

Reading the Bones

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Nebula Award Winner

I

Someone was trying to tell him something.

Ries Danyo wallowed round on the bench, peering through the tavern's thick haze, eyes unfocused by too much *zyth*. The sitar he didn't remember setting on the bench beside him crashed to the floor. The gourd cracked as it hit stone.

A male Freh sat beside him, the alien's almost lipless mouth moving urgently. The Freh had a peculiar swirling design tattooed from his forehead down the nose, and one of his hands was wrapped in a filthy rag. Ries stared at dark blood seeping through the folds. The alien spoke again, the pitch of his voice writhing like smoke.

Ries didn't catch a word.

Sometimes he wondered if the native vocalizations on this planet should even be called anything as advanced as language—especially the impoverished version the Freh males used. Not that his human employers were interested in actually having a conversation with these aliens. Just as well. He wasn't the lingster he'd been just five years ago.

The native liquor had given him a pounding headache and he needed to sleep it off.

The Freh's unbandaged, bird-claw hand shook his arm, urging him to pay attention. Dizziness took him. For a moment, he drifted untethered in a matrix of protolanguage, unable to grasp either the alien's Frehti or his own native Inglis to form a reply, a sensation closely resembling what he remembered of the condition lingsters called interface but without the resolution.

A harsh burst of noise battered his eardrums, booming and echoing around the low-roofed tavern. He squinted, trying to clear his clouded vision. Two male Freh capered across the floor, arms windmilling. He started to rise—

And was knocked down off his chair and dragged behind the overturned table.

Thuds. Screams. The crowded tavern erupted into shrill pandemonium. Freh voices ululating at the upper end of the scale. Something else—a deeper footnote that brought the hairs up on his neck.

He tried to stand. The room cartwheeled dizzily around him. A pungent odor filled his nostrils—a stench like rotten flesh, decaying fungus. He had a sudden image of nightmare beasts rutting. The meal he'd just eaten rushed back up into his throat.

Something slammed into his back, toppling him again. He struggled out from underneath the weight. A pudgy juvenile Freh, shapeless in layers of thick, stinking rags, stared down at him for a moment, then scrambled away hastily. Ries sat on the floor in the wreckage, his head throbbing, his mind blank.

Tongues of flame flickered across the low ceiling; acrid smoke filled his lungs and made him cough. The coughing caused him to retch again. He doubled over.

“Talker.” The alien with a bloody hand shook his arm. “Talker. Danger.”

The sound of Frehti was like birdsong. Trying to make sense of such warbling, twittering and chirruping—problematic at the best of times—was impossible in his present state. He got maybe one Frehti word in every two.

He closed his eyes against the stinging smoke, the piercing screeches. *Maybe I really am dying*, he thought.

No exaggeration. Maybe not tonight, or tomorrow or even a month from now. But he sensed his body succumbing to death little by little, felt the slow tightening of *zyth's* grip around his heart. He had a sudden vision—a splinter view of green foothills and sapphire lake—that closed down as rapidly as it opened. If he didn't give it up, he wouldn't live long enough to see Earth again.

Then he was aware of the bump and scrape of being hauled over benches, broken crockery, other bodies in the way.

He was too tired to resist.

* * * *

One of the aliens had tried to give him a message last night.

The memory pricked him as he dropped a step behind the Deputy Commissioner's wife and her companions moving through the cloth merchants' bazaar. He shielded the flask of *zyth* he was opening from their sight and took a medicinal gulp. The demon that lived in that flask raced through his blood like liquid flame, and he felt his heartbeat quicken.

In his experience, stone sober or drunk like last night, the Freh had the most stunted language of any sentient beings in the Orion Arm. Even very early linguists from pre-Guild days had taught there was no such thing as a primitive language, and what was true on Earth had proved true through the Orion Arm: All languages the Guild of Xenolinguists had ever found were as sophisticated as their speakers needed. On the other hand, the Guild could be wrong; Frehti, the language spoken here on Krishna, could turn out to be an exception.

His head pounded as if he'd slammed it repeatedly into a stone wall, his skin was clammy, and his throat seemed to have been scrubbed with sand. He had no recollection of how he got back to his quarters in New Bombay.

It was not yet noon, but the heat was already fierce. Dust rose as he walked, making his eyes water. He sneezed, startling a small cloud of insects hovering about his face. Already he could smell the rich, chocolate odor of the river moving sluggishly past the edge of the native town. The monsoon would be here any day, bringing its own set of problems. There were no pleasant seasons on Krishna.

The native name for the planet was Not-Here. *"How can anybody say their own world isn't here?"* The Deputy Commissioner's wife had demanded when he'd translated this for her. *"No wonder they're all so useless!"* Krishna was too benign a deity to give name to this planet, he thought. Kali would've

been more appropriate.

The DepCom's wife and fifteen year-old daughter moved slowly down the line of stalls in the silk merchants' section, followed by the wife of some minor official in the human colony. The women dabbed sweat from their cheeks with one hand, fended off flying insects with the other. They took their time, the DepCom's spoiled daughter plucking with obvious irritation at her mother's sleeve. The girl's red hair which she'd piled on her head in a style much too old for her had come loose, and he could see damp strands of it stuck to the back of her slender neck.

The bazaar was crowded with small, plump aliens whose skin had a color and texture that reminded him of scrubbed potatoes. The males' faces were decorated with tattoos, crude as a child's scribbled designs, done in dark purple ink; the females went unadorned. Like many races he'd seen in the Orion Arm, the Freh were humanoid, as if once having found a good recipe, Mother Nature was loathe to throw it away, and no taller than ten year-old human children. Their mouths had almost no lip, and their eyes were round and lacked lids. Like a bird or a reptile, they had a nictitating membrane that could veil their gaze, and their hands were four-fingered. The oddest thing about them was that such lumpish beings had mellifluous, bird-like voices.

Almost all of them here in the bazaar were male. They squatted along the edges of the narrow path between the stalls, leaned on poles supporting tattered silk awnings, or crowded around the stalls of food sellers. Two thirds of the male population never seemed to have anything to do; their sole purpose in life seemed to be standing about half-naked, staring at each other and at the humans.

No more details surfaced from the events in the tavern. When he'd been younger, he'd bounced back vibrantly from nights like last night. Now they left him feeling a hundred years old, his body demanding more of what was killing it to function at all. He took another sip—the alcohol flamed in his throat—put the flask back in his pocket and caught up with the women.

He despised these shopping trips. The women argued and disparaged and forced the prices down to a level he was ashamed to translate. And then they'd take their shimmering purchases back up to the Residence and have something fussy made out of them. The DepCom's women liked the delicate textiles on Krishna, but they preferred the elaborate fashions they remembered from Earth, however inappropriate they might be in this climate. But even that wasn't the heart of his discontent. This was no job for a lingster, even one who'd fallen as far as he had.

Ragged awnings over each stall hung limp in the still air. The ever-present smells of the bazaar, rotting vegetables, flyblown meat, sewage running in open ditches behind the stalls, and the merchants' sweat-soaked rags filled his nose. A hand dimpled like a child's plucked at his sleeve, and he turned to see half-raw meat on a stick offered to him. The seller of the meat gazed at him.

He recognized a juvenile, still carrying the rolls of fat about its neck that marked immaturity. Behind the juvenile, rows of small, featherless, flying creatures the natives trapped were set to roast over a bed of coals alongside succulent red-brown tubers. He shook his head and regretted it when the hangover pounded again in his temples. The juvenile grinned. There was a youthfulness in all their faces, a bland childlike expression that never seemed to mature. The only difference between them as they grew was that while they stayed pudgy they tended to lose the exaggerated neck fat.

He'd never seen an old Freh, male or female, or even an obviously middle-aged one. He didn't know if this meant they died young, if they simply kept their old out of sight, or even if they put them all to death above a certain age. It was a mark of how little importance humans placed on the natives of this world, their customs or their language, that no xenanthropologists had spent time here, and the xenolinguists initially sent by the Guild had spent precious little.

Across the alluvial plain on which the Freh town was built, Krishna's sun climbed the Maker's Bones till the eroded mountains glowed fiercely white like the skeleton of some extinct mammoth. He wiped a trickle of sweat from his neck, willing the women to hurry up. Sometimes they could go on like this for a couple of hours, examining bolts of iridescent material, picking and complaining.

The squatting merchants held their wares up silently, gazing incuriously at the human women, occasionally scratching simple marks on small squares of damp clay to keep track of their sales. They had no written language, and their arithmetic, on a base of eight, seemed not to be very flexible either. He glanced at an alien infant lying in a makeshift cradle underneath a stall; its parent paid no attention or perhaps was too lazy to swat the insects swarming over its face. The DepCom's wife had organized a wives' committee to teach Krishna's natives elementary hygiene; it didn't seem to be having much success.

"Danyo." Mem Patel crooked a finger at him. "See that bolt? Find out what this shifty-eyed thief wants for it."

For this elementary task the DepCom's wife required the expensive services of a Guild lingster. Mem Patel, like the rest of the human colony, hadn't bothered to learn anything of this language beyond "Kitchen Frehti," an impoverished pidgin of a very few alien words and her own native Inglis which she used with the female Freh who worked in the Residence.

"Danyo! The brocade this boy's holding!"

Beside the male alien, a female stood up, ready to bargain. She wore a shapeless brown garment and a necklace of plaited vines with a few grey clay beads that was no match for the garish blue designs on her mate's face. On Krishna it seemed to be the female's job to communicate; he wondered if perhaps males found it beneath their dignity to talk too much.

Before he could begin, the comlink the DepCom insisted he wear on these outings buzzed at his wrist. He held the tiny receiver to his ear.

"Ries. I need you up here. Right away." Deputy Commissioner Chandra Patel's voice echoed inside his skull, disturbing the brooding hangover again as if it were a flock of bats.

Ries stared at his shaking hand. "Sir?"

"Intelligence just in," the DepCom's voice said. *"Mules massing across Separation River."*

In the little more than two years Ries had been here, he'd seen the pattern repeat every year. A handful of the second race on Krishna, nicknamed "Mules" by the humans from their long, horsey faces, came into the native town and ran wild for a few days just before the monsoon struck. Nothing serious, as far as anyone could tell. A few fights with their Freh neighbors, an occasional native shack burned to the ground. One of the DepCom's hobbies had been gathering information, anecdotal for the most part, about the Mules.

"It's monsoon weather, the silly season," he said, watching the women plucking fretfully at rainbow silks. "Mules don't pay attention to New Bombay."

"Maybe. But I found a record of an attack when the colony was founded fifteen years ago. Almost wiped them out."

The DepCom's daughter turned and, catching Ries's gaze on her, stuck her tongue out at him. He frowned at the girl and saw her laugh.

"The early commissioners kept very poor records," Patel said. *"Maybe we can't trust them. But I*

don't want to take chances."

"Nothing the *Star of Calcutta* can't take care of, surely?"

"Bring the women back to the Residence, Ries. Immediately."

* * * *

The DepCom's women hadn't been pleased. Ries had let their indignation wash over him, ignoring their shrill protests.

Back in his own quarters in the Residence, he poured a shot of *zyth* in a small glass. They'd been wrong at the Mother House to think he couldn't handle it. There was a lot of pressure in lingsterring; some of the Guild's best people broke under the strain.

He leaned down to the computer on his desk and touched a key; the screen became a mirror. The action reminded him how long since he'd used the AI for the purpose it was intended; hours spent browsing through its copious files on the flora and fauna of Krishna didn't count. It was as superfluous here as he felt himself to be. A highly-trained lingster and a superior AI with nothing to do, what a waste.

He frowned at his swollen face under tangled curls of dark brown hair—no grey showing yet—the line of his cheek bones blurred under the flushed skin, the blue eyes bloodshot like the tracks of a wounded bird over snow. He stepped away and noticed an extra couple of kilos around the waist.

He changed into fresh tropical whites, tugged a comb through his hair, erased the mirror and went out of his room. At the top of the stairs, he changed his mind, ducked back inside and grabbed the flask which he tucked into a thigh pocket.

On the ground floor, a Freh houseboy with no understanding of how a central air system worked had left the doors of the Residence's great entrance hall wide open. A faint breath of humid air moved sluggishly inside, already laced with aerosols from the distant ocean's seasonal diatom bloom. Soon the monsoon would turn the streets of human enclave and native town alike into rivers of mud and the air into a smothering blanket laden with infection. He closed the doors.

Turning back, he found one of the houseboys silently moving across the hall. This one was draped in gaudy layers of red and orange silk. But today something fierce slid through the houseboy's small eyes before it was replaced by the servile, grinning expression the Freh adopted in human presence.

An arched alcove revealed a closed door. Ries knocked.

"Come in."

Chandra Patel glanced up from a large desk dominated by an over-size screen. The only sign of luxury here was the antique scarlet and gold carpet with a design of thatched huts and water buffalo that lay on the polished wood floor. Purchased from an impoverished museum in India and imported at great cost, it soothed Patel's occasional bouts of homesickness.

On the desk today Ries saw an uncharacteristically disorderly heap of papers, infocubes and disks, as if the DepCom had lost patience and banged a fist down in their midst, jumbling them. The usually immaculate diplomat hadn't taken time to shave this morning, and the burgundy silk lounging robe he wore looked as if he'd slept in it.

"What haven't you told me?" Ries asked.

Across the room, Patel's tea kettle on a hot-stone and two cups of delicate porcelain waited on a small

table. Ries took a pinch of aromatic black tea leaves from a canister, put one into each cup, then filled the cups with boiling water. Back turned to the DepCom, he poured a few drops of *zyth* from the flask into his own tea. He handed the other cup to the DepCom.

Patel said heavily, “The *Calcutta*'s on training maneuvers. Out of the sector. It'll take too long for her to get back.”

Tea forgotten for a moment, Ries stared at the DepCom. When humans had first arrived on this planet, the Freh who lived mainly in the lowlands along Separation River had been easily impressed by the display of superior technology into letting them settle peacefully. The DepCom was fond of pointing out that most Freh were living better now than they'd been before the advent of human colonists. Not to mention the stuff they managed to steal from the humans they worked for, his wife would add; colony wives had developed the necessary ritual of inventorying household property at least once a month.

The Mules seemed to be a different species than the Freh. Almost nothing was known about their history or their culture; their only observed behavior was this once-a-year mayhem visited on their neighbors. Ries himself had never even seen one close up. But the purpose of the small starship, *The Star of Calcutta*, was mainly to guard the planet against attack by the Venatixi, an alien race who bore no love for humans and whose violence intermittently scarred this sector of the Arm. Yet it seemed somebody had blundered, having the ship gone right now,

“But that isn't why I called you down here, Ries. Look at this.” The DepCom indicated the screen with a brown hand. “I know you're interested in the Freh language. I think I've found something more bizarre.”

Curious, Ries moved over to the desk to look. The one thing that had made his employment here bearable was Patel's friendship. It was the DepCom who suggested Ries make use of the sitar that had been his. The sitar, Ries remembered now, that had been damaged and then forgotten in a native tavern.

Before Patel could elaborate on what he'd found, the door opened and his wife hurried in. Nayana Patel—a short woman who might've been voluptuous in her youth—had changed into an elaborate red gown with voluminous skirts heavily embroidered in silver. He could see hints of the gown's Indian ancestry, but over-ornamented and fussy; the embroidery must've added at least a kilo to its weight.

“Chan!” she said sharply to her husband. “You must say something to the servants. Amah ruined my breakfast this morning. You'd think after all this while she'd have learned how to prepare naan. Now I find that she's run away.”

Nayana Patel called all the female house servants “Amah,” refusing to learn their names in retaliation for what she saw as their refusal to prepare the vegetarian diet the Patels followed, and claiming she couldn't tell one from another in any case.

“Find yourself another servant, Naya.”

Half a dozen silver bracelets on her wrist chimed musically as she moved in front of his desk. “That's what I'm trying to tell you, Chan. They've all gone.”

Patel stared at her for a second, then abruptly turned back to his desk and pressed a button on a small pad. They waited in silence. He banged his hand on the pad again. Nothing happened.

“You see?” Mem Patel said. “We're alone in this great awful house. Left to fend for ourselves.”

Remembering the odd, veiled look the houseboy had given him, Ries felt a tremor of apprehension slide up his spine.

“Ries,” Patel said. “Get my family to the *Calcutta's* base. Take my skipcar.”

Mem Patel said petulantly, “I’m not going anywhere without you, Chandra.”

“Stop arguing for once, Naya, and go with Ries. I’ll follow as soon as I can.”

She stared at him. “But I need to pack—”

“Get the children.” Patel took her arm and steered her out the door. When she’d gone, he gazed at Ries. “I can trust you with my family, can’t I?”

“Sir?”

“You’re a good man when you’re not drinking,” Patel said bluntly.

Anger burned in his stomach. “You can rely on me.”

* * * *

“The bottom line, Ries,” Magister Kai had said, “is that we can’t rely on you any more.”

The Head of the Mother House of the Guild of Xenolinguists had turned his gaze out the arched window of his study as if autumnal rainclouds slowly obliterating Alpine peaks absorbed his full attention. Ries had been summoned back to the Mother House for retraining, something all lingsters were encouraged to do at regular intervals. Other lingsters caught up on new technology and techniques, but he was subjected to lectures from a new Head, a man less inclined to be indulgent than the one he’d known as a student twenty years ago.

“I see from the record that the Guild has given you a number of chances over the last three years.” Magister Kai turned to face him again. “You were a very talented lingster in the beginning. But your addiction to native alcohols is a serious problem.”

“It’s under control now, Magister.” What choice did he have but stay sober on Earth? They would’ve found and confiscated his supply at the port if he’d tried to bring any home with him.

“Is it, Ries? I’d like to think so. I’d like to think that all the years the Guild spent preparing you for service haven’t been wasted after all. I’d like to believe that we could send you out into the field without worrying whether or not you’d be sober enough to do your job. But I find that belief hard to sustain.”

His last assignment had been a disaster. He knew the Guild would’ve much preferred to send someone other than himself, but the client alien had expressed urgency, and he’d been the only experienced lingster close enough to take the assignment at the time.

“I was sick. Picked up some kind of native virus—”

“And dosed it with native alcohol,” Magister Kai said. “Dangerously compromising the interface because you were out of control. Another time you, and the Guild, may not be so lucky. You do realize the risk you take?”

Lingstering was more of an art than a science for all the Guild proclaimed otherwise, and as an artist he’d found that some native liquors set his considerable talent free. That last time he’d managed to scare himself because it had taken him days to shake the demons that stalked through his skull.

There were hazards to mixing alcohol or any pharmaceutical, alien or otherwise, with the already volatile drugs of interface. The Guild had long ago learned to weed out candidates with sensitivity to Terran

intoxicants, narcotics, stimulants and hallucinogens, not even bothering to send them for treatment. Yet it was impossible to know in advance all the alien substances a human could become addicted to and develop appropriate immunogens.

He'd begun the slide three years earlier when his young wife died. He'd promised her he'd be the rock under her feet; instead he'd let her die. The Guild told him there would've been nothing he could do for Yv, even if he'd been there. There was nothing anybody could've done, they said. He didn't believe them; the Guild didn't approve of lingsters marrying. He'd been out of it on some native potion that morning, incapable of helping her when she needed him. Later, he drank to forget the damage the drinking had caused. And then he'd found he couldn't stop. The Guild had moved him from planet to planet, and on each he'd found something to ease his pain, something they couldn't immunize him against in advance. He didn't need some sanctimonious representative of the Guild telling him he should quit; he knew it. But he knew he wasn't ready just yet.

He said tersely, "I'm sober now."

"Perhaps you mean it this time." Magister Kai gazed at him for a moment. "And because of that, I'm giving you one last chance. The colony on Krishna was founded a dozen years ago. The aboriginal population is placid with the rudiments of a simple language. The lingsters who forged the interface set up the AI to handle it."

"Then why does anybody still need a lingster?"

"The Deputy Commissioner on Krishna, Chandra Patel, is an old friend of mine," Magister Kai said. "He wants a personal translator for his family."

* * * *

Shopping facilitator was more like it, he thought, as he left the DepCom's study. There wasn't even enough work here for a grade one translator. But he'd kept his word to Magister Kai. He hadn't missed a day of this boring and demeaning duty.

He crossed the hall. Through the high windows he saw the first wisps of cloud gathering over the jagged ribcage of the Maker's Bones. If Patel was right and the Mules intended to attack the human compound this time while the ship was offworld, there'd be real trouble.

He entered his own room and gazed at the mess he lived in. While the DepCom's wife packed, he'd better pull together a few things of his own. The only object of real importance he possessed was the fieldpack of interface drugs that all lingsters carried when they were on assignment. Not that he'd had any opportunity to use either the alpha or beta sequences in the whole two years he'd spent on Krishna, but no lingster ever walked off and left his fieldpack behind.

He thought of apocryphal stories of lingsters who'd come through disasters, triumphantly hefting their packs as if they'd faced nothing more than a routine interface. The stories were more propaganda than actual history, but the habit lingered. He strapped it on the hip opposite the flask.

To himself at least, he had to admit that he'd loved the Guild once, when he was young. He still thought with fondness of his student days. It had seemed an almost holy endeavor to immerse himself in the mystery of language, and the Guild, monastic in its foundation in any case, did little to discourage this religious fervor in its lingsters. Yet there was something about the Guild that ate up a lingster's productive years, then spat him out, exhausted, cynical and bereft.

Somewhere in the silent house he heard a muffled thud. Mem Patel, probably, bumping a trunk full of expensive clothes and baubles, and he'd be the one stuck with carrying it up to the roof. In a sour mood,

he started up the stairs that led to the family's private apartments.

Another thump, behind him this time. Then a sharp crash of furniture overturned. And a scream.

He turned back too fast, triggering a giddy spell. For a second the stairs tilted crazily under his feet and he lost his footing, slipping down two steps. He grabbed at the stair rail for balance, then moved with great care across the hall till the dizziness subsided. The noise was coming from Patel's study.

Nausea rose in his stomach. He hesitated outside the door. Another scream.

He flung the door open on a nightmare scene and came instantly, sharply sober.

The DepCom lay on the antique carpet by his desk, the spreading pool of his blood obliterating its pastoral designs. One of Patel's hands clutched the shattered keypad of his terminal. Standing over him, a small, naked alien, with a face so covered in tattoos that the natural color of the skin hardly showed, held a blade like an elongated thin pyramid in one bloodstained hand.

It took Ries several seconds to comprehend the incredible scene. Not Mule. The assassin was Freh. His heart lurched.

The plump little alien glanced at Ries. Two others, wearing only the Freh version of a loincloth, were ransacking the room, overturning chairs and emptying bookshelves.

He screamed at them in Kitchen Frehti: "Scum, obey your master." Lingster or not, it was all he could remember of the language in his shock.

The Freh holding the three-edged knife crimson with Patel's blood jabbered nervously. The other assassins reverted to familiar native behavior, shoving each other in their haste to scramble out the open window through which they'd entered.

Sick with horror, he let his eyes come back to the DepCom's lifeless body, glazed with its own blood. Then he dropped to his knees. Patel's fingers had flickered briefly.

Something clattered to the floor as he knelt. Ignoring it, he cradled the DepCom's bloody head in his lap. Close up, he caught the faint iron smell of the spreading blood.

"Ries," Patel whispered hoarsely. "I must tell you—Mules—Something I just learned—"

"Save your strength, Chan. I'll get help."

Weak fingers scrabbled at his sleeve. "Important. You *must* know this. The Freh—"

Patel's voice stopped. His head lolled back, his eyes stared unseeing into the lingster's own. Then his colorless lips moved soundlessly, and Ries read his last words: "Save my family."

He stared down at the dead man in his arms for a moment longer. Then he laid the head gently back down on the Indian carpet and stood up.

The assassin still stood, knife in hand, gaping stupidly at the result of his treachery. Ries took a step forward, and the alien bolted, scrambling out the window in his turn.

He glanced back one more time at the body, feeding a growing rage. The broken flask lay beside Patel, *zyth* running like a fiery oil slick over his bloody body.

* * * *

The family's private apartment was at the end of a long hallway on the third floor. Ries skidded on wooden tile polished slick every morning by grinning Freh houseboys, the same ones—or their friends and neighbors—who now had the blood of Chandra Patel on their hands. Never in the fifteen years the human colony had been on Krishna had the Freh given any indication they could turn into killers.

The fogginess of the hangover he'd experienced earlier came back, clouding his thoughts as the shocking clarity of Patel's murder faded. He could use a drink—but he knew he had to stay sober now.

The DepCom's bedroom door stood ajar, and he heard the *skreek* of trunks being dragged across the wooden floor, the thud and thump of the family's frantic packing. He knocked once to announce his presence then went inside without waiting for a reply.

Three year-old Jilan, the Patels' late-in-life child, sat in a heap of vivid scarlet and turquoise pillows on the huge bed, silently clutching a stuffed toy. He'd always thought there was something fey about this child who'd been born on Krishna. The older daughter was adding her weight to her mother's as they tried to close an overstuffed travelling chest. Lita's eyes were deep brown flecked with gold, and when she'd finished growing out of her awkward years he imagined she'd be as exotic as a tiger. For now, she was a moody teenager, unpredictable as a cat.

“Danyo.” Nayana Patel looked up and spotted him. “I can't find a boy to help us. Give me a hand with this.”

“Respect, Mem, but we have to get out now. Leave it.”

She stared at him, fussing absently at the long, elaborately pleated gown. “I can't go without—”

He grabbed the woman's elbow and turned her toward the door.

The younger daughter wailed. But the older daughter snatched at his sleeve, and he saw scarlet, long-nailed fingers.

“Don't touch my mother!” the girl ordered.

He removed her hands from his sleeve. “We don't have time to waste.”

Mem Patel's eyes widened as she caught sight of the blood on his hands where her husband's head had rested. “Chandra?” she whispered. Color drained out of her dark face leaving it grey.

He was afraid she'd break down helplessly if he gave her the truth. But she obviously guessed the news was bad. She clapped a heavily-ringed hand over her mouth stifling her exclamation. Then she turned back to the bed, bracelets tinkling, and swept her younger child up. The toddler whimpered as the stuffed toy fell out of her arms. The big case she'd been packing forgotten now, the woman moved to the door.

Lita scowled, pushing a loose strand of copper hair back up on her head. He watched her grab up a smaller case that had been on the floor by the bed, feeling the heat of her dislike. “*What are you, Danyo?*” she'd once asked. “*Monk or fairy? Do you ever even look at women?*” How close she'd come to the truth; since his wife's death, he hadn't been with a woman.

Lita followed her mother to the door.

“Wait.” He stepped in front of Mem Patel and looked cautiously around the open door.

The upstairs hallway was deserted, the great house silent, giving no hint of the carnage he'd witnessed downstairs. A sense of wrongness suffused the place. The stairwell leading up to the rooftop was at the

opposite end of the hallway from the main staircase. No rooms opened off the hall at this point, no balconies or even windows that opened, and if they were challenged here they'd be cornered.

As the fugitives moved down the hall, a row of holo-portraits of former Deputy Commissioners watched grim-faced, white-robed men and women in ceremonial saris, whose most serious threat during their tenure on Krishna had been the upholding of Hindu customs in the face of Freh indifference and incompetence. To make eye contact with any one of them was enough to activate circuits that would deliver snippets of wisdom in the subject's voice. Some had chosen favorite axioms of diplomacy, others repeated cherished lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*. He didn't look at them. There was no advice modern or archaic they could give him; not one of them had faced a nightmare like this.

"You might not want to tell Mama the truth, Danyo," Lita's low voice said just behind him. "But you'd better soon tell *me* or I'm not going anywhere with you."

He glanced back at the girl's sullen face. "You don't have much of a choice."

"Pah! Your breath stinks of liquor," she said.

Jilan wailed and Mem Patel smothered her child's face against her own breast, muffling the sound. The woman's eyes glittered with tears, but she held her grief in silence. He shepherded the family along until they reached a door that led to the roof stairs. Opening it cautiously, he listened for sounds.

They were directly above a small, walled garden the Patels used for meditation, with a holo-statue of Krishna in a niche surrounded by flowers. It struck him then how the Patels clung to the things of home, how little they'd adjusted to this new life. Yet in this they were no different from the rest of New Bombay colony.

A damp wind was picking up, souging through the trees on the other side of the wall. Tall and skinny, they reached as high as the flat roof of the Residence. The Freh called the trees, "Spirit-Trap," the name serving to suggest again how little he really understood of the Freh or their language. The air was heavy with the clotted green smell of the coming monsoon. His sinuses tingled.

He stepped cautiously outside. Beyond the trees, he saw the other wall, the one that shut New Bombay off from the native town squatting at its feet like a scruffy beggar, and south of the town, Separation River. To the north and east was a great chain of mountains dropping down to foothills in the north-west where it was possible to cross to the rolling sweep of grasslands where the starship was based. Their only hope of safety lay in the *Star of Calcutta's* base.

The DepCom's silver skipcar crouched on a bullseye pad in the center of the roof, an over-sized mosquito about to launch itself into the sky. It was small enough that Mem Patel's luggage, if he'd let her bring it, would've made it unbearably crowded. He didn't need to know much about flying; the onboard AI would take care of most of it. The sooner they embarked the better. He beckoned to the women.

His way was suddenly blocked by a Freh in a voluminous ankle-length, orange-brown garment. A white silk scarf, like all the natives wore during the season of blowing spores, covered his face.

"Talker. Wait," the alien said in Frehti. "No harm."

Mem Patel gasped, but if the mother was scared, the wildcat daughter certainly wasn't.

"Go from our way," Lita said in a high-pitched Frehti that Ries hadn't known she could speak.

The Freh stepped back a pace and allowed the white scarf to slide down, revealing sallow features and one lone tattoo squiggle that began on his forehead and ran down over one cheek. Ries recognized the

male alien who'd been in the tavern last night; his name was Born-Bent. The Freh's spine seemed twisted out of alignment, raising one shoulder higher than the other and throwing the head off balance. One eye was dull amber, the other grey. *"What they'd call back home a sport,"* the DepCom had once commented, coming upon the malformed alien in the marketplace.

"What are you doing here?" Ries demanded in Frehti.

Born-Bent had done small services for him from time to time, but he'd never trusted the Freh.

Behind him, he heard the child's voice start up again in a rising whine of protest, and the mother's urgent hushing.

The Freh made a half servile, half nervous gesture with his head. "Danger here."

He became aware of the tremor in his hands and shut his fists to still it. "What do you want with me?"

The lipless mouth pulled up in an ugly caricature of a grin. "I do service. Then Talker do service."

He wondered suddenly if the name the aliens called him indicated respect or contempt. Probably the latter, since males didn't seem to hold conversations.

"What service?"

At that point, the little girl screeched loudly.

"What is it, precious one?" Mem Patel asked anxiously.

Born-Bent reached into his tent-like robe with his bandaged hand and pulled something out. "Take."

His hand rose instinctively to ward off attack before he saw what it was the alien held out: the sitar he'd left in the tavern. The cracked gourd that had formed the instrument's resonator at its base had been replaced with the shell of a large, native nut.

"This also."

Ries looked down at a second object the alien laid on his palm. It seemed to be a small bone from an animal with some kind of marks scratched on its surface; at first glance, they resembled the scrawl of the primitive counting system used by the merchants in the bazaar. Yet as he gazed at the bone, something stirred in him, some sense of mystery.

"What is it?"

"Soul bone. Give to the mothers."

He had to raise his own voice over the sound of the child's wailing. "What mothers? Where?"

"Beneath the bones. Go. Great danger."

The last thing he had time to do was carry a native relic to an alien graveyard. Ries shoved the bone into a pocket and looped the carry-cord of the sitar over his shoulder.

He turned back to Lita. "Get in the 'car."

"I don't take orders from servants."

"Lita!" Mem Patel scolded.

“Well—He is.”

“Your Papa wishes us to go with Danyo, and so we will.”

The girl scowled but turned toward the vehicle. He took the still shrieking, red-faced child from her mother. Jilan pummeled his arms with her fists.

Mem Patel suddenly seemed to understand the cause of her child's distress. “Where is it, sweetheart? Tell Mama.”

Jilan pointed back toward the open door at the top of the narrow stairwell.

His skin prickled. For a moment he thought he'd heard the rumble of voices rising up the stairwell, the echo of tramping feet. He listened. Nothing.

“We have to leave, Mem. Now!”

The older girl was already in the skipcar; she leaned back out the door, holding her arms out to take her sister. He lifted the child up to Lita's waiting arms, then turned to help the DepCom's widow.

Nayana Patel was running back toward the stairwell door to fetch the child's toy, one hand clutching the ridiculously ornate skirt above her knees. Lita screamed. He lunged after Mem Patel, but Born-Bent grabbed him, pinning his arms. The Freh was surprisingly strong for his small size.

“Talker!” The alien said urgently. “You understand how words make.”

As Nayana Patel reached the door, another alien appeared, his body naked but his face scarved in white. Ries caught the prismatic glint of a three-sided knife. Mem Patel screamed, the sound dwindling away into a gurgle as bright red arterial blood spurted high, hitting the lintel as she fell.

“Mama!” Lita wailed.

Two more Freh spilled out onto the roof, stepping carelessly over the downed woman.

He threw his weight against the sport. His head spun dizzily, but he caught Born-Bent off-balance and almost broke free.

Born-Bent punched him full in the stomach.

His knees buckled under him and air rushed out of his lungs. The alien dragged him across the roof and shoved him like a sack of vegetables through the door of the skipcar. Inside, the child's deafening noise echoed round the confined metal space. His belly scraped painfully over the ridged floor. Lita's long-nailed fingers scrabbled at his arm, pulling him in; her red hair had come loose from the clip, and long curls spilled over her face.

He glanced out the door again, just in time to see Born-Bent go down under the flash of a blade.

II

The skipcar was flying low over leafy Spirit-Trap treetops glowing olive by storm light. High crests whipped past only centimeters away. Lita Patel sat in the pilot's seat, frowning out the forward port at the horizon, where the grey-green of the jungle met the iron grey of the clouded sky. She'd had the presence of mind to get the skipcar airborne after Born-Bent shoved him aboard.

“Flying too low,” he observed. His eyes were raw and his stomach felt bruised.

“Glad you're feeling better.”

“Onboard AI—”

“Overrode it. I'm keeping us under the storm clouds.”

He squinted at the jungle flowing like a dark river beneath them. “Didn't know you knew anything about flying.”

“More than you, apparently.” She turned to look at him. “You drink too much.”

In the watery light he saw smudges under her eyes which were bloodshot as if she'd been crying. Her red hair had come completely loose now, tumbling over her shoulders.

And suddenly he knew that one of the things about her that irritated him so much was that her hair was the same rich color as his young wife's had been. Looking at this half-grown vixen triggered painful memories of his lost, sweet Yv. The sooner they reached the 'base and he could hand these two over to somebody else the better.

His head felt as if it had been hollowed out; the sound of his own voice when he spoke boomed and echoed inside his skull. He leaned forward and punched up the 'car's automap and studied it. The terrain between New Bombay and the base was hilly and wild; their route passed over a ridge thick with unbroken jungle, a tapestry in vermillion and umber.

“Danyo, I expect you to explain—”

“Not now.”

“Then advise me. I've been trying to raise *Calcutta's* base, but I get no response.”

Even with the starship gone, there should be a skeleton maintenance crew left behind. He deactivated the map. “Try again.”

She leaned forward and keyed a command into the pad. Nothing happened. “Why don't they answer? Is something wrong?”

He considered possibilities but decided not to share them. Ahead, a jagged spike of lightning streaked out of the black clouds and raced to the ground.

After a moment, she said in a whisper which couldn't hide the shakiness of her voice, “Tell me the truth now, Danyo. My father's dead too, isn't he?”

If they were going to have any chance of getting through this, she would have to grow up. There was no way he could make it painless. “The Freh killed him.”

She closed her eyes, and he saw her small white teeth biting her lower lip. She had her mother's ability to absorb terrible news and not cry out. He couldn't remember the death of his own parents—he'd already been on assignment for the Guild—but he knew it wasn't under terrible circumstances like these. He felt there was something he ought to say to her but couldn't think of anything appropriate.

They skimmed over the wind-churned treetops in silence again for a few seconds. Rain spattered in a crazy staccato on the forward port. They'd be lucky to make it to the base before the storm caught them.

Finally, he said lamely, “I'm sorry.”

She stared resolutely ahead. “We have to get to the *Calcutta* now.”

He hadn't been able to weep after Yv's death. Like Lita, he'd found no time for grief. Instead, he'd taken the way past the pain of living through a bottle of whatever a planet offered. But that had been just another kind of lie.

“The ship isn't at the base right now.”

“Not there? Then—”

She didn't get to finish her thought. The little skipcar shuddered as if hit by a giant fist, rolled tail over nose and headed straight down for the forest floor.

* * * *

When he opened his eyes again, he was dangling upside down from the seat webbing, the floor of the skipcar above his head. Branches poked their way in through broken ports. A long jagged spike of what was supposed to be shatterproof plastiglass was poised above his neck. It took him a moment to figure out that the 'car must have been caught in a tree that had broken their fall.

What the hell're we going to do now?

The silence made him nervous. Supporting his weight with one hand on a strut, he wriggled cautiously round until the glass no longer threatened to impale him. Now he could see the pilot's seat.

Empty.

He craved a shot of *zyth* to steady his nerves, but he knew he was going to have to do this alone from now on. The thought scared him. Then he abandoned caution and twisted in the web until he could see the back. Also empty. If they'd been ejected—

“You're conscious,” Lita said leaning in the window, careless of the splintered glass.

He stared upside down at her. “I thought you might've been killed.”

“You don't have that much luck, Danyo.” Her expression, wan beneath the coffee-brown skin, gave the lie to the bravado of her words.

“We must've been struck by lightning.” He wondered if the onboard AI had been badly damaged, and if it contained a self-repair program.

“I got Jilan out first in case the 'car burned.”

She indicated where her sister sat, finger in her mouth, at the foot of a tangle of slender jungle trees. Long emerald fronds dripped rainwater on her.

He noticed that Lita had removed the ornate overskirt she'd been wearing at home—the thought brought back an unwelcome image of Mem Patel's skirt spattered in blood—revealing sturdy brown legs in serviceable shorts. She carried the skirt slung over one shoulder like a cloak. The little strap sandals on her feet were not so practical.

His seat web was jammed and it took time to free himself. Lita helped, supporting him to take tension off the web's fastening.

“Devi! You weigh too much,” she grumbled.

He turned, allowing his legs to slide slowly down to the ceiling that was now the floor, and felt the sitar bump against his head. For a moment he considered leaving it behind. But it had been Patel's, and Born-Bent had gone out of his way to mend it and bring it back. It really didn't weigh that much. The sitar's carry cord had caught in the seat web and had to be untangled. A lightweight jacket he'd thrown into his pack had snagged on the cord too, and came with it.

He rolled himself cautiously out of the wrecked 'car and stood beside the girl in the wet forest. Immediately, his sensitive sinuses tingled painfully.

"Jilan's hungry," Lita said. "She hasn't eaten since—"

He felt heat on the back of his neck and turned to see the skipcar burning. He stared at it for a moment. The forest was too damp for the fire to become a threat, but he hadn't had time to get their belongings out.

"You see?" she said. "Now what?"

Krishna wasn't a world that invited tourism. He knew few things about the foothills other than they were wild and dotted with small Freh villages where some of the bazaar's vendors lived. He'd trusted the skipcar's AI to get them to the base without knowing exactly where it was. Now he was certain of only one thing: They dared not stay here in the jungle, so close to the chaos in New Bombay.

"Now we go on foot," he said.

Lita scuffed a toe in the grass that formed a thick, waist-high carpet under the trees, and drops of water flew off the stalks. "Not much of a path. And what about Jilan? This is over her head."

He glanced in the direction she indicated and saw the little girl pushing her way through grass that reached her shoulders. As he watched, she stumbled and fell, disappearing under a green wave that closed over her. If she went off on her own, they could easily lose track of her.

"I'll carry Jilan."

"Do you know what direction we should take?"

He didn't, but he wasn't going to admit that. Spirit-Trap trees hid the mountains from sight, and the sky was too overcast for him to get his bearings from the sun. If he climbed one of the trees, he'd get a better sense of which way to go, but these trees were too thin to take his weight. He had no idea how many hours had passed since they'd fled New Bombay. He had to do it soon, or what little daylight was left would be fading.

He picked up the toddler and settled her on his shoulders where she twined her fingers in his hair, leaning her head drowsily against his. She was heavy, but at least she'd given up that awful screaming. He wasn't used to children, and he'd never had much contact with this one in New Bombay; she'd stayed most of the time in the nursery with the family's personal servants.

"Be careful with my sister," Lita warned. "She's very upset."

He glanced at the older girl. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed her interpreting for her silent sibling. "Doesn't she speak for herself?"

"Why should she? My mother spoiled her. And the amahs did everything for her. Everybody around her did the talking."

Three was late for a child to begin talking, he thought. All healthy human babies were born with impressive linguistic skills. Jilan should be conveying her thoughts with some fluency by now, not relying on others to do it for her.

Somewhere a stream rushed by, hidden in the dense undergrowth, chattering urgently to itself. The sharp, clear scent of water lay like a descant over the darker notes of wet soil and thick plant-life. Enormous magenta and scarlet blossoms hung from vines that climbed the tree trunks; smaller, acid yellow flowers lit up the shadows beneath them. Clouds of eyeless insects whirred by; guided only by the smell of the flowers, they blundered constantly into the humans' faces. He pushed his way through the high grass and Lita followed.

"These sandals are rubbing my feet," she complained at one point.

He wouldn't have believed the brutal carnage they'd left behind in the Residence was the work of Freh if he hadn't seen them himself. Something had caused the normally placid aliens to rise up against the humans. If they'd been harboring deep resentment against the colonists all these years, they'd done a good job of hiding it. He tried to remember if he'd ever sensed anger or even reluctance in the native behavior, but all the images he conjured up were of bland, incurious, passive faces.

"You understand how words make." Born-Bent had been wrong; he didn't understand at all. There were obviously huge gaps in his knowledge of how Frehti operated. He wished he could take the problem back to the Guild, let his old teachers play with it. He imagined them as he'd known them in his youth. Magistra Eiluned, old already when he'd first come to the Mother House, and Dom Houston who'd believed that every language served only to disguise. Was Frehti disguising something he should know? In memory he saw them gathered round the seminar table while the warm green smell of summer flowed through tall windows and cuckoos spoke from sunlit apple orchards.

A stifled exclamation at his side brought him back. Lita had caught one of her flimsy sandals in a wiry grass strand. He put out a hand and steadied her.

When the sandal was settled back on her foot, she glanced up at him. "Do you have any idea what caused that ... that ... what happened back there?"

Her voice wavered, but he could tell she was determined not to let him see her terror. Hair in disarray, clothing streaked and torn, she was, after all, hardly out of childhood herself.

"Time to talk about it later," he said.

Something had happened in the native tavern. Born-Bent had tried to give him a message and perhaps been killed for it. The DepCom had tried to share something he'd learned. Again, something important enough for a man to waste his dying breath trying to communicate. Ries had a sense of huge pieces of information lacking, questions without answers. Until he understood the deadly puzzle, he and the DepCom's children were in mortal danger.

When they'd gone a few hundred meters through the dense undergrowth, he found what he was looking for. An old Spirit-Trap with a thick, gnarled trunk shoved its head up through the canopy formed by its younger neighbors. He let the child and the sitar slide gently down to the wet grass. Jilan clung to his leg for a moment, staring up at him wide-eyed, but she made no sound. He was beginning to find the child's silence unnerving.

"Wait here a minute," he said. "Okay?"

Jilan didn't answer.

“What're you doing now?” Lita asked as he began to climb. She seemed to have pulled herself together again. “You'll never make that, Danyo. You're out of shape.”

The smooth trunk was slick from the rain but free of the clinging vines. Near the top, the main trunk split into three, and he could go no further as each thin limb bent under his weight. He sat in the security of this three-pronged Y, blood pounding in his temples, leaning out precariously to gaze over the surrounding forest.

The rain had stopped and the sun had already set, leaving a diffuse glow in the banked clouds on the horizon. To his left, the storm had cleared, and he saw the first faint spark of the constellation the Freh called “The Thief.” Below it, a white smear, a tail end of the home galaxy that the Freh knew as “Sorrow-Crossing” gleamed faintly. Somewhere down that soft wash of light, a small blue planet orbited a sun too insignificant to be visible this far away.

He looked away. Fugitives couldn't afford the luxury of being homesick.

They were on the slope of one of the foothills, a gentle rise that he hadn't noticed as they'd trudged through the thick jungle. He gazed across canyons choked with dark vegetation and saw Separation River, glowing like a pewter ribbon in the twilight, winding across the alluvial plain. He thought of his first impressions of Krishna as the shuttle ferrying him down from the starship came in through the atmosphere: A lush green planet laced with shining waterways, signs of squalid habitation appearing only after the shuttle landed.

In the foreground, downslope, he noticed a number of trees seemed to be leaning crazily, and he realized he was staring at the skipcar's crash site. Then his attention was pulled back to the distant human settlement on the banks of the river. It seemed as if it were illuminated. As he stared, it erupted in a fountain of flame that turned the bluffs crimson. New Bombay was on fire.

“How much longer are you going to stay up there?”

It was completely dark on the forest floor when he slid back down the tree again, but his eyes retained the after-image of flame. The DepCom had thought danger would come from the wild Mules, yet it was the placid Freh who'd rebelled, and that was more frightening.

“Well, did you find which way we have to go?”

“I think so.”

No sense passing on to her what he'd learned from the AI of carnivores on Krishna. As if to underline his concern, the leathery black shape of a huge nightbird slipped between the trees and swept past his shoulder. He heard the slap and creak of its featherless wings.

And he heard something else. Something more menacing than a wild animal.

“What? Danyo, why're you pushing me?”

“Up there.” He jerked his chin at the tree he'd just climbed down. “We'll wait up there till it's light.”

“But I don't climb trees. And what about Jilan?”

He shoved the hesitating girl towards the tree. “Get your foot up on that bole there. Then the other. Keep going!” He slung the sitar over his shoulder, grabbed the child up and held her close to his chest with one hand, reaching into the tree's darkness for a handhold with the other. The fieldpack dug into his hip as the child clasped her legs around him.

Lita seemed to pick up his urgency and she climbed quickly. He followed, burdened by the child and the sitar which he couldn't leave behind in the damp grass. It banged into his shoulder blades with each movement. Scared by the ascent, the little girl made it worse by clinging tightly to his hair. Lita's foot slipped twice on the damp trunk and struck his fingers, almost knocking him off. The child struggled, and he had a hard time hanging on to the slippery bark.

“Stay calm!” he commanded.

She whimpered but stopped struggling. Lita had now reached the Y where he'd stopped earlier; he pushed the child up into her down-stretched hands. Relieved of Jilan's weight, he scrambled up after her.

He heard the harsh intake of Lita's breath as she turned toward the plain of Separation River. The entire sky to the south and east was lit by the lurid glow of the fire, and under it the wet leaves of the forest canopy glittered redly as if they'd been drenched in blood.

Below them, the forest suddenly filled with screams—the crash of bodies running blindly through undergrowth—a high-pitched keening that brought the hairs up on his neck and arms. A sudden smell like putrefying flesh rose up to his nostrils.

“Merciful Lord Krishna!” Lita exclaimed, her hands clasped over her nose. “What is it?”

At the foot of the tree that sheltered them, a naked, spindly-legged creature, its corpse-white skin hanging in folds like a too-big overcoat hastily thrown over spikes of underlying bone, wrestled a plump Freh female to the ground. The Freh shrieked and thrashed about as the other alien covered her. Ries could see her fists pummeling the larger alien's shoulders—a male, he could see its elongated penis and scrotal sack—and he heard the stream of scolding she gave vent to in her birdlike voice. The male made no sound in reply.

This was the first Mule he'd ever seen close up, and he was stunned by the height and emaciation of the alien. The powerful reek of their violent mating rose up in a thick cloud till he thought he would vomit.

Then it was over. The Mule stood up, his long, horse-like head turning slowly, the over-large ears pricked as if they were listening to sounds out of human range. Then he vanished wraith-like into the trees. A moment later, the Freh female picked herself up from the ground, brushed leaves and dirt off, then strolled away as if nothing had happened.

It made no sense. The Freh and the Mules were separate species; that was obvious at a glance. Had he misunderstood what was happening?

Lita was crying now. The mask of arrogance and precociousness that marked the teenager in the bazaar this morning had dropped away. The younger daughter stared up at him, her eyes wide with fright, her hands gripping the front of his jumpsuit.

“She looked like one of Jilan's amahs,” Lita said in a wobbly voice. “What're we going to do, Danyo?”

“We'll stay up here for the night. In the morning, we'll make plans.”

He put one arm around each of them, drew them close to share a little warmth, and thought about what she'd just said. The girl obviously didn't share her mother's boast that she couldn't tell one Freh from another.

The lurid glow in the sky over New Bombay gradually faded. The storm had blown over for the time being, leaving a sky bright with alien constellations and the white trail of Sorrow-Crossing. The planet had no companion in its orbit round its sun; Krishna's night sky was perpetually moonless. He looked down.

Now the wet leaves mirrored the fierce glitter of stars.

When it was light again in the morning, he'd try to remember information browsed in the computer's library about edible plants and roots. One protein-rich, red-brown tuber the natives roasted over hot coals, he'd tasted in the bazaar. The Freh used the husks to make the dye they favored for their own robes. If he could find some tomorrow it would solve the food problem.

Something dug into his ribs where the child clung to him. He took Born-Bent's soul bone out and examined it curiously. It was about the size and width of his own index finger, and in the starlight its surface gleamed almost as though it were translucent. He ran his finger over the symbol scratched on it, but it yielded no secrets to him. The mothers—whoever and wherever they were—would know what to do with it, the Freh had said. If he survived long enough to find them.

After a while, the girls slept, but he remained awake and watchful for a long time, listening to the sounds of flight and evasion and bestial rutting that came from all directions, punctuated with an ominous animal roaring that brought to mind the chilling sights and sounds of jungle life he'd found in the AI's library.

* * * *

He slept fitfully. Shortly before dawn, he dreamed Yv was drowning in Separation River. She was wearing the sky blue dress she'd worn on their wedding day, and her outstretched hands implored him to help while he stood on the other bank, unable to reach her.

When he woke, his head had the sticky, cobweb-filled feeling he knew well, a clogged dullness that *zyth* caused and only *zyth* could remove.

His muscles jumped and trembled this morning. Fire raced down the nerve paths, and sweat broke out on his brow in spite of the cool morning. He felt weak, drained, ready to give up, desperate for the courage *zyth* could give him, even if it didn't last.

The forest had dissolved in a pearl-white mist that dripped off the leaves. He looked down at Jilan, still nestled in the crook of his arm. She was awake, gazing up at him, thumb in mouth, her face puffy and tear-streaked. *This wasn't part of my Guild oath!* But for the child's sake, he had to pull himself together.

Lita was kneeling in the tall grass in the grey light, emptying something out of her skirt which she'd used as a basket. Wisps of fog drifted slowly over the ground.

She glanced up at him. "I found breakfast while you were still snoring."

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of seeing her barbs strike home. He let the sitar slide down until it was low enough to drop safely into her outstretched hands. Then he grasped Jilan with one shaky hand and with the other lowered himself down to stand beside Lita. The little girl wriggled free and clutched her sister's arm. Lita pulled her sister down to sit on the ground close beside her, then indicated a mound of thumbnail-sized, dark purple berries.

"The houseboys sometimes brought us berries," she said. "They looked a bit like these."

He picked one out of the mound and raised it cautiously to his nose, then broke the berry open with a finger nail and gazed at the honeycomb of tiny segments surrounding a small oval seed. "This one's okay."

He handed it to her and picked up another.

"You mean you're going to do that with each one?" she asked, her disbelief obvious. "But they all came

from the same bush. If one's okay—”

“Three kinds of berries all grow on one bush. They all look alike on the outside. The one I gave you is female, safe to eat. Another kind contains the male chromosomes, a kind of red dust that will make you sneeze and your stomach cramp, but it won't kill you. The third is sexually neuter. It's designed to kill the plant's enemies that mistake it for one of the other two.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth. “But I was so hungry, and they looked—Danyo, I already ate one!”

“Does your stomach hurt?”

She shook her head.

“You were lucky. Next time, wait for me.”

“I was only trying to help,” she said in a small voice.

He sat cross-legged on the wet ground and sniffed, split and sorted the berries, discarding most of them, stopping to sneeze frequently. Both sisters watched him work. Finally he took a berry from the smallest pile and—to reassure Lita—put it with great show into his own mouth. Then he turned that pile over to her.

“Those you can eat safely.”

“You're only going to eat one berry?”

“I'm not hungry.”

He didn't tell her that *zyth* was distilled from the poisonous form of these berries, made safe only after a long period of fermentation, and perhaps not even then. Hunger for *zyth* rose up from his bowels like a starved beast, all claws and teeth, overwhelming his body's need for food. For a moment he considered saving the dangerous berries. If he put one under his tongue, sucked it, didn't chew—

He stood up abruptly and walked away from temptation.

While the children ate their meager breakfast, the sun rose and the mist gradually melted off the grass. A fallen tree trunk provided a place to sit. He unslung the sitar from his shoulder, settled it in his lap and began to explore the strings with a hand that wouldn't stop trembling. The native nut that had replaced the cracked gourd changed the resonance, and he compensated for it as much as he could. He really needed a wire plectrum to pluck the strings, but that hadn't been in his pocket when Born-Bent returned the lost instrument to him.

His fingernails were still caked in the DepCom's blood. He wiped his hand clean in the wet grass.

Lita came over to sit beside him as he finished. Her red hair tangled over her shoulders, and pink juice from the berries stained her mouth. Jilan was drawing on a patch of bare ground, using a piece of dry grass she'd pulled from the forest floor. Absorbed by her work, the child paid no attention to them. The two looked nothing alike, he thought. Lita would be as voluptuous as her mother but taller when she matured; the child was elfin-faced and seemed destined to be small and delicate.

“That was my father's sitar,” Lita said.

“Yes.”

“Play something.”

He picked out an old song he'd learned as a student, a lament for time past and homeland lost, like a thousand similar dirges sung in different languages over the millennia by humans who'd been explorers and wanderers since they emerged from the primal ocean.

“Sad. It reminds me of Earth.”

He set the instrument down on the ground beside him.

“I never learned to play. I think it would've pleased my father if I had.” She ran one finger tip down the length of a string. “I've been away so long, it's hard to remember Earth let alone India. Have you ever been to India?”

He shook his head and stood up, working on tension in his neck and shoulders.

“One thing I remember is a white house in the mountains, near the headwaters of the Ganges. We lived there in the summertime. We had peacocks and monkeys in the gardens—”

She broke off. He watched her staring into the distance, the rising sun illuminating half her face, highlighting the dark cheekbones so that she seemed a bas-relief carving of a young goddess on a temple wall.

In the silence, he bent down and retrieved the sitar, sliding an arm through its carry-cord. “Time to move on.”

After a while she said, “You must've met lots of aliens.”

“A number. They're not all pleased to meet Homo Sapiens.”

She scrambled to her feet and took her sister's hand. They stepped out through tough, wiry grass that grew up to the height of the child's head. He took Jilan from Lita and swung her up onto his shoulders. The child grasped the neck of the sitar as she rode, which didn't prevent it from banging his back but tightened the carry-cord as it passed across his throat.

Lita walked beside him. “How did you know about the berries?”

“There was a wealth of information in the AI's library. Your father seemed to be the only person in New Bombay who was interested in it.”

She was silent for a moment, then she said, “You don't like me very much, do you?”

“Not important. I have to get you to safety.”

“Well, maybe it's mutual.” She halted, staring at the stark peaks, bones shrouded in funereal grey mist. “I hate this planet. Especially those ugly mountains.”

He glanced up without slowing his pace. “The Maker's Bones?”

She caught up with him again. “And why do they have that name? Do the Freh believe in a god called the Maker? Is he supposed to be buried up there or what?”

“I haven't seen any evidence the Freh have a god.”

“How can that be? All primitive races have gods or goddesses.”

Before he could answer, something crashed through the undergrowth ahead of them. He seized Lita's arm and pulled them all down behind a tall clump of the bushes. Jilan whimpered and pressed her face against his chest.

The noise grew closer, and now they could hear snuffling—growling—keening—

“What is it?” Lita whispered, her breath warm at his ear.

Three figures emerged from the trees, a tall Mule male with deepset eyes and two male Freh, one a juvenile, wrapped in rags and still showing the distinctive rolls of adolescent neck fat. The Mule tackled the naked adult Freh and wrestled him to the ground. They rolled over and over in the grass, the Mule grunting, the Freh screeching, and both pounding each other, at one point coming so dangerously close to the humans' hiding place that Ries smelled the Freh's sour sweat and the rancid odor of the Mule.

The Mule appeared to be trying to sink long fangs into the Freh's arms while the juvenile stood by, shrilling and gesturing with his four-fingered hands. Ries would never have guessed from the starved look of the Mule that he would be so strong, but he was obviously getting the better of the sturdier-looking Freh.

As abruptly as the sexual encounter had ended last night, this fight ended. Now the combatants separated, not looking at each other, sat up and brushed dirt off themselves. A long moment passed. When he finally stood, the Mule's thin arms were as long as his legs; Ries saw the bones clearly through the skin as if the alien were a walking anatomy demonstration.

The Freh turned unblinking eyes in the direction of the hidden humans, but far from signalling defeat, there was something that seemed gluttonous and satisfied in that expression. There was some unexplained connection here, some clue he was missing that would explain the bizarre interaction between these two species that he'd witnessed last night and today, but he had no idea what it could be.

Through all this, the juvenile continued to wail. Suddenly, the Mule seemed to become aware of the noise for the first time. With a roar that was almost too deep to come from such a sunken chest, he now turned on the younger Freh. At first Ries thought he meant to kill the juvenile, but he saw that the Mule's intention was to drive him away. The juvenile took a step back, his eyes large with fear, arms flapping ineffectually in front of his face. The Mule lunged forward.

Then, to Ries' astonishment, the adult Freh joined the chase. At this, the juvenile turned and ran. The Mule and the adult Freh both ran after him. The sounds of the chase gradually died away behind them and the silence of the forest returned. Ries blew breath out, releasing tension.

“I want to go home!” Lita clutched her little sister.

He sighed. “New Bombay burned last night. You saw the fire.”

“Not New Bombay. Earth.”

He didn't think any of them had much chance of ever seeing Earth again.

* * * *

Warm rain pelted them without ceasing, and sodden blind bugs crashed against their faces and hands. He'd given his light jacket to Lita who was carrying her sister on her back; both of them huddled under it. Their hair hung limp and wet over faces streaked with mud. Lita's flimsy sandals had disintegrated in the rain, and now she wore his boots, lashed around her ankles with vines to prevent them falling off. His own feet were protected only by socks with strips of tree bark to fortify the soles, also secured with

vines; leaves jiggled festively as they walked. The tropical white jumpsuit he'd put on yesterday morning was now filthy and ripped.

Lita seemed in better spirits this morning. He heard her murmuring to her sister, telling her how close they were to the *Calcutta's* base, how soon they'd be there. Maybe he'd had the same optimistic resiliency when he was her age; he certainly didn't now. He trudged, head down, water pouring down his back. His empty stomach protested constantly and his tired muscles ached. His nerves shivered with need, and it was hard to stop thinking about *zyth*. One shot of it would be like grabbing power lines in his bare hands, electricity racing across the connection, burning, energizing.

It would be so much easier to give up, lie down, surrender—

I am a channel ... Through me flows the meaning of the Universe...

The words of the lingster's mantra rose unbidden in his mind, dragging him back from the abyss. *First was the Word and I am its carrier.*

He had to go on. There was no choice; the Guild had seen to that. The Guild had branded him, and there was no removing the mark from his soul. Alien alcohol was his attempt to break the bond and it had failed, just as it had failed to take away the pain of Yv's death.

He swatted insects and moved on. He was glad for the small relief of being rid of the younger child for a while, and not just because of the burden of carrying her extra weight on his back. Jilan's continuing silence was unnerving. She didn't respond to anything he said to her. He had no idea what to do about her.

If Yv had lived, he wondered, would she have wanted children? One of them would've had to leave the Guild since the Guild discouraged childraising by its lingsters. Would she have done so gladly? Could he have accepted her decision, whatever it might've been? A memory surfaced: She lay under him in a grove of giant, singing ferns on an exotic world, the first time they'd made love; the wild red hair spilled over her small, firm breasts, her eyes in shadow the color of moss, a sprinkling of rosy freckles over her nose. He ached to realize there were things about his young wife he hadn't had time to learn.

Underneath his thoughts, like an evil mantra, the need for *zyth* pulsed. He should've gathered the berries. He could go back—just a small detour—It took all his fading strength to prevent his feet from leaving the path and turning back.

First was the Word...

The depth of his need for *zyth* terrified him. He had to escape this nightmare addiction before it was too late, and abstinence was the only way to free himself.

The jungle gave way slowly to the sparser vegetation of the hill country; trees were not so towering here, their leaves sprouting higher up the trunk. And the grass no longer grew so tall. With a sigh of relief, Lita put her sister down on the ground.

They heard it first: an insistent murmur like faraway traffic, growing to an animal roar. Then the ground sloped under their feet and they came out suddenly from the forest to stand on a bank where trees tumbled down a ravine to the west. Through the bare branches they glimpsed water, an emerald cascade flashing over the rock face in the subdued light and racing away through the undergrowth. One of the many tributaries of Separation River with its headwaters in the mountain range they were skirting, it lay directly in their path, too wide and flowing much too fast for them to cross.

His mind woozy with fatigue, he stared at it, trying to remember the automap he'd consulted before the skipcar crashed. There shouldn't have been a river that size anywhere near. How had he gone wrong?

"What do we do now?" Lita asked, her voice husky.

It was a fair question. New Bombay was gone. The *Calcutta's* base was probably deserted but better than nothing if he could've been certain he could find his way across this country. Which apparently he couldn't.

Then he thought of something. "You speak Frehti."

A spot of color came and went on her high cheekbones. "Well, I've learned a little."

More than a little, I'll wager, he thought. "Do you remember what the Freh sport said to us as we left the Residence?"

She frowned. "Something about his mother?"

"Not his mother. 'The Mothers.' I think it's a title."

"Well, where do we find them?"

"Under the bones," the misshapen alien had said, and he'd imagined a graveyard of some sort. But now he realized it meant The Maker's Bones, the sharp-toothed mountains to the north. They'd been heading north-west when the skipcar went down, crossing the foothills to get to the base. They needed to change course.

"North-east and uphill, I think."

"Up *there*?" she asked, her voice full of skepticism.

"Could be our only hope for help."

"Who's to say these 'Mothers' will be friendly? The rest of the natives aren't."

"We don't have a lot of options."

She heaved a deep sigh for his benefit. "How far?"

"Far enough."

He gazed up at the distant peaks. Perhaps a two day journey on foot, maybe longer because of the child. The rain was bad enough here where the thinning trees still provided some shelter. Up on the ridge, they would be exposed to the full force of monsoon winds and torrential rain and the cold of high altitude at night. It would take all his strength to get them through this, but he had no strength any more. They needed—deserved—a far better guide.

Lita was right, whether the Mothers would shelter them was doubtful, but he couldn't think of an alternative. And there was nobody else around to help them.

He selected a peak shaped like the broken tooth of a jungle beast as a reference point, then lifted Jilan off her sister's back.

"Let's get moving," he said.

For the next two days they made slow progress over rugged ground, keeping the distinctively shaped peak in sight at all times. The land sloped steeply up through boulders and rocky outcroppings; the tall, tropical growth of the jungle floor gave way swiftly to low, wind-battered trees with sharp needles instead of leaves. Cold rain sleeted down all day. The ground beneath their feet turned to mud, slowing their progress further.

“We'll take a break here.” He indicated an isolated clump of stunted Spirit-Traps that seemed as lost and out-of-place as the human fugitives on these high slopes and in almost as much danger of not surviving.

They huddled together in the meager shelter, watching the rain. Lita leaned back against a knobby trunk and closed her eyes; after a while, her regular breathing told him she slept. He needed sleep too, but the constant itch of his craving for *zyth* prevented him from finding it.

Jilan seemed unable to sleep. He studied her. There was nothing dull or retarded about the eyes that gazed back at him, and he knew she wasn't deaf. Then why didn't she talk like a normal three year-old? He seemed to remember hearing her exploring pre-speech sounds like all human children, trying out the full range available before settling on the ones selected by the language that would become their native tongue and forgetting how to make the others. But she hadn't progressed to the next stage.

“Baby,” he said softly, so as not to wake Lita. “Talk to me. Say: ‘Ries. Hello, Ries.’”

He sounded ridiculous to himself. It gave him a sudden respect for mothers everywhere who provided models for their children to learn language from. The little girl stared at her hands in her lap.

“Try: ‘Hello Lita.’”

Nothing. He pondered for a moment, made another decision.

“*Taq'na*,” he said. Food, in Frehti.

Her dark eyes flicked briefly over him. Not much, but more reaction than he'd got for Inglis. Encouraged, he tried again.

“*Yati*. How about that one? *Yati*. Mama.”

She blinked at him and he feared for a moment she was going to cry. Idiot! he thought. Why bring up bad memories? But she'd obviously grown bored already; she began to trace patterns in the mud with her fingers. Not surprising that she reacted to Frehti, he decided. She'd probably had more interaction with her alien amahs than she'd had with her parents.

His musings were interrupted by a bout of sneezing. His nose was constantly on fire with invading spores. The DepCom's daughters didn't seem to be as bothered by the phenomenon; Lita sneezed occasionally and rubbed her eyes, Jilan's nose was runny, but neither one was seriously affected. His immune system was challenged more than theirs. The AI had warned about *zyth* addiction's side effects, but he hadn't paid attention, arrogantly certain none of it was ever going to happen to him.

After a while, Lita woke up, and they continued their journey. Along the way, he kept his gaze on the ground, searching for signs of the nutritious tuber that would solve one of their problems, not daring to venture far off the path he'd set for fear of getting them further lost. He didn't find any.

Their second night out, he had better luck and found a sheltered place between a jumble of huge boulders where he could light a small fire to dry their clothes. That night he also found the last of the edible berries for their supper, but not enough for all three. Even with his share added to hers, the child whimpered from hunger, her face wan and pinched with distress.

It wasn't hunger that sent the spasm through his body, and it took all his willpower not to put one of the poison berries under his tongue. *Just one—How could one hurt?—You'd feel so much better—the seductive voice inside his head pleaded and cajoled. You could handle one.*

His hands shook so badly as he handed Lita her share of the berries that she noticed.

“It's *zyth*, isn't it? You need some.”

He sat down on the other side of the fire from her. “Who told you that?”

“Mama said you were an incurable drunkard. She said it was a scandal the Guild sent you to us.”

“A lot of things your mother never understood.”

“She said it was good we didn't have to pay the Guild too much for your services because you were squandering all your share in the native taverns.”

“None of her business what I did with my money.”

“My father always defended you when they argued, did you know that?”

He felt too sick to be angry. “I don't want to hear any more. Get some rest.”

“Well, don't go and die on us during the night, will you?”

She lay down and covered herself and her sister with his jacket and was soon sleeping soundly. He stared at the little fire till the flames flickered out. It took him a long time before anger and need both subsided, allowing him to fall asleep for a little while too.

* * * *

The third night, they were not so lucky. After a long, exhausting day when at times he despaired of finding a way around the huge boulders in their path while the child cried constantly from hunger, they camped out on stony ground on a windswept ridge where even the thorny bushes couldn't take hold. The rain held off when the sun went down, but it was bitterly cold and he found nothing to burn.

For a long time after Jilan had closed her eyes, he heard the soft muffled sound of Lita weeping. After the girl finally fell asleep, he sat stiffly beside them, every muscle in his body aching from physical exertion, his nerves vibrating with a desperate craving for *zyth* that wouldn't let him sleep.

It was time he faced the truth. He didn't know these mountains. He had no clear idea where he was going. He was incapable of looking after himself; how could he hope to take care of these two children? Only a fool would take seriously native superstitions about “souls” and “Mothers” who might or might not exist. How could they help him even if they did? He'd made a bad decision. They should've tried to get across the river to the base. There was no way they would survive this ordeal, and just as he felt he'd been indirectly responsible for Yv's death, he would now be to blame for the death of the DepCom's children.

He pulled Born-Bent's bone out of his pocket and peered at the symbol carved on it. Disgusted, he flipped the bone into the darkness. He heard it glance off a rock.

Then he lay down, and immediately distinguished the uncomfortable lump of the fieldpack from the sharp stones digging into his ribs. Even now, he couldn't violate his training and throw the thing away. He hadn't thought so much about the Guild in years, and now he could hardly get it out of his mind. It rode on his heartbeat and slid through his veins; he was as addicted to the Guild as he was to *zyth*. He couldn't lift his

hands without its laws springing up in his path. He had never hated the Guild so fiercely nor needed it so much.

He shifted the pack so it wasn't directly beneath him, and closed his eyes. At once, all the useless, stupid, shameful scenes out of his past sprang vividly to his mind. The opportunities the Guild had given him that he'd wasted, his constant failure to live up to the lingster code, the way he'd ultimately betrayed Yv, he relived them all. Dark thoughts skittered through his brain, tormenting him late into the night.

* * * *

He came suddenly awake just before sunup, conscious of someone bending over him. His skin crawled as he forced himself to bear the silent scrutiny without flinching. Whoever it was could've killed him as he slept but hadn't. Beside him, he could feel Jilan's small body, wedged between him and her sister for warmth. Both girls were still sleeping.

He heard a sudden intake of breath above him. Cautiously, he slitted his eyes and looked up.

A pudgy, adult male Freh knelt over him, layered in the familiar ankle-length, orange-brown cloth. The Freh's head was turned, tilted as if he were listening to some sound coming from the direction of the jagged peaks which loomed white as snow this morning in cold pre-dawn light, looking more like the fangs of a beast than bones.

Then the alien became aware the human was awake, and his head swivelled back in alarm. Ries stared at him. One half of the Freh's face was covered with an ugly red blotch that spread from just below the hairline to well below the chin. The nose was twisted and warped off-center, a defect that pulled one eye down with it and trapped the nictitating membrane halfway over the eyeball.

The Freh scrambled to his feet, keening anxiously. Something slipped out of his fingers. Ries sat up. Now he could see that behind the male there was a female gesturing to him.

"What do you want?" he said in Frehti.

At the sound of his voice, Lita woke up. She took one look at the Freh and shrieked. The Freh stumbled away in obvious panic. The female clutched his arm and hobbled beside him, half pulling her companion, half being dragged along by him.

"Devi!" Lita said. "I've never seen such an ugly one."

The native was another sport, only the second he'd seen.

The child was awake and whimpering now. Lita stooped and picked her sister up. "Are we just going to let them get away?"

The two Freh were scrambling up a rocky incline toward the nearest peak. He watched their awkward progress; they seemed to know where they were going. And if they could do it, so could humans.

"No. We're going to follow them."

"Jilan can't go much further without food."

As he bent down to retrieve the sitar, something caught his eye. The bone lay out in the open where the alien had dropped it. He picked it up; a crack obliterated part of the markings. He dropped it back in his pocket.

Lita took two shuffling steps forward with her sister perched on one hip. The girl's exhaustion was

apparent in the slump of her shoulders, her pinched expression. He caught up with her and took Jilan from her.

“I’ll carry my father’s sitar,” Lita said.

They stumbled forward silently for a while, no energy left over for talk, while the land rose inexorably beneath their feet.

The rising sun brought no warmth, and the dazzle it struck from the bare peaks hurt his eyes. At least it had stopped raining, and his nose seemed a little less sore. Lita had shut her eyes against the fierce light and walked blindly, clinging to his arm. He squinted through lowered eyelids, his vision narrowed down to the point where he felt as if he were sleepwalking. With his free hand, he adjusted the way the fieldpack rode at his waist. One good thing had come from so much exercise and so little food: his belt fit looser now than it had a few days ago.

Yet in spite of his exhaustion and the pressing need for food, he felt better in spirit than he had in a long time. Miraculously, his mind was clear and pure as spring water this morning. The self-hatred of the night before seemed to have burned away; possibilities spun in the bright air like butterflies in the apple orchards at the Mother House. He looked deep into his being and found it miraculously free of the demon that had bound him for so long. He took a deep breath. He might not have a coherent plan for their survival, but for the first time since Chandra Patel’s murder he knew hope.

It was such a ludicrous emotion under the circumstances that he laughed aloud. In the thin air of this high altitude, the laughter soon turned to gasping for breath.

“Come not nearer.”

The Frehti words cut short his amusement. Shielding his eyes against the sun with one hand, he peered at the small, bent figure of an old Freh female standing directly in his path.

His heart jumped with the realization: An *old* female.

She wore a long, shapeless brown garment of some coarse, woven material, the hood thrown back from her lined face revealing thin, greying fur on her head. She was holding a three-edged Freh knife ready to strike, reminding him powerfully of Patel’s assassins. Belatedly, he set Jilan down, pushing her and Lita behind him.

“Name yourself,” the old female said. “Tell what you seek here.”

“I am called Ries Danyo. I seek the Mothers.”

“You have found. I am called First-Among-Mothers.”

The word she used was *Na-freh'm-ya*, and he heard a common root in it, but she didn’t give him time to think about it. She gestured with one clawlike hand, and they were suddenly surrounded by three more hooded figures who had come up on his blind side where they’d been hidden in sun dazzle. All three carried the vicious-looking triple-edged knives.

Before he could react, the little girl was taken from his grasp. Seeing one of the hooded figures lifting her sister, Lita yelled and kicked at her own captors. Ries’s arms were seized and rapidly bound to his sides; his nose filled with the powdery scent he associated with old age, and something danker, an underground smell that clung to their robes.

Every one of their captors, he saw, was bent, wrinkled, grey-furred, skinny-necked, and female. It

would've been funny, he thought, a gang of old alien females struggling uphill with a furious human teenager and a wailing human child, if he could've been sure they wouldn't resort to using those knives.

First-Among-Mothers held up one hand, stopping Lita's noisy protest. "Little one safer here than Danyo."

"Why is Danyo not safe with the Mothers?" he asked.

She stopped abruptly in his path and he almost fell. One of the other females yanked his bonds, pulling him upright. First-Among-Mothers' face was an arm's length away from his. In spite of the situation, he was fascinated by this close view.

There was nothing here of the blandness that had marked every Freh's features he'd seen until now, yet she was no sport. The round, amber eyes, curdled with age till they resembled milky opals, held a depth of intelligence that was unmistakable. He read anger in them, but also a touch of humor in the lines at their edges as if she laughed at herself for a role she was playing. Something in her expression seemed to say this was all an elaborate joke. The effect was so human that he felt convinced he could read her basic goodwill. It was almost impossible not to anthropomorphize and think of her as an old woman.

He knew instantly to distrust his naive reaction. He'd forgotten a lot of the Guild's teachings over the years, and disobeyed more, but this stayed in his mind: The closer to human an alien appeared, the more difficult it was for a human to read its intentions.

"Danyo male," First-Among-Mothers said.

"But Danyo not Freh," he countered.

She considered this for a moment. "No trust here."

At that, they all resumed their uphill journey. The old Freh females urged the humans to hurry with kicks and slaps and the occasional warning prick from the tip of a knife, though he noticed that they were easier on Lita than they were on him.

He felt like Gulliver captured by the Lilliputians.

* * * *

It was past noon when the party halted in the shadow of the broken peak he'd used as a bearing.

"In," First-Among-Mothers said.

The females escorting Lita and Jilan went ahead through a narrow opening in the rock. He did as he was told, and found himself at the top of a flight of steps carved into rock walls. Torchlight made shadows leap on the walls.

"Down."

He went down.

The steps opened up into a cavern, broad and high-ceilinged, with rough-hewn pillars supporting balconies that overhung shadowy side aisles. The stone floor was covered with a layer of rushes, and plainly-woven hangings gave privacy to different areas. While it was still cool down here, it was several degrees warmer than the air outside, for which he was grateful. But he was mostly struck by its resemblance to the monastic design of the refectory, the oldest building of the Guild's Mother House. The cavern lacked only modern means of lighting and windows to look out on high mountains rather than be

buried beneath them as here. A long wooden table down the center completed the resemblance.

Old females sat together on stone benches in groups of two or three, all wearing the same kind of homespun robes. The scene was almost reassuring in its domesticity, until he noticed the glitter of a knife tucked in one old crone's belt.

They were stared at with a good deal of open-mouthed curiosity, but unlike just about every Freh he'd ever come in contact with, these old females didn't grin in the presence of humans. It was always an odd sensation to be stared at as a human on an alien world, one he'd had many times but never managed to get used to. Suddenly, when he least expected it, the tables would be turned and he'd perceive himself as the alien in the crowd, the man far from home.

From somewhere in the vast cave came the aroma of food being prepared. The smell made his knees buckle with hunger. Now he was pushed back against one of the columns. He resisted and a female slapped him across the mouth, making him taste blood. His thighs encountered a hard edge, and he slumped awkwardly onto a narrow stone bench while one of the aliens secured his arms to the column.

He was suddenly aware of how filthy and repulsive he must seem, more like a wildman than the neatly dressed colonists of New Bombay with their emphasis on hygiene. He could smell his own sweat, sour from days of not bathing.

Across the way, he saw Lita and Jilan seated at a long wooden table where First-Among-Mothers sat with them. There seemed to be no menace in the alien's actions toward the girls. He tested the bonds; they were flimsy enough that he could burst free if he had to, but he saw only one exit from the cave that would lead up to the surface, the one they'd come down.

Soon other females appeared carrying large pots made from nuts like the one Born-Bent had used to mend the DepCom's sitar; they began ladling the contents out into clay bowls to serve the girls. He, apparently, was not going to be given food.

As if she sensed his thought, Lita turned and glanced at him. "Danyo hungers too," she said in very clear Frehti.

First-Among-Mothers leaned forward and gazed at Lita. "No male eats here but the kipi." "

She used a word Ries had never heard before. In spite of his stomach's protests and the presence of danger, he was excited. He felt an adrenaline rush at the unfolding revelation of mystery. While the form of Frehti First-Among-Mothers used ranged from the simpler, chirping utterances of males in the marketplace to more complex constructions, he knew that no lingster encountering it would question the high sentience quotient of the speaker. He had difficulty following it at times, accustomed as he was to the male form of the language.

And he understood now why those first lingsters had been so mistaken in their judgement: They'd forged interface with the wrong sex.

"Danyo is a..." Lita struggled but didn't find a word for it in Frehti. "...a *lingster*."

Lightheaded from hunger, he almost laughed, remembering an old student joke: *What comes in two sexes but has no sex life? A lingster.*

First-Among-Mothers glanced at him. "The tale arrives before the male. A vragim comes from Sorrow-Crossing and speaks our words."

"I am vragim too," Lita said, jutting her chin stubbornly.

It surprised him to find the girl arguing in his defence. A lot of things about her that he still didn't understand. Her handling of Frehti was one; the DepCom's daughter used the new word as confidently as if she'd always known what it meant.

First-Among-Mothers got up and came over to him.

“Vragim. *Lingster*,” she said. If she'd been human he would've read contempt in her tone, but he must resist making connections that might not be there at all. “And do you know how words make, as the tale is told to me?”

He blinked, hearing Born-Bent's voice in memory, “*You understand how words make.*” He jumped suddenly between the known and the hidden, the leap of faith every lingster performed at some point, the lucky guess that was also one of humankind's most basic tools for learning language.

“I bring the kipi's soul home for the Mothers to make words with,” he said.

The effect in the stone cavern was electrifying. Every Mother set down her work or her food and stared. Others crowded in from rooms off the main hall till there were at least forty old Freh females gaping at him, round-eyed as owls. A long silence followed, broken only by the clatter of the child's bowl; Jilan seemed the only one in the cavern not affected by his words.

He closed his eyes for a second against his body's weakness, seeking strength to prevail in the battle of wills he sensed had been set in motion.

First-Among-Mothers held out her hand, palm up, and he was startled by her look of almost desperate desire.

“Give.”

“No.”

She thought about that for a moment, then turned and snapped her fingers. A bent figure hobbled quickly forward and undid the bonds holding his arms. Another followed with a bowl full of the thick stew.

So she thought she was going to bribe him with food?

His stomach insisted it was a fine idea.

First-Among-Mothers waited while he wolfed the contents down without tasting. A second bowl appeared, and he devoured that too, barely noticing how rich and spicy it was this time. When the third bowlful arrived, he was able to eat with a semblance of manners that would've been acceptable in the Guild's refectory.

First-Among-Mothers gestured to the gathered females and they moved silently away. He saw one old alien carrying Jilan, and Lita following them. The main cavern emptied slowly out.

“Now,” First-Among-Mothers said. “We make the words together.”

* * * *

He followed her through a low arch at the far end of the big cavern, and came to a smaller cave. The light was dimmer here, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw the Mothers waiting silently in a circle. His breath caught in his chest.

The old aliens had stripped off and discarded their shapeless robes. The flickering light of wax tapers

glowed on naked flanks and fleshless rumps, touching with silver the grey fur on their heads, sliding past bony shoulders and spilling over flat, shrivelled breasts. One emaciated female turned her back to him, and he saw clearly knobs of vertebrae and sharp blades of bone outlined under the skin that he identified as ribs, though they didn't appear to be assembled in the human plan. Although Freh females' faces were never tattooed, decoration covered their trunks and all four limbs in scrolls, swirls, leaves and vines. Primitive, by the standards of high civilizations in the Arm, but full of energy and power, the tattoos were dark purple, the color of *zyth* berries.

He'd never seen a roomful of nude women, let alone old women—It was next to impossible not to think of them as women; they seemed more human unclothed as if spirit was more important than species—but he felt no awkwardness. They wore their years with dignity and a kind of patient beauty like a ring of wise elder goddesses.

Now First-Among-Mothers also dropped her garments on the floor, kicking them impatiently against the cave wall. Nakedness seemed to make her grow taller than the others, her body straighter than theirs though no less slack and wrinkled, her grey head fur still partly dark. Like the others, her body was covered in intricate purple designs. The circle opened to let her through.

She walked slowly clockwise inside the ring which began to move counter-clockwise around her. There was something on the ground inside the ring, a center which First-Among-Mothers was circling, an irregularly shaped mosaic formed by small bones, all about the same width and length of the one Born-Bent had entrusted to him. To one side, there were several haphazard, smaller piles. There must've been well over two hundred bones in the pattern, but it looked unfinished, with many spaces and gaps interrupting whatever design was in the process of being formed.

Some kind of religious ceremony, he guessed, watching her circling slowly, her bare feet marking an intricate rhythm on the stone floor. Then she stopped, caught up a bone from the pattern, raised her arms and began to gesture. Her hands caught the tapers' light, sweeping in a broad arc above her head. She seemed to be inscribing some kind of ephemeral calligraphy on the air. As she did so, she opened her mouth and sang one note. Now all the Mothers followed her lead, performing the looping arm movements, the singing tone in unison.

First-Among-Mothers repeated this with each of the bones in turn, marking each with a different sound. Then, after a long while, the group fell silent, the outer circle opened again, and the malformed male Freh who'd stood over Ries on the mountain appeared. The kipi, who was naked too, entered the circle humbly, shuffling forward over the stone floor on bare knees and holding one hand high above his head. In it, Ries saw a another small bone like the one in his pocket.

Now a low, animal hum broke the silence, rising quickly in pitch and volume. The sound became almost deafening in the confined space, then stopped abruptly as the kipi reached the center of the ring. He took his time choosing a place to set the bone he carried. In the silence, First-Among-Mothers squatted to see it. The kipi remained on his knees, head bowed.

She examined the bone, holding it close, turning it, shifting its position, exchanging it with others. At times she seemed to change her mind and returned a bone to its original position, removing another that had now apparently become less desirable and tossing it on the outer piles. Whatever these decisions meant, Ries sensed they were of the utmost importance to the assembled Freh. At last she put a hand on the kipi's shoulder and the ring of Mothers gave a long drawn-out sigh.

First-Among-Mothers turned, and Ries could see her owl eyes glowing in the light from the nearest taper. She held up the kipi's bone. Now he saw it had marks scratched on it, like the one in his pocket. Then accompanied by another elaborate hand movement above her head, she sang out a clear, distinct

syllable. As she did so, the Mothers followed her arm movements and repeated the sound after her like children performing rote learning. It reminded him suddenly of how, hundreds of years ago on Earth, Chinese children had learned by tracing the characters of their language on the air.

The revelation of what she was doing stunned him. First-Among-Mothers was reading the bones.

But these couldn't be complete words, he realized in a great rush of comprehension, not even morphemes, the smallest units of meaning. The Freh had no written language. She was taking the first step, inventing a system of codifying the phonemes, the individual units of sound. From the gathered bones at her feet, she was choosing the best symbols to begin writing her language.

It was obvious from what he'd observed that not just any shape on a bone would do. Creating a written language was a sacred job, not one to be completed hastily. *Through me flows the meaning of the universe*. He thought First-Among-Mothers would understand the Guild's philosophy very well.

Runes, hieroglyphs, logograms, ideograms, pictograms, alphabets, humans had tried them all through long millennia of experimentation. The Guild taught lingsters in a few years what had taken centuries to unlock, the secrets of these scripts. All but the main one: how they had come into being in the first place. He'd always wondered what accidents of chance and intelligence had caused early humans to take the first step, associating sounds with symbols then developing them into script. And from that to go on to write laws and poems, shopping lists and equations that guided starships across the darkness of space to a world that still stood on the threshold.

The Guild itself with all its research hadn't been able to answer that question, not even for one Terran language. A great wave of exhilaration washed over him. He was witnessing an alien race setting out on that mysterious journey. Yet he could also see First-Among-Mothers had a long way to go before the symbols she was collecting were usable.

After a while, she fell silent. The kipi^q shuffled back out of the circle into the shadows at the edge of the cave. Ries was aware of her gaze on him now.

It was his turn. The bone containing the symbol Born-Bent found so vital he called it his "soul" must be added to the collection growing at the feet of First-Among-Mothers. The ring of old females gazed at him, waiting patiently. But even in his excited state, a sense of human pride restrained him. He was not going to remove his clothes, nor would he enter the circle on his knees. If the Mothers wanted Born-Bent's soul, they would have to take it his way or not at all.

Conscious of the weight of a shared destiny, human and Freh, he walked solemnly forward in the silence and leaned down, placing the bone in a vacant space.

First-Among-Mothers squatted, peering at the bone as she had done before. Now she reached for it, squinting in the glimmering light. For a long time she studied the symbol scratched there. Then her hand dropped slowly to her side. She stood and faced Ries, her expression bleak.

"Broken," First-Among-Mothers said. "The soul is gone."

Around the ring, old Mothers began to wail.

IV

"Think about the waste," Lita said to him. "The tragedy, as the Mothers see it."

The girl had been his only visitor since a group of females had dragged him off to a small niche in a corridor off the main cavern and barred the entrance with a strong lattice of wooden branches lashed

with vines. The alcove had probably been a vegetable storage area, he guessed from the lingering smells.

Lita passed a cup of water through the lattice gate and he took a sip. In her other hand she held a slim taper that made deep shadows jump in his cell. He felt exhausted; all emotion and energy had been sucked out of him.

It was hard to estimate the passage of time in this darkness, but he guessed a day had passed since First-Among-Mother's ceremonial reading of the symbols on the bones. While he'd been stuck here, contemplating the consequences of one moment of bad temper, Lita had apparently been deep in conversation with First-Among-Mothers.

Her ability shouldn't have been surprising. She'd been about eight or nine when the family came to Krishna, an age when children still learned languages with some ease, and she must've been exposed to the more complex forms used by the house servants who were largely female. She'd just never let him see evidence of it.

"Freh males don't contribute to the work. Except the *kpiq*, of course, and not too many of them make it to adulthood."

"I imagine not," he agreed, thinking of the day he and the DepCom had encountered Born-Bent in the bazaar. In his experience of cultures of the Arm including early human, such deformities had usually signalled a short life for the child born with them.

"Do you understand how serious this is, Danyo?" Her face in half-shadow, she looked as if she were thinking about leaving him alone again. "The race doesn't use language like humans. Freh males have a very simple version. Sort of like Kitchen Frehti. Without the Inglis words, of course."

He had the absurd fantasy he was back at the Mother House taking an exam about pidgins and creoles. "It's uncommon to find such a wide division in ability between the sexes."

"The females are *much* better at it! But the big thing is, up here, year after year for a long time, the Mothers've been working on finding a way to get the language written down."

"You've learned an impressive amount in such a short time."

"Well," she said, softening her tone a little, "I might've missed a few things. I'm not really perfect in Frehti yet. Anyway, every Mother who manages to come up here contributes something. And the one who is 'First-Among-Mothers' puts it all together."

"Why are symbols from the sports so important?"

"The *kpiq*," she corrected, "are male. First-Among-Mothers says the language must balance between male and female or the race will eventually destroy itself. But regular males don't use language well, and *kpiqs* usually don't survive to be adults, so they don't get very many male symbols. So when the one you brought was broken, they were upset."

It was as if he could hear First-Among-Mother's words echoing through Lita's, and he had the sense that the Freh meant something he couldn't fathom yet.

"The Mothers believe if they can write the language down, they'll have a chance to prevent something bad from happening. Do you understand, Danyo? Can you follow this?"

"Does she say why there are no old males up here, only old females?"

“She said it was the—the—Oh, a word I don't understand. *Sem yaj*—something.”

“Sem yaji nuq,” First-Among-Mothers said. She had come to stand in the shadows behind Lita.

“Tell me in other words, words I can understand,” he said, switching to Frehti.

“Sem yaji nuq. No other words.” She turned to Lita and said kindly, “The little one calls you.”

Lita went away, taking the taper with her. In the darkness, he was aware of First-Among-Mother's soft breathing.

“No male comes here except the kipi^q who brings his soul bone,” she said. “Now I must kill you.”

He was suddenly exasperated with her mysteries and evasions. “Explain the death of these children's father, and maybe I can help you speed up the work.”

“You bargain with me?”

“Yes, I bargain with you.”

She hesitated, thinking it over. Then she said, “He learned about sem yaji nuq.”

“I do not understand those words! Use others.”

“I have not your skill.”

“You accepted my bargain.”

Her voice rose in anger. “He knew about Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over. You call them *Mules*, but that is your word, not ours.”

He peered through darkness, wishing he could see her expression. Lingsters learned to use visual clues as well as aural ones to decipher meanings. “*Something I just learned...*” Patel had said. “What is this connection, so important a man must die for knowing it?”

“You have the answer you sought. Keep your word.”

If so, he thought, it was an answer he didn't understand, but he was apparently not going to get any further explanation at the moment.

“I have seen many worlds, First-Among-Mothers, spoken many languages. You are not the first people to wrestle with this problem.”

She was silent for so long he began to think she'd gone away. Then she said, “In the market they call you Talker. But you cannot help with this.”

“You have nothing to lose by letting me try.”

He had the feeling she was reading his face, as if her milky old eyes could see in the dark. Then he heard her sigh.

“We have a saying, ‘Bone defeats bone, but stone outlives.’ I think perhaps you are stone.”

“Let me look at the bones, First-Among-Mothers.”

In the darkness, he heard her slice the vines holding the lattice with her knife.

* * * *

He squatted on the stone floor, examining the bone pattern, while First-Among-Mothers held a taper so he could see. The air was thick and fragrant with the incense-smell of tapers, making his eyes heavy. He frowned, concentrating. Somewhere in the main cavern, he heard the sounds of the sitar: Lita picking out tunes to soothe her sister.

He stared at the symbols on the bones. The fine etching had been colored with a dark, rusty ink that might very well have been blood. He was aware of an almost religious quality to the moment. Spread out before him on the rough stone floor of the cave was the birth of a writing system, a script that could capture a language and its speakers' vision of their world. No modern human had ever witnessed such a moment.

Then he remembered Born-Bent's hand in its bloody bandage and he examined the bones more carefully. They were all a similar length and shape, and all of them had once been fingers, he was sure of it. The symbolism of the Mothers' task began with the medium on which it appeared. He was awed that these aliens—judged simple aborigines by the human colonists—cared so much about a project that many of them couldn't possibly even comprehend. He glanced up at First-Among-Mothers.

"Each Mother gives one," she said. "Except the First. She gives all before her death. One by one."

She held up her hands for his inspection. Freh were four-fingered, three forward and a flexible fourth below the palm. He counted three fingers gone out of eight, two from the left hand and one from the right. An alphabet forged in blood, a ritual as demanding as interface and as dangerous, he thought, given the primitive state of medicine on this world. He wondered if he could've found the courage if it had been his ritual.

"The work has taken many, many years," she told him. "The shapes must be just right to hold the sounds that make up our language. Not every one that is given is accepted. It is the work of the First to choose."

She gestured with the taper, indicating he should continue. After a while, she squatted beside him and gazed at the bones as if she too was seeing them for the first time. Forgotten, the taper dripped wax on the floor.

Some of the symbols he examined were carefully and lovingly inscribed; others resembled the first scratchings of a child. Champollion seeing an Egyptian cartouche for the first time might have felt lightheaded like this, he thought, and Niebuhr copying cuneiform inscriptions may have caught his breath in just the same manner as connections became clear. Ries Danyo, drunkard and failed Guild lingster, was becoming part of the galaxy's history.

Many of the finger bones carried obvious pictograms, tiny exquisite glyphs that were suggestive even at first glance of objects from the world of the writers, though he knew better than to suppose the picture necessarily gave the meaning of the sign anymore than it had in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Others bore what were apparently semantic symbols, abstract representations of the sounds of Frehti, and these delicately carved logograms had an austere beauty of their own.

Mixed systems were not unprecedented; Earth had seen several, most notably the Egyptian and Mayan scripts. He wasn't particularly surprised to find one evolving here. But eventually all the languages of Earth had found it more convenient to adopt alphabets. The first problem was not the mix of symbols for sounds and glyphs for whole words, but that there were still far too many choices here at present. Some would need to be eliminated.

First-Among-Mothers touched his shoulder. "I will tell the sound of each one."

Then she began essentially to repeat the ceremony he'd witnessed earlier. One by one she picked up the bones and pronounced the sound that went with it, but where earlier she had sung these phonemes as part of a venerable ceremony with the assembled Mothers, now she was content just to vocalize.

Almost immediately he realized the impossibility of working this way. It was like trying to catch one drop out of a stream of water. He didn't have the stamina to sustain this concentration for very long. He needed to impose some kind of order.

Not for the first time since he'd fled New Bombay he thought with regret of the AI left behind. Sorting and identifying so many alien signs without help was a daunting task. But there'd been translators and interpreters long before there'd been lingsters, before computers too; those early pioneers had worked under primitive conditions.

"I need wet clay. And something to mark with, like a cloth merchant keeping tally."

First-Among-Mothers made no reply to the request, and he wondered if the idea of reducing her exalted goal to humble clay seemed like sacrilege to her. If so, she'd have to get used to it; humanity's profoundest laws had first been scratched in clay. She set the taper on the floor and clapped her hands. A moment later, a figure appeared in the cave's low archway. First-Among-Mothers said something in rapid Frehti and the Mother withdrew. They waited in silence.

After a while, the Mother came back with a lump of clay the size of his fist, clammy from the storage bin. He took it and flattened it out, stretching it into a tablet he could use to make a syllabic grid to plot the signs of written Frehti.

* * * *

The work progressed slowly over a number of hours; he lost track how many. Twice, First-Among-Mothers sent for more tapers and refreshment. He drank water gratefully, and splashed some on his face to ward off drowsiness, but in spite of his recent hunger he couldn't eat. Gradually, he familiarized himself with the symbols so that similarities and repetitions began to appear, and together they weeded the redundancies out. Over and over again, she patiently repeated the sounds that accompanied glyphs and logograms. It was tedious work.

"It goes too slowly," First-Among-Mothers commented.

She was right. It was an enormous task and would take days at this rate, possibly weeks. The early scholars on Earth had spent years unravelling the secrets of cuneiform or Linear B; if he didn't want to spend that much time here in this cave he needed to find some way to speed things up.

In his fieldpack there was a way.

He touched it now, still safe on his belt; since he'd arrived on Krishna, there'd been no occasion to use it. In it, there were two sequences of drugs that lingsters used in interface. The alpha sequence consisted basically of sophisticated neurotransmitters that increased alertness and enhanced the lingster's ability to work at high speed, especially at such routine tasks as analyzing, cataloging and memorizing. He'd used them many times on other worlds, always when working with an AI that also monitored the dosage; he knew how effective the alpha sequence could be.

That had all been a long time ago, before he'd begun poisoning himself with *zyth*. No way of telling if there'd be a drug interaction, or how severe. He hadn't had any of the Krishnan liquor for several days; perhaps that would lessen the danger. And if not? "*Another time,*" Magister Kai's voice said in his memory, "*you may not be so lucky.*" In all his career, he'd done very little to make the Guild proud of him, and much he was ashamed of. This was a risk he had to take.

“I can make it go faster,” he said.

He took out the rack of small plastivials and thought about the pills they contained. First-Among-Mothers gazed steadily at him, her round eyes luminous as a nocturnal animal's in the taper-light. She'd asked no questions since he'd begun studying the bones, even when he disturbed the careful way she'd laid them out, accepting that whatever he did it would advance her work. He hoped he could reward her faith.

He shook two small brown ovals onto the palm of his hand, then swallowed them. Within seconds, he felt the sudden jolt of the alpha drugs streaming through his veins. Thoughts sped through his brain too fast for words to catch them; his vision sharpened till microscopic details sprang into vivid display, and he could see individual hairs on First-Among-Mother's head even in this dim light, the wrinkles on her face like the paths of long-dry rivers.

Something else, too, something different this time, something flickering at the back of his mind, disappearing when he turned his attention to it. Then it vanished in a great rush of endorphins that lifted and tossed him like a cork.

The work went faster. Connections seemed suddenly illuminated for his recognition, correspondences jumped out at him, were considered, and First-Among-Mothers indicated her choices which he then recorded. A workable Frehti alphabet began to emerge on the clay tablet.

* * * *

“One sound is missing.”

His nerves jumped at the sound of her voice. Absorbed by the work, he'd lost awareness of his surroundings and again he was confused by the passage of time. Disoriented, he gazed at the last of the tapers burning low, flickering in the draft she caused as she stood up from the work. He squinted through the wavering light at the neat chart he'd inscribed on the clay tablet, sixty-seven symbols that best represented the consonants, vowels and diphthongs of First-Among-Mother's language, chosen from the drawings on the assembled bones.

“A small sound,” she continued dreamily. “Not often used. But the very highest of all. I have waited a long time to find its symbol.”

“What sound is that, First-Among-Mothers?”

In answer, she formed a small O with her mouth and allowed breath to come sighing through; he could see her curled tongue almost touching her lips, shaping the sound. What emerged was a diphthong with an initial labial, a singing tone as if it came from a flute. She repeated it for him twice more.

A small scuffling noise behind them drew First-Among-Mother's attention and she fell silent.

“I—I am sorry, First-Among-Mothers,” Lita said nervously in Frehti from the shadows in the archway. “My sister wandered off—and I just found her. I will take her away.”

“Do so.”

For the first time, he wondered what First-Among-Mother's life was like before she came up here to live beneath the Maker's Bones. Had she worked in the bazaar for a cloth-merchant mate, or had she cleaned and cooked in a human residence? Had she borne children, and were any of them male, and if so, did she ever think of what had become of them?

First-Among-Mothers waited until the sounds of the children faded. Then she inclined her head toward the small pile of bones remaining on the stone floor, urging him back to work.

He glanced at them, seeing only duplications of symbols that had already been assigned or obvious clumsily drawn discards. There was no sign left over that could correspond to the new sound she'd just made.

She raised a hand and he was aware of the missing fingers. “A holy sound. Not one Talker hears in the market. It is *Wiu*, The White Bird. You will not find its sign there among the ordinary ones. It is a male sound, and a *kipiq* should give it shape. Now, Talker-from-Sorrow-Crossing must replace the *kipiq*'s soul that he lost.”

The high mood of the alpha sequence deserted him as fast as it had come on. Cataloging the symbols on the bones with her help was one thing; that was no different from the regular duties *lingsters* often performed for their employers. Deliberately adding a human element to an emerging alien alphabet was another.

It was such a temptingly simple thing she asked of him: One sign, just one, from all the possibilities he'd encountered in human history, or from any of the worlds along the Arm for that matter. But even that little gift would be interference from one culture in another's development, and even minor interference was strictly forbidden. Nothing good ever came from violating this rule, however much the people of the less advanced culture wanted it. Like all *lingsters*, he'd sworn an oath to respect that prime prohibition.

“I cannot do it,” he said. “I am sorry.”

“Why can you not?”

“I cannot give you a sign that has its roots on the other side of Sorrow-Crossing. Nothing good would come from such a gift.”

“I wish the work completed before my death, Talker,” she said, her voice as calm as if she discussed the price of a bolt of silk. “And I do not have much time. You will do it or you will die. I will give you one day's turning to decide.”

* * * *

Two Mothers had appeared as if they'd been waiting for her command, and taken him back to his alcove prison.

Alone in the darkness once again, exhausted, his thoughts drifted. First-Among-Mothers had posed a dilemma for him. To give her what she wanted he must violate his oath. Never in his life had he knowingly done anything big or small that would alter the natural destiny of any of the alien races he'd come in contact with. But to die for the sake of that oath now meant he must violate the promise he'd made Chandra Patel to protect his family. If he died, the girls had no hope of ever reaching the *Calcutta's* base.

Which was more important, interference in a developing culture—such a tiny touch at that, just the one symbol—or the suffering and perhaps death of the DepCom's children? How would the Guild decide?

“Danyo.”

He jumped at the sound of her voice. Without knowing the boundary, he'd drifted from thought to sleep. This time Lita hadn't brought water or a taper.

“Danyo, something's wrong with *Jilan*. She seems very hot and—”

“As you may have noticed, I'm a prisoner here.”

“Devi! Why don't you just open the door and walk out?”

He heard the sound of the lattice gate opening.

“How stupid you are sometimes, Danyo. I could tell as soon as I touched it they hadn't lashed the lattice together again.”

If First-Among-Mothers had allowed the opportunity for him to escape, then it was because she knew there was nowhere he could escape to, with or without Lita and her sister. The thought frustrated him; he didn't like being defeated by an old Freh female, even one so obviously intelligent.

“Now will you come and see Jilan?”

He felt Lita's impatient hand on his arm, tugging him through the open gate; he let her guide him through the darkness until light seeped into the corridor from the central cavern.

“I don't know what good I can do. I'm not a medic.”

“Keep to the wall just to be safe. No sense letting them see you out here.”

“Maybe the food didn't agree with her.”

“She's been eating Freh food all her life. That's all the amahs ever made for her after they stopped wet-nursing her. She never touched what Mama and I ate. Do hurry up!”

Jilan was sitting cross-legged on a wide stone bench cushioned in bright silk. Tapers burned in a sconce fixed to the cave wall above her head. In their yellow light, he saw colored clay beads strung on a thong, a crude doll made of wood and covered in fur, toys he'd seen Freh children play with under the stalls in the bazaar. Jilan was making marks with a cut reed on a small lump of clay the size of a cloth merchant's tally. By the uneven flamelight, he could see her pixie face looked flushed. He laid a hand on her cheek and felt how warm it was. Lita bent quickly to wipe saliva from the corner of her sister's mouth.

“I've been giving her water.”

“Good.”

“What else should we do?”

The child didn't look too sick to him.

Then he became aware Jilan was saying something, very softly, almost under her breath, over and over again. No, not saying, *singing*—But not that exactly either. He felt chilled. Possibility shivered up his spine, moved like the touch of a feather across his nerves. He knelt quickly on the pad beside the child who immediately stopped vocalizing.

“Baby, say it again for me,” he said. “Please?”

“What is it?” Lita asked.

Jilan stuck a thumb in the corner of her mouth and stared wide-eyed at him.

“Where's the sitar? Get it for me.”

Lita scrambled away and was back a moment later with the instrument. He ran his fingers over the five melody strings, searching for the right notes that described the pitch values of Frehti: G#, A, B flat, B.

Jilan seemed to be listening intently. Encouraged, he let his fingers wander among these four tones, the drone strings humming under the impromptu melody.

“What're you doing, Danyo?”

Jilan opened her mouth and sang a note.

Not B flat, he realized, somewhere in between B flat and C, a flattened C. The native nut altered the tones he produced, fitting the sounds of the language better than the original gourd. He quickly adjusted the tuning pegs to reflect the subtly different harmonics of the semitone. Now she gave shape to the sound. His hands shook as he realized what he was hearing, the diphthong First-Among-Mothers had pronounced for him: *Wiu*.

“Danyo?”

“Get First-Among-Mothers and meet me in the cave with the bones.”

He hooked the sitar over his shoulder, grabbed up the clay block and the writing utensil in one hand, and tucked the child under the other arm. He felt her cheek burning against his as he ran back to the cave.

New tapers flickered in the small cave, eerily lighting the disturbed pattern he and First-Among-Mothers had left behind. He set Jilan down on the stone floor. Silent again, she gazed up at him, her breathing heavy and quick.

“This won't take long, baby.”

“Children invent language,” the Guild taught. Why not the alphabet too, or at least a small part of it? The child was as close to a pure source as he was likely to find. Her parents might've come from Earth, but she was born on Not-Here—the planet's alien name was suddenly more appropriate than the one the colonists had given it—and she'd never spoken a word of Inglis. It was a near-perfect compromise. As long as First-Among-Mothers accepted it.

“Have you changed your mind, Talker?”

The clouded eyes gleamed like mother-of-pearl in the taper light when he turned to face her. She stood very erect, almost as tall as Lita.

He chose his words with care. “I offer a compromise, First-Among-Mothers.”

“No more bargaining. Only one solution. Make the sign to hold that last, holiest of sounds.”

“I cannot give you the sign you desire. It is not my gift to give and would only bring you evil. Instead I offer a child from Sorrow-Crossing but born on Not-Here. A vragim from her mother's womb, but nourished with a Freh mother's milk. Let this child make the sign.”

First-Among-Mothers gazed skeptically at him in silence.

“The symbol you want from me,” he said gently, “would be male, but it would be alien to your world. What I offer now is better. Trust here.”

He waited for several long moments more. She said nothing, but she didn't specifically forbid the attempt either. He took the sitar and plucked the flattened C with the nail of his right forefinger. The child gazed up at him, thumb in mouth. She was drooling again.

“Come on, baby,” he coaxed. “Sing for me.”

He plucked the note again. She removed the thumb from her mouth and copied the semitone the sitar sang.

He heard the smothered gasp of surprise from First-Among-Mothers, and as the note died away he sounded it again. The child gave voice to the diphthong a second time, and this time her small pure voice was joined by the old woman's larger, mellower one.

He laid his palm flat across the strings cutting off the vibration. The child gazed up at him. He set the sitar down and held out the clay tablet to her.

“Draw the sound, Jilan,” he said. “Draw *Wiu* here, in the clay.”

She took the tablet and the stylus from him and stared at them for a moment, then began to draw. Apart from the child's labored breathing there was no sound at all in the cave. From time to time she smoothed over what she'd done and began again. Finally, she held the tablet up and tilted her head, examining it. Then she held it out, not to him, but to First-Among-Mothers.

Over the child's head, her sister shot him a startled look.

First-Among-Mothers squatted down and took the tablet reverently as if it were holy, peering at it in the dim light. She took her time.

Then, in a soft voice, she said, “I accept the last sign.”

He let the breath he'd been holding come sighing out in a whoosh of relief. Leaning forward, he peered at the symbol the child had drawn. The clay tablet held the crude, stick figure of a bird. He discovered that where a moment before he'd been chilled now he was sweating heavily.

First-Among-Mothers laid the tablet down and took the child's hand in both her own, closing her fingers over it. “But it must be written on bone.”

Lita got the significance first. “You can't cut a finger off my sister's hand. I won't let you!”

She threw herself at First-Among-Mothers, almost knocking the Freh and the child over.

First-Among-Mothers didn't appear upset by the outburst; instead, she smiled at Ries over the angry girl's head, a terrifying rictus grin from that almost lipless mouth. Taking the child's hand had been an act of provocation, showing him who held the power here.

“A child's sign, a male's bone together complete the work.” She released the child and stood swiftly. Her hand came up with the three-edged knife glittering in it.

His vision seemed clouded, splitting the light from the knife into a rainbow of fire that stung his eyeballs. The universe was full of wonder and beauty, the Guild taught, but it also held much that was painful and cruel. The first lesson Earth's earliest astronauts had learned hundreds of years ago was that space offered suffering as well as glory. *The faint of heart among you*, the Guild warned its young students, *should stay at home*.

It was a small sacrifice she asked of him, and far better him than the child. Humans had been given an extra finger, as if Nature had long ago foreseen this moment and the need for one of her children to help another. He would think of it as payment for the privilege of witnessing the birth of a written language; no other lingster could say that. His head ached with the burden of such knowledge.

“And in return, will you give us safe passage over the mountains to the starship's base?”

“We will guide you to your people, Talker.”

“Take Jilan away now,” he said to Lita.

“No, Danyo! We're staying right here with you.”

First-Among-Mothers nodded as if their presence too was an acceptable part of the ritual. She held out her hand to him, and hesitantly he put his left hand in it. For the first time in days he thought how good a shot of *zyth* would be to steady his nerves.

She drew him down until both of them were on their knees on the floor in a circle of golden light. With one hand, she positioned his on the stone. The other raised the knife.

At the last moment, he found a center of calm within. He didn't flinch as the knife descended.

* * * *

The weather was cold and clear as they crossed over the stony summit of the Maker's Bones. It was still two hours before dawn, and alien constellations blazed above them in a forever moonless sky. He stopped to gaze at the brilliant river of light that was the home galaxy, Sorrow-Crossing. Somehow the name seemed to fit better here, in the farthest reach of the Arm, than “Milky Way.” Dark sky and high altitude combined to make a magnifying lens of the thin air; he squinted at the enormous treasure of stars spilled across black space, half convinced he could distinguish the one dim pinpoint of light from all the rest that was Earth's Sol.

Lita touched his arm and he started walking again. First-Among-Mothers had given them food for the journey, and she'd sent along two females who knew the mountain paths as guides. The group moved purposefully, not wasting breath on conversation. From time to time a creature chirruped sleepily from an unseen nest, fooled by their passage into thinking it was morning.

Gradually, the pageantry overhead faded, and a breeze came up followed by the first rays of Not-Here's star. Within the hour, the sun shone fiercely down on them; there was little heat in it yet, but he started to sweat again. The air had the clean, clear smell of sun-warmed stone, and it was mercifully free of spores, but he had difficulty breathing and stumbled often on the uneven ground.

Below them on one side of the ridge, the land swept down a hundred kilometers to the valley of Separation River and the alluvial plain where the human colony had been. The other side fell less steeply to the golden sweep of grassland and the starship base. From up here, the planet appeared suddenly new, as if he'd never seen it before, more exotic than his memory of its strangeness the first day he'd landed. Knowing some of its secrets made it more alien, not less.

He felt light-headed, an after-effect of the wound to his left hand that still throbbed, and the fact that he'd had no desire to eat much in the days that followed the reading of the bones. Lita scolded him for his lack of interest in food, but he was relieved to be free of both the promptings of hunger and the need for *zyth*.

First-Among-Mothers had bandaged the wound herself, stopping the blood by packing a native moss into the space left by his severed finger, then wrapping it securely in layers of silk. While he still lay on the bed where Jilan had played, he'd seen the Mothers reverently preparing a small cauldron of boiling water into which they'd added herbs to boil his flesh off the bone so the child's symbol could be inscribed properly on it; his head still rang with the sound of their chanting.

For a moment his mind teetered between past and present, then First-Among-Mother's face rose up before him as she'd stood by his bed. *"I am well pleased with the work,"* she'd said. And he'd argued, *"But mysteries remain. Tell me why language belongs to Freh females but not Freh males."*

"Have you forgotten what Freh means?" She held up one of her remaining fingers. He'd never really thought about the literal meaning of a word he'd used so casually for two years. He guessed, *"One? First?"* Then he knew: Those-Who-Come-First.

The memory faded and he staggered against one of the Mothers. She grabbed his arm, steadying him, her old eyes peering into his as if assessing his ability to continue the journey. The two Freh females had caught their long skirts up over bony knees and wore animal skin boots laced above their ankles. The level of their energy surprised him; old as they seemed to be, they'd been taking turns carrying Jilan on their backs over the uneven ground.

But at that moment the child skipped beside them, gathering pebbles and flowers along the way, and chattering in Frehti like any three year-old who'd been born on this world. Since that first sound uttered over the bones, she hadn't stopped babbling in First-Among-Mother's language. As if a wall had been breached, he thought, allowing the child to express everything she'd saved up for just this moment. Yet it was just another irony of the human experience on this world that the child had found her native tongue at the very moment when she must leave the company of those who spoke it.

"Are you all right, Danyo?" Lita asked, coming alongside him. "We could rest for a few minutes."

He couldn't rest until he'd fulfilled his promise and brought the DepCom's daughters to the safety of the starship's base.

Lita's cool hand touched his forehead. "You're very hot."

He attempted a joke. "Teething. Like Jilan."

He remembered Lita visiting him soon after his *donation*—a word he could deal with without self-pity. She'd tried to distract him from the pain in his hand with gossip: The Mothers were busy practicing writing out the alphabet under First-Among-Mother's direction; the girl had laughed, describing their first clumsy attempts. She also told him Jilan had cut a late molar and her fever had gone away.

"Let me look at your hand again. Maybe it's infected."

"Antibiotics at the base."

"Danyo," the girl said. "Stop trying to be such a hero all the time."

He stared at her, uncomprehending. She stalked off ahead down the rough path. The ferocious sun dazzled his eyes, and his head throbbed again.

"What has this to do with Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over?" he'd asked First-Among-Mothers. *"We are one and the same,"* she'd said, *"only you do not see it yet."*

He thought about her words now as he stood on the path, one hand pressed to his chest, catching his breath. Metamorphosis was not uncommon among species in the Orion Arm; humans had encountered it more frequently than they'd found sentience on the worlds they'd visited. Even on Earth, caterpillars turned into butterflies and tadpoles became frogs without anyone being too surprised. Why shouldn't a pudgy Freh transform into a gaunt Mule? And if it only happened to one sex, it would still be no stranger than a hundred other quirks and tricks of Mother Nature he'd seen elsewhere. Yet butterflies weren't prone to do violence on caterpillars.

"There is more to it than that," he'd argued, thinking of First-Among-Mother's urgent need to write the language out. *"Some secrets remain hidden until their time comes,"* the old Freh had replied. *"And will you tell me then, First-Among-Mothers?" "If we both live, Talker."*

An hour later—Two hours? Three? He seemed to have lost the ability to keep track of time—the party stopped. They'd reached an overlook, the land falling perhaps two hundred meters straight down a cliff. Spirals of dust rose in the heat, and the view before him shimmered hazily as if it were underwater. A vast plain spread out before them, an enormous valley stretching like a lake of grass to a range of mountains on the misty horizon. Huge flocks of bright-skinned, featherless birds rose and fell over gold-green fields, and the sweet smell of the grasslands drifted up on the warm air.

Sweat started out on his forehead and neck, instantly evaporating, and he sneezed once. He squinted through watering eyes into brightness at the goal they'd struggled to reach for so long, the end of their journey.

“There,” one of the Mothers said, pointing.

“The *Star of Calcutta's* base. I see it!” Lita said.

“We go no further,” the second Mother said.

“We can make it from here, can't we, Danyo?”

He nodded and wished he hadn't as the sparkling world spun around him. Drunk without *zyth*, he thought.

One Mother handed Lita the sitar she'd been carrying, the other gave her package of food to the girl.

“You are stone,” one of them said to him, touching his head gently.

Stone was a much more humble position to aspire to than rock, he thought.

Then both of them started back up the path. He knew they were anxious to rejoin the frenzy of work going on in the cave, writing out the history of their race in order to preserve its memory. And perhaps put an end to violence in some manner he didn't understand. What excitement there'd be in the Mother House when this story got back to the Guild. He could almost see the Head—whoever it would be now—summoning the teachers and the senior students—

“You really are feverish,” Lita said.

“I'll get you there. Don't worry.”

She stared at him. “*You'll get us there?*”

For the next few minutes she was distracted by the antics of her little sister who scampered back and forth across the path, chasing small flying creatures into the thickets. He was able to direct all of his strength into putting one foot in front of the other instead of having to spend it making conversation. For some reason, going downhill was more difficult and took concentration.

The gleaming white domes and communication towers of the starbase grew steadily bigger as they followed the zigzagging path, but the heat increased, slowing their progress so that the nearer they came to the valley floor the longer it seemed to be taking. It didn't seem to bother the two girls, but he found it harder and harder to lift his feet.

“No use,” he said, after a while. “I can't go any further.”

“We're almost there.” Lita adjusted the sitar over her shoulder. “Look. Only about another hundred meters to the perimeter. I can see the gate and the guard house.”

He slumped down by the side of the path. Jilan came skipping back and gazed at him, a spray of crimson wildflowers in her fist. The small blooms were the color of the blood that spurted from his hand when First-Among-Mother's knife descended. He put his bandaged hand up to support his head which seemed to weigh more than he remembered.

The child opened her mouth and sang, "*Wiu*," a note as pure as a bird's.

"Please, get up," Lita said urgently. "I can't carry you."

"You go. I'll wait here."

"They'll be able to help you down there. You just need some good human pharmaceuticals..."

As she stared down at him, the hot breeze rising from below teased the coppery hair and brought its faint scent like woodsmoke to his nose, so that for a moment he had the illusion he was looking at Yv.

So long ago. He'd fallen in love with the way Yv's long hair lifted in the warm wind, the hair with its smoky perfume that bewitched him. He could see her clearly in memory, sitting in the shade of a tree when he'd first seen her, her arm around one of that world's younglings who was teaching her to name the flowers that surrounded them. Though he'd always been sharply aware of his alienness on each world he'd visited, Yv had always seemed at home.

Then he knew one question was answered: Yv would've wanted children. And he would've come to love them, too. It felt good just to sit here and think about his wife.

"There. I can see a guard." Lita stood on tiptoe and waved her arms excitedly. "Oh, he doesn't see us. But I'll go get him, and then somebody'll come back for you."

Jilan put her bouquet of wildflowers in his lap and their perfume was so rich it made his head spin. She danced away from him into the light, her slight figure shattering in a myriad diamond points that hurt his eyes to watch. She seemed more an elemental spirit of this world than a human child, and he recognized in that one scintillating moment that there were mysteries that were not given to him to understand.

"You'll be all right?" Lita asked. "It won't take very long."

"Yes. Go."

She hesitated for a moment longer, then leaned down and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "When we get back to Earth, Ries," she said, "I'm going to become a lingster, like you."

He put his hand up to touch his cheek and found it wet with his own tears.

The DepCom's daughters ran down the path to the base, the DepCom's sitar bouncing on the older daughter's back. The running figures became smaller and smaller. Then a tall figure emerged from the gatehouse and hurried towards them. Ries watched till the radiance forced his eyes closed.

When he opened them again, his wife was standing in the wildflowers at the edge of the path, hair spilling like flame over her shoulders. She was wearing the sky-blue wedding dress.

Yv held out her arms to him, welcoming him home.