

## NO BRIGHTER GLORY

By Sheila Finch

ALYN CARADOC BROUGHT the small dive boat to the tree-surrounded dock on Walden's main island.

The dwarf *Tursiops truncatus* surfaced beside her, squawked once in apology, then submerged.

Dr. Rob Wong held out a towel. "You're on a fool's errand, you see."

InterWorld-Biotech's senior scientist picked up the conversation he'd started this morning as if there'd been no time in between. Alyn hadn't expected the scientists at this research station to be ecstatic with her presence since her findings might delay their work, but Wong seemed to take it personally. She climbed onto the wooden dock, planks warm underfoot; she was conscious of her tight-fitting alien wetskin that suggested far too much.

Wong averted his gaze. "There's really no work here for a lingster."

The dwarf tursiops surfaced again, turned an eye on the humans, then headed off to the dolphin pens, his wake sparking red in the late afternoon sun. IW-Bio used a number of dwarves on this planet, half the size of their Terran ancestors. This one was called JJ.

"PETAL sent you a long way for nothing. I hate to see you waste your time," Wong said.

Alyn wrapped herself in the towel. "I'd like to decide that for myself, Dr. Wong."

"Rob," he said.

He was as angularly awkward as a teen with a body grown too fast for poise. Tall, black-haired, carelessly dressed in faded blue dungarees, he seemed maybe a few years older than her own just-turned-thirty, with the intense aura of one who'd been down into the pit; some of its darkness still clung to him. Under other circumstances, she'd have found his air of melancholy rather attractive. That was the Celt in her, as her brother would've said.

She closed her eyes. The memory of her brother still hurt; there'd been no time to mourn when the message caught up with her just as she was leaving for Walden. There still wasn't.

"We've identified only primitive species here, you see. And no signs of

intelligence. IW-Bio is trying to save life, not endanger it.” Wong spread his hands wide, inviting her to share his bewilderment: The Good Guys, trying to save life, slandered by a disgruntled ex-employee.

The indigenous life forms on this planet would most likely die out in the process, even if they weren’t directly used in the field trials. Yet where else could IW-Bio have chosen to test its vaccines against such a deadly enemy? Mynah A attacked the unborn of a world’s flora and fauna, maiming and deforming the offspring in animal womb or plant seed, sometimes in hideous fashion. Hijacking unsuspecting travelers, it vaulted from planet to planet across the Orion Arm and had been identified as the culprit in die-backs on half a dozen worlds.

There would’ve been no problem with IW-Bio’s research if the ex-employee hadn’t told People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life that Walden’s oceans contained at least one possibly intelligent species that wasn’t reported. PETAL hired a xenolinguist with dive skills to investigate.

“If you’re right, I won’t find anything” she said. “There’s nothing personal in my investigation, Dr. Wong. But if I find even one sentient ILF, I’ll have to shut you down.”

“Please, call me Rob.”

His accent marked him as not Earth-born, but she couldn’t place it. There were so many human colonies and colony worlds scattered around the Orion Arm she’d lost count.

“Some people here have dedicated their lives to defeating this killer,” he said. “They don’t understand why PETAL is interfering. They’d like to see you fail.”

“Is that a threat?”

He gazed steadily at her for a moment. “I heard the Guild takes good care of its own.”

The Guild of Xenolinguists was far away and not as omnipotent as he seemed to believe. Risk was built into her job; she sometimes thought of it as being a secret agent behind enemy lines. Lingsters were taught to maintain neutrality, and that shielded them from the worst repercussions.

“You’ll have to excuse me now.”

“Sure. I didn’t mean to hold you up.” His smile was lopsided, like a shy schoolboy’s. “I’d like to take some time and show you around. Do you like small islands?”

“I was born on one. Maybe later?”

She walked past him beneath lush foliage toward a cluster of functional cubes perched on stilts over mudflats that exhaled the briny tang of seawater.

Enjoying the luxury of a hot shower in the dormitory cube’s well-equipped communal bathroom, she decided that whoever named this world possessed a sense of humor. The planet had no continents, only long chains of low-lying tropical islands circling the globe in a narrow band near the equator. IW-Bio had selected Walden for research because it resembled the water world on which humans had first encountered Mynah A.

It was a planet carrying only primitive ILFs, she’d been informed, plants and simple forms of animal life sacrificed to the greater good. The argument a man once made to his vengeful god on Earth had been codified into law throughout much of the Orion Arm: finding one sentient species here should spare the planet. Codes spelled out just how high on an intelligence scale an ILF would need to score to earn the judgment of sentience.

But all intelligence should be treated with respect, not just the rarer glory of sentience. IW-Bio’s use of even primitive ILFs for critical research had required dispensation from a tribunal representing many worlds and many sentient races; it would be revoked if Alyn reported violations. PETAL paid well for her services; her account would be satisfyingly thick, even after the Guild took its hefty share.

Back in her room — Wong had assigned her the comfortable guest quarters for visiting IW-Bio execs — she checked the time. Still an hour before the evening meal. She’d seen the brief clip smuggled off-world by the whistle-blower; the complete version should be here in IW-Bio’s computer. She’d thought about checking it this morning after the shuttle dropped her off, but opted to take advantage of good weather instead. Unfortunately, the dive had produced no new evidence.

Not really hungry, and anxious to get on with her work, she decided to forego joining the scientists for supper.

“Computer. Access the survey records of the tursiops JJ.”

Dwarf tursiops had been bred a hundred years ago for convenience, and their intelligence had suffered. They were the miniature poodles of the cetacean world: charming, helpful, but lacking the sharp minds of their wild ancestors. Like lingsters, the dwarves carried embedded chips for communication. However, they didn’t have her ability to shut it down at will, and that meant the computer had witnessed and recorded everything JJ had seen.

She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. “Begin sequence with target

creature.”

Immediately, the computer’s transmission engaged her sensorium, and she was underwater with the tursiops as her mind flooded with images downloaded at dizzying speed. Outlines of rocks and caves emerged, alien plant forms, all accompanied by a continuous stream of data from the computer: depth, oxygen content, nitrogen, temperature. The viewpoint was a dolphin’s eye, disorienting until she got the hang of it, and complicated by the superimposed shimmer of the dolphin’s echolocation probe.

On the sandy floor of a cave, she made out a glistening line of asymmetrical shells apparently from some kind of mollusk. The view zoomed in — her stomach reacted to the illusion as though she’d physically shot rapidly toward the target shells — and now she saw that the edges of some shells seemed to have been deliberately sharpened.

Then: movement in the gloomy interior. A blurry shape. Milliseconds passed. Whatever it was scuttled quickly away and the download stopped.

She considered what JJ had seen. It had been a brief encounter, far too quick for a human to make a judgment. Nor did the existence of tools in itself prove a creature intelligent. The standard criteria for determining sentience from intelligence added that their absence didn’t prove the opposite. Phylogenetic chauvinism had long prevented humans from recognizing forms of intelligence that didn’t require the making or use of tools, as the dolphin tutors at the Mother House relished reminding their pupils.

“Run the image of that ILF, without sonar data.”

The computer complied. Out of the thick darkness which seemed to engulf her, something moved indistinctly.

“Enhance.”

The image in her mind grew larger, sharper. A grayish-blue creature emerged, long tentacles descending directly below a bulbous head ringed with tiny eyes.

“Freeze. And measure.”

A grid appeared, superimposed on the image: the creature was a little under forty centimeters head to tip. She stared at it for a few seconds.

“That’ll do. Exit tursiops records.”

She lay still, thinking about the preliminary pieces of the puzzle. Intelligence without sentience was the norm in the Orion Arm, but occasionally an inexperienced

lingster took a display of the first as proof of the second. If she found the right signs, then IW-Bio must suspend operations until arrangements could be made to shield the ILF from potential harm.

Rob Wong wouldn't like it, but that couldn't be helped.

Early next morning, the small boat bobbed in the swells at the dock as Alyn waited for the dwarf dolphin. The day promised to be hot again; the sun shone in a cloudless turquoise sky shading to cobalt on the horizon. The air itself was almost liquid, sparkling with humidity and streaming with a smell like fish and kelp that reminded her of home in the Hebrides.

She checked the contents of a small pouch, then secured it on her belt. Small, bright metal blocks in assorted shapes — color's usefulness faded with increasing depth as long-wavelength light was attenuated — and a flat piece of plastic that folded out to reveal holes that matched the blocks. Items she used to conduct tests on marine life.

Sound burst over the link. She recognized the distinctive syntax and joyfully breathless tumble of JJ's voice which the computer reproduced faithfully.

“Coming, we, now! Here! Here?”

Like all Delphinidae, JJ used the plural pronoun. The dwarf tursiop's smiling face rose out of water so clear it looked like the cut face of an emerald.

“I'm ready, JJ.”

JJ flashed away toward open sea. The small boat purred to life, and she followed the dolphin out of the shelter of the bay. Yesterday JJ had taken her to an island where the dolphins had sighted the creature, but several hours of searching yielded nothing. Today he guided her past the island to a reef on the northern edge of the archipelago girdling the planet's equator.

“Arriving, we, soon,” JJ's voice said over the link.

Making out a low line of rock, she cut the engine and drifted till she was close enough to drop anchor. The cable slid smoothly over the bow. She pulled the wetskin's face flap up over her head, leaving her nose and mouth free. As soon as she sealed them, the wetskin — a Venatixi design — would begin filtering oxygen out of the water and feeding it straight into her bloodstream through the surface of her skin. Light as spidersilk, the wetskin covered every part of her except her eyes and hands, keeping her warm down to freezing temperatures. She'd tucked the thicker gloves into her belt but didn't expect to need them today.

JJ watched as she fastened fins onto her feet, familiar tursiops smile on his

face. An orca had once confided to her that it really did amuse cetaceans to watch a human put on fins.

She slipped over the edge into the water. When they'd swum a few meters along the reef, she pulled the slick wetskin up, sealing her nose and mouth. The sensation of being smothered seized her as it did each time at this point, triggering an atavistic fear. Her heart rate shot up, and she fought the urge to panic. Then calm returned as oxygen entered her bloodstream directly through the alien skin interface. She adjusted the fit of goggles over her eyes.

The temperature dropped steadily as she descended, following the anchor cable; she stayed warm inside the wetskin. Glancing up, she saw the shadowy hull of her small boat silvered with bubbles. High power lenses enhanced her vision in the gloom; now she could see a marine forest, dominated by a tall plant whose black and yellow fronds were strung with small bumps like an upside down bead curtain. From time to time, something small and monochrome flashed past.

It would be a tragedy if Mynah A escaped from the lab and doomed the unborn life forms of this world. The vectors by which the virus spread from female to female were still not well understood. Her own potential risk was minimal; as a lingster, she'd long ago taken precautions not to have children.

She considered opening the link to the computer to record her impressions, then thought better of it. Although Wong seemed pleasant enough, she felt the need for caution. Anyone with access to the computer could see and hear everything II did; they didn't need to monitor her special viewpoint as well.

Something brushed against her leg. She looked down to see a tiny creature no bigger than her fist, resembling a cross between mouse and small crustacean, with a streamlined carapace, large eyes in a small head, whiskers and tiny feet. The creature bumped against her outstretched hand. Cute little thing, she thought, but not enough intelligence to fear the unknown. Fish on Earth showed the same blank acceptance of divers.

“Finding cave, we, now,” JJ sent. “Approve?”

“Approve.”

The tiny newcomer whisked away.

JJ nosed along the slope of the reef. She followed, parting the tangle of strands carefully, peering through dimness into crevices and caves till her attention snagged on a soft glitter of iridescent shells like a magpie's horde.

It reminded her of an exhibit she'd seen in an anthropology museum: chipped flint ax heads, humankind's first primitive tools. She'd been no more than eight or

nine, but she remembered sensing the sweep of human history that stretched from ax heads to starships. “The roots of language,” her Guild teacher told them, “leave no artifacts, but have the same humble origins.”

Did the ILF she sought eat the shells’ occupants first, or did it merely scavenge the discards? Carnivore or omnivore, the likelihood of intelligence would be higher than if it were an herbivore.

Movement at the corner of her eye caught her attention. Lifting her gaze, she found herself face to face with the creature itself, its ring of eyes glowing milkily like a pearl headband in a weak shaft of light. A cephalopod of some kind. Or a decapod without the chitinous carapace; she counted ten long tentacles waving frantically. It seemed as astonished to see her as she was to see it. For a second it floated in the cave’s entrance, rotating slowly as if allowing each eye in the circle to observe her in turn. Then it changed shape, the bulbous, almost transparent head elongating, the tentacles clustering straight together, and it shot back headfirst into the darkness.

But it didn’t go very far. She caught the gleam of luminous eyes watching her from inside the cave.

JJ nudged her arm with his hard beak. “Approve?”

“Approve.”

She studied the shells, wondering what the creature used them for. Formation of goals, problem solving, ability to learn from experience the shells probably represented several of the basic criteria on the scale. Intelligence led to tool-making, and tool-using increased intelligence.

One of the quickest tests was curiosity, the great driver of Homo sapiens’ ascent from beasthood. Opening the pouch on her belt, she took out a shiny metal pyramid the size of a pigeon’s egg and laid it down beside the shells, then backed off a little way and waited.

At first the decapod did nothing. Then, so fast she almost didn’t see it happen, the creature emerged, a tentacle whipped out, seized the pyramid, and withdrew.

Problem solving came next. Cautiously, she slid a couple of centimeters into the cave. The creature didn’t move. She came in a little further. This time, it stood straight up, all ten tentacles stiff— more comical than scary — and she halted, not wanting to frighten it.

Below the circle of eyes at one point, there was a mouth, hardly more than a horizontal slit. The mouth gaped open in what might be a threat gesture, and the creature’s head lit up with green bioluminescence. It reminded her of her small

niece's attempt at a Halloween ghost puppet, a white scarf over a crumpled ball of paper for a head, and a clumsily inked mouth.

Settling cross-legged on the sandy floor of the cave, she held out both hands, palm up: No threat. The decapod settled back down too, its eyes staring at her warily. She wondered whether she was looking at a male or a female, or if indeed the decapods were even a two-sex species and not a one or a three. So much was unknown here; for once, she was the first human to interact with a new species. The thought excited her.

She reached for the pouch to retrieve another item. The decapod startled and backed away. She waited, motionless, and the creature flowed forward a few centimeters. She touched the pouch, and again it backed off. Obviously, something about the pouch alarmed the decapod, and she wasn't going to get very far using it.

On the little finger of her left hand she wore a tiny silver ring made of crumpled metal foil, a good luck charm from her brother's small daughter the last time she saw her family on Skye. They'd broiled fresh-caught fish on the beach; then the child had taken the silver wrapping the condiments had come in and fashioned a gift. The little ring had been on Alyn's finger ever since. The hardest part of being a lingster was having to accept that she'd never see her family again. She'd thought she'd made her peace with that loss, until news of her brother's death reopened the wound. But she had a job to do here and wouldn't indulge in sentimentality.

As the creature watched, she slipped the ring off and placed it on her palm, a shiny temptation. Slowly the decapod extended a tentacle toward her until it made contact; before it could grasp the ring, she closed her fingers and the creature backed off. Now she put her other hand out beside the first, palms down, offering the decapod both fists. For a few seconds, nothing happened; then the tentacle inched forward, hesitating over each fist in turn. The creature hovered close enough now for Alyn to see the gill flaps working on either side of the slit mouth.

The decapod lightly brushed the hand concealing the ring and waited. She turned her palm up and uncurled her fingers. This time it didn't snatch at the trinket, but slid the tip of one tentacle through the ring and held it up. Alyn saw a line of sucker pads along the arm's length like a row of tiny ornamental buttons on a woman's sleeve. Then the decapod took fright again and fled deep into the cave.

"Happy, you?" JJ asked.

"Yes, happy."

"Returning, we, tomorrow. Approve?"

"Approve."



From the pouch on her belt, she took a marine camera, two centimeters long, and attached the suction pad on its back to the cave wall. On land, the computer would record what the camera observed in her absence. The creature's eating habits would yield useful clues; omnivores had more movement programs in their brains, and that led to mental versatility. Its social interaction, if any, would tell her a lot too.

Oceans had been the womb of life on many planets in the Orion Arm and had nurtured intelligence in their depths. The preliminary evidence for the same process happening on Walden seemed convincing. Alyn was satisfied with the day's work.

THAT EVENING, she stood on the raised deck in front of the dormitory building and began the basic forms of moving meditation, harmonizing movement and breath. A cluster of tiny golden moons hardly bigger than river pebbles arced over an indigo ocean, but together with the vast sweep of the galaxy overhead their light was brilliant. A warm breeze carried the rich scent of salt marsh and the exotic perfume of night-blooming trees; they were short, more like tall bushes, with clusters of grapefruit-sized blossoms that suddenly erupted after sunset directly from the furred trunks.

"Old Chinese discipline," Wong's voice said behind her. Tonight he wore a midnight blue jumpsuit that sparked silver as he moved, and his black hair gleamed. While his clothing was more elegant than yesterday's, his posture seemed if anything more awkward.

"Tai Chi," he explained.

"With a name like Wong, I guess you'd know."

He leaned with his back against the wooden rail and watched her. Something in the casual pose reminded her of her brother, black-haired too.

"My grandparents practiced every day," Wong said. "But I don't really see the point of clinging to rituals just because one's ancestors believed in them, you see."

She said neutrally, "The Guild teaches many disciplines to manage stress. This one works well for me."

"I suppose stress is part of a lingster's life."

Glancing at him, she read the tense clutch of his face muscles, the twitch that had developed in the fingers gripping the rail. He was uneasy in her presence, as if she might notice he'd forgotten to shave or had put on mismatched socks. There probably weren't many female visitors to Walden on whom he could practice conversation, but she wouldn't rule out a more ominous cause for the tension he displayed just yet.

“The color of your tunic matches your eyes,” he said suddenly.

She looked down at her thigh-length, moss green tunic and matching tights. They were old and comfortable rather than stylish, crumpled from being stuffed into her duffel bag, and she doubted he could tell the color of her eyes by starlight. She didn't know whether to feel flattered or amused; she settled on suspicious and stopped her practice.

“Did you come out here to discuss the color of my eyes?”

He ducked his head, looking embarrassed.

“Where are you from originally?” she asked. “Not Earth, obviously.”

“I was born on Suchow, in the Leopard system.”

Suchow had been one of the first worlds to be devastated by Mynah A as it spread. She said, “That explains your passion to defeat this virus. It must've been very bad.”

“So you must realize that no one would hold it against you if you found you couldn't satisfy PETAL.”

“What're you saying?”

“Better divers than you experience hallucinations.”

“You think I hallucinated the decapod?”

“No. But you might be exaggerating its abilities, you see.”

“It appears to be intelligent. The question is, how far up the scale?”

He said warily, “Not as far up as humans.”

“Obviously! But I need time to study it.”

“Time's what we don't have, you see. You must trust IW-Bio.”

She noted the recurrent speech tic. She'd had a teacher who believed a guilty conscience tried to draw attention to its sins through such tics. What was she supposed to “see” in Rob Wong?

“The tech who informed PETAL bore a grudge,” he said. “We'd fired him. You don't trust an unreliable witness like that, do you?”

“I’ll trust my own observations.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said, “I want to show you something.”

He took her arm as if they were old friends, and they set off toward the lab buildings squatting dark against the star-thronged sky. Tonight they reminded her of boxes of explosives she’d once seen stacked up along a disused runway on a planet devastated by civil war. She half expected to see the fading red danger sign painted on their sides. Instead, they paused at a door displaying a hazard symbol. He palmed the lock.

“Why the need for security? I didn’t think you allowed many visitors.”

“When you’re battling a killer,” he explained, “you take every precaution to keep your personnel from accidental contamination. This serves to reinforce caution.”

“I thought males were immune?”

“They could be carriers. We don’t know enough about how the virus spreads to take chances.”

She entered the chilly room after him. On the far wall, a row of orange, full-body biohazard suits waited for users. He picked up a palm-sized key pad. Over the lab bench, a screen lit, and she saw what appeared to be a plate of warped, olive-colored spaghetti with irregular black swellings, squirming like a nest of snakes. The sight of it made her stomach queasy.

“What is it?”

“Mynah A. More virulent in its own way than our one-time nemeses, the Ebola virus and Tam-Kizlyk’s myxovirus. Instead of killing its host, Mynah A slaughters the next generation.”

She shuddered. “It looks like Medusa’s hair.”

“We have to do everything we can to destroy this one, you see. Before it destroys us.”

“I understand your mission, Rob, but that doesn’t mean I can allow you to risk a possibly intelligent species —”

“Nobody can understand who wasn’t on Suchow!” he interrupted sharply. “Mynah A maimed every child born in the colony, my firstborn included. You can’t imagine what he looked like. There were no ears — no eyes in his eye sockets — his

tiny hands —” He broke off and passed his own hand over his face. “My wife drowned our baby. Herself with him.”

“I’m so sorry....”

He switched the display off. “Human lives are more important than everything else when you fight an enemy like that.”

There really wasn’t anything else she could say. The strict rules of procedure imposed by the Codes seemed out of touch with tragedy like his.

Wong gazed at her, and she read the pain still etched on his face. “All I’m asking for is a little more time. Couldn’t you delay your investigation a few days? I’m so close!”

She shook her head. “I won’t debate this with you, Rob.”

In silence, they went to supper in the mess hall. She was glad for something that prevented an argument neither could win. Besides Wong, there were three other scientists and seven techs, all male but not all human, and most of them treated her courteously. Two of the human scientists, however, ate in silence, avoiding eye contact with her and leaving the mess early. The others engaged in some goodnatured teasing that PETAL preferred endangered worms and slime mold to people. Wong didn’t have much to say.

Back in her room, she prepared for sleep, then remembered the marine camera she’d planted. A prickle of anticipation ran over her. Maybe she’d be lucky here on Walden, and not only do her job for PETAL but also find something to interest the Guild.

On command, the computer downloaded what the lens had seen. Several minutes of empty film ensued. Then, the decapod appeared, its tentacles holding a struggling mouse-fish. A blur of movement. The decapod appeared to be hacking the fish’s carapace apart with one of the sharpened shells. Bloody gobbets of flesh drifted past the camera’s eye as the decapod worked, the light catching an occasional twinkle from her niece’s foil ring.

She watched a long minute of the butchering activity then stopped the download.

The next two dives yielded no results. The decapod did not return to the cave, and JJ was unable to locate any of the creatures at the reef or any of the nearby islands. Tension strung her nerves tight; she couldn’t do her job for PETAL if she couldn’t find the ILF. Rob Wong seemed to be getting the delay he’d asked for with no help from her. But she felt another frustration; there was information here the Guild would value, she was certain, but it seemed to be slipping through her fingers.

Something about the assignment itself began to bother her. Several times she went over the computer record of the dolphin's original sighting that had sparked the fired tech's complaint. JJ hadn't really seen much at all, so why had the tech been suspicious enough to report it to PETAL? Something seemed wrong here.

Late in the evening of the second day, as she scanned blank hours recorded by the remote in the decapod's cave, someone knocked at her door.

"Is this late enough?" A dimple came and went in Wong's smile when she opened the door.

"Excuse me?"

"You told me 'later' when I offered to show you around the island. And I noticed you skipped supper tonight. So I've packed some cold food and a bottle of wine. I thought perhaps we could have a midnight picnic."

She'd been working hard for many months; she was overdue for some R&R. And she could take suspicion of everyone here too far. "Well, why not?"

He led her along a narrow, sandy trail, ducking under a thicket of the short, fragrant trees, to the low ridge that formed the island's spine. From up here they had a 360 degree view. The fiery white torrent of the Milky Way flowed over their heads and down to the unseen horizon. Below them the drab buildings of the IW-Bio compound rested on their stilts, softened by the starlight into a flock of sleeping herons.

"Are Walden's other islands this lovely?" she asked.

"For the most part. Some are too small to be anything more than bare rocks." He unpacked a makeshift picnic basket.

She glanced at the sea, a mirror image of the sky, full of drowned stars; it was almost too lovely to be real, a magnificent stage set for an obvious seduction scene. Yet she couldn't see any harm in enjoying it as long as she didn't forget her duty.

"So much beauty in the universe," he said. "And also so much pain."

"You sound like my Guild teachers."

He grinned, and the shy schoolboy reappeared in his face. "Would you believe I once considered becoming a lingster?"

She bit into crusty bread and asked with her mouth full, "Why didn't you?"

“Too old already. Twelve or so. They would’ve trained me to be a translator, that’s all. That wasn’t good enough for me. I wanted to forge interface, break the hidden codes of language, be a pioneer.”

She sympathized with his reluctance to settle for second-best. Teasing the secrets of language out of interface was a high joy and an addictive experience.

He filled a wineglass and placed it beside her. “What do you like best about your job?”

“That’s easy. There’s a special moment right at the heart of interface. Lingsters call it ‘communion,’ because it really does feel sacred. There’s a sense of becoming one with the Other. Transcendence. Lately though, I’ve been doing this kind of work, running tests, establishing sentience. Interesting, but I miss interface.”

“Tell me about the decapod.”

“Not much to tell. There’re a lot of different kinds of intelligence in the Arm. Some are easier for us to spot and deal with than others. I don’t have enough evidence one way or the other just yet.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said, “You’re doing a very necessary job.”

“And so are you,” she said. A little embarrassed, she looked away from him. “Please don’t think I don’t value what you’re trying to do here.”

“Yet you were hired as my watchdog, perhaps to the point of shutting me down.”

His words were sad, not accusatory as hers might’ve been in similar circumstances. She had an urge to take hold of his hand and comfort him, but she hesitated to act on it. Her career interfered with any chance to form long-lasting relationships with anyone, and she’d long ago learned it was less painful not to start friendships she couldn’t develop.

Perhaps that’s what the Guild meant when it cautioned against allowing emotion to color either the interface or one’s life. The Guild was certainly too sophisticated to believe it was necessary — or even possible — for a lingster to shut emotion out altogether. But she wasn’t the kind of volatile personality who would fly apart easily; she could handle her feelings. She turned back to gaze at him.

He leaned over and took her by the shoulders, drawing her face to his. His kiss was gentle, tentative. She tasted the warmth of wine and the freshness of salt breeze on his lips. It had been a long time since she’d been attracted to a man; awareness of what she’d given up for her career flared suddenly in her mind. Her

heartbeat quickened and she closed her eyes like a diver entering cool water on a hot day.

What am I doing? she thought suddenly. It didn't take a lingster to know what the kiss communicated.

As if he sensed her hesitation, he pulled back and laid his cheek against hers. "We're on different sides, you and I, Alyn."

"This isn't a war," she objected.

"Sometimes it seems like one. I have to defeat Mynah A. I have no choice."

The sense of what this battle against the virus meant to him cut her. Certainly there were standards humans must observe, behavior that was important; she didn't question that. But was a slavish following of rulebooks written by dry scholars on benign worlds the best way to face real life? The soldier on the battlefield experienced the danger more immediately than the strategist safe at home.

She said slowly, "I haven't found anything conclusive yet, but if I do, would anything really be lost if I waited a few days to report it to PETAL?"

"You don't have that option," he said.

Stung that he should be the one thinking of duty, she pulled away and emptied her wineglass out onto the grass in silence. But after a moment she decided he was correct, and she was ashamed of her weakness.

He stood up and held out his hand, which she ignored. Neither spoke again as they gathered up the remains of the picnic and re-packed the basket.

Early next morning, Wong observed her preparations from the far end of the dock, his parka snapping in a stiff breeze. He didn't offer to help. She considered going over to speak to him, then decided it was better not to encourage the feelings that had stirred yesterday. He hadn't come to breakfast, but she'd found a triangular shell no bigger than her little fingernail on her plate, a hazy mauve peace offering. The shell had a small hole drilled at its apex. Back in her room, she rummaged through her duffel bag to find a length of cord, then slipped the trinket quickly over her neck and under the wetskin before she could change her mind.

The weather was cooler this morning and overcast, with the wind teasing the waves into whitecaps. Today they were going to search the reef again since it seemed to be the best bet. The boat bumped at the dock as she fumbled with the mooring lines. Far out, almost around the point of the main island, she saw another boat, larger than the one she'd been assigned.

Glancing back at Wong, she saw that one of the other scientists had come to stand beside him. The two men talked animatedly, but the wind blew their words away. As she watched, they both turned and hurried off the dock.

Putting Wong out of her mind, she started the boat's engine and followed JJ through waves as dark as burgundy wine. The further out they went, the rougher the sea became. Spray flew past her in a fine, shining mist. She touched a button and the hydrofoil rose up off the water, gathering speed.

"Waiting, you, here," the dolphin sent as they neared the place where she'd seen the decapod. "Scouting, we. Approve?"

"Approve."

The hydrofoil settled down to the surface again, bobbing in heavy chop. JJ disappeared under the waves and Alyn waited. After a while, he returned, chattering in alarm.

"Looking, we. Finding/not! Coming, storm. Going/back, we? Approve?"

She picked up fieldglasses and searched a horizon which rose and fell monotonously. The boat the scientists were using was still visible; they were as far from the main island as she, apparently not concerned by the weather. That seemed encouraging.

She started the engine again and pattered slowly, meeting the waves at an angle. In the lee of the island she dropped anchor. This morning she opened the computer link, wanting a record of what she might find.

Settling the goggles over her eyes and pulling up the face flap, she slipped over the side of the boat into dark water that seemed sharply colder than yesterday even through the protective layer of her wetskin, though not as cold as the North Atlantic where she'd learned to dive. She followed the anchor cable down.

The dolphin led her through the now-familiar curtain forest. Small, triangular creatures with mottled shells rapidly buried themselves in sand at her approach. No decapods. JJ nosed into all the possible spaces where they might hide.

Then she suddenly caught sight of one hovering a few meters ahead. She advanced cautiously. It stayed put, one tentacle curled around a flat shell. Now the distance between them was no greater than arm's length. Something glimmered faintly — the foil ring. Her heart hammered.

The decapod extended the shell with the sharpened edge, and when she hesitated, placed it on the sand in front of her. Careful not to frighten the ILF, she picked the shell up. It had been polished smooth till it gleamed like mother-of-pearl.



Two shell gifts in one day, she thought; perhaps that was a good omen.

This time when she reached for the pouch the decapod didn't dart away. She put the shell inside and cautiously tumbled the board and the shapes onto the sand. The decapod spun slowly in place, watching her from each of its many eyes in turn.

Then JJ swooped in front of her and she heard the garble of his transmission over the link.

“Going/back, now! Going/quick! Approve?”

He flashed away before she could answer him. The decapod, startled by the dolphin's agitated movement, disappeared in a cloud of sand.

Dwarf dolphins were skittish at times, she knew; JJ had simply chosen a poor moment to tire of working. She certainly wasn't ready to leave now. The creature had demonstrated more with that exchange of gifts than she could've hoped, but the Guild insisted on redundancy. She arranged the test set she'd brought in a line beside the plastic board and waited.

After a while, her patience was rewarded. The decapod came back, hovered over the shapes, selected a cone, and inserted it into the appropriate hole in the board. Then as if to demonstrate its scorn at such an infantile test of its abilities, it rapidly filled the remaining holes with correct shapes, spun in place, eyes glowing, and shot away again.

Enough evidence for PETAL to block IW-Bio immediately. And more — the scholars at the Mother House would be interested in this previously unknown intelligent being. The Guild collected languages and treasured evidence of sentience wherever it was found. Her pleasure was tainted by regret for what it would mean to Rob, but he'd reminded her she had no alternative.

Time to go. Immediately she saw that she'd obviously swum too far from the anchor cable today; she couldn't find it anywhere. Better to surface somewhere, she decided, and then look for the boat. She drifted slowly back up through black water.

The chop slapped against her face as she surfaced. It was late afternoon and the weather had worsened; gray clouds roiled overhead and thunder boomed in the distance. The sea rose and fell, tossing her like seaweed. Pushing the wetskin back off her head, she trod water, gasping at the shock of cold air that flooded her lungs. She looked round for the boat, anxious to get on board and set out for dry land. She couldn't see it.

“JJ! Where are you? Where's the boat? What's happened to it?” she sent.

“Seeking, seeking! Help. Men. Boat. Help. Approve?”

The dwarf’s panic transmitted itself to her. She saw heaving walls of dark water in every direction. The boat couldn’t have drifted away; she’d anchored it securely, and the anchor cable was made of flexible plastisteel, strong enough to withstand just about anything. It wouldn’t just give way. The cable would have to be deliberately cut. As a large wave lifted her, she searched the horizon for the other dive boat she’d seen earlier. It was gone.

“They’d like to see you fail,” he’d warned her. Somebody wanted her to drown out here.

JJ appeared beside her, nudging her arm. The thing to do was dive back under the turbulence; the Venatixi wetskin would keep her warm and supplied with oxygen indefinitely. But she was tired now, and the thought of submerging again into the darkness became suddenly unappealing; she’d rather take her chances on the surface. She considered the distance they’d come today. The main island couldn’t be that far away.

Pounded by the force of the waves, she made little progress. JJ nosed under her, lifting her. It was slow going; the reef sank out of view behind them, but she still couldn’t see the coastline of the main island. After a while, a larger rock loomed ahead of her, and she scraped her shins. Maybe if she pulled herself up, gained a little height, she could check how far offshore she was. Clinging to the slick surface with one hand, she slipped off the fins and tossed them higher up. Then she found a toehold in a crack just below the waterline and pulled herself up. She couldn’t see the shore in the gloom.

“JJ. Go. Get help,” she said. “Fetch Rob Wong.”

The dwarf darted off. Nothing for it but to wait until the sea calmed down. As she heaved herself out of the water, her right foot caught in the crevice she’d wedged it into, and her ankle wrenched painfully before coming free. She collapsed face down on the rock, gasping as waves washed over her.

On the horizon, the black sky split open with jagged lightning. Rain stung her face, but the storm seemed to be moving away from her. The rock offered little shelter; she couldn’t stay here long. She felt drained, woozy with pain —

She jerked alert, scared of losing consciousness and being swept off the rock before JJ could fetch Rob.

Exhausted, she yawned and closed her eyes again for just a moment.

SHE AWOKES TO FIND herself almost upside down, legs higher than her head, arms dangling over the rock into the sea. Her injured ankle ached. She’d been

dreaming. Her brother sat in the heather on Skye with his little daughter, handing the child triangular seashells and naming them. Dwarf dolphins called to them from a jade-green sea.

“Language per se,” the Guild taught, “is not a marker of sentience, though no sentience occurs without it.” To which Magister Tien had added a footnote in the Guild’s second century: “We haven’t enough samples yet to consider this an absolute.”

A jolt of cold water splashed her face, bringing her fully into the present. Her body cramped and every muscle complained, but the wetskin had kept her warm through the night. Judging by the faint streak of salmon pink on the charcoal sky it must be close to dawn. A sharp breeze swept the remnants of last night’s storm out to sea.

She pushed back from the water and attempted to shift the position of her legs. The uninjured leg seemed to be stuck at the high point on the rock, and she struggled to get it loose. Something held it fast. A thin, ropelike something.

A decapod crouched above her, tentacles spread wide, holding on to the slick surface. Its body had adopted the mossy color of algae-covered rock. The tentacle anchoring her leg wore a ring.

She waggled her leg and the decapod released her. A tremor passed through the creature and the mouth slit opened; it gave a hoarse, breathless kind of moan, then lapsed into silence. The cool breeze carried a pungent smell to her nostrils of rotting kelp and musk.

“Thank you,” she said, hoping the decapod would understand the impulse if not the words.

She righted herself and sat on the rock, left knee clasped under her chin, the other straight out, ankle throbbing. The sprained ankle was swollen and she guessed it wouldn’t support weight. The wetskin had stretched tight over it like an elastic bandage; otherwise, the swelling would’ve been worse.

Dogs on Earth had been known to save their owners’ lives, and altruism wasn’t unknown in other intelligent ILFs around the Arm. The Guild never accepted that as sole proof of sentience. There were far more rigorous standards this amphibian would have to meet to earn that judgment. For a moment, she entertained the fantasy of the decapod installed in the Mother House and her teachers studying it.

The decapod touched her arm. Farther up the rock, she saw what looked at first like a small twist of sodden, gray cord. Then she realized she was looking at another decapod, much smaller than the first, perhaps an infant. There seemed to be

something wrong with it.

She crawled cautiously up the treacherous rock. The adult decapod moaned again. The infant didn't move. She counted the tentacles twice. Six, not ten; two seemed normal, but the others were stunted and misshapen. The infant's slit mouth was open, and pus oozed from the lifeless eyes.

From the top of the rock, a large, tree-covered island became visible, and she could see the stark buildings of the compound looming above the mud. The enormity of IW-Bio's carelessness hit her. At her feet, the decapod wrapped its tentacles around the dead infant. She hoped this intelligent animal didn't understand the death sentence it had been given because any future offspring it might have were doomed too.

There had to be consequences. The fired tech was right. IW-Bio must've known of the existence of the decapods; they must've realized they couldn't keep the virus in check for long. She often felt the Guild was unnecessarily harsh in the way it trained lingsters, yet it was always ethical. The Guild had written the Codes the worlds of the Arm subscribed to, and the Codes had been trampled here. IW-Bio must be brought to trial.

And Rob too?

Standing cautiously on the slick stone, weight on her good leg, she contemplated the main island. Still a fair distance away, but she was a strong swimmer. Would be, she corrected herself, if she hadn't sprained her ankle. She looked for the fins she'd tossed on the rock; the waves had apparently washed them off during the night, so she'd have to make the swim without their help. And if JJ encountered anyone other than Wong, he might not be allowed to come back for her. In any case, she couldn't wait here any longer.

She lowered herself over the edge of the rock into the water and started swimming. She hadn't gone far when she became aware of the decapod beside her, its body inflating and deflating like a bellows.

The sun burned high overhead when her toes scraped on the bottom, and little remained of yesterday's cloud cover. Low tide under the pilings left the lab buildings high above water. Beside her, the decapod bobbed in the surf, sunlight spangling the bulbous head.

"This is as far as you go," she explained, touching the amphibian lightly. The skin felt warm under her fingers. "I have to do the rest myself."

On the long swim she'd had a chance to think. Lingsterring was a dangerous game, and lingsters often found themselves in jeopardy of one sort or another. Fortunately, the Guild had anticipated emergencies such as this, and just as there

were protocols for interface turned suddenly hazardous, there were procedures for persuading locked computers or hostile AIs to send a mayday message if a lingster could find no other way.

Using her link to connect through the computer was out of the question, for whoever had left her out there to drown might intercept her message. Instead, she'd need to find a key pad like Rob had used to send a private, coded message. If she could find her way into a lab she could probably locate one easily.

Cold water had helped her ankle. She picked her way over ooze that stank of rot and decay into shadow under the pilings. From the position of the sun she guessed it must be about lunchtime, and with luck, few people would be about.

The suck and squelch of mud behind her made her turn. The decapod made its way up the beach, walking like a spider, head high over skinny legs, its body mottled brown now like the mud, trailing its sour odor. One tentacle touched her leg as if in supplication, and the slit mouth opened silently.

On the underside of one of the smaller buildings, she saw a trapdoor used to haul items out of the water at high tide. She pushed — it wasn't locked. Heart thumping, she opened the trapdoor partway, listening for sounds but hearing none. Cautiously, she hooked her fingers over the frame and pulled herself up.

The room was unoccupied and seemed to be an office, not a lab. She eased herself inside and looked around. A desk, a swivel chair, a screen on the wall, a shelf heaped with computer cubes and a line of six two-liter plastiglass jars used to keep lab samples. On the desk top lay a large collection of shells, sorted according to color and shape, as if some potential Darwin had been at work here establishing a taxonomy of alien mollusks in his spare time. The cool air carried the metallic signature of unknown chemicals.

Then her gaze caught on one of the lab jars. Floating in the clear preserving fluid was a grotesque little creature. The limbs were all of different lengths, and the head was elongated and twisted, almost unrecognizable. Only the ring of blank eye sockets marked it as an infant decapod.

At first, she didn't make sense of what she was seeing. Then, in growing dismay, she glanced from this misshapen thing to the jar beside it on the shelf. The monster it contained was worse than the first. The same discovery awaited her all down the row.

"Mynah's children," a lingster had called them long ago: casualties of the virus. But these pathetic victims couldn't have been the result of accidental infection. Now it was obvious why someone had tried to kill her by taking her boat. She'd worried the virus could escape by chance, but they'd wanted to hide something far worse. Here were the results, she thought, displayed like obscene trophies.

The adult decapod pulled itself through the trapdoor and seemed to gaze at the jars too. They were evidence of an atrocity the Codes had been designed to prevent, Codes which IW-Bio had criminally ignored. Alyn stood clumsily, blundering into the side of the desk, her vision blurred from tears she was too angry to shed. PETAL had been right to send her, but it was too late.

A key pad that would fit in the palm of her hand lay on the desk beside the ordered shells. She seized it and touched her fingers rapidly to its surface. Her fingers shook as she tried to enter the sequence without error and it took several attempts to get it right. Communication over such immense distances was not instantaneous. Her signal must bounce at light speed from relay to relay across space, and the reply would hardly travel faster.

Then she heard the sound of a door opening. Fear laced through her anger as she turned. Rob Wong stood in the doorway, wearing a pair of faded work dungarees. Behind him, she glimpsed a sky now blue and cloudless. Relief flooded over her.

“Thank goodness it’s you! Somebody tried to kill me —” She broke off, belatedly realizing he had a gun in one hand.

His face was almost as ashen in color as the decapod had first been. “What’re you doing in my office?”

“Your office?” She stared at him, realization growing. “Then these —”

“I tried to explain. I couldn’t find the right words. These were the result of my failures.”

His failures. He used the word so casually. Anger brought hot blood up into her face. “The Codes explicitly forbid —”

“What option did I have? Vaccines have to be tested, and there’s no way to test them without ultimately sacrificing somebody. Computer modeling can never be the whole answer. Would you rather I’d endangered a human subject?”

Don’t get involved in false argument, she warned herself. Concentrate on duty. In the face of this disaster, PETAL would want her to save however many decapods she could. “Where’re you keeping the adult subjects?”

“There aren’t any left.” He began to pace the office nervously as he spoke, the gun, forgotten, pointing at the floor, the fingers of his free hand clenching and unclenching. “I couldn’t free them once they were infected. You must understand that, Alyn. They carried the virus. Those that survived, I had to kill. Don’t think it was easy for me! I would rather have killed myself.”

The anguish she'd seen on his face when he'd spoken of his own dead child had come back, and she believed his words. What he'd done sickened her, yet she couldn't avoid weighing the alternative he'd looked at, the trail of horrifying death the virus left from world to world, his own fatally damaged child.

He stopped pacing abruptly and glanced at the decapod crouched at Alyn's feet. His voice trembled as he said, "They're clever animals, you see. One escaped."

Surely no one understood the nightmare better than Rob; small wonder he'd been over-zealous stalking this killer. And the last time she'd seen him, she reminded herself, she'd been eager to compromise too.

"What were you doing in here?" His gaze turned to the key pad she still held. "You wanted to send your report to PETAL to shut me down?" He smiled without humor. "You're too late. Yesterday we confirmed our first tentative results. We've found the vaccine to stop Mynah A."

He'd pulled it off, conquered the killer. Who was she to say there was another way to win the war? Who could count the dead before another way was found? What had happened here was reprehensible, even in the service of such an admirable goal, but she'd lost the right to judge him. Yet she knew someone would, someone who might not take into account the torment that had driven him. The Guild in its monastic isolation taught its youngsters to follow logic. Life outside the Mother House was not so unambiguous.

"They'll need my testimony against you," she said slowly. "I could refuse to give it..."

He stood by his desk, picking up and replacing tiny shells one by one, searching for something. He said quietly, "You weren't supposed to come back."

Somewhere in the conversation she'd already guessed the truth; she felt more sadness than shock. "You knew they would take my boat."

"I'm sorry. It wasn't personal. I like you. Maybe if we'd met somewhere else \_\_\_"

He held out the mate to the shell he'd given her earlier, and she could imagine the tiny mauve pair hanging from her ear lobes. She put her hand up between them, rejecting the gift. He replaced the shell on the desk without comment.

"The work was my responsibility," he said. "I accept the consequences of violating the Codes. But I had to protect my team. You see, I'd observed certain behavior— The decapods seemed to be signaling to each other."

Language was the greatest tool of them all. Even in the midst of catastrophe, her training spoke: “Tell me how?”

“Some kind of visual system. Kinesic. Light pulses.”

She thought of the decapod’s display when she’d alarmed it on that first encounter. Given time, she could’ve learned to communicate. She leaned against the shelf behind her, and her shoulder brushed against one of the jars; she heard the slosh of preserving fluid as the contents shifted. Her stomach knotted at the slaughter and the lost opportunity both.

“I knew you would’ve decided they’re sentient,” he said. “And I couldn’t take the risk of your trying to shut me down. It wasn’t my finest decision.”

He damned himself further with every word he spoke. He’d killed a sentient species in his quest to defeat Mynah A, and he would’ve killed her too because she stood in his way; he should pay for his actions. Yet some treacherous part of her still insisted he was a good man — She felt as if she were being ripped in two.

She was a lingster; she would cling to what she’d been taught. She closed her eyes briefly as the lingster’s mantra rose in her mind. “I am a vessel — I am a reed — Through me flows the meaning of the universe —”

The Guild had never let her down and it didn’t now. Calmer, she said, “Rob, put the gun down.”

“Several hundred years ago on Earth, they hammered out a doctrine that specified what humans could do to each other in the name of science. That’s where your Codes began.”

She stared at him, unable to respond to his words. In her hand, the key pad pinged. She ignored it.

“In my desk you’ll find a signed letter exonerating the rest of the team,” he said. “I accept full and sole responsibility for what was done here.”

When her eyes recovered from the dazzling flash of the laser, she saw him lying below the row of jars with their pathetic contents. There was a small, round, bloodless hole in his right temple. Shaking, she knelt beside him. She bent down, feeling for a pulse in his neck but found none. As she did, she felt the scrape of the tiny shell under her wetskin and pulled it out. She coiled the cord and closed his dead fingers around the shell.

The decapod came spider-walking toward her, its odor making her gag. She stood up, hollow as an empty shell, but there were things that must be taken care of.



The decapod had suffered enough; time for it to go home. Then she had a thought: what if there were none of its kind left for it to find out there? She'd only encountered the one decapod, easily identifiable with the child's ring. Perhaps they'd been a small population to begin with. Since this one escaped after being infected, it could've spread the virus, and a vaccine would be too late to help it or any others. To return it to the ocean might be to doom it to a lonely existence, last of its kind.

The decapod extended a tentacle and touched her leg. Then it walked slowly toward the trapdoor.

“Wait!”

If she took it back to Earth, the Guild would care for it. The knowledge the Guild gained from studying the decapod's language might be invaluable, perhaps even leading to discoveries as magnificent in their way as Rob's vaccine. Each language contained part of the answer to the great mystery of mind. Every new one encountered in the Arm was a cause for rejoicing in the Mother House. What metaphoric explanations for Time's passage might a dendropod contribute? Perhaps no one-way arrows for a being that saw front and back together. And how would this amphibian's spatial orientation affect its explanation of Space? Something of value could come out of this nightmare.

On Earth, it would be an exhibit, a curiosity, and more than ever alone.

As if it understood, the decapod hesitated. Alyn gazed down at it, remembering how it had accompanied her back to the lab. If she truly believed the decapod was sentient — and how could she not? — then it wasn't her decision to make. Sentient beings were autonomous, even when they chose to go to their own death. In the universe, the Guild taught, there was no brighter glory than the mind's shining.

The little creature touched her ankle again, the circle of milky eyes studying her. Rob had done his duty as he saw it — she added the loss of Rob to that of her brother, to be mourned over later, when there was time — Now she must do hers.

She held up her arms in a gesture of release. The decapod gave a small shudder, then lowered itself through the trapdoor in the floor and disappeared. The last thing Alyn saw was the glitter of the foil ring.

\* \* \* \*

By Sheila Finch

Among our most popular stories from 1998 were Sheila Finch's two Lingster stories, “Reading the Bones” and “The Naked Face of God.” Ms. Finch recently finished a Young Adult novel entitled *Tiger in the Sky*, and now she's working on

more episodes from the annals of the Guild of Xenolinguists. This new story is one of the best: a stirring tale of research and intrigue on a watery planet —