

## SHEILA FINCH - Out of the mouths

THE OLD MAN WAS WADING, net in hand, tending his fish ponds, when the visitor arrived. He hadn't heard the approach of an aircar. Tattered curls of autumnal mist caught in the low boughs of oak and alder; patches of night darkness still lingered on the estuary beyond the fish ponds; the rich, dark smell of river mud rose like a favorite perfume to his nose. He transferred the net to his left hand and shaded his eyes with the right, bending forward from the waist. "Heron," his students had once called him, affectionately mocking his awkward height. The name had stuck.

"Good morning." A small, brown, middle-aged woman stood on the opposite bank.

There was something clipped and suppressed in her speech; he understood from it that she didn't like him. By his leg, a fish jumped, a gleam of dull gold above gray glass. He watched the ripples spreading, aware the woman watched him.

"Do you know who I am?"

He sensed the itch of irritation that ran through her words. He studied the woman's face, reading small physical clues that gave the lie to words as he'd taught his students to do. The visitor was unafraid of tough decisions but not blessed with patience. She was annoyed at having to be here. Yet he'd known for a long time that she would come some day.

"You are Magistra Orla Eiluned," he said. "Head of the Mother House of the Guild of Xenolinguists."

The visitor's mouth twitched. "I remember a time when that was your title, and I was a lowly probationer, fresh from a provincial world no one had ever heard of."

"Minska. I'd heard of it."

Orla Eiluned glanced at him. When she spoke, the anger was back underneath her words. "Must we confer across this stinking water? I'm susceptible to the damp in this island, even if you aren't."

He waded out onto the bank where his visitor stood, laid the net aside, and pulled off his hip boots. He led the way up the path to the small cottage. Inside, she gazed around, and he saw it fresh through her eyes: a book-filled room with sloping roof, a long cot under a window and a cooking alcove at the rear. He thought of the ample apartment that had been his at the Mother House, overlooking the lake beneath snow-crowned Alps. He wondered if she'd brought in pictures and rugs and musical instruments of her own, as he had, though he'd brought mostly books. The memory ached this morning.

"Ten years it's been, since you were Head." She turned from a bookshelf, her face in shadow. "Do you miss the Guild, Magister Heron?"

He thought about that for a moment. "The students, perhaps." She was silent while he set tea in pottery mugs on a small table before her. At his gesture, she sat, her eyes reading his face as he had read hers a moment ago.

"You had a reputation as a good Head. It's all the more wonder to me --"

"Keri and T'biak," he said at once, because there could be no other reason. He remembered a sharply clear, end-of-winter morning, and a baby, pink and smooth as a porcelain doll, lying in his arms; he remembered how she'd smelled of milk and petals and innocence.

"Indeed," Orla Eiluned said. "And now the final chapter to this sorry experiment must be written."

"It was wartime," he said. "We took extraordinary measures for what seemed good enough reason at the moment --"

"The thought of using babies is horrifying, no matter how desperate the times or how noble the purpose!"

He bowed his head and waited.

She sighed, and for a moment seemed to set aside the mantle of her office. They sat quietly, as if they were old country wives, mending threadbare patches with their words, preparing to examine the troubled fabric of the past.

THE HUMAN CHILD had arrived first.

A cold, clear day at the end of winter. Heron stood on the porch of the secluded, centuries-old stone house that Essa had refurbished for them, the child awkwardly draped across his stiff arms. She was three weeks old, an orphan, with a tiny pouty mouth and a fuzz of almost silver hair.

"You act as if this is the first infant you've held!" Essa glanced at him from under a purple wool scarf, a spot of color in a white landscape.

"It is." The Guild discouraged parenthood for lingsters, and he, a dutiful son in the Mother House for the last five decades, had never needed to question its wisdom. But the thought made him ask, "What happened to her parents?"

"Casualties of the war," Essa answered shortly.

"Poor child. Does she have a name?"

"Keri."

Uncontrolled emotion was dangerous for a lingster at work; all his training guarded against being swept away in the storm of strong feelings. Never let emotion color the interface, the first rule of the Guild. He could see how that applied here too; becoming sentimental about the baby would lead to inappropriate actions that could jeopardize the project. He gave the infant back to Essa. Yet his arms retained the imprint of her tiny body long after she'd been carried into the house, an odd effect that he noted as dispassionately as he marked the snow softening underfoot as the thaw began.

Essa had found the house in a pine forest on the slopes of a mountain, not so far north that the weather would be a problem, but far enough away from the Mother House for privacy. Heron had considered going off-world, but that would create additional difficulties because of the uncertainties of civilian travel due to the war, and he'd bowed to Essa's choice. The house, which had belonged for many generations to a prosperous family, boasted several living rooms, and also bedrooms with wood-burning fireplaces, a feature that had appealed to him in these times of austerity. A large stone-flagged kitchen opened out to a greenhouse and vegetable garden behind the house; that would help keep their costs to a minimum. The fewer times he asked the Guild for money, the fewer awkward questions would be asked. He wanted to avoid the awkward questions.

Essa had filled the house with rocking chairs and antique rugs and handmade quilts, and also with dogs and cats; the children were not to be deprived of the comforts of a normal childhood as she saw it. He didn't argue, though he wondered how animals might contaminate the experiment. He recognized that he needed Essa's warmth as counterweight to his necessarily colder vision.

Three months ago, an ambassador he'd only vaguely known -- but whose sister was once Heron's student -- had approached him with a proposition, and excitement and apprehension had warred in his blood ever since. The ambassador had reminded him how often he'd mused with his students about such an experiment; war, the ambassador said, often allowed great leaps of scientific knowledge to happen. Why not in Heron's field too?

There was no denying the great need for such an advance. In the centuries since humans had begun to spread out to the worlds of the Orion Arm, they'd never encountered an enemy like the Venatixi. The ambassador told a disturbing tale of a race whose history, customs and intentions toward humans were all unknown, inscrutable; only the trail of destruction and blood they left behind spoke of their fierce enmity. "If we could crack their language," the diplomat said, pacing the floor in Heron's study at the Mother House, "we could decipher their intentions and frustrate them! The Guild is our only hope."

But the Guild lacked the nerve to do what had to be done; forcing the issue ran the risk of tearing it apart, perhaps fatally. He would never knowingly do anything to damage the Guild. For the first time in his long career, Heron knew he had to act outside the Guild.

Odysseus must have felt like this, he thought now, on the porch of the stone house: lured by the twin sirens of duty and intellectual adventure. He would never have agreed to do it for money. It was good that Essa would be the children's ombudsman if they should ever need protection; he understood that some people found him too austere. Questions there might be, in the future, but he didn't want it said he'd been cruel.

A few hours later, the Venatixi infant arrived with a face like a forest god, half fawn, half fox. He'd never seen a Venatixi before, and he was stunned by the child's beauty. He remembered Essa's comment when he'd first asked her to join him: "They kill like demons, but they look like angels."

The adult Venatixi male who accompanied the child resembled a vision of human perfection carved by a master sculptor. Taller than Heron, he seemed much younger in spite of his pure white hair. His skin was golden, and his dark eyes seemed to look into the deeps of space from which he had come. If Heron expected to read hostility or defiance in the alien's expression -- understandable emotions for an enemy, brought here under who knew what coercion -- he was disappointed. The beautiful face was blank. Or else, he thought, the play of Venatixi emotions across the face was too subtle for even a trained linguist to read. He sensed a distance in the alien, rather than the circumstances of war demanded, or their incompatible languages.

He disliked the man on sight. This unusually strong reaction distressed him; he amended it with logic: What kind of creature delivers its young up to the enemy? How could the Venatixi be sure he didn't plan to torture the child, or even dissect it? And what was the alien's connection with the shadowy ambassador who had set the project in motion and then disappeared?

Heron never found vague unease to be a useful state of mind in which to work; he turned his thoughts back to the project in hand.

The alien attendant made it known the baby was to be called T'biak. Odd, how pointing and naming were used so often among the races of the Arm. But names were all he could be sure of at this point. Ah, but the project would rectify all that in time, he thought, and was flushed with eagerness to begin.

The Venatixi possessed the same organs that in humans facilitated speech. No struggling with olfactory cues, or intricate light pulses, or any of the half dozen or so other variations in the way communication was handled around the Arm. Yet he'd observed that the closer an alien's physiology to human, the more subtle the problem of unlocking the language. The temptation was strong to believe too quickly in surface similarities. Humans were lonely creatures, driven on an endless search across the galaxy for soulmates.

Over the years he'd developed a sixth sense for invisible problems, quirks of language that didn't easily slip from one tongue to another, hidden minefields that blew understanding sky high when least expected. The best linguists sometimes met languages that contained obstacles all their skills couldn't overcome. Venatixian appeared to be such a one. He'd studied it as best he could while he was still in the Mother House; linguists who encountered it around the Arm sent back samples. The language was slippery; as soon as he thought he'd identified words and assigned denotation to them, they slid away, meaning changing under his fingertips even as he worked.

Inglis had retained many homonyms, despite centuries of attempts to standardize and regularize it, but he found Venatixian held a more baffling mystery. It would've been daunting if it had occurred between friendly races; with a ferocious enemy like the Venatixi it was monstrous. The war that had resulted -- from what? territorial imperatives? xenophobia? misunderstanding? nobody knew -- had gone on too long, destroyed too many lives, and now threatened the survival of Earth itself. Time for visionary measures in the search for solutions.

"Did you stop to wonder how the ambassador got hold of an alien child? And so quickly at that!"

Essa had come back to stand beside him on the porch where he'd been gazing at the surrounding forest. She chewed at her under lip, a habit he knew she would've suppressed when she was younger for what it gave away of her inner turmoil.

"Kidnapped him, I suppose."

"You joke, Heron, but I have misgivings."

"Only partly, I'm afraid. Ugly things happen in war. Perhaps he's a hostage of some kind --"

"Where do you get such a terrible idea?"

"History," he said. "Many tribes in Earth's own past made an exchange of high-ranking children to be brought up in the enemy's camp. A good way to ensure peace between them!"

Essa shuddered.

"But I don't want to know the truth," he said. "It's a chance to explore a most promising theory, and I'm not about to lose it through needless bureaucracy." His blood began to pound; he felt flushed, giddy with the excitement of setting out in unknown territory, the Marco Polo of language. But he understood she might have misgivings. "Of course, it's natural that you'd feel some uncertainty --"

"More than that. I'm wondering whether we ought to do this at all."

"Keep in mind the great good we're doing for our world."

"How many scientists have said this down the centuries, I wonder, as they raced to damnation?"

He smiled tolerantly at her. Nothing could shake his confidence today. "Essa, you exaggerate the dangers here!"

"Do I?" she said quietly. Beyond where she stood with her back to the forest, the setting sun turned the mountain tops bloodred. "I don't know. But I think perhaps I should've turned you down when you asked me to help. I should've stayed where I was -- grounded and safe in the Mother House's library until I retired!"

"In your day in the field, you were one of the best lingsters the Guild ever produced. Your skills are as sharp as ever. I need them."

"I wonder if I need this assault on my ethics."

Impatient with her hesitation, he said, "I can do this, Essa. I know I can!"

"Hubris, old friend," she said somberly. "Occupational hazard, I suppose."

But she gave up arguing and went inside.

The experiment he'd designed wasn't a new idea; in fact, early theoretical xenolinguists such as Elgin and Watson had discussed it centuries before. Raise a human child with an alien, and she'll have the other's language in her head from birth, as well as her native tongue. A chance to interface between languages without the programs, the drugs, the implants that lingsters normally used to forge understanding out of chaos. The theory had been well thought out long ago. But the opportunity and the resolve had never presented themselves until now.

He had the chance to save human lives from a violent enemy, and expand the boundaries of knowledge at the same time. It was hard to say which was the more compelling.

"Saving lives by sacrificing two innocent children, do you mean?" Orla Eiluned interrupted the old man's story.

He turned stiffly from the window where he'd been staring at the ponds. Sunlight played over the water now, and the fishing birds that had not yet flown south arrived to work their craft on unsuspecting carp. Perhaps, he thought with sudden insight, he devoted his last years to these fish precisely because they had no voices.

There was no point in explaining; she knew it as well as he: human children were born with a template for language, any language. The young of Homo sapiens learned second, third, even fourth languages rapidly, easily, while their parents labored over the grammar of a second. But there was more, something seen many times in human history. Nations were thrown together by conquest, or met in shared servitude, their languages mutually unintelligible. Pidgins developed: odd, ungrammatical mixes, bits from here or there to get the adults through the daily task of living and working together.

The next step had to be taken by the second generation, the children who invented the creole, the beginnings of a genuinely new language in the interface between the two their parents spoke. And they did it easily, compulsively, brilliantly. The mystery of how language had come into being was solved: Children were its inventors. Children had spoken those first words in the caves and around the cooking fires.

"You must return with me at once to the Mother House," Orla Eiluned said.

"I don't travel anymore."

"Nevertheless, I insist. There's much at stake." She stood, staring moodily out the window at the gleaming ponds over which a hazy net of insects hung and an occasional turquoise kingfisher flashed through shadow. "Whatever inspired you to retire to this damp island?"

"Solitude and ghosts," the old man said. "This estuary has seen the blood of a great nation's birth and passing away. It comforts me to remember how insubstantial human dreams are in the sweep of time."

"And sometimes, how unprincipled?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "Perhaps we ought never allow scientists to play with their toys unsupervised."

The Head frowned as if she wished to argue the point, then thought better of it. "Well -- Go on!"

ASSA HAD GIVEN the old stone house a name since he was last here, and the deaf old man who cooked and cleaned for them had carved it and hung it over the door: Manhattan.

Heron stopped at the foot of the porch steps and read it. Melting snow dripped off the house's sloping roof, and the wind souged gently in the pine trees behind him. Beyond, in the clearing, the 'car that was his as Head of the Mother House -- a luxury not granted to other people these troubled days -- lifted off and went to shelter. Essa watched him, sharp-faced.

"An odd choice," he suggested. "I would have chosen something to do with mountains. Or trees, perhaps."

"You don't recognize the reference?"

He frowned. "I seem to remember something about buying an island -- No? That isn't right?"

Essa snorted. "You read the wrong history, my friend!"

He smiled at her as they went inside. "How're they doing?"

"See for yourself."

For three years he'd divided his time between his duties at the Mother House and the children's hideaway, but his heart grew ever more firmly rooted in the stone house. In Geneva the talk was of colonies lost and cities destroyed, the war coming nearer and nearer to Earth itself. The sense of some horror creeping closer day by day, some catastrophe waiting to engulf them all when they were least expecting it, sapped his energy. He found himself glancing anxiously over his shoulder at shadows, jumping at noises, suspicious of strangers until his nerves frayed and he couldn't work. He worried whether there'd even be time to complete the language project, let alone reap any benefits from it. But in this forest he could be hopeful, dreaming of the future as if he were as young as his small subjects in a world at peace.

He never spoke of the children or the stone house when he was in Geneva, allowing the Guild Procurators to believe that when he was away he was busy writing his memoirs. When the day came that the project was revealed, he expected they would be displeased at his secrecy, but by then the results would justify his actions.

Essa led him to the well-equipped playroom where the toddlers, almost three years old now, spent most of their day alone in each other's company. He stared through the one-way glass, watching them; they were absorbed with each other, a head of golden curls bending close to one of dark silver. The hidden mikes picked up a steady stream of infant babbling; at the same time the computer recorded and analyzed the proto-speech for replay and reinforcement later.

Ideally, he would have isolated the children from all other human contact, but Essa hadn't allowed that. "The human child will lose her humanity," she'd argued. "Our culture is transmitted, not inherited. We teach our young to grow up human!" In any case, there was a flaw in a language produced in total absence of models; even if it should work, the basic problem of interfacing afterwards with existing tongues would still remain.

He listened to the children's voices coming from the speakers, the rising and falling music of baby speech, trying with his practiced ear to catch the tonal variations, the patterns of stress and juncture that should be emerging by now, hinting at the assignment of meaning. They seemed content at their play, and they were obviously healthy -- Essa saw to that. If anything, their physical progress seemed accelerated by isolation, not hindered.

He wondered idly if this was how parents felt, watching their offspring at play, a combination of pride and awe and helplessness. The Venatixi child was beautiful, but it seemed to him that little Keri was his equal. She turned now and smiled, perhaps at something T'biak said. But he felt as if she sensed his presence behind the glass wall, and instinctively he smiled back, though she couldn't possibly see him. He knew a sudden, peculiar ache in his heart, and a sadness for which he knew no cause touched him briefly.

He shook the sensations away and returned his thoughts to the project. The children were not cut off from adult contact altogether, only the language exchanges were limited. His aim was to produce speakers able to move easily back and forth from their native tongues to the creole he expected them to invent in the buffer zone between them. If his theory was correct, that new language would prove to be as rich and full of subtlety as either of the parent tongues, and it would provide the key to communication between humans and the Venatixi that was so desperately needed.

As the project had begun, he'd taken into his confidence two talented members of his faculty at the Mother House, an older man and a young woman, and they'd come to the stone house with him. When the children were fed or bathed, they were taken separately by their adult guardians and spoken to in the languages of their birth. At least, he had to assume that was happening with T'biak, since communication with the Venatixi attendant remained non-existent.

In front of him, as he stared through the one-way glass, he saw the daily working out of a miracle he'd dared to dream. Why, then, didn't he feel more cheerful? Where did this sudden, oppressive sense of loneliness come from today?

"Shall we review the observation notes first, or do you want to listen to the language samples the AI has processed so far?" Essa asked.

He'd almost forgotten her presence, and was glad to turn his attention to the choice. On each of his visits he reviewed the progress, made recommendations, but generally left day to day activities in Essa's capable hands, a task she handled well.

"The samples, of course!" He strode ahead of her to the small room at the back of the house which he used as his study. Essa fed cubes into the computer for him. The AI had analyzed the morphemes it identified in their speech, and assigned probable meaning to the combinations. He settled himself in a comfortable chair behind the desk to listen, familiarizing himself with the sounds at the same time as he studied the tentative Ingliis spellings the computer had used for them. He was surprised at how few words the AI confidently identified; somehow he'd expected more by now.

Of course, so much of the verbalizing Keri and T'biak were doing remained baby babble; he knew what could be expected of toddlers, and these two were hardly different. A project like this demanded patience and time. He worked until his stomach complained that it was suppertime.

As he was about to leave the study, the young woman staff member came to find him.

"What is it, Birgit?"

"The Venatixi's missing, Magister," she said. "We need him to take T'biak out of the playroom now. The children're hungry and need to be fed."

"Perhaps Merono knows where he is?" The older lingster seemed to have befriended the alien, an action Heron approved but couldn't share.

"I can't find Merono either."

"Have you checked the outbuildings?" Essa asked. The alien never socialized with the other staff when his duties were done, and lived by himself outside the house.

"Empty too. But he's never been missing before! He always takes good care of T'biak."

"Well, let's think this through. The weather's been mild today. Perhaps he's gone for a walk?"

"Perhaps he's gone home to Venatix!" Essa said.

He glanced at her and saw she was only half joking. No one could be really sure if the Venatixi approved of what they were attempting to do here, or even if he understood. He remembered his first suspicions of the man, and Essa's unease over the manner in which T'biak had been found for the project. Perhaps she was right and the alien had tired of his role as a hostage of sorts, and had escaped? But why leave a child of his own race in enemy hands? It wouldn't make sense. At least, he amended, it wouldn't if one were human. And it would be disastrous for the project; they needed the adult Venatixi to teach the boy his own language, or the whole attempt would fail.

He ordered a search of the area around the house and the nearby forest. The days were slowly lengthening as spring approached, but darkness still fell early so far north, and there was very little daylight left. In a drift of snow turning to slush, they found the blood-soaked body of Merono who might one day have succeeded Heron as Head of the Mother House. He looked as if wolves had got him. But no wolf tears off a man's hands.

"Why was he killed?" Birgit wailed. "Merono was never anything but kind to the Venatixi. He was more like a father than a colleague to us all."

They had to wait for morning to hunt for tracks. No new snow fell overnight, yet they never found any tracks; the Venatixi had disappeared without a trace. All they learned was that the alien had taken his small supply of belongings with him. He wasn't coming back. Perhaps he'd taken his victim's hands with him too, for they were never found either.

Heron returned to the house in a somber mood. He'd lost a gentle, valuable member of his team, victim of a grisly crime, and an indispensable if unlikable alien. He wasn't at all certain what to do next.

Essa waited for him to come in, the sleepy alien boy cradled in her arms. "Now what?" she demanded, voicing his own question.

He shook his head. At that moment he felt overwhelmed with horror at the brutal murder. But he knew an even greater frustration at being blocked so near his goals such an opportunity would never arise twice in a man's lifetime. Yet there was no way he could succeed without the Venatixi. Everything hung on the children growing up bilingual.

While he hesitated, little Keri came and clasped him about the leg. One of the pups that had attached itself to her whined softly, and she let go of Heron to pick it up. Watching the child cradling the pup, he had a bleak vision of his future: abandoning the project, returning to his sterile, bachelor rooms at the Mother House, knowing he'd never see Keri again.

The thought caught him by surprise; his project lay in ruins and he mourned the loss of contact with a child? That shouldn't have mattered at all. He was ashamed of his sentimental weakness.

"We can't abandon this precious boy," Essa said, absently ruffling the child's silver hair. "But what will we do with him?" Then he saw how to make the best of this, how to salvage something from his ambitious plan.

"We'll keep them both here. We'll work with T'biak -- teach him Inglis --"

"No, Heron." Essa shook her head. "Let the children go. It's over."

"I don't accept that. We have too much at stake here!"

"How would teaching T'biak Inglis bring an end to the war? The problem of communicating with his people will

still remain."

"Forget that, Essa. Think instead of the new possibilities!" His excitement grew as the new plan unfolded before him. "We have a chance to observe how an alien brain processes human language! A chance to see how much truly is due to biogrammar and whether that biogrammar itself varies from race to race."

She didn't seem to be listening. "Poor little orphan!"

"We've had experience with other races learning Inglis, of course." He was thinking aloud now, exploring the dimensions of his idea. "But how much do we really know about how they acquire language in the first place? We accept the concept of Universal Grammar because it's proved serviceable, but we don't really know how it works! Perhaps it's only a useful illusion. If we're ever going to open up the Guild to lingsters from other races, we'll have to know."

Essa wasn't impressed by his argument. "How could we teach him his own heritage? We know so little about the Venatixi!"

"Teach him whatever you'd teach Keri," he said impatiently. "It's that or perish for him. Don't you see?" His face felt flushed and a nervous energy seemed to have taken hold of his hands, which moved in an eager ballet, an emotional sign language that for once was not under his conscious control.

"It's Keri, isn't it?" she said thoughtfully. "Are you quite certain that your motive isn't to keep her here at all cost?"

"Essa! We have a chance to train our first alien-born lingster. Think how the Guild will benefit!"

"And how will we do this -- with two less staff? Birgit and I and that senile old cook -- I don't owe this much work to the Guild!"

"I'll find you local help with the chores. It won't be as sensational a situation as before -- it won't cause as much gossip. And I'll come more often myself," he promised. It seemed very necessary that Essa be persuaded to continue; he valued her support and her intelligence.

She hugged the alien boy to her breast, looking doubtful. "I don't know, Heron --"

"Essa, old friend. Do it for me."

Unconvinced and grumbling, Essa carried T'biak off to bed. Keri trotted behind them, the pup at her heels.

He watched them go. At least she hadn't refused his request. It irritated him that Essa should think he proposed this new direction because he was so concerned with Keri. He was taken with her, yes -- she was a pretty child. But obviously his first duty was to salvage something from the wreckage of the experiment. Essa herself fussed over the boy like an anxious mother bird; he wasn't convinced the child appreciated so much attention. The one thing he'd come to be certain about the Venatixi was that they didn't experience feelings the same way humans did.

Alone, he sat staring out the window at the mountains through a curtain of melted snow dripping off the roof, and planned the training of an alien lingster to serve the Guild.

"So you blame the Guild for your continuing this unethical experiment?" Orla Eiluned had been watching him intently as he spoke, as if ready to pounce on the first lie he dared to utter. "Of course, you would need to find another scapegoat once the war ended!"

The war had ended as suddenly and as inexplicably as it had begun; but it was an uneasy peace based on incomprehension and there was little room for joy in it. Humans and Venatixi remained as far apart as ever.

Outside his window, a late dragonfly hovered, admiring its own reflection in the glass. He watched until it darted suddenly away in a whirl of opal brightness over the fish ponds beyond. There would be no more dragonflies this year.

"No," he said when the iridescent insect was out of sight. "I don't blame the Guild. But there was an urge in me to expand its work, and a pride in doing so. As there must be in every good Head."



She thought about that for a moment. "An 'occupational hazard,' I believe your Essa called it?"

For the first time, she smiled thinly at him.

HE HAD HARDLY ARRIVED back in Geneva when the announcement came of the truce with the Venatixi; for a moment he wondered if T'biak's attendant could have known the news before they did, but that still didn't explain abandoning the child. The ambassador's name featured prominently in the news. It occurred to Heron to wonder why, if the ambassador was capable of arranging a truce now, he'd ever come to Heron about the project in the first place. But as the diplomat never contacted Heron to officially end it, Heron felt justified that he hadn't.

It was just one more unknown in a whole disturbing catalog of unknown things to do with the Venatixi. Humans had been overdue to meet an alien they would never understand. Yet there'd been moments when he'd thought he pinned something down, captured some essence, stood on the edge of breaking through. Was there truly something to this, or was it only self-delusion?

In spite of his promise to Essa, his visits to the northern hideaway became less frequent; his responsibilities to the students in the Mother House caught up with him. There was a need to find new faculty to train the lingsters increasingly in demand around the Arm once hostilities ended, and more students than ever applied for admission and had to be tested and evaluated and counseled. New buildings had to be planned, and roofs replaced on old ones. Money needed to be found. And the dolphin tutors demanded that they be given more say in the selection of students since they felt they could better evaluate certain areas of expertise than any human faculty committee; it took diplomacy on his part to settle the dispute that resulted.

He visited briefly as often as he could, and in between he looked forward to the regular reports Essa sent, relying on them for details of the children's progress. There was a certain joy to be gained from knowing the children were thriving in their hidden sanctuary. Essa was a perfect caregiver; his presence wasn't necessary -- and sometimes that thought bothered him. Alone in his chambers at the Mother House at the end of day, he took his secret knowledge out and turned it over in his mind, enjoying the bitter-sweet memory of Keri.

The thought of her, he sensed, was less dangerous for him than the reality which threatened to undermine his careful life, flooding him with unaccustomed emotion. He began to catch himself at odd moments, brooding over what he'd given up to serve the Guild; the disloyalty of it frightened him.

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the project, he returned for a visit after a months-long absence. He set the 'car down in the clearing and saw Keri outside in mild sunshine. He was eager to see her, but a vague apprehension stopped him from calling to her as he'd been about to do. Instead, he stood watching, unnoticed.

Spring this far north was a brief explosion of color and perfume, a rebellion against the punishing cold that ruled most of the year. The little girl was playing with chains of tiny wildflowers, and beside her, the dog that had been her constant companion as a pup nursed a litter of her own. He saw she'd decorated the bitch's neck with the same small blooms.

"I taught her how to make daisy chains," Essa said from the doorway.

"Daisies?"

"So unobservant, you are! Do you ever notice anything outside the library and the classroom?"

"When it's important to me," he answered honestly, then became aware she was teasing when he saw her grin. He said ruefully, "I shall be a stuffy old fool in my old age, shan't I?"

Essa indicated the bench outside the door, and they sat comfortably together, old friends watching the young ones at play. The moment of unease he'd experienced faded away.

Then Keri came to him, hands outstretched. The touch of her little fingers in his own suddenly enormous hands started a rush of tears. He still didn't know how to behave. He glanced at his old friend for help and Essa smiled encouragement. He stooped and brushed Keri's soft cheek with his lips.

The result startled all of them. The child drew back instantly, staring at him as if she'd somehow made a

mistake and given her hand to a stranger.

Before he had a chance to speculate what had caused Keri's reaction, T'biak trotted up to them, and he immediately forgot Keri's strangeness. The boy opened his small fist and revealed a dead bird -- crushed, by the look of its mangled feathers and jutting bones thin as needles.

"Where did you find that dead old thing?" Essa scolded her favorite indulgently, taking the carcass away from him and brushing stray bits of feather and blood off his hand.

He had the unpleasant notion the bird had been alive when the child found it. It was a strange idea, and he had no proof; he decided not to share this with Essa.

The moment of warmth -- of family, he thought, astonished at the word --passed. He sensed his own withdrawal back into a narrower self that for a brief second had unfurled like the petals in Keri's daisy chains. Essa threw the sorry corpse away into undergrowth, and they all went into the house.

Somber now, he moved into the office, anxious to bury himself in work and drive both the uncomfortable suspicions about T'biak and his own disturbing emotions away. A small fire murmured in the grate, filling the room with wood smoke. Birgit entered silently, bringing cubes of the children's progress as she always did on his visits; she fed them into the small terminal on his desk. He sat down at the desk, looking forward to the calm the routine of work brought with it.

Instead of leaving, Birgit stood by the desk.

He looked up. "Is something wrong?"

"Something bothers me, Magister. They still babble a lot together."

"Babble?" He frowned, unwilling to entertain doubts about the project even in this revised version.

"Babies do it. Pre-language. Made-up words. But they should've passed that stage long ago. It's as if they're still inventing their own language. Not Inglis, certainly."

He searched for an explanation. Birgit was a talented linguist and a gifted teacher, not one to come to hasty conclusions, a good counterbalance to Essa's fussy motherliness. If anything, he'd always judged her a little too calm and a bit distant.

"Maybe they're bored?" he suggested.

"You be the judge, Magister."

She left and he turned his attention to the children's language. Almost immediately, he sensed that Birgit was right: something was indeed wrong. It wasn't Inglis that poured from the speaker, nor did it seem to be the proto-language they'd started to invent before the Venatixi attendant disappeared. Yet he could have sworn it wasn't nonsense babbling either. He frowned at the catalogs of nouns and verbs the AI spelled phonetically in Inglis -- an already extensive list scrolling up the data screen.

There was a certain murkiness to the computer's translations. Closing his eyes to concentrate, he listened to the high pure voices filling the room. Language was a signal, but this set of signals lacked constants; it had variable referents, moments when the ground underfoot vanished though the children strode confidently ahead. His heart constricted with the pain of being left behind.

In this queer, sad mood, he realized there was an odd something other present, like something dimly glimpsed in the dark woods outside, sensed rather than recognized. He stopped the voices and glanced quickly at the screen.

"Inglis equivalent for --" He thought for a second, then touched one of the transliterations of the babies' sounds.

The data screen divided and displayed Inglis words -- six -- ten -- a dozen --

"Stop. They can't all be homonyms?" How could they all be equivalencies for the same word? Worse, he

saw, some translations were totally opposite to each other. "How can they have made one word mean 'far' and 'near' at the same time? 'Dark' and 'light.' What am I missing?"

And then he knew. Why had it taken so long to see what was happening?

"Run comparison with Venatixi," he ordered.

The AI complied; two columns of collected data flowed over the screen.

"Probability of a match?"

"Greater than 98 percent."

Essa came into the office, having tucked the children in bed. She peered anxiously over his shoulder at the screen. "Does it matter?"

He glanced back at her. She'd always been remarkably protective of her babies. He wondered now if that wasn't a negative attribute, something he should've guarded against.

"Instead of T'biak learning Inglis so we can work with him, Keri's learning Venatixi from him," he said. "That shouldn't be possible. He lacks models for Venatixi."

Essa warmed her hands at the fire. "So? Apparently the Venatixi are born with full language capability. Not just potential like us."

She wasn't surprised, he realized. She'd known this for a long time. Perhaps she'd even been hiding it from him. "What language do they use with you? Come now, Essa. Tell me the truth."

"I know them so well, you see . . ." She hesitated, stuffing her hands into large pockets in her skirt. "We don't really have to say much to each other to get along at all! It doesn't matter, does it? They're only children, after all."

But it did matter. And perhaps at this late date he was experiencing the scruples he should've felt all along. Something of the bleak mood he'd experienced earlier on the porch came back. He said stiffly, "The boy will have to go back to his people. I'll do what I should've done before. I'll contact the ambassador."

Essa began to protest, but he waved her objections away and she ran out of the room near to tears.

Before he had a chance to talk himself out of his decision, he instructed the AI to open a channel to Geneva. Within the hour, he received an answer to the query he sent: the ambassador had been accused of treasonable activity with the Venatixi and executed.

Heron was now, by default, the boy's sole guardian.

"And even then," Orla Eiluned noted, her tone heavily sarcastic, "you didn't foresee trouble!"

She stood with one hand on the door of her aircar, waiting. The old man lowered his head. The telling of his story sucked energy from his bones like sap retreating from the leaves and branches of deciduous trees as winter conquered the land. Willow and ash, poplar and elm, the trees of the estuary bloomed and decayed, the rhythm of life. He felt his own December approaching.

"Perhaps, by then, I didn't want to see trouble," he said.

He gazed past the vehicle to the river, shining now in the full light of the low sun, as if he would never see it again and must imprint it on memory. A lone butterfly floated over the surface, and rainbows flashed into being and disappeared again as birds flew up, fish glinting in their beaks. They seemed to know the guardian of the fish was going away, leaving them to poach undisturbed. He didn't begrudge them an occasional fish. It was their nature, and nature made no moral judgments. Some lived and some died; he accepted nature's plan.

She indicated he should enter the 'car. He climbed in slowly, aware of a growing arthritic stiffness in his joints. Somewhere, a lark's song skirled down from the vast sky. It sounded like a funeral dirge.

He'd jeopardized his position at the Mother House by spending so much time away on business he couldn't explain to anyone. The death of his faculty member, which he'd managed to smooth over, was brought up again by enemies he hadn't known he'd made in the Guild. During the next year, urgent work kept him in Geneva for weeks, unable to get away. Perhaps, he admitted to himself, there was also fear of the tangle of emotions he experienced whenever he saw Keri. Easier to stay away than deal with them.

A great source of concern was the fact that T'biak grew increasingly alien before his eyes, his moods shifting quickly from light to dark. He was a very beautiful child, even more than Heron's little favorite, yet without her winning charm. But his social interaction with Heron and Essa deteriorated rapidly, and he was given to quick flashes of disapproval when crossed. Not temper, exactly, for there was no heat in them, but Heron could find no name for these outbursts, and he was coming to fear them. Things touched by T'biak ended broken and damaged more often than not -- Like the bird, he thought. The child was not yet five years old.

Then one of the house cats disappeared, and this time when he found the mangled corpse under a fir tree he knew who was the killer. He'd managed to cut a little time out of his overloaded schedule to go back to the stone house, and he was prepared to stay for a while; he had a sense of things out of control, coming to a head. So he wasn't surprised to find its front paws had been hacked as if a clumsy attempt had been made to remove them.

Long ago, before she'd been blinded by love, Essa had seen the demon behind the angel eyes of the Venatixi. The uncanny echoes of the killing and mutilation of Merono chilled him even though the day was bright and warm, but he didn't know what to make of them.

The boy came up as he contemplated the body. He watched Heron, his eyes bleak as the mountains that ringed the stone house. Suddenly, Heron had no desire to move the corpse or confront the killer.

It didn't make sense. He accepted by now that the Venatixi language was inherited complete at birth and did not need to be learned from models in the inefficient way of human languages. That seemed plausible, once he thought about it. Birds still chirped even when hand-raised from hatchlings; they didn't have to be taught. Some even inherited their songs. But an entire culture, down to its rituals -- and how else was he to interpret the mutilated animal than as a child's imitation of what adults do? -- was unbelievable.

For several weeks he tried to explain the almost daily oddness the boy manifested as coincidence. "We see it because we look for it," he told Birgit. But he didn't believe that himself. Essa, as usual, would have none of it. "He's just a child, Heron!" was her constant refrain.

The summer after the children's fifth anniversary, Keri brought him the mother dog that loved her so warmly. He was in the office, going over accounts with Essa, when the child laid the body tenderly on the desk before him. He didn't need to examine it to know there were no paws at the end of the bloody stumps.

The little girl gazed at him with that pure, cherubic look he'd grown so attached to. It was a game, a mimicry of the adult behavior that had led to the killing of Merono. But he had no idea what the rules were.

He wanted to shout at her. He wanted to weep. He did neither. Angels, he understood now, were as amoral as scientists. Like lingsters, they kept emotion out of the interface.

"What have you done?" Essa exclaimed in horror.

Keri's expression clouded. Without a word, she swept the mangled dog off the desk and carried it outside. He glimpsed T'biak waiting for her under a fir, sunlight striping his cheeks like war paint. It had been some kind of test, he knew. And he'd failed it. His fists clenched with frustration but he did nothing.

Even then he wanted to believe it was a mistake, that T'biak had killed the dog and Keri was only bringing it to them. The language -- well, yes, he could believe she could pick that up to the exclusion of her native tongue. But not the culture. That couldn't be transmitted without adult models. Not an entire culture!

Essa rose from her chair, her face white. "It's my fault. I've failed you. I should've seen --"

"Nobody could see this coming, Essa. Don't you think I would've made some provision if I had?"

"We must end it now."

"End it how?"

"Admit to the Guild what we've been doing here. We have no choice now, Heron! They'll find a way to return T'biak to his own people."

He could see love for the boy at war with fear of him in her expression, and wondered if she saw a similar conflict in his own eyes. "And Keri?"

"You've lost her already, Heron. If it's the last thing you do here, accept the truth!" She ran out of the house.

He knew he should go after her. But instead he sat and stared out the window at the forest where fragile wildflowers bloomed so briefly and birds darted through conifers, nest-building, scraps of fur scavenged from the household cats and dogs in their beaks. He couldn't recall ever noticing them before. So much had changed in the way he viewed the world. Hatched only a year ago, now the birds knew -- all untaught --how to seize life's flickering warmth in a year mostly cold and dark. The sheer bravery of tiny things touched his heart.

He ran outside at the sound of the first scream, but he was too late to save Essa. He did, however, manage to prevent T'biak from cutting off her hands.

"The Procurators decided it was better not to let the true story get out," the old man said. "I was allowed to 'retire' from the Guild."

The 'car hummed softly, lifting over the sea to the destination the Head had coded into the onboard AI. After a while she sighed.

"And you exiled yourself on that island, far away from your life's work --"

"As penance, Magistra."

She stirred irritably at his use of the honorific. "There're better ways to make amends than becoming a hermit!"

He felt drained of words, a relief, as if he'd lanced a boil and let infection flow out. After the shock of events had begun to fade, he'd made the decision that he couldn't trust himself ever again. Hubris, Essa had called his crime. On his river mouth, where silent fish and noisy birds pursued their instinctual ways, he'd found healing if not forgiveness. For that, one had to pay one's debts, but it had not been possible to pay his.

"Did you ever learn why T'biak killed Essa?"

"I think because she loved him. They can't take too much love."

The Head glanced quizzically at him. "Well, we shall never know. He was returned to his people not long after."

The 'car was descending now and he recognized the autumnal gold-green dress of the Alps. They skimmed over ripe fields and flag-bedecked towns; in the distance, he saw the white buildings of the Mother House, surrounded by apple orchards. He imagined the shimmer of young voices under the heavy boughs, practicing their craft on each other, their music a reminder of how much he'd loved the Guild and its mission. Everything looked fresher, more prosperous than he remembered. The peace, incomprehensible though it might be, had held; things had improved.

"You don't seem curious to know why I came for you." Orla Eiluned waited for him to answer. When he didn't, she said: "The girl asked for you. You must find out why."

He raised an eyebrow at that.

"Oh yes," she said, misunderstanding. "We've taught Keri Inglis! She learned fast enough once the boy was gone. We have great hopes for her as a superior lingster. Something good will emerge from your abominable experiment, after all."

He saw then how she was like the man he'd once been. It was the Guild itself that bred such ambition in its

members, such proud ignorance. He could no more expect her to understand than he had in the beginning.

"I sometimes think Venetian will always remain beyond our reach," she said. "All those years, you made so little progress!"

One homonym, he thought. One connection he was sure of. But he didn't say it to her.

"Keri speaks Inglis. But does she still think in Venetian?"

She glanced sharply at him. "Her attendants say she dreams in it. They hear her talk in her sleep."

"Attendants."

She looked uncomfortable for the first time since she'd come for him. "The girl has had -- some problems."

He could imagine what those problems might be. "We teach our culture to our young," he said. "It's not inherited. Not instinctive. I'll never believe that."

"But who's to say which model is learned, and when, or why?" the Head asked. "Young children bond, and the bonds are hard to educate away."

"And you need me now. Why now?"

"Well -- She needs you. You'll see."

The 'car settled on a dark green lawn, folding its Wings with a soft flutter. In front of him, he saw the classical lines of familiar buildings: the low roofs of the dolphin hall where the dolphin tutors taught their young pupils the restraint of physiology on concept and philosophy, classrooms where eager voices called and answered, polyphony in a dozen tongues. He'd apprenticed to the Guild at the age of ten, never wanting to be anything other than a lingster. He caught sight of the residence that had been his home when he was Head of the House, and then the library -- he still thought of the library as Essa's domain though she'd been dead for a decade. His throat tightened and his eyes stung. The Guild had been his whole life for so many years, yet at its heart he'd found an aching loneliness.

Orla Eiluned touched his arm, urging him toward a building that hadn't existed in his time. Doors opened silently ahead of him and he followed their invitation slowly, down a short corridor and into a small room filled with green plants and a dazzle of sunlight. He blinked and shaded his eyes. The Head waited outside.

Keri stood by the window, her back to the light. She wore a simple white tunic that caught the light and gave her the look of an angel in a medieval illumination. His heart leaped, recognizing her instantly by her presence long before his eyes could adjust and identify her features. When his vision cleared he saw how tall she'd grown in ten years, slim as a willow sapling, a young girl trembling on the edge of full womanhood. Her beauty took his breath away.

Yet there was some indefinable quality under the surface, as if -- in spite of the robust health she displayed -- she were dying. A bird, he thought in dismay, unable to break its way free of the egg that has nurtured it, would look like that. He understood why the Head had come herself to fetch him.

"My dearest child."

He opened his arms. She flowed into them in one graceful, catlike movement, and he folded her to his chest, feeling the fragile bones under skin as soft as wildflowers. Neither said anything for several moments. Then an embarrassed cough revealed the presence of another woman in the room.

"Please. Leave us alone."

"Is that wise, Magister Heron?" the woman asked.

"This is my daughter," he said simply, finally bringing himself to claim a bond of the heart if not of the blood.

The attendant looked doubtfully from Heron to Keri and back. But she went out of the room and closed the door behind her.

"You understand why I asked for you?" Keri stepped out of his embrace but kept his wrinkled old hands in her smooth young ones.

He was thrilled by her voice, low and musical like the call of a bright bird on his river. He felt himself rising to its lure. "Yes."

She studied his face. "I cannot be completely free without this rite."

He nodded, understanding. "T'biak too. But earlier?"

"Venatixi males mature faster than females. They need to. Our world is bloodier than yours."

He noted her choice of pronoun without comment; somehow, he wasn't even surprised. Her radiance held him transfixed. Perhaps the carp looking up felt this way as the kingfisher flashed overhead.

Her eyes filled with shadow, and she added: "There is no anger in the act."

"Surely a Guild lingster can understand that!" He smiled at her. "They hope you'll be a great lingster, you know."

She smiled too. "I shall. But not here. I have to go to Venatix."

"And how will you do that?"

"T'biak speaks to me. He is my mate. He'll come for me."

He thought again how much like angels they all were, and who could doubt that such superior beings moved in ways humans could never dream? Or made choices humans never faced. He remembered the way he and Essa and Birgit had searched for the vanished Venatixi in the snowbound forest after gentle Merono's murder and found no trace. He was an old man now, and such things were easier to believe than when he'd been young.

She lifted his hands and studied them thoughtfully, and the touch of her fingers burned. He tried and failed to suppress a shiver.

"I'm old. I have no regrets. But -- my hands --" He broke off. It was irrational. "An old man's whim."

"Inglis too is full of metaphors about controlling hands," she said gently, letting go. "But I'll grant you them."

She drew him slowly toward her by his arms. His nose filled with her scent of milk and petals, and he thought suddenly of innocence as the river understood it, the cycle of life and death that nature wrote. He couldn't say whether he'd created an angel or a demon, nor did he care. The universe was more complex than the Guild recognized. But the Guild was young; he hoped it would learn.

As her face swelled in his vision, he saw her eyes brimming with love.

"Father," she said.

Love and death, the only Venatician homonym he was certain he understood, they were intimately connected in the languages of Earth too.

He had the sense of a debt paid. He was at peace.