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The Roaring Ground
by Sheila Finch
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First published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, April 1997

Fictionwise
www.fictionwise.com

Science Fiction

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Delfin Hayward clattered down the hallway past the lecture rooms, the leg prostheses turning clumsy in her haste. She'd known better than to linger in the observation room -- today of all days -- but she'd been compelled by the rare drama of senior lingsters frustrated in interface.

Reaching the examination room, she skidded inside and closed the door, the metal fingers of her exoskeleton engaging the knob nervously. She couldn't get the image of the alien child out of her mind. She'd felt his loneliness and pain as if they'd been her own. But she had to move past it because she'd never get to be a lingster herself if she didn't do well in this final test. Fail now, and there'd be no chance to continue on.

Two examiners wearing the ceremonial cobalt robes of Preceptors of the Guild of Xenolinguists sat at a long oak table, backs to the open window. A cool breeze flowed in from Alpine meadows behind the Mother House. Neatly laid out on the table in a ray of wintry afternoon sunlight were the plastiglass vials from a lingster's field pack.

"Please sit down," one examiner said.

She read coldness from the woman, extreme devotee of the Guild's teachings who'd wiped all feeling from her life, not just from interface.

"Remember/you, breathe deeply,_" Greyface, the senior dolphin tutor had advised yesterday. She sat and took a deep breath. Being a lingster was all she'd ever dreamed of for the last sixteen years; she'd worked hard, excelled in all the theories and the history her instructors demanded of her. Yet it might not be enough. The Guild had no room for those who couldn't handle interface.

"Is that chair suitable? Do make yourself comfortable." The older examiner, a portly, grey-haired man with a sallow complexion, leaned across the table and smiled.

He meant it as a friendly gesture, but she knew he was determined to show no favors even to one as physically different as she. It was uncomfortable to read people so clearly. She didn't like this skill or whatever it was but she had no control over it.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

The examiners would arrange a computer simulation of a meeting with an alien race. They'd judge the types and amounts of drugs she chose from the field pack, the accuracy with which she managed to decipher a complex message once she'd achieved interface. They'd lay traps. The work of the Guild was too dangerous to allow the weak to qualify. Above all they'd monitor how she navigated through the shoals of the unexpected, vigilant to abort the exam at

the first sign of a student losing her way.

She must stay calm, emotionless, only a conduit for communication, a channel through which language flowed. Nothing more. She was not expected to comment or judge, or even react to the message she retrieved. Realizing the examiners still waited for her answer, she nodded.

"Computer will give you preliminary data," the woman said. "Open your link when you're ready."

As she did so, her mind flooded with a torrent of data on an alien she'd never learned about in class. Her stomach cramped. She hated the scratch and sting of information downloaded into her brain at high speed. It always made her feel sick, and it seemed somehow beside the point. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the details of physiology and environment a lingster in the field would expect to know as she started work.

The flow stopped abruptly. She opened her eyes to find the examiners gazing at her, waiting for her to begin. Her metal hand hovered uncertainly over the row of beta sequence state-alterers. The examiners would be noting her choice.

Better to start conservatively. She selected a mild drug that gave off the sweetly acid scent of pears and dripped the thick liquid onto her tongue. The room hazed over almost immediately. The walls rushed away, the floor dropped out from under her. Kaleidoscopic images tumbled past her eyes.

Take control of apparent time, she'd been taught. _Slow it._ She remembered to breathe. Chaos settled down to more manageable levels. The computer fed her samples of the alien speech.

She threaded her way methodically, using the computer's feedback to map morphemes as she passed. The fog drifted away. Deep structures emerged, skeletal trees in a primeval forest, layered branches of meaning which she tagged in passing, a trail to get her home again. Comprehension grew. Connections appeared, subtleties, a mosaic of grammar and content. The outlines of language emerged -- a message to be deciphered --

Abruptly, storm clouds moved over the interface.

A fierce wind tumbled shadows over her path -- something hateful shrieked across exposed nerves. Tangled strands of meaning snagged, dragging her down. The path slid under in thundering darkness -- She tumbled out of control through nightmare images --

"That will do, Delfin!"

The woman's voice cut sharply across the malformed web of interface she struggled in. Someone grabbed her, dragging her out of darkness into the aching light of the examination room. The contents of her stomach threatened to rush up into her throat, and she found her face wet with tears. The man held out a glass containing the sequence neutralizer. Head pounding, she gulped the chalky liquid down. Slowly, the nausea subsided.

Never let emotion color the interface. She'd broken the first law of the Guild.

* * * *

"I don't see why not!" the slender, blond boy had said last week as the class discussed the first law. Instructor's pet, he'd been the only one of them who'd dared argue.

Old Dom Yonato squinted at his students through dust motes spiralling slowly in a ray of winter sun. "Challenge the Guild's teaching, do you?"

The boy smiled, confident of his favored position. "Why isn't it useful in interface, Dom? Nothing else seems to be working with the alien child they brought here!"

His name was Marco, and Delfin, alone in the back row, had never seen anyone more intelligent or more beautiful, but he seemed hardly aware she existed. Deformities of any kind were rare on Earth, particularly severe ones like her own kind of phocomelia; most problems were discovered and fixed in utero. Cyberlimbs had long ago made her a loner.

"I mean," the boy continued, running a careless hand through hair the sun's ray turned bright gold, "couldn't emotional response -- on a non-verbal

level -- be the key to unlock communication where conventional means fail?"

"Telepathy?" Dom Yonato said sharply. Favorite student or not, he wouldn't allow heresy to invade his classroom.

She was impressed with Marco's courage, though she knew it didn't cost him much to say these things. Marco was teasing. But it was different for her; she had no choice. She watched the old instructor's face; a dull red flush crept along his cheekbones.

"No lingster has ever found a race using telepathy of any kind in the Orion Arm, young man," Dom Yonato said. "It's a nursery tale that communication could take place from mind to mind."

"Maybe not telepathy, Dom," Marco persisted. "But that doesn't explain why emotion could be dangerous in interface."

The old man came around to the class side of the desk. He hitched his faded green robe over bony knees and sat, sandal-clad feet swinging informally as if to set his students at ease. Delfin wasn't fooled even if the others were. She could feel the underlying throb of his anger.

"There have been one or two lingsters in the past who asked that question -- you remember the instructive story of Tobias Naki's death? They didn't last long." His eyes met Delfin's, and she knew the anger was directed at her for some reason. "The Guild is well rid of them."

Blood burned in her own cheeks now. The old man had the voice of a master lingster, compelling and hypnotic, pinning her to her seat by its soft weight.

"You've been taught the concept of Neutrality. The Guild serves the monster as well as the saint, and the Guild never judges the message, nor the sender, nor the cause. To do so, to become involved in moral judgements, opens the door to destruction. Emotion is the child of the primitive self, not the intellect that serves the Guild."

No, she wanted to say. _No_, it's not like that at all!_ But he wouldn't understand. Nobody did.

"Children call it the 'art' of the interface, but I tell you it's a science and has no room for emotion. For once a lingster allows emotion to color her responses in that fiery chaos where languages are born, that roaring ground of interface, she loses control. And she will surely be swept down to madness. Perhaps even to death itself."

The room was silent as he finished; not even Marco dared question him further. She knew he'd aimed those words at her alone. She'd tried to hide her inner difference, to be like the others, and maybe some of her teachers might be fooled. But Dom Yonato suspected her otherness ran deeper than cybernetic limbs, and Yonato feared she was a danger to the Guild.

* * * *

"You may go back to your room now," the cobalt-robed woman said, her voice carefully expressionless.

The afternoon sun had long gone and the examination room was in shadow. The man was assembling the scattered vials and replacing them in the field pack. He avoided meeting Delfin's eyes.

She'd failed. What's more, she deserved to fail. Yonato was right. The Guild had no room for those who couldn't keep emotion out of the interface. She left the examination room, exhausted and hopeless.

Outside, she found Marco waiting for his own test.

"How'd you do?" he whispered. "Are they very cruel?"

She shook her head silently at him and fled to her cubicle in the dormitory and the forgetfulness of sleep.

* * * *

The dwarf *Tursiops truncatus* _breaks the surface. Mynah's sun paints a rainbow arc on her back. She turns a wide dolphin smile to the empty shore, then flashes through bright water out to sea -- _

Delfin woke, heart pounding, face wet with tears. Sensing movement, the cubicle's overhead light came on. The rest of the dormitory's inhabitants slept peacefully. The sky outside her window was still dark, and a new fall of

snow glittered under a moon that had not yet set.

Greyface called the recurring dream a mythology of the mother. In reality, she had no more knowledge of the dolphin surrogate who'd carried her to term on far off Mynah than she had of the human mother who'd killed herself in despair. The Guild to which her lingster aunt brought her shortly after her birth was all the family she knew. Yet the dolphin dream had persisted over the years.

The exoskeleton was suspended above the bed, a silvery spiderweb cage gleaming in the cubicle's light. She leaned toward the release toggle and tongued it on. With a sigh, the exoskeleton descended over her thin body-suit, folding itself around her slight trunk like a medieval warrior's chainmail but light as his lady's shawl. She felt the familiar tickle of neural nets connecting to embedded sockets, linking her to a world of science and logic as it gave her limbs to replace ones the planet's virus had destroyed.

"Your parents were scientists," she remembered her aunt saying, on her only visit. _"Your mother learned too late the secret of Mynah. Why nothing grew there, and all things conceived were born misshapen."_

"Then I'm not alone?" she'd asked.

"A dolphin before you. It didn't live."

Magistra Indira, Head of the Mother House, had directed her to read biography: Sacajaweya and Malinche, early translators who'd walked between the worlds before there were lingsters or a Guild to give them laws. But those women hadn't been suspended between the two-legged and the finned creatures as she was, belonging to neither.

She thought of the alien child. She'd been in the habit of slipping into the infirmary where he was housed to visit him. Like herself, he was a misfit, an orphan brought to the Mother House, lone survivor of an unimaginable holocaust on a planet two thirds covered by ocean. Lingsters whose task it would've been to carry vital information back to Earth had perished in the disaster. The little one was the only witness and he had no words.

Brooding about his plight wouldn't help her own. She pulled long dark hair away from her face and fastened it in a knot at the nape of her neck, then left the dormitory.

The dolphin pool was dark and smelled of brine and seaweed; a faint glow at the north wall showed where an archway led out to the tutors' private area. A high domed roof regulated temperature and pressure to the tutors' comfort, compensating for the high altitude of the Mother House. Sitting on a submerged bench made by wide steps at one end, she leaned back, hooking the exoskeleton on the waiting metal frame, then slipped it off. Free, she slid under the surface.

Her happiest times were spent here, learning the lessons of evolution and environment that caused the tutors to see the world differently and thus develop language that veered far from the human norm. Her stunted limbs, hideous parodies of a dolphin's flippers and no match for the dexterity demanded of a human, served well enough in this pool.

The buoyant salt water freed her from the painful clutch of gravity. Arching and curving her spine in catlike movements, she undulated up and down the dark pool without the grace of tursiops but with a freedom she never knew on land.

A sudden push against her shoulder made her open her eyes again; a familiar smell of fish and ocean flooded her nose. The senior tutor, a smiling grey shape, loomed beside her. He spurted water at her brow, a signal to engage her link.

"Doing/well, you, exam, yesterday?"

She'd learned, as all the students had, to listen past the clicks and whistles of cetacean speech, concentrating instead on the translation in her head. The dolphins too carried microchips, and the computer was supposed to mediate between cetacean and human forms of language. It had worked well enough until recently when somebody decided the program should be redesigned

to retain the distinctive flow of dolphin thought.

She leaned her cheek against Greyface's flank, resting her body on him. "I'm not like everybody else. I might as well not be human."

Greyface circled the pool slowly, supporting her. She thought how different cetacean caring was from the sterile science espoused everywhere else in the Guild.

"Physiology affects worldview, you told us. And body image has much to do with language."

"Needing/not, lingster, hands. Knowing, we."

Without emotion, she thought, communication was condemned to the superficial, like the fractured syntax of this awkward computer translation of Greyface's language. She wanted to use language as the dolphin tutors seemed to among themselves, a stream of bright thoughts with warm shadows underlining, something the computer could never capture but which she sensed through an empathic interface her teachers vehemently denied.

"I feel sometimes as if I was born without a skin, not just arms and legs. I feel other people's pain."

"Empath, you," Greyface agreed.

"Useless ability, according to the Guild!"

She caught the dolphin's amusement with human dogma. Greyface rolled, tipping her onto the wide, shallow steps, then flashed away, water foaming and breaking in his wake. The exoskeleton enfolded her again, and she climbed heavily back out of the pool.

* * * *

The expected summons to the Head of the Mother House came a day later. With no classes to distract her, Delfin moped about her cubicle, sorting files, tying up loose ends of the first two decades of her life. She'd hoped for an assignment like her aunt's to the Pacific Institute, where the orca tutors would prepare her for service on a water world. Obviously, that would never happen now --

In the middle of the thought, she found her mind flooded with an image of the alien child and a deep sadness filled her heart. She hadn't visited the child much in the last few days, too consumed by her own worries to take on his. She needed to see him again, but first she had to answer Magistra Indira's summons.

The exoskeleton, wonderful as it was, had its limits. Today it chafed her skin at the contact points as if it didn't fit properly. She walked slowly, aware of its limitations, down the long, gleaming hallways where the smells of wax and polish rose like domestic incense, past the dolphin pools and the library to Magistra Indira's private quarters. She dreaded the confrontation that waited for her, Magistra's inevitable disappointment at her failure.

"Come in!" The voice was imperious, a woman used to being obeyed.

She pushed the unlatched door and went inside. Indira Chen, a tiny, coffee-skinned woman with white hair, wearing an iridescent turquoise sari bordered with silver thread, sat straight-backed at her desk. She'd been a firm but just guardian to the odd child left in her custody, yet in the past Delfin had sometimes sensed reservoirs of warmth that perhaps the woman herself didn't know existed.

Magistra Indira came right to the point. "Your exam results are disappointing, Delfin."

"I'm sorry, Magistra."

"You seem unable to control this unruly passion of yours. We've given you more than one chance. I'd hoped -- But I'm afraid you'll be little use to the Guild." Silver bracelets tinkled as the Head of the Mother House closed a book she'd been studying.

Delfin stared at her metal feet. It was what she'd expected. But she could no more change her emotional nature than grow her missing arms and legs.

"I've tried, Magistra."

"I'm aware of that. And I understand your personal difficulties. You've

been asked to bear more than the average student who comes to the Guild!"

"I can't help it. I seem to feel what others are feeling. I don't _like_ it -- I just can't stop it."

"Carrying the world's pain around on your shoulders is for martyrs, not lingsters." Magistra Indira sighed. "I'm trying to decide what to do about you -- "

She was interrupted by an urgent knocking at the door. It opened, revealing the old instructor who'd lectured them on the dangers of emotion.

"Magistra? Could you come to the infirmary?"

"What is it, Yonato?"

"The little one!" Delfin said before Dom Yonato could reply.

Apprehension flowed through her. "I can feel him."

Magistra Indira and the instructor both glanced sharply at her. The sour wave of Dom Yonato's surprise and annoyance washed over her.

"It's the alien child," the old man said, his hard gaze still on Delfin. "It seems to be in trouble."

"He. The little one's male, Magistra! I know that much about him." She took a deep breath to calm her shaking hands. It had to be said now. The child was in urgent trouble. "I can -- feel -- certain things -- "

But they were already out of the room. She clattered behind them, metal feet unsteady at speed on the polished wood, not quite catching up as they ran down the hall to the infirmary.

Arriving at the infirmary, Magistra Indira halted beside a small crib that had last been used when Delfin herself came to the Mother House, and Dom Yonato peered over her shoulder. Delfin hesitated in the doorway, temporarily forgotten.

The alien child had greyish skin covered with fine silky down, and his limbs were gangly as a newborn foal's, the thin arms as long as the legs. He lay still, his huge black eyes unblinking, dwarfed by the dials and gauges that monitored his life. A light antiseptic smell lay over the crib like a pall. She didn't know his name if he had one, or the name of the world he'd come from, but she'd experienced his anguish the very first time she'd seen him. His terror was her own. She ached to help him.

"What's wrong with the child?" Magistra Indira asked.

A young male medtech who'd been checking gleaming medical equipment glanced up. He shrugged, wiping a strand of fair hair out of his eyes. "We don't know, Magistra. At least -- its vital signs are diminishing from the standards we've observed over the last few weeks."

"But we don't know what's a normal range for this species, do we?"

"No, Magistra."

They spoke about him as if he were some exotic animal, she thought, instead of a tiny child with a hurt so big she was terrified he would drown in it and pull her down with him.

"Yet something's obviously wrong," Magistra Indira said.

A wave of grief hit her. A wail rose into her throat; she clamped her jaws tightly to keep it in. She felt the child's anguish rising up from the pit of her stomach.

"It seems stable enough at present," the medtech said. "But I don't know what we're dealing with here."

"He's lonely!" she exclaimed. "Can't any of you tell?"

They all turned to stare at her. The medtech frowned, and she knew that in his eyes she was guilty of trespassing in his area of expertise.

"This is hardly the place for a _student_ to be giving advice," Dom Yonato said acidly. "Especially one who cannot seem to keep her own emotional chaos out of things. Had she not received special dispensation -- " he glanced sharply at Indira Chen " -- she would've been dismissed years ago!"

Magistra Indira met his eyes steadily but said nothing. Delfin said, "At least let me try to comfort him -- "

The medtech shook his head. "I don't recommend it."

"Whyever not?" Magistra Indira said.

She felt sick from the child's anguish. Ignoring the argument around her, she stepped forward and stroked his cold brow with the soft pads of her metal fingers. Fear swept up her arm at the touch. He was slipping away -- dying of grief -- Then her arm was seized in a tight grip.

"You take liberties," Dom Yonato said.

"He's going to die -- I know it -- I can feel it!"

"What do you feel, Delfin?" Magistra Indira asked thoughtfully.

"He's so -- sad, Magistra. I think he wants to die because he's so alone -- No one knows what he feels -- "

"We've tried everything we can think of," the medtech said.

"So perhaps we can try something we haven't thought of." Magistra Indira turned energetically, the rainbow folds of the sari swirling around her ankles. "I'm of a mind to try an experiment. Yonato, see that we're set to try interface this afternoon."

"Interface has already been attempted, Magistra -- multiple times!"

"Not Delfin's way."

The old man stiffened. "Is this wise?"

"I don't see why not. There's a great deal at stake here."

She could feel Magistra Indira's growing excitement at this moment, and something more -- a ripple of affection, rusty from long disuse.

"A great deal at stake, indeed!" Dom Yonato said. "This is a student, and not one who shows much promise -- "

"Perhaps the promise lies in areas we haven't thought about?"

"Delfin's way -- as you call it -- is a violation of Guild teaching."

"Guild teaching hasn't brought a solution to this particular problem, has it? Sometimes a too narrow science overlooks practical solutions. I think we should allow Delfin the chance to find something that evades us."

The old man's voice was tight. "The Chapter of Governors ought to be consulted -- "

"Lovely if we had the time!" the Head of the Mother House said sharply. "Meanwhile, the child's dying."

As if he understood her words, the little one mewled weakly. The anger she could sense welling up in Dom Yonato frightened her, a rage that threatened to tear the Guild itself apart. Not for my sake! she wanted to cry. But she dared not say a word.

"If I were Head of the Mother House -- "

"But you're not, Yonato. I'll make a pact with you. If this attempt fails, I will resign. If it succeeds -- "

Dom Yonato stalked out of the infirmary.

* * * *

This time the milder beta drugs Magistra Indira chose for her took her into the mist slowly. Or perhaps it was because she was compelled by the child's desperate need to do it right this time, not fight the sensations so bitterly that they drowned her. Her own disappointment and misery didn't matter here. Whether the Guild stood or fell was not important now. Only the child mattered.

At the margin of comfort where the familiar faded and the unfamiliar loomed, she hesitated. Apprehension prickled her neck and snared her breath. The first faint traces of the alien child's sorrow and fear rose to her nose like a sour perfume and she trembled. She picked her way warily for there were no recognizable linguistic signposts to rely on here. Hovering at the edge of this borderland, she was aware of Magistra Indira, small and jewel-hued as a bird, a presence that wouldn't allow her to slip. This time, when the high tide of the little one's grief flowed toward her she didn't fight but accepted it as if she were sliding into the welcoming water of the dolphin pool.

Passion flowed over her like rainbows over sunlit water, and she remembered what she'd known all along. There was no need to hide from who she was. She was no stranger here.

Interface, the roaring ground, the boundary place where worldviews met and overlapped and language sprang up, was a metaphor itself. It wasn't a land

waiting for lingsters to conquer with their science and their protocols as old Dom Yonato thought. It was a place of dream, of myth, and the best lingsters had always understood that instinctively. They too felt the siren pull of emotions here, sucking them under, though not as pervasively as she felt them; they survived by armoring themselves against the compelling undertow. They read the patterns of interface and they gathered languages as if they were seashells in the palm of their hands.

It worked in most cases the Guild encountered. But she understood now that language harvested that way had no shadow. Such languages died uprooted from their oceanic matrix. The alien child came from a race that communicated on a broader bandwidth than the Guild was used to dealing with. Experienced lingsters had failed precisely because they were not prepared to sense this undercurrent, a bass line carrying part of the tune, incomprehensible without it. She must meet this shadowy underlining, trusting that though she might be swept away she wouldn't be destroyed.

All sensation of her separate self dissolved in the rush of emotion. She disobeyed the first law and let it color the interface.

* * * *

"Celebrating, you, difference?" Greyface sent as the three of them swam together a week later.

She luxuriated in the cool run of water over her body, the sharp scent of salt in her nose, once again free of the rub of the exoskeleton. She still felt weak from the experience of interface, a lassitude she'd known once before after a bout with pneumonia. At Magistra Indira's order, this was the first day she'd been allowed out of bed.

She watched the little one turning, long limbs flashing in the bright water. The language she'd broken through to was already being explored and codified by more experienced -- and traditional -- lingsters.

"Serving, ways/other, Guild."

She shifted till she could see herself reflected in his small bright eye. "You think there are other lonely babies around the Arm just waiting for an empath to find they want to go swimming?"

Greyface signalled his pleasure at the joke with a spurt of water.

"Messages/some, emotion/not, complete/not."

It wasn't a real joke; the problem remained: she'd never be a conventional lingster. Perhaps there were other races in the Arm with shadowed-languages like the little one's, but she wouldn't be able to reach them. She submerged. Underwater, the sounds the dolphin made came clearly to her, a rich counterpoint to the computer's sparser translation so that together the message came fluently: The heart must open as well as the ear.

When she came back up for air, Magistra Indira stood at the edge, her sari -- plum colored this time, with a golden hem -- trailing in a small puddle. She looked as if she hadn't had much sleep. The senior tutor lifted his head out of the water and gazed at her.

"You're right, Greyface," Magistra Indira said. "Communication isn't entirely a matter of the intellect. But it's far too dangerous for lingsters to give way to emotion in interface. I don't see how I can allow them to take the risk."

The turmoil Magistra Indira was feeling in the face of this dilemma spilled over on Delfin. She thought of how the tiny woman had waited by her side through interface, giving her courage to let go and experience the full shock of the child's raw emotion.

Greyface blew water. _"Using, Guild, tools/all." _

"Some of the elders are deeply unhappy with what we did here. And they're right, of course. The Guild must be protected. Yonato will call for an enquiry, and I must answer to it."

"But you won, Magistra," she said. "We succeeded. And Dom Yonato..."

"Dom Yonato never said what his side of the wager was."

She could take whatever ruling they handed down to her. But she couldn't bear the thought of harming this woman who'd been the nearest thing

to a mother she'd known. "You took a great risk for me, Magistra."

"I never doubted," Magistra Indira said simply.

The little one undulated past, oblivious of the storm his predicament had caused the Guild. He swam like a dolphin too, she noticed, arms and legs working gracefully, not the clumsy way human children swam, all bluster and splashing.

"Working, Lingster, alone/not. Good plan! Working, we, team," Greyface sent.

"What're you suggesting?" Magistra Indira asked.

The senior tutor lifted himself half out of the water and seemed to backpedal furiously away from them. She couldn't help smiling, even Magistra Indira allowed her expression to become a little less solemn. Then he slid down under the water and left them to solve the problem by themselves.

"A team," Magistra Indira repeated thoughtfully. She became aware suddenly of the trailing sari and lifted it, dripping, in one slim hand. "You, an empath, with another lingster trained to guard as you both enter interface. Not every interface demands this, but occasionally -- "

As Magistra Indira paused, Delfin's chest was so tight she could hardly breathe.

"You see, there're a few languages we've encountered already that we couldn't break. Oh, our best lingsters could give us a workable pidgin, but fluency eluded us. Until now we had no idea why."

She hardly dared say it. "Do you think..."

"Your gift may be rare -- I don't know, we screen so many candidates out so quickly! But I suspect we'll come to find it's crucial. Perhaps we wouldn't be wise to dismiss our first trained empath so lightly." The sari's golden edge was forgotten and trailing in water again. "We'd have to develop specialized emergency protocols. And where would we send you to train? To the Pacific orcas, do you think?"

She had no words to express the emotion she felt just then. The little one fluttered back to her, and she nuzzled her cheek against him, hearing the tiny purring sound he made. Magistra Indira smiled at her as she rolled in the water with the little one.

Delfin smiled back. She'd devote her life to using this gift wisely.

And she'd repay the Guild, with open heart as well as ear.

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