of rock. It got rapidly colder. Several times he was aware of being handed off from one kidnapper to another, traded like a sack of potatoes, but his abductors' pace hardly slackened, and he couldn't tell how many of them there were.

Then his captors halted abruptly, allowing him to slide to the ground. Muscles cramped and fire raged through his veins. His mind raced. There was no motive that he could see for anyone to kidnap a lingster whose services could be easily engaged. He had no wealth, Jheru certainly wouldn't ransom him, and the Guild never responded to the demands of terrorists or blackmailers.

Hands fumbled with his bonds, and suddenly his arms were free. Blood rushed back in a stinging tide. The sack was removed and he could see that he'd been brought to a place of great boulders. The night air was very cold at this altitude, and he shivered in his thin tunic.

Three short, stocky males bent over him, their faces shiny with sweat in the moonlight. They were breathing hard, but otherwise showed little sign of strain.

"I -- not -- harm." The speaker used Ozal's High Tongue, haltingly.

Merik blinked up at the small alien he'd seen by the gaming court, middle-aged, with a wide, flat-nosed face covered in pale, downy hair, and narrow, slanting eyes.

"B'ni gev cha, tol?" a second male said.

The first alien murmured a reply and the other went away. "I not harm," he said

again.

"Like hell!" Merik said, sitting up. "You --"

The small male held up his hand, silencing him. "Not harm!"

"You've got the wrong man, you understand? Wrong man!"

The alien frowned in confusion. "I -- want -- You work."

"Damn you! Go through regular channels like everybody else."

The alien's grasp of the High Tongue appeared sketchy. Then he grinned, revealing chipped and stained teeth. He tapped his chest. "Zov." He squinted at Merik to see if he understood. "Name. Zov." He pointed at the lingster and tilted his head, waiting for an answer.

Merik sighed, then stood up and touched his own chest in the widely recognized gesture of naming. "My name is Merik Qintana."

The alien touched his brow in salute.

Merik copied the gesture. "What do you need a lingster for?" When the small male frowned, he tapped his chest again. "Me. Lingster."

"Ah. Lingster. You help."

The third alien spoke. "Py' ani, tol. Py' ani na.t"

"Come." Zov touched Merik's arm.

Tol, an honorific, he thought. In spite of his seething anger, he had already begun cataloging variations of tone and pitch in the alien's speech, isolating phonemes and marking the frequency of their repetition. He allowed them to lead him into the mouth of a cave.

Zov strode ahead of him down a dark passageway. Merik followed more cautiously. They stopped at a place where the walls opened abruptly into a good-sized cave. Welcome warmth met him from a fire burning in a stone-ringed hearth, its flickering light striking sparks from exposed veins of metal in the rock overhead. Over the flames, meat hung from a spit which a near-naked child turned slowly. The aroma of roasting flesh reminded him he'd skipped a meal.

A circle of about forty figures in furs and rough woven cloth squatted around the fire, their shadows leaping on the cave walls. They spoke together in the same guttural, staccato language Zov had used, but conversation stopped when the speakers saw the human.

"Ty," a 'cha." Zov indicated the tribe around the fire. The alien shrugged off a heavy fur outer garment he'd been wearing; under it, a thick metallic collar

gleamed in the firelight. "First, eat!"

The tribe shuffled around, making space for Merik, who sat cross-legged on the stone floor beside them in a wave of sour sweat, animal skin, rancid fat and rotting teeth; he kept his breathing shallow. Nobody spoke, but he caught their openly curious glances.

A young female cut meat from the turning carcass and held it out on the point of a knife to Zov. Then she carved a second chunk and offered it shyly to Merik, thin bracelets clinking on her wrist. His gaze moved from the female's ornaments to Zov's collar piece to the gleaming veins in the cave roof. The tribe wasn't so primitive that its members didn't know how to work silver when they found it.

Now a young male moved the spit out of the flame, and an old female pulled the juvenile onto her lap and fed him morsels of meat. The young female squatted at Merik's feet, and he glanced down at her. She was small and plump, with a round face, silky as a ripe peach, and slanted eyes that were all black pupil, a vivid contrast to the bald, spindly females of Jheru's race. But she paid for this comeliness, he noticed, by an increased susceptibility to parasites. As he watched, small red-shelled bug-like creatures crawled along the part in her hair.

The tribe picked up the conversation. Merik listened, automatically scanning this new language for the particular patterns of deep structures created by its biogrammar.

"You," Zov said, his mouth full of meat. "Help. You help. Yes?"

He wasn't ready to forgive his treatment yet. "Maybe. Depends what you want me to do, tol."

There was an intake of breath from the circle, and for a moment Merik thought he'd misread the word's meaning. Then in the silence that followed, he became aware of newcomers at the back of the circle. Two burly males in greasy furs set down a wrinkled old male they'd been carrying. The old one wore what appeared to be scraps and tatters from more than one animal's pelt; stringy gray hair fell forward over his face, and his sunken eyes blazed with such ferocity Merik's first thought was the old alien was insane.

One of the females shuffled aside to make room, but the old alien remained standing leaning shakily on a staff, staring at Merik. The young female got up hastily and fetched a slab of meat for the newcomer. The old male grabbed at her arm, and she settled docilely at his feet. No one spoke.

Shaman, Merik guessed; the tribe's magician. Every aboriginal tribe he'd ever encountered in the Arm seemed to have one. Sometimes more than one. Loony old men or women who thought they had access to the wisdom of the universe. They could be dangerous, and they usually resented lingsters.

Zov waved an arm at the silent group who hurriedly scrambled up from the stone

floor and disappeared in the shadows at the back of the cave. The shaman whacked at the young female with his staff, urging her after the others; she skipped out of his reach, bracelets tinkling. As his arm moved, the shaman's tattered sleeve fell back, and Merik saw the track of long scars in the lightly furred skin below his elbow.

Zov peered at the lingster through the fire's glow as if he were lip reading. "You talk with other. Not Ty'a'cha. You talk for?"

"Talk for," Merik repeated. Might as well indulge them, keep them friendly. "That's what lingsters do, tol." The outline of the problem began to reveal itself. Zov might be a primitive, but he obviously understood that lingsters translated things. "The Ty'a'cha want to make peace with an enemy?"

Zov frowned intently, catching up. "Very bad enemy!" he observed.

On a planet like this there might be hundreds of tongues, each used by a tiny handful of speakers. He hadn't realized Zov's language existed before today, and the language spoken by Zov's enemy was probably equally unknown. Achieving an interface between two languages neither of which the lingster knew in advance took time. And interface required the use of the specific drugs in a lingster's fieldpack--which he hadn't had with him when he'd been abducted. But he knew the world's other cultures, the linguistic families. He could handle it.

"Enemy kill Ty'a'cha. Many, many! Females. Babies --" Zov broke off, obviously overcome with the enormity of this enemy's evil. "You--" He pointed to his right ear. "You?"

The old male with the scarred arms spat deliberately into the fire, his mad eyes never leaving Merik's face.

"I hear," Merik said. "I understand."

Ozal was a bloody world, he thought, the memory of the trampled child rising in his mind. He was sick of it. There was no reason to hope these people were any less barbaric in their customs than the Excellent One. The sparkle of silver in the cave's roof drew his eyes again. Technically, he was under contract to Jheru at the moment, but he might be persuaded to work a little on the side -- if the Ty'a'cha were prepared to reward him sufficiently for taking the risk.

His conscience pricked. Long ago, he wouldn't have thought that way, when he'd been young and the profession had been all of his philosophy and his religion. Now he knew better. Lingstering was just a skill, an art of talking which he was good at. And why not get paid well for it?

"Come!" Zov rose up from the floor.

Instantly, the two burly males reappeared from the shadows and lifted the old shaman as if he were unable to walk by himself. Merik followed Zov and the others down a passage that became increasingly narrow. Nobody seemed to have

thought there was a need for a torch. Ahead of him, Zov's footsteps echoed confidently on the stone. Merik moved cautiously, feeling his way. Then Zov halted abruptly and Merik -working from the cessation of sound rather than being able to see -caught himself just in time to avoid stepping on Zov's heels. It was colder here, almost freezing.

"See!" Zov commanded.

And oddly enough, after a few seconds Merik did. There was a diffuse light in the cave they'd come to; he glanced at the high ceiling, trying to find its source. There was a peculiar smell in here too, iron and something earthily pungent he couldn't identify but felt he ought to. Then he recognized the glow of bioluminescence coming from the walls which appeared to be marked in patterns.

Not patterns. He stepped closer, and his breath caught. The rock walls were covered with outline drawings of Ozalian animals. He saw long-necked garii running at full tilt across an imaginary veldt, tomti rearing to strike, their tails lashing in fury, huge meklemek beasts stepping ponderously in line like an advancing wave of marauders. There were birds in flight, game animals fleeing the advance of unseen hunters, and fantastic creatures that never existed on this or any other planet Merik had ever seen. The drawings covered almost every surface, the artists making use of the natural bosses and concavities that occurred in the rock walls. The colors ranged from bright red through coppery brown to charcoal black, and each line glowed in the dark cave.

He became aware he was holding his breath and let it come whistling out. Whoever the artists were who'd drawn these creatures, they were hardly primitives.

"Good talk," Zov said. "Fathers. Enemies."

Talk had been a noun that time, not a verb. Merik turned to the Ty'a'cha headman. "They're marvelous," he said.

Zov shook a finger at Merik. "Not more. You talk!"

The shaman said something then in a high-pitched, rapid voice and Zov reacted angrily. Leaning on his staff, the old male raised an arm, his shredded furs swaying. He pointed at the walls, then at Zov, then turned to glare at Merik. There was something proprietary in the shaman's gesturing, as if the wall art were his and he resented the lingster seeing it.

Merik looked at the walls again. The drawings were some kind of magical conversation, apparently. But about what? If they followed a pattern found elsewhere in the Arm -- even on prehistoric Earth itself -they were invocations to food animals to surrender to the hunt, or else they were charms to keep the pictured predators away. Yet Zov had displayed them in the context of talking to enemies.

Something glittered -- a small spark Merik caught out of the corner of his eye

-- and suddenly apprehensive, he turned toward the shaman in time to catch him fumbling a blade into the sleeve of his robe. Then the shaman sank cross-legged to the ground in the dim glow of the fantastic drawings.

Zov left the cavern. The two males who'd carried the old man shoved Merik, urging him to follow.

Back in the first cave, one of them tended to the fire that had burned low in their absence; then they both withdrew. Merik sat hugging his knees next to Zov who squatted on his haunches, silver collar glittering. Above him, the firelight struck answering sparks from the ore striping the cave's roof.

"Gurja not want -- not give -- power," Zov observed. "Gurja not trust. I trust."

Merik needed time to gather samples of the Ty'a'cha language; the microchip every lingster carried in his brain was mostly useless without a computer to link with. For now they'd have to make do with Zov's halting knowledge of the High Tongue.

Zov spoke again. "Old talk -- fathers. Not like now Big enemy now. Gurja not know. I know!"

Gurja must be the disapproving shaman, Merik guessed.

"You talk. Then -- all good."

"No, tol, that's not how it works."

But Zov waved the objection away and plunged on through the thickets of the High Tongue. Merik listened in silence, his imagination filling in what the headman didn't have words to express, piecing meanings together with snippets of history and gossip he'd overheard in Jheru's city. There was a new enemy who threatened the Ty'a'cha; this enemy didn't want the tribe's game, or its females, he wanted its subservience or its complete destruction, and the tribe was losing the battle.

"Jheru," Merik said as Zov paused.

Zov grunted. "Very bad enemy."

"The worst." No way Zov's tiny tribe could resist Jheru's might for long, with or without a lingster. They might be cunning and physically strong, but Jheru had technology."

Gurja old. No power left."

A dozen Gurjas wouldn't make much progress with Jheru, Merik thought.

"You talk," Zov insisted again.

"You pay?" Merik could be equally insistent.

Zov glared at him. "Ty'a'cha pay!"

"How did you know I was a lingster?"

Zov explained haltingly how he'd lurked in the city, picking up words and phrases. He'd seen the coming and going of transport ships from space, and seemed to understand what they were. The leader of this tribe, Merik realized, saw the advantage of learning modern ways."

And your shaman -- Gurja -- didn't agree?"

"Holy One not go. Stay with Ty'a'cha. Law of Ty'a'cha."

"If Jheru is willing to talk to you, tol, then you'll have to go back to the city."

"No! You talk."

A lingster was a conduit, a channel, nothing more. He had no power to make binding treaties. Even if he were rash enough to try interceding for the Ty'a'cha with Jheru, the Excellent One would never agree to the tribe escaping his rule. The sparkle of silver above his head told Merik that; if Jheru didn't suspect its presence already, he soon would.

Zov indicated Merik should roll himself up in a grubby pelt lying nearby and sleep, then set the example and was soon snoring beside the fire. The fur held a faint musky smell.

Merik lay awake thinking it over. At the edge of the firelight, one of Zov's warriors stood guard, a long blade slung over his back. He needed to stay alert here. There was no guessing what the tribe might do, but it would be nothing in comparison to what Jheru was capable of if he thought his lingster had betrayed him. He couldn't fault Zov's desire to move forward out of ignorance into the modern world, yet he suspected there was a lot here he didn't understand. He knew he couldn't achieve everything Zov wanted -- that was impossible -- but he wouldn't betray the Ty'a'cha to Jheru, either. Perhaps he could make inevitable progress a little easier for the tribe.

And if a little of their silver ended up in his pocket, that would only hasten the day when he could leave the Guild. There was really nothing to hold him any longer. Even what he'd once considered the sacrament of interface between alien language -- the dangerous, addictive whirlpool that drew a lingster back again and again -- had disappointed him, described, regulated, tamed by those who'd gone before.

It was still night-dark in the cave when Merik awoke, though he guessed it must be dawn. The fire had burned low and the warrior who'd stood guard last night was shaking his shoulder. Merik sat up and discovered that the warm weight

against his back was the young female who'd brought him meat from the spit. He was suddenly certain she'd been speaking to him, murmuring into his ear all through the night while he slept. He was sure of it, though he didn't remember a word she'd said; he wondered what it could mean. A parasite flickered like a tiny ruby at her hairline, then vanished; she woke and scratched the place absently, gazing up at him.

The sooner he got out of here the better. He got to his feet, thought again, and reached down for the fur. It would be a long, cold walk back down the mountain.

But the warrior didn't lead him out to the open air. Merik recognized the narrow stone corridor they were following; it led to the cavern he'd been shown last night. For a second, his skin prickled and he felt a pulse leap in his throat.

Sensing his hesitation, the alien half-turned. "Dya!"

He really had no choice. He moved forward again, his eyes adjusting to the dim cave. He could see Zov and the humped figure of the shaman murmuring together. The atmosphere was pregnant with the sense of momentous things hovering. On the walls, the luminous paintings gleamed blood red with the eerie light of fungus.

Zov looked up. Gurja -- as usual -- scowled. Merik thought how feeble the shaman seemed today, barely alive.

"You talk now," Zov said. He seemed angry about something. "Gurja say."

Zov had called the rock paintings "talk," Merik remembered, speculating that the tribe used mutual art-making in a ritual to seal friendship among former enemies, a reconciliation of spirit and imagination that brought peace. It wouldn't be unusual. He'd witnessed similar rites elsewhere in the Arm, and on Earth, tribes had once celebrated truce with songs and dancing around the fire.

But no more, Zov had said, and he'd thought the old alien wanted to lead his tribe out of their Dark Age into the light of science. The lingster would replace the shaman as peacemaker. Yet now they apparently wanted him to paint pictures before he left. There were many things here he didn't understand.

"I don't know how, tol," he said mildly. "I'm not an artist."

"Gurja say!" Zov repeated.

An icy current of air from some unseen vent feathered across the back of Merik's neck and he shivered in spite of the fur around his shoulders. In the deep silence of the cave, he was aware of his heart beating, his breath sighing the blood rushing through his veins.

Zov gestured impatiently with one hand, and Merik saw small mounds of dark pigment in bowl-shaped depressions on a rock ledge. He'd have to fake cooperation until he could get away. Luckily the Ty'a'cha weren't going to be sophisticated art critics.

Gurja half turned toward him, shuffling his feet by rocking his body rather than lifting them, and now he saw that the shaman was holding a knife. Gurja lifted the sleeve of his filthy robe, then drew the blade in a line through the hair on his forearm. Blood welled. The shaman watched impassively as it dripped into one of the stone bowls. After a moment he seized Merik's arm and -- surprisingly strong for one who appeared so feeble -- he'd opened a thin line across Merik's arm before the lingster could resist. Merik's blood dripped into a second bowl.

Stay calm, Merik thought. These were simple folk and they took this seriously; best not to anger them. He would endure it, then he'd get out of here, and before very long he'd be rid of this brutal world altogether. But watching his blood pool in the bowl made him light-headed.

Then the shaman mixed his own blood into the dry pigment with his fingers, and indicated that Merik should copy him. Silently, they both stirred the muddy paint that resulted while Zov watched, his attitude reverent.

The shaman raised his blood-smeared fingers and licked, his tongue flickering in and out like one of the tomti on the wall.

Zov nudged Merik to do the same.

He hesitated, then lifted his fingers reluctantly to brush his lips. The mixture tasted bitter, the iron of his own blood almost lost in something organic and pungent. He thought suddenly of toadstools, collected on Earth for a science class when he was a young student at the Guild's Mother House, the clammy feel of *Amanita muscaria's* fleshy gills, the instructor's warning of its toxicity. It had been part of a lesson making the students aware of the peril of mixing any other drugs, natural or manufactured, with the drugs they carried in their fieldpacks. It was dangerous for him to continue. He had no idea what the shaman's substance was or what its effects might be.

Zov nudged him in the ribs again, harder this time, and Merik identified the prick of a blade. The shaman shuffled slowly round to face a blank space on the rock where he began to trace a line.

Merik sighed, squinting in the dim light, hoping to find something easy to copy. Then, as he lifted his fingers to the wall in his turn, a wave of nausea shook him. His sight blurred and his head throbbed. The drawings of *garii* and *meklemek* seemed alive, moving across the stone.

Hallucinogens in the pigment. Like the contents of a lingster's fieldpack -- but uncontrolled, unknown. His mind whirled. It felt like going into interface unprotected, the no man's land between languages, the roaring ground from which a tribe's history sprang. He had to get out while there was still time.

A harsh voice like a scream leapt over the darkness, incandescent and terrifying

--

Merik's concentration shattered. Unprotected interface was dangerous, chaotic, like looking into the naked face of God. Shards of lessons the Guild taught rose in his mind, fragments of the emergency protocols designed to protect a lingster from being swept away.

Step One. Let go of -- Let go --

He struggled, but he couldn't make himself recall the words that could save his life. The native drag was too powerful.

Zov touched his arm, urging him back to work. He stared at the alien, and for a moment his mind cleared.

Step One. Let go of fear...

Gurja was using his nails to work lines into the painted images. Merik could see the drawings becoming luminous under the shaman's fingers. He recognized a bird, a giant raptor stretching enormous wings. The shaman chanted in a high nasal whine, something rhythmic, repetitious; his face was skeletal in the eerie glow of the fungus. And Merik knew that the talking art Gurja practiced was not the art of reconciliation but the art of death to enemies.

A bright fog swallowed him then, making further thought difficult a fog that now seemed stitched through with the unnerving, searing voice he'd heard before. There was a message here -- an urgent knowledge he almost grasped, a presence

Then flame seemed to arc across the chip, burning his brain dry of thought. Something raced through the interface, and he cowered before it like prey under the wings of a raptor. He felt the fabric of his being shredded in the turbulent darkness till he screamed in terror. Something opened its jaws to devour him.

He did the only thing possible for a lingster in jeopardy: he dove in deeper and surrendered to the fierce currents of language's birthing ground, risking all in an attempt to control from within.

The fog fell abruptly away.

A deserted hilltop. He stood on a narrow path.

Not deserted-- Something was out there. Something primal, elemental, a power that howled in darkness. The One from whom all life, all language sprang.

First was the Word

He would remember his training and not step out of the path of malevolence, much as he wanted to. I am a conduit -- Something seized him -- he was struggling -- gasping -- dying. He would not give way --

Through ME flows the universe!

The struggle stopped abruptly. He was back in the silent cave, the bowls were empty, and Gurja was making more cuts on their arms. Blood flowed again into dry pigment. Again they licked their fingers. His lips snagged on nails that were ripped and bleeding, yet he felt no pain.

The image of the raptor they were creating together was huge and menacing; it spread across the cave wall, glowing as the paint dried. He felt the power tugging his mind back to that reality behind the world. He lost sense of where his fingers ended and the image began as he drifted in the delirium of interface. The raptor's wings began to beat. Colors ran together and lines blurred till all that remained was a blood-splattered rainbow swirling in a drop of oil.

Then that too vanished and he was alone in chaos again, gazing into the unveiled face of God Itself.

"Gol'zha'ti na!" The shaman's voice echoed as from a great, stone distance.

Merik's bowels loosened as he collapsed.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying on furs by the fire, with a splitting headache. His throat was raw, his lips stung, his tongue seemed swollen twice its normal size, and his fingers hurt as if they'd been thrust into the flames. Someone held a cup with brackish water to his lips. His stomach flared into agony as a drop trickled down and he doubled over, retching. He wiped his lips on the back of his hand and found it spotted with blood. Water splashed onto his arms; a hand touched his brow, soothing. He opened his eyes and saw the rosy young female.

She smiled and got up from her knees. Behind her he saw Zov standing at the edge of the firelight, his face solemn.

The cave was full of smoke that made him cough, but the fire in his stomach subsided. What was it he'd been dreaming? His memory was clouded. How long had he been asleep? Hours? Days? Dim images skittered through his mind -- toadstools -- a huge bird stretching its wings -- Then nothing.

Zov stepped into the firelight's glow. "Not the enemy now," he commented.

"Not...enemy?" Merik frowned, trying to understand.

"Gurja gave his spirit to you. Tongue, too."

"Oh. Gurja." He tried to think about the words. There was something odd about them and he ought to recognize what it was. He nodded and his head throbbed again. "Gurja --"

"He's dead," Zov said, sounding satisfied. "His heart stopped."

Then it came to him. The alien wasn't using the High Tongue anymore.

"Ky'e'cha'ti," he'd said. Yet Merik had understood- not translated- the tribal language as if he'd been speaking it all his life. Cha: the folk. And ti: a diminutive, one of the folk, he. Ky'e: a state of non-living --

Then the Ty'a'cha language swallowed him and he couldn't hear it from the outside any more.

The young female came back with more water. He took the cup from her with unsteady hands and sipped. This time he managed to keep a little down though it scalded his stomach. As his arm came into view, he saw the long red wounds where Gurja's knife had slashed. They were already healing into scars.

Panic struck, cutting off his breath.

He needed time to think. He was alive, that was something. But he might have done irreparable damage by ingesting a wild hallucinogen, as powerful as anything the Guild used. Lingsters had to fear the unwanted, lingering effects of non-controlled drug use. What had he taken? He needed to know to gauge its effect.

His stomach knotted. How long had he been senseless? Long enough for cuts to heal, for the Ty'a'cha language to be whispered into his unconscious brain and stored by the chip. How much time left before the ship took off for Earth?

He struggled to sit up and found he was weaker than he'd realized; his legs were unresponsive to his brain's commands. He'd been careless, so sure of his superiority over these aborigines that he'd risked everything that mattered. His head pounded painfully with the stress.

Something else. He'd nearly lost control in interface. There'd been something in the chaos on the other side this time, an alien presence unlike anything he'd ever encountered; it had almost killed him. Whatever it was he'd wrestled, it was older than humanity or the Ty'a'cha. He'd met it on its own ground, but in doing so had he opened a chink to let it into this world? Or was he still delirious and thinking nonsense?

The female gently blotted sweat off his brow. In his exhaustion, he allowed her to lower him to the furs again. He dozed for a while.

Nightmare shapes skittered across the fragmented landscape of his sleep. A raptor moved across the dark void, rending it, bringing life into existence. A voice rumbled across space --

When he next awoke, Zov was squatting across the fire from him. The female lay curled beside him, awake.

"You're feeling better now," Zov said.

"No thanks to your medicine."

Zov threw back his head, laughing. "You're going to be as difficult to deal with as Gurja himself!"

The main thing was to get out of here as soon as possible. Merik peered through the flames at the tribe's leader. Forcing his tone to remain casual, not betray the rising anxiety he felt, he said, "You'll want me to speak to Jheru soon."

"Gurja said you didn't understand," Zov said jovially. "You have spoken already! The enemy will not live long now."

Take nothing for granted, the Guild taught. Make no assumptions. It was odd, thinking of the Guild in this language, as if it was beside the point.

The female stroked his arm.

Zov glanced at the female. "She belongs to you. The Chosen Folk pay their debts."

He moved his arm quickly away and was suddenly aware how badly he stank. He stared at the tribe's leader. "How long have I been here?"

Zov shrugged. "One revolution of the moon -- maybe two."

Ozal's little moon raced around the planet in just under a Terran week -- He'd been here at least ten days. He tried desperately to stand, his fingers scrabbling for purchase on the rock floor, but his legs refused to move. The cave whirled a round hi m and he was failing, falling down a dark tunnel back into primal void.

After a while, the cave stopped spinning and he saw Zov's face creased in a huge, benevolent smile.

"Gurja's magic was worn out," Zov said. "But you have new magic, from other worlds in the stars."

"I'm a lingster." He was panting now as if he'd been running. "Not a magician."

"You talk. That's what lingsters do. You talk and Jheru dies."

"I must go back --"

"The Holy One goes nowhere. I told you." Zov spread his arms wide as if he were apologizing. "It's our law."

The young female caressed his cheek with grubby fingers, then wrapped something around his shoulders. Looking down, he recognized Gurja's robe of tattered furs. The sour smell rose to his nostrils and he felt the answering madness rising into his throat. Terrified of what he might already have become, he made another attempt to get his legs to move.

Again, nothing happened.

He looked down at his useless legs and saw the new scars on the back of his knees where the tendons had been cut. His sight went black. He was the Holy One, and like Jheru's tilitili birds he wasn't going anywhere ever again.

"Merciful God!" he whispered.

"The gods are rarely merciful," Zov observed.

The female settled by his feet, her black eyes liquid. She stroked the scars on his arm with great tenderness.

He had to get down to the port and to the ship -- He would crawl, pulling himself by his fingers -- or the female would carry him, she was strong like her tribe --

He knew it was useless.

"You'll serve us well, Holy One," Zov said.

Take nothing for granted. There were possibilities everywhere if he could discover them. Even here. He breathed deeply, letting go of fear and despair --

And he felt again the presence on the barren hilltop, heard the ancient voice that contained everything. "Gol'zha'ti na," Gurja had said of him when he returned from that vision: "One with a shaman's power."

He remembered now the peculiar exultant tone the shaman had used. There'd been disagreement between the shaman and the chieftain; Zov had valued a science he didn't understand over the shaman's familiar magic, and that had angered Gurja. The old laws had been swept away by Zov's act of choosing a lingster as the next shaman. Gurja had lost, but the shaman had nevertheless been triumphant, for he'd understood that the power which seized Merik in interface was more terrifying than any science.

Merik closed his eyes and the numinous blood-red image of the giant raptor he'd created on the cave wall blazed against his inner sight. For a second more his thoughts fluttered like a flock of tilitilis-- then doubt fell away.

When he was young, he'd thought of interface as a sacrament, something holy -- not even guessing the truth. Did the Guild suspect? In its many secrets, was this one? He'd gone through the fire. He'd survived. But what was "he" now? Mad as old Gurja, perhaps. Or as infinite as the being he'd met on the mountaintop of his vision.

After a while, he opened his eyes and gazed steadily at Zov. A flicker of doubt ran across the alien's expression, and he took a step back.

Zov spoke hesitantly. "Perhaps -- If the Holy One thinks? -- A new way of doing

things-- Maybe we could allow the Holy One to go clown the mountain --"

"There is no need anymore." He didn't recognize his own voice.

Zov shuddered, and the female covered her mouth with her hands. Merik's fingers played with her hair absently. A red parasite crawled across her skull and he touched it lightly with the tip of his finger. It shriveled to dust at the touch. He smiled; Jheru was as good as dead already, and he would kill Zov whenever it pleased him. The female he could tolerate for a while longer.

The gods were rarely merciful, except to one who wrestled them and survived.