

STRING OF PEARLS by SHANE TOURTELLOTTE



*Illustrated by John Allemand*

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**Any tool has multiple uses. Language, for example, can be either a bridge or a barrier....**

The doortone sounded, but Marcus Parrish didn't answer. He had set aside these hours, almost all his hours on the ship, for study in his cabin. He had to make the breakthrough, before planetfall if he could. The task allowed no time for casual socializing.

If his caller were just casual, he wouldn't have to worry. He settled back into the glossary before him, letting the deep white-noise hum of the FTL engines suffuse him, shutting everything else out.

The door sounded again, twice in succession. Marcus laid the tablet aside. So much for casual. "Is that you, Jun Hua?" he asked in his best New Mandarin.

"Did you expect someone else, Marc?" came the reply in English.

The familiarity with his name grated, but he ignored it. "Come in."

The door hissed up. Jun Hua slid his rotund frame inside, a move made harder by the large canvas bag he carried with him. "You've been avoiding me, Marc," he said, as he looked for a place to sit.

"I'm avoiding everyone." Marcus threw a couple of pillows to the other side of the low table where he sat. *Naha Uchusen* was a cramped ship, but it did try to provide comfort in its small spaces. "What brings you?"

Jun Hua folded himself down. "I wanted to give you a deeper briefing, about your sponsor on Obrith, and other things about the Kevhtre Union, including some pertinent social details."

"I've been studying the Kevh for years." He caught Jun's scowl. The aliens used "Kevhtre Union" as a corporate noun to describe both their race and their polity. They didn't seem to have a more succinct name for themselves. "Kevhtre" and "Kevh" were common abbreviations among humans, and humans only. Jun Hua was probably afraid he didn't know that. "If you've got info I haven't, I'm all ears."

Jun handed him a tablet slip. "These are some personal observations on Bunwadde, from embassy staff and Language Section officers. They have found him one of their most receptive private citizens."

"That helps when you do a lot of business with Earth," Marcus said, "even in the Kevhtre's particular style. Comes of speaking five human languages, I guess."

Jun nodded slowly. "That, and he is unusually tolerant of humans who try to speak his."

Marcus's cheeks burned. It was a failing all humans shared, but it still felt personal. He took the slip from its sleeve, and plugged it into his tablet. Reading it meant he didn't have to look at Jun Hua right now. "Must feel good for the language experts to find a Kevh who'll do as much as tolerate them."

That struck home. "We don't need reminders of our shortcomings. We get them every time we speak more than a few sentences of Vetra with a native speaker."

Sentences were the problem, of course, not words. The vocabulary was large but not that difficult: non-inflected, conjugation with tense-mark words, and just a few irregular plurals and possessives. But

the syntax...

"And remember," Jun Hua continued, "you're in the same boat we are."

"I'm a businessman first," Marcus snapped, "not a linguist."

"But we have a common goal."

Marcus didn't reply. For them, it was an end. For him, it was a means, to break through in his business career, to break into the immense Kevhtre market. Or it had started so.

"Full immersion is often effective in learning languages," Jun said. "We would have done this earlier, if the Kevhtre Union government had not resisted."

That government knew the advantage it held. It banned its people from providing humans any language instruction, prescribing terrible punishments for the offense. Its computer networks were off-limits to humans, lest one dig up that information. There might have been attempts, but there had been no successes, and nobody had admitted a failure.

Marcus nodded. "It's easy to negotiate from strength. Do I want to know what we gave away this time?"

Jun stiffened. Another hit. "Luckily, there are some avenues that don't require negotiations."

He reached into his bag. Marcus perked up. Then his eyes widened. "What is that?"

Jun Hua laid the large box on the table. The top was dominated by a trio of triangles nested in a line, points up-down-up, white ideograms on black, orange, and black.

"*Tazpet nulh chomaken*," Marcus read. "Gems on a pendant-pin?"

"The English vernacular would be 'String of Pearls.' It's a very popular game on Obrith."

"Game?" He undid the clasps and opened the box. Inside was a round turntable with a raised grid, an equilateral triangle tiled with smaller triangles in several different colors. He counted sixteen triangles to a side.

Under the turntable was a drawstring bag. He spilled some of the contents onto the grid. They were the same triangular tiles as on the lid. They came in seven colors, like a human spectrum, but just that little bit off, like fruits not quite ripe. The red tiles faded toward orange; the yellow ones had a sickly greenish cast. The black was actually deep violet, if one looked closely.

He read a few of the ideograms, each with a tiny number below it. He flipped one tile, and found the same marks, the number now down at the point rather than at the base.

Marcus rolled the tile around in his hand. "I used to play a game like this. I was good, too."

Jun Hua chuckled to himself. "I know the game, but this one builds sentences instead of words, and has many other differences."

"Like, what spelling is to ours, syntax is to theirs." Marcus nodded, then knitted his brow. "But it isn't like they can use a dictionary as a judge, unless--" He found it just as Jun pointed: an on-off switch. The game had a built-in computer judge, and probably used chips in the tiles.

He still frowned. "So, I'm supposed to learn the language from this?"

"It's another part of the immersion. One more tool, and we have few enough. You should have plenty of opportunity to test yourself at it."

Marcus caught what hadn't yet been said. "Bunwadde plays this?"

Jun closed off any expression. "One of Earth's minor diplomats ... learned this. It seems reasonable he would play you, if you were willing."

Marcus took that as a challenge. "Sure I'm willing." He looked at the board and the scattering of tiles. He pinched the tile he'd been manipulating between two fingers. "But forgive me if I'm not sure putting together rote sentences with--" He dropped the tile into its bag. "--a very limited vocabulary is better than hearing and speaking their language in context."

"Consider it part of the context, at least culturally. Besides, your stay with Bunwadde is all about doing several things at once. You'll be teaching yourself by hearing and reading and speaking, and playing; just as your work on Obrith is to learn the syntax, as well as to help Bunwadde build his--how did I see it described?--his pirate empire."

"Now, now, Jun. Not even I would call it that."

"Of course you wouldn't." Jun smiled. "Not in Kevhtre Union presence, certainly."

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Marcus studied the game during spare hours in the week before planetfall. There were few of those. He had his other language studies, jumbled by the shift in sleeping patterns he was forcing to match Obrith's diurnal pattern. He almost never left his cabin.

He told himself it was helping his adjustment. It didn't help his learning. The great insight did not come. It felt like going into a battle unarmed.

The ship made sub-light transition during what was now to him the small hours of the morning. The shift in hum woke him, but he went back to sleep. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that *Naha's* shuttle touched down outside Ubhettid, Obrith's administrative seat. (Kevhtre Union translators rejected "capital" as too centralized.) Most of the passengers went in a group to the embassy, leaving Marcus alone in the terminal, standing outside the streams of Kevhtre walking by.

He was used to the people, but not to the numbers. They moved in streams of blue and silver, with robes in nearly every other color. A few looked his way. If he read their faces right, they were amused.

Soon, one was sure to come over, to say something to him. He'd be hoping for a good laugh. Marcus hoped he wouldn't give him one.

"Mister Parrish?"

To his relief, there was another human, standing by one of the public sinks and holding a sign. Within two minutes they were aboard the fellow's flitter, lifting into the sky and turning southeast.

The driver spent a moment making a call. "Bunwadde will meet us at the field," he said with a quick look at the back seat.

"Okay." Marcus had expected to go straight to his home, but Bunwadde was, in all senses, the boss.

They angled toward a landing field on the northern outskirts of Aghrelowa, not approaching the broad spread of the city or the river it abutted. Two buildings near the field had Bunwadde's company's name in

story-tall ideograms. They drifted past those buildings, and settled onto a corner of the field.

Marcus's door popped open. "There he is," his driver said. "Good luck, sir."

He took the dismissiveness in stride, grabbing his bags and getting out of the flitter. He soon spotted the teardrop-shaped land car, parked off the edge of the landing field, with a figure standing beside it. Marcus walked over, through a buffeting of wind as the flitter took off a bit too early for comfort.

"Marcus Parrish!" the figure by the car said, easily audible over the flitter's departure.

Now Marcus was sure it was Bunwadde. The entrepreneur was big even for Kevhtre Union males, and had the voice to match. His two-belted robe was solid red, bold against his powder-blue complexion, and he wore a broad, shady hat. Gray bristles ran down his cheeks and neck, well-groomed. His prominent nose and the natural hunching forward of his head added to his bulldog appearance, like some old-time British Lord.

Marcus marched right up to him, getting an extra jolt of surprise at how tall two meters twenty really was close up. "A pleasure to finally meet you, Bunwadde Pesh Nuluk Mur-Aghrelowa. Thank you for inviting me to your home."

It was a canned greeting in Vetra, checked ahead of time for grammatical felicity. Using Bunwadde's full name on first meeting was properly polite. Bunwadde had done the same calling to him: Marcus's middle name embarrassed him, and it wasn't in official records.

"You compliment me by accepting my hospitality," Bunwadde said. "I hope you're not too fatigued by traveling."

"My trip here was comfortable," Marcus replied, using another prepared statement.

The driver had stepped out, and was putting Marcus's luggage into the car trunk. "Then let's not waste time with the last part of it," Bunwadde said. He opened a car door for Marcus, who stepped inside. Bunwadde himself got into the seat ahead of Marcus, doffing his hat, while the driver slipped back into the small steering compartment at the nose of the car.

Marcus nearly commented on the seating arrangement, but curbed his tongue. "I understand you're fluent in English," he said in English. "That will make communication easier still, for both of us."

Bunwadde tipped his head. "No doubt it will." He slipped back into Vetra. "But we should stay with my language. I'm sure you need the practice more than I do with English."

True as it was, it stung. "I understand," he said in Vetra. "We do need to discuss what specifically my work with you will entail."

"Naturally." Bunwadde reeled off several of the tasks, with scatterings of details. Marcus needed some of those details filled in, which meant asking unplanned questions. He was torn between deliberate slowness that would sound mentally dense, and the quick fluency of Bunwadde that he could not pretend to have.

He muddled on, doing his best. If Bunwadde found his syntax dim-witted or funny, he didn't make it obvious. If Marcus sensed certain hesitations before Bunwadde's answers, and a slower speech pattern to make himself clear to the human, maybe he was being paranoid.

Soon they were at Bunwadde's house, not far from the river that ran through Aghrelowa. It looked modest for someone as rich as he, but Marcus knew the two floors above ground surely topped a full floor below, and maybe more. "Very pretty," he said about what he could see.

Everyone got out. "Make sure the girls are there, Trepid," Bunwadde said, and the driver headed inside. Marcus retrieved his luggage, and started to follow. Bunwadde motioned him back with a huge, six-fingered hand. After a moment, he started ahead himself, with Marcus close behind.

He found a mist falling in the foyer, his host stretching his neck about as it drizzled onto him. Spying Marcus, Bunwadde shut off the mister. "Not a human indulgence, I forget. Come, let's meet everyone."

A Kevhtre woman stood waiting in the main hallway, with two children behind her. They inched toward Bunwadde as he came up, their eyes fixed on Marcus. "Here is our guest, Platp," he told his mate, "Marcus Parrish."

Marcus took this as his cue. "Greetings, Pesh Bunwadde Platp Mur-Kendi-Kelht. I am honored to join your household for this time." Again, his words were scripted.

Pesh--as with Bunwadde, Marcus would be using the more formal name--was closer to his height, but still nearly two meters. Her skin was more silvery than her mate's. Her robe was fuller, more like a dress, ample for the girls still hiding behind it.

Marcus bent at the knees, bringing himself to the children's level. "Good day, Pesh Milinor Mur-Aghrelowa. Good day, Pesh Movedhor Mur-Aghrelowa."

Milinor, the elder, finally looked him in the eye. "Good day," she said, abrupt to rudeness. Movedhor stayed shyly quiet.

"Forgive them," Pesh said as Marcus stood. "They've never met a human before. It's a long way from Earth. I hope the voyage was pleasant for you."

"My trip here was comfortable." He was repeating the canned statement, and he felt Bunwadde had to notice. He forged onward. "Interstellar ships have little space, but they find ways to compensate. Unless you really detest--"

Pesh's face went pinched for a brief moment. Milinor laughed, a stuttering, high-pitched bark. Movedhor began to imitate her sister.

"Stop that, children," Bunwadde said. They did, looking contrite.

"Well," Pesh said, covering her own lapse, "you won't lack for space or comfort here. In fact, you're welcome to join us in the conversation pool now. We'll get to know each other better."

"A good idea," Bunwadde said, "but Marcus needs to settle into his room first. Maybe he'll come down with us later."

"Yes, I will," Marcus said, daring no more.

He followed Bunwadde to a bedroom at the back of the house. It had a human-style bed, made of local materials, next to a standard Kevhtre sink. The bedspread bore sharp patterns of bright yellow, sea green, and purple, against the silvery sheen of the headboard and bedposts. The desk was also made for humans, in a good imitation of colonial style, though with a few knickknacks scattered on its surface that had to be Kevhtre, because Marcus couldn't see what they were otherwise. The walls bore several small paintings, bucolic landscapes mixed with jagged abstracts that defied framing.

Marcus took it in passively. "It's certainly roomier than I've had lately. Thank you very much." He lifted his bags onto the bed to start unpacking.

Bunwadde noticed the canvas bag immediately. "String of Pearls, I see. You play?" he asked with a skeptical tone.

Marcus was hoping Bunwadde would bring it up first. "I've been teaching myself." That made Bunwadde's bristles stand up. "It's a way to learn about part of your everyday culture, and to improve my language skills a bit. If you happen to play, I'll offer you a game any time." He kept unpacking throughout, as though this were nothing very important.

Bunwadde made a noise in his throat, then swallowed it. "I might enjoy that, Marcus. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure." He carried an armful of clothes to the dresser, this of Kevhtre design. It was made of native wood, suffused with blue stain, and its top reached his chin. He pulled out a drawer. "Might I ask a question? It's part professional, but part personal too."

"Please do."

Marcus cast his eyes around. "How well does this room mesh with Kevhtre Union aesthetic sensibilities?"

"It was furnished for your use," Bunwadde said, "so it's more important to ask how well it suits your taste."

"It ... it doesn't. It's much too disparate, almost deliberately so. It ... clashes," he finished, the last word in English.

"Exactly how I'd put it. I wondered how you would respond."

If Marcus had had bristles, they would have stiffened. "I don't think this room would seem right for any human."

"Some wouldn't care. Some wouldn't say anything about it. You aren't one of them. Marcus, I think we shall get along well."

So he had passed the test. "I'm sure we will."

Bunwadde walked toward the door. "I'll have Tropic help you rearrange the room right away--unless you'd like to join us in the conversation pool first."

"Thank you. I'll be down in a moment." He unzipped a pocket in one suitcase, and rummaged for his swimsuit.

Marcus got his office in one of Bunwadde's buildings the next day. It was on the top floor, unprestigious for Kevhtre but perfect for a human ego. Awaiting him there was a large inventory of Kevhtre items, and a lone female Kevhtre assistant.

One of his jobs for Bunwadde was to judge the likely profitability of Kevhtre arts and crafts on Earth, and the best markets for them. He found everything cataloged and cross-referenced. All he lacked was some obvious place to begin.

He handed the manifest to his assistant, picked up the nearest lot, and had her read off the notes for it. She stammered over it more than once. Was she afraid of him? Marcus could understand that from the children, but not her. Maybe Bunwadde had cowed her into an exaggerated awe of the human coming to work for him.

Handicrafts ran the gamut, but he saw the best prospects in the woodcarvings. The woods had colors

and textures unknown on Earth, and carvings of Kevhtre and native animals added another layer of the exotic. They had serious broad-market appeal.

The jewelry might be another matter. The stones and metals were mostly things known on Earth; the premium for Obrithi gold or diamond or sapphire would be limited. The artwork on the metals and settings would help, but the only breakthroughs would be the biological stones, the local analogs of pearl and amber. The rest would be a niche market, though a high-end one.

Artworks were tricky. Stocks here were heavy on the jagged abstracts he remembered from the walls of his bedroom, though he found a set of electronic frames that produced kaleidoscopic fractal formations that mesmerized him. He assumed there'd be some sub-market on Earth for everything here.

He took his observations home that evening, and gave Bunwadde an oral synopsis. His boss seemed pleased, if tight-lipped, about it. "Might you want me to discuss all this with Pesh?" Marcus asked. His briefing notes mentioned that she worked for his company in distribution and sales.

"Of course not. This isn't her work."

"But ... I had the impression--"

"She handles domestic sales, not off-planet ones." If he was going to say more, the sound of his daughters running downstairs from their tutoring session with Trepid stopped him. Business was over.

Marcus got back to inventory the next day. His assistant, Eshlarh, was definitely less overawed, and even a bit testy at times. Marcus minded very little. Work was mostly the same, and he had only a few new angles to discuss with Bunwadde that evening.

"No furniture?" Bunwadde asked. He was soaking in his private water room. Marcus had taken off his boots, rolled up his pants, and dipped his feet in the tub, to be polite.

"Most of it's too large for us humans, or creates awkward postures. It would be impractical, meaning sales would be for novelty alone. That could support sending a few items to create a scarce market with premium prices, but even that is questionable because for the same mass and bulk, you could ship other items that would bring much higher profits."

Bunwadde sat silently for a few moments, before giving an affirmative hum. "Very sensible, if I understand you correctly. Good work, Marcus."

The compliment felt good, almost uncomfortably so. "Thank you," he just said.

"You've earned a bit of relaxation." Bunwadde handed back the inventory list. "Would you like a game with me tonight?"

In the first press of work, he had forgotten about String of Pearls. "Very much, Bunwadde."

"Good. We'll make it right after dinner." He slid deep into the tub, until just his upturned snout and half his head showed above water.

Marcus wanted time to practice, but supper was imminent, and he ate with the family. Right afterward, Bunwadde asked him to bring his board upstairs. Odd that he didn't want to use his own board, but Marcus didn't mind.

Bunwadde was in his home office, shifting items off a sturdy table, when Marcus came up. "Bring over those chairs." Marcus got them, and met Bunwadde and the table in the middle of the room.

The furniture, of course, was sized and shaped for Bunwadde. Marcus felt like a child sitting there, and an uncomfortable one. "A practical example," he said, "regarding the furniture."

Bunwadde laughed. "You've made your point. Ready?"

He turned on the board. "*Tazpet nulh chomaken*," it announced in a chipper voice already familiar to Marcus. "*Uredha lustodon*?"

"*Tra lustodon*," Bunwadde answered. Two players.

"*Kuss. Groa vat lusto tragi*."

The board had randomly chosen Bunwadde to play second. Smiling, Marcus reached into the bag, picking out tiles one by one. Soon he had eight arrayed in his dish, and he passed the bag to Bunwadde. As Bunwadde picked his tiles, Marcus hunched over the dish, and shuffled tiles around.

A minute later, he picked up six tiles. The first went at the apex; the others ran down the right-hand side of the triangular grid. The first and last tiles went on their own colors, doubling their values.

Marcus tapped the "*Lustep*" button. "Eighteen," said the board. The score flashed on a display between the grid and the bottom of the turntable.

"Good," Bunwadde said. He turned the board his way, as Marcus drew, then suppressed a frown. Too much violet-black in his dish. He'd have a tough time playing all those nouns without a conjunction: he had played his only one between vowels on his first turn.

Bunwadde put down five tiles, stringing up and right to the end of Marcus's first play, incorporating its last two tiles in the sentence. "Nineteen," said the board.

It continued this way for a couple turns: Marcus playing cautiously, but Bunwadde not pulling very far ahead. Bunwadde's third play gave Marcus an opening. Crossing it, he could get two high-value tiles on their colors. He laid it down, confident he was about to retake the lead, and hit "*Lustep*."

And heard the rejection tune he had learned to hate all the way back on *Naha Uchusen*.

"Invalid sentence," the board said. "You lose your turn."

"What? I thought ... What did I do wrong?"

"Sorry, not in the middle of a game." Bunwadde pointed at the board, and Marcus picked up his misplayed tiles. Bunwadde promptly laid down all of his.

"Forty-one," the board announced, "and a free turn."

Marcus could only sigh. Bunwadde drew fresh tiles, and played five of them in a prepositional phrase extending from the end of his previous play, for another big score.

That was a strategy Marcus hadn't thought of before. He tried it on a lateral play back up the board. It got rejected. Bunwadde then played his own prepositional phrase in front of that same sentence. It was good, naturally.

Marcus was never in the game after that. Nearly half his plays got razzed off the board. Much of that was self-inflicted, as he made desperation plays trying to catch up. One of those did work, drawing a compliment from Bunwadde that stung as badly as a taunt.



Bunwadde finished with a flourish, playing his last six tiles so a high-point adverb hit one of the four white spaces along the base of the board, tripling its value. "Thirty-one. Second player wins, 360 to 187."

At least it was over. "Congratulations," Marcus said.

"Thank you. I'm glad you could play."

Bunwadde started putting away the tiles, saying no more. No false or consoling compliments. No "Not bad for a beginner." Or "for a human."

Marcus resented not hearing something like that. He would have resented hearing it, too, but then he could have focused his resentment on Bunwadde, rather than himself.

A few minutes later, he was down in his room. Making sure the door was shut, Marcus unpacked the game again. He dialed the volume low, and turned on the board. He needed practice.

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His ego healed, with the help of work. He finished off the inventory backlog at the office, and went downstairs to give Bunwadde the final report. Bunwadde promptly tasked him with drawing up a detailed sales strategy for the items the company would ship to Earth.

That devoured the rest of Marcus's day, and the evening, and much of the next day. He returned to Bunwadde's office with the plan in hand. Bunwadde looked it over, and thanked him without comment.

"That's all?" Marcus said. "I thought you'd want to review it with me."

"I may, in a few days. First I have to see what my other specialists, my Kevhtre Union specialists, have recommended. Don't worry, you'll have work to fill the time."

Bunwadde handed him a manifest. "We'll be getting this shipment from Earth five days from now. We have descriptive information on all the items, naturally, but I would like your own professional observations as well. Flesh out the descriptions wherever you have personal knowledge or interest. Tell me why particular items are worthwhile to own."

Marcus glanced up. "For Kevhtre Union or for humans?"

"For humans. Platp and I can handle the sales appeal to Kevhtre Union customers, but we want the added dimension of a human perspective."

They could have gotten that just as easily, or more, on Earth, but Marcus didn't say so. He scrolled through the manifest, with a growing unrest. "I see you're bringing in a lot of ... intellectual property."

"The best kind. Added transport costs are almost nothing, and acquisition is often very inexpensive."

If a Kevhtre could look smug, Marcus had just seen it. "Inexpensive how? It's giving you and others a poisonous reputation on Earth." He saw Bunwadde's look change. "I'm sorry. I think I overstepped there."

Bunwadde waved a big hand. "No, it's plain you need to clear your nose on this. Speak freely."

Marcus needed a second to recover from Bunwadde's metaphor. "It's the opinion of a great many humans. They think Kevhtre Union traders are exploiting them, carrying off our culture for nothing. Video programs, music, literature--"

"But how can that be," Bunwadde said, "when Earth's own courts declared that the copyright protections

you claim did not exist?"

Marcus couldn't deny that. There had been language in copyright law and contracts extending protection throughout the universe, or similar concepts. Courts had struck down such language as arbitrarily broad, not long before the Kevh made first contact. Attempts had been made to reinstate that language, now that the concept wasn't so theoretical. The courts were blocking those on the grounds that the language now amounted to deliberate discrimination against the Kevhtre Union.

"Obviously, the judges were wrong," Marcus said. "They lacked imagination. I don't see why Earth needs to suffer for their short-sightedness."

"If they were so short-sighted, how did they contrive to become such powerful arbiters?" Bunwadde stood. "I can appreciate your frustration, but humans have to live within the system they chose for themselves."

Marcus sighed. "Perhaps so, but that doesn't mean you must exploit that system to the limit." That stiffened Bunwadde's bristles. "I don't think I'm saying anything bizarre. As a businessman, surely you know the value of good will."

"I do. My exhibiting it, however, would not achieve what you want."

"Why not? You'd gain the gratitude of a lot of humans, who'd be much more willing--"

"Marcus Parrish, you are a smarter businessman than that. Maybe your trouble with our language is confusing you." Before Marcus could reply in anger, Bunwadde switched to English. "If I stopped obtaining exposed intellectual properties, it might gain me something in other areas, though probably not enough to compensate. But others would fill the space I had left. It only takes one, and you won't convince all my competitors to stop--any more than you'll convince me."

The next argument didn't come to Marcus. He didn't see one. Defeated, he looked back at the manifest. "I can only hope your customers on Obrith appreciate human writing."

"They like the video and audio productions more," Bunwadde said. "The writing is a smaller market, though there are some who enjoy human craft in that."

"Craft? We like to think of it as more creative than that."

"As art?" Bunwadde huffed through his nose. "There's no art in human writing, especially when the authors try to make art of it."

"Well, I don't--"

Bunwadde reached back with a double-jointed arm for a data pad. "I think I've kept you far too long. Get started on that manifest. I'll see you at home tonight."

Marcus had preliminary notes ready by evening, and expected Bunwadde to want to see his progress. He had other plans.

"Marcus plays String of Pearls," Bunwadde told his family at the supper table. "I thought we could all play a game of it with him tonight."

Miliner looked delighted, and Pesh quite agreeable. "Can someone teach me how to play?" Movedhor said.

"There's only room for four to play," Milinor told her. "You'll have to stay upstairs with Tropicid."

"Mom!"

"Movedhor can help you play, Milinor," Pesh said firmly.

"And you can teach me, too," Movedhor added in the same tone. Milinor sulked.

By the time everyone was downstairs in the living room, Milinor was reconciled to the arrangement, and was explaining the game to her sister with only the occasional help of her father. Marcus sat opposite the children, while the adults set up the board.

*"Tazpet nulh chomaken. Uredha lustodon?"*

Bunwadde quietly told Milinor to answer. *"Gosho lustodon,"* she sang out.

*"Kuss. Groa vat lusto ibegi."*

Milinor cheered as though she had just won the game. Movedhor cheered along with her. Milinor let her sister pick the tiles, then played four up the left-hand leg of the triangle for nine points. Pesh extended the play by three tiles, scoring nineteen.

That gave Marcus a good six-tile play, or so he hoped. It involved making a subsidiary three-word sentence, but its structure looked safe. He played it, and the board promptly razzed it off. Milinor and Movedhor laughed, their squeaky barks worse on Marcus's nerves than the board's rejection tune had been.

"Stop that!" said Pesh. "You won't be allowed to play if--"

"Let me handle this," Bunwadde said. "Girls, remember, our guest is human. Humans have trouble with our language. Now play nicely."

"Yes, Father," they said. Neither one apologized.

Bunwadde seemed satisfied, as he promptly turned to his play. Three tiles went down near the top, making five sentences in all three directions, every one good. "Thirty-five," said the board, and Marcus couldn't help being impressed.

Tropicid walked in from the kitchen. "I heard your commotion," he said to the youngsters. "Are you being unruly?"

"They're fine, Tropicid," Bunwadde said. "Thank you."

Tropicid was about to withdraw, before spying the play Milinor was starting to make. "Remember what I taught you yesterday, Milinor?"

She stopped, got a serious look, and took back her tiles. Marcus opened his mouth, but felt Bunwadde's heavy hand on his arm. He might not have had the nerve to object to Tropicid's meddling, but now he certainly didn't.

She finally laid down a two-tile extension. "If it's not good," she said to Marcus, "don't laugh."

"I would not laugh at you," he said, rather tartly.

Movedhor hooted softly. "What if he played *that*?" she stage-whispered to her sister. Milinor didn't

reply, and hit "*Lustep*." The play was good, earning both their cheers.

Marcus's play turned cautious. The cramped, difficult board bequeathed by Bunwadde's play contributed early. Even after Bunwadde opened it up, at some cost to himself, Marcus went for acceptable plays, not high scores. It was his goal not to be laughed at again that game.

Once he lost that goal mid-game, his fallback was not to finish last to Milinor. He did not get much help.

"Father, what do I do with this?" Milinor turned her dish so he could see inside. Bunwadde leaned in and whispered his advice, then gave Marcus a look that dared him to protest. He didn't.

That play put Milinor in third, and she stayed there until the tile bag was empty. She made a play to go twenty ahead of Marcus, but he saw two ways to play his last four tiles. Both scored better than twenty, and no play by Pesh could possibly block them both.

He sighed--then gasped, as Pesh took all seven tiles out of her dish and laid them on the grid. He was too stunned to hear the board announce the final scores.

"One point, Platp," Bunwadde said. "Excellent play." Dimly, Marcus was aware that Pesh had just beaten her husband.

"And I beat Marcus, right?" Milinor chimed in.

"Listen again." Bunwadde got the board to repeat the score. Milinor shrieked with joy, and began capering around the room, Movedhor right behind her. Bunwadde joined in her celebration, picking her up and doing his own heavy-footed dance.

Marcus just sat, watching, listening, burning.

\* \* \* \*

Work was not a very good salve that time, even though there was lots of it. Bunwadde's incoming shipment was large, and notations for all of them took time, even where Marcus's knowledge was thin. Neither was he in a mood to confess ignorance, on anything.

He delivered a preliminary list to Bunwadde late that day. "I should have the full descriptions done by the end of tomorrow," he said, "but that's a good start."

Bunwadde's head made a slight, vaguely affirmative motion. "It is satisfactory for now. Platp and I can work on this during restday."

Marcus hadn't noted the calendar. "Will I be coming in to work tomorrow, sir?"

"I don't see the point. Almost nobody will be here."

"I see. Still, I should bring the files home. I'll be able to finish up there, pretty easily."

"Yes. Good."

Marcus didn't like the growing sense of detachment. "We might even have time for another game tomorrow. I hope it can be just us. I find I learn--"

"I'm sorry, Marcus," Bunwadde said, standing up, "but I'm not interested in any more games with you."

Marcus felt himself shrivel. "I'm sorry if it was presumptuous of me to ask that way."

"It was, but that is not why I refused. I would not enjoy another game." His mouth took on a downward curl. "I do not find it a challenge."

It was like being punched in the gut, slowly. Marcus tipped his head. "I understand, sir," he said, and made for the door, carrying all the dignity he could.

"However," Bunwadde said, catching him at the threshold, "I don't mean to frustrate your hobby. I will see to it that you get to play."

\* \* \* \*

Milnor cupped her hand over the raised edge of her tile dish, and lowered her head. "Don't peek," she said, with a crafty look.

Marcus didn't protest his innocence, but leaned back in his chair to show he wasn't looking over her hand. It gave him a twinge in his knees. The furniture in the upstairs study room was scaled for the children. That made it a little better for humans than the adult furnishings, but it was still built wrong for him.

While Marcus rubbed a sore leg, Milnor picked up five tiles and arranged them on the board. She then sat, looking at them, frowning. When Tropic came in to collect some books, she called out to him, "Is this right?"

Tropic looked at the board, then briefly at Marcus. "It would not be fair for me to say, Milnor. This is your game, not mine."

"But you told me the last time!"

Tropic grew stern. "Remember, Milnor, your father said you could have these games with Marcus if you behaved yourself."

Pouting, Milnor turned away from Tropic and pressed "*Lustep*." The play was good, lifting her spirits and extending her lead to twenty-nine.

Marcus looked his dish over again. He still didn't have anything very promising, except one play through Milnor's last sentence that would use all his tiles, in the unlikely event that the computer accepted it.

It was late in the game. Without this play, he would probably lose. If he made it, and it stayed, he was almost sure to win after all. If it got kicked off, he was certain to lose, and he was just as sure how Milnor would react, whatever Tropic might think.

Bunwadde would like it if he lost. Indeed, he expected it. He held Marcus's playing in contempt, and Marcus was growing sure that Bunwadde held him in contempt.

He and Pesh were downstairs now, combing through his product descriptions. Marcus was useful to him, praiseworthy as far as he furthered Bunwadde's business, but nothing more. How could he be worth more? He was only human.

Marcus stopped himself. Was that injured pride talking? Was he taking all the little wounds he had borne and building them into a grand edifice of paranoia and self-pity?

The Kevtre had humans overawed, and he was starting to fall into that mindset, the helpless victim. Even if Bunwadde were deliberately belittling him, this was just how he would want Marcus to feel. Well, he wouldn't play that role. He wouldn't be helpless, or afraid.

He scooped up all his tiles and laid them down the board, all the way to the bottom row. Milinor moaned, but he eschewed anything that could even seem like gloating, and hit the button.

"Invalid sentence. You lose your turn."

Milinor did not eschew the gloating.

\* \* \* \*

"Welcome, Marc," Jun Hua said behind the desk in his office. "Please have a seat. How was your trip in?"

"Okay," Marcus lied. He had been nauseated the whole way from Aghrelowa to the Terran Embassy in Ubhettid, not from airsickness, but from aversion to the debriefing to come.

"Glad to hear it. It was good of Bunwadde to let you off for the morning."

"They're unloading a cargo ship at the landing field. Bunwadde's supervising that, so he doesn't need his shill for a few hours."

Jun Hua raised his eyebrows. "Shill? What's the matter? And do take a seat."

Marcus paced over to the window, which mostly showed the building next door. "He had me writing descriptions of his incoming inventory. Turns out I was writing the first draft of a script: my own. He means me to be the presenter for those items in his network catalog."

"Then Bunwadde finds you useful," Jun Hua said, almost smiling. "Isn't that good?"

"He finds me convenient. I'm a human face, and voice, to lend an air of exotic authenticity to his wares. My actual expertise is secondary, if how little of my report made the script is any indication."

"But certainly you--Marc, either sit down or stop pacing so at least I can go stand next to you." Still fuming, Marcus dropped himself into the chair, swiveling it so he looked at the side wall, not Jun. "You understood Bunwadde was hiring you to help his business from the start."

"I did, but I didn't think he'd--" He sagged into the chair, not even noticing that it was made for humans, and didn't torment his back or legs. "I thought I would be an advisor, not a mouthpiece."

"Does he have you speaking Vetra or English?"

"Oh, Vetra. He trusts me to do that from a script."

"Ah. Can I infer from that that Bunwadde trusts you less to speak Vetra in other circumstances?"

"Infer what you will," Marcus grumbled.

"I shouldn't have to," Jun Hua said. "You're here to inform me fully about your progress. If we don't get that information, I can have the embassy invalidate your visa. It wouldn't help your career back on Earth to have an expulsion from Obrith on your record."

"In some quarters it might," Marcus answered, but his heart wasn't in the retort, and Jun Hua could tell.

"Answer my question, Marc. Are you making progress in mastering Vetra syntax?"

Marcus seemed to examine the floor. "No. None that I've noticed."

"Is String of Pearls not helping your studies?"

He tried to hide a wince. "It's not giving me any special insights. I'm working on it. I've gotten to play several games."

"Against Bunwadde?" Jun Hua asked. "And did you win?"

"Two against Bunwadde. And I didn't beat him." He didn't mention his games with Milinor. He had actually won his first one yesterday, by all of two points. His ego wasn't so far gone that he would try to brag about that.

"Did you keep the games respectable?"

Marcus finally looked at Jun Hua, who didn't bother trying to wipe the faint, supercilious smile from his face. "Are you enjoying this, Jun?"

The smile opened a little, like a flower to sun. "The Language Section has endured a lot of scorn from humans--especially some business people--for not solving Vetra syntax. When such people learn for themselves the intractability of the matter ... well, it's only human to feel a little vindicated."

Marcus's nausea came back in full force. "Not very professional of you, is it?"

"Better a little professional than completely amateur." Jun Hua picked up a tablet. "So tell me about these games, Marc. Each one, please."

Marcus thought for a moment whether his career could actually be advanced by getting tossed off the planet. It might, if he could somehow repay the travel costs to and from Obrith that the Language Section, for now, was carrying for him. He didn't doubt they would soak him with that.

"I'm waiting."

No matter how he ran the numbers, he couldn't make them add up. Willing his stomach to behave, Marcus started to recap his games.

\* \* \* \*

Marcus didn't eat much at dinner that night. He did take double helpings of water, to soothe a mouth and throat strained by several hours of recitations for the catalog. Declining Milinor's offer of a game, he took to his room early.

He began his nightly language studies, but could scarcely concentrate on his texts. There seemed no point to trying. The gulf was too wide. Finally he pushed the tablets aside, and pulled out his String of Pearls set.

With the game's volume so low even he could barely hear it, Marcus started experimenting. He would lay out a sentence, see if it was good, then reset the game and try it in a different arrangement. He marked down the versions that were syntactically proper on a tablet, and moved on to another sentence, and another.

He searched for patterns in the valid sentences, but they remained as elusive as ever. Sentence structures that worked often became invalid when he substituted a new subject or verb, or even a preposition one time. He could not see the rules.

Marcus kept testing, despite seeing the hopelessness. One could learn a language's vocabulary by rote, but a variable grammar? He told himself that a sub-vocabulary of one hundred fourteen, all the words

appearing on the tiles, was a place to start.

He kept at it past midnight, and didn't get nearly enough sleep. It was an effort to give his catalog readings the same energy they had had the previous day, but he felt he was succeeding.

Eshlarh, his assistant, grew edgy fast. "Take a rest, Marcus," she said. "I will return soon." She left the studio, her big slapping feet putting Marcus in mind of an agitated duck.

Marcus stewed. Throughout the recordings, she had been acting like his boss, not vice versa. This was just one more order he resented.

Eshlarh returned quickly. "Let's do a few more, fast," she said, advancing the prompter text. "Bunwadde will be here soon. He'll have some encouragement for you."

He didn't like how that sounded. He kept reciting, though with his first flubbed line of the day, until Bunwadde arrived. To Marcus's surprise, Bunwadde was carrying a small urn with insulated handles, and a cup perched on the top.

"Maybe this will help," Bunwadde said, setting things down on the shelf of a sink fixture. "It was part of the shipment bound for the Terran Embassy, but I have diverted a modest amount." He waved Marcus over. "Have some."

Marcus came over, wondering if he recognized the smell. He put the cup under the tap, turned the valve, and soon had no more doubt. "Coffee?"

"Technically a luxury," Bunwadde said, "but I have heard some Embassy humans speak of it as a necessity. I suppose they are right, by what Eshlarh tells me. Take whatever you need."

"Thank you," Marcus said, even as he felt the patronizing sting, again. Apparently sugar and cream weren't part of the necessity, but the coffee wasn't bad without them. He drank a cup for medicinal effect, and got back to reciting. That dose, and a second a few hours later, had him back to performing at par, or enough so that Eshlarh was much calmer the rest of the day.

He got through his performance, and had a bit more appetite at dinner that evening. He did not, though, have increased confidence in his game-playing. "I'm sorry, Milinor, not tonight," he said when she asked again for a game. "I'm tired from work today."

"But I want another game," Milinor complained. "This is just because you won the last game, and you don't want to lose again."

"Milinor!" Pesh said.

"That's not true," Marcus lied reflexively. It went unchallenged, as Milinor's parents, Pesh in the lead, took away her game privileges for the night. She apologized sullenly to Marcus, sounding awfully like any seven-year-old.

Marcus soon retired to his room, and went straight to the desk and the game. Tonight, he was calculating the color frequencies of the tiles and the board spaces. Which tiles could get premiums for landing on their color most often?

It was the nouns, of course, but compared to their frequency in tile distribution, there was a paucity of violet-black spaces. Worse, almost all the nouns were low-scoring, so one didn't gain much. The ratio was better for everything else. Conjunctions were best, with verbs and tense-marks not far behind.



From these statistics, he could gain a better idea of what tiles it would pay to hoard, what tiles he should play on matching spaces when he could, and what tiles he shouldn't bother trying to match. It was a first step in game analysis: if he couldn't win on strength of grammar, maybe he could win on strategy.

Maybe it would be enough that Milinor would grow sick of losing instead of him. Maybe it would be enough that he could compete with Bunwadde. Then he could tell *that* to Jun Hua.

But it wouldn't hurt to know more. He counted up how many of the conjunctions were group conjunctions, useful for noun-heavy dishes. He toted up the various tenses of the tense-marks, theorizing how they could relate to one another in a compound sentence. He studied the pattern of the board, thinking of how he could set himself up on one play to hit premiums with leftover tiles on his next.

He didn't hear the footsteps until too late. He could do no more than set the board atop its box lying on the floor before his door swung open.

"You're still awake," Bunwadde observed.

"Yes," Marcus said. "I'm still having trouble sleeping." He walked over to his bed, hoping to draw Bunwadde's eyes with him.

"I hope it is not the coffee. I didn't think its effects lasted so long." His eyes moved. "Were you playing?"

"No." That was true enough. "I was just looking at it, whiling away time, trying to lull myself to sleep." Bunwadde's cool gaze pressed in on him. "Trying to understand it better, too, perhaps."

"Good. I'm glad you still have an interest in the game. Milinor will be, too. Now do rest, even if you cannot sleep. We need to finish the catalog tomorrow."

"Yes, Bunwadde," Marcus said, sighing.

\* \* \* \*

"That's a pretty play."

Marcus didn't reply to Milinor. He didn't believe her. It was a mediocre play, a safe play that wouldn't lose him a turn, but wouldn't get him the lead or set him up to take it. Even if she meant it as a genuine compliment--he didn't trust much these days--it felt like mockery.

Milinor made her play, with a quick look over to Tropic. Marcus glanced at him too, but the servant showed no expression. Marcus turned back to his dish, and thought over his options.

He had a six-tile play that would score fairly well, but not vault him ahead. There was a shorter, lower-scoring play on the other side of the board, though, that would let him keep a conjunction with two spaces of its color in easy reach. It would mean keeping two tense-marks, which could be awkward, but with the right draw, he could play them combined with the conjunction and make a big score.

The board chimed. "You must play within thirty-two *kaphon*."

"See, you're taking too long!" Milinor said.

"Sorry." He made the shorter play, and drew new tiles. Before he could look at them, Milinor made her play, covering one of the spots for his conjunction with a mere noun.

Marcus looked over his new tiles, and frowned. Two more tense-marks. He might still reach the conjunction premium, but not without leaving his dish clogged with tense-marks. He gave it up, and found

a place higher up the board where he could hook onto an existing verb, playing off his conjunction to help clean up his holdings. The score got him a little closer, but not much.

He tried more set-up plays, but by the time one worked for him, he had sacrificed more points than he gained with his lone success. By the endgame, he needed an eight-tile extra-turn play to have a chance, but the branching sentences had cut off all the empty areas. He made one of his familiar desperation plays, and got the familiar rejection tune from the board.

"I won, Tropicid!" Milinor shouted after the board recited the score.

"Yes, you did, and you made no incorrect plays. Good work."

Marcus packed up the board quietly, but not fast enough. "We're going to play tomorrow, right?" Milinor said.

"If your parents and Tropicid let you," Marcus said, "and if I don't have to work too long."

Milinor hooted at this. Marcus didn't know whether it was his grammar again, or whether she found his work patterns so risible.

He left the game in his bedroom, and went downstairs to the water rooms. He gave himself a quick shower, part of his daily routine. Before dressing again, though, he departed from habit, and went over to one of the lounging pools. He put in one foot, and found the water bracingly cool. He laid aside his towel, and stepped in. Aghrelowa's heavy heat never seemed to lift, and this was a refreshing departure.

He leaned back, luxuriating. Time seemed to fade away, leaving just himself and his thoughts. For a few minutes, those thoughts didn't include the frustrations of the day, and every day. They did creep back, stealthily, reclaiming their accustomed place.

Marcus lowered himself a few more inches. Only briefly did he imagine drowning himself there. "Very impolite, I'm sure," he said to himself. "Upset the whole household." He didn't feel that badly about *all* of them not to care.

Someone came thudding down the stairs. Marcus let his solitude go philosophically: this room was too heavily trafficked for it to last. He saw it was Tropicid, a mild surprise. "Good evening," he said politely. Tropicid had always been correct toward him, no more and no less.

"Good evening, Marcus," Tropicid said. "It's good to see you're having a cool soak. You were long enough in taking advantage--or are humans less sensitive to heat than I've heard?"

Marcus had never heard such garrulity from Tropicid. "I can't say what you've heard," he replied, "but the water feels very good. And how do you know I haven't used this pool?"

"I have to keep track of everything in the household." Tropicid slipped off his sandals and shed his robe, leaving him down to a broad strip of cloth covering him from stomach to mid-thigh. He thought better of removing it, and stepped into Marcus's pool with it on. Kevhtre shared pools without a thought, and Marcus didn't mind.

Tropicid made a guttural "Grrraahh" sound as he lowered himself into the water. He sat quietly, head back, for a moment, before looking at Marcus. "I hope you do not hate Milinor."

"Hate her? I..."

"She has a kind side to her, but she is competitive. That has served her parents well, and they are

teaching her--and having me teach her--to be the same."

"I ... understand, Trepid. I can't blame anyone for that."

"And she is very bright, very perceptive."

Marcus chuckled. "That's something of a comfort."

Trepid gave him a long look. "I think I understand *that*, Marcus. Your position here is awkward. Sometimes, it is more awkward than it needs to be."

Marcus absorbed that slowly. "I cannot really complain. I wasn't drafted."

Trepid's features bunched up. "What was that?"

Maybe that idiom didn't translate well. "I wasn't forced to come to Obrith. Whatever happens here, I came to it with my eyes open."

Trepid droned, deep in his chest. "Open eyes do not see everything ahead."

Trepid was surprising Marcus every minute. He was presenting overtures of sympathy, of friendship--or was it more?

The Language Section reportedly had been feeling around for a Kevhtre Union citizen to defy the government and explain the language to them, to fill in what humans were missing. They had made no progress, and rumors about the cost of their failures had been disturbing. Had Marcus stumbled onto what they had missed?

He moved cautiously. "Naturally, it is frustrating to understand something when others use it, but not to understand how to use it oneself."

"Yes, it must be painful," Trepid said, "but it is something you must confront yourself."

"I have tried. I also think I've gone as far as I can by myself."

Trepid shifted, sending little waves across the pool. "I already have a job as a tutor, Marcus Parrish. I don't think you should ask me to do more."

Marcus said nothing. There was no more to say. He didn't pretend Trepid's answer carried any ambiguity. After a decent interval, he reached for the towel at the edge of the pool. "Thank you for the company, Trepid."

\* \* \* \*

Marcus stood by the window in his bedroom, watching dusk fade to night, thinking. Standing was about as comfortable as sitting in his Kevh-style chair, and would be kinder to his legs in the morning. String of Pearls was packed up and under his bed.

He wished he could keep the game under there forever. It had been an incubus, promising him language insight, and giving him worse than nothing. It had led him astray, and much of that was his doing. He had come to treat the game as its own end, not as a learning tool. That had let Bunwadde make it his own tool, to keep Marcus humiliated, to keep humans in their place. Just one tool for him, but a particularly irksome one.

At least the mortification of his shilling stint was finished--until the next shipment from Earth arrived. Bunwadde would find more work for him, of course, but he would have to look hard to find something

as embarrassing to Marcus.

He quickly regretted thinking that. Bunwadde would manage, somehow. Marcus doused the lights and slipped into bed, hoping not to carry that thought into sleep.

As usual, rest was elusive. His everyday failures were frequent nighttime companions. His latest loss was with him tonight, that and Milinor's "pretty play" comment that clung stubbornly under his skin.

He could envision the words now, in the darkness. The play was a stair-step parallel, one short horizontal sentence played under another, overlapping by two tiles, one base and one vertex. The play made two additional short sentences on the diagonals.

It wasn't special. That kind of play happened constantly, as much as a dozen times a game. Milinor made such plays herself, without such a compliment. If he had overlapped four or five tiles, difficult but doable if verbs were in the right places, that might really be pretty.

But Milinor was young, and no student of the game. When she said a play was pretty, she didn't mean it was tactically elegant, she meant it looked pretty. Maybe she was babbling childishly, but Marcus didn't think so. Tropic said she was bright and perceptive, and Marcus believed him.

What was there, in that nest of curves, bars, slashes, and dots? He tried to think, but concentration was ebbing. The ideograms began swimming in his head. Soon they were undulating like the surface of a restless sea.

He gasped. Had he drifted off? Had he been half-asleep the whole time? He was wide-awake now.

He turned on a light, found a tablet, and wrote out the ideograms, each of the four sentences on separate lines. He fixed on the second one. It was a bramble, but within it he could see the sketchy, gentle sweep of a sine curve, falling, rising, and falling again. The third sentence was the same.

The other two, Milinor's sentence and his, didn't have the sine curve, but Marcus knew now that there was some pattern in them. In those patterns would be the explanation of why one arrangement of words made a sentence to Kevhtre eyes and ears, and another did not.

He started making notes on his tablet. He didn't mean to stay up all night, but he was going to leave himself enough information so his insight wouldn't fade like dreams.

He was going to be tired at work again tomorrow. This time, it would be for the right reason.

Marcus heard Bunwadde walk into his office. "How is your work going?" the boss asked.

"It's going well. I'm writing up the reports on your new export items. You can have the first group now, if you like."

He knew how Bunwadde would answer, and was putting it on a tablet before he asked for it. Marcus had been able to go further in-depth on marketing strengths and weaknesses for this group, partly because it was smaller, partly because he had requested as much informational material on the items as he could get. Those materials had helped a great deal more with his other work.

"You really have these sculpture replicas rated so low?" Bunwadde asked. "I understand about the name, but might that not be a selling point with some humans?"

The sculpture's title in Vetra sounded very like an English vulgarity. Marcus wondered if Bunwadde would notice how red he was turning. "It could be, except that the thing it means in English looks ...

similar." Bunwadde said nothing, but studied the tablet, turning it this way and that for a different look.

Marcus's studies of Vetra had been moving fast, but outwardly he was playing it slow. Jun Hua knew nothing. Marcus's ambiguous reports to the Language Section, hinting at some possible progress, would sound like forlorn masking of continued failure. He would reveal himself in his own time.

"Good work on this," Bunwadde said. "Indeed, I am gratified at how you've settled in during the last twenty days. You had some difficulties before that, but you have definitely found your place here."

Marcus went through modest motions. "Thank you, Bunwadde."

"Of course, Milinor has been complaining about you."

"She has?"

"Yes. She tells me you've been beating her at String of Pearls lately."

His restraint had fallen to his competitive spirit here. Last night was his fourth win straight against Milinor. "I have, sir, finally."

"It was a while in coming. Do you feel up to playing me again?"

Marcus heard how he turned it around, as if Marcus had been the one to refuse more games, avoiding Bunwadde's beatings. He fought the urge to leap on the offer. "Well, will it be a family game, or just us?"

"Just us, I think."

"Well ... all right, I think I'm ready."

"I'm glad to hear it," Bunwadde said with a slight grin. He had heard Marcus's garbled syntax in that last sentence, as Marcus had intended. "Are you ready for a meal break?"

"Not yet, thank you. I want to get through some more of these reports." Bunwadde let him do that, and Marcus buckled down, not to writing, but to reading: reading more of those informational materials, delving into the patterns of ordinary words that were more clear to him each day.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was excellent. Either Marcus was growing more used to Kevhtre cuisine, or Tropicid was shading the fare toward a human palate. He would remember to thank Tropicid either way.

Once they were done, Bunwadde went upstairs to get the board. "Not this time," he said when Marcus started to follow. "Go down to the living room. We'll play there."

He wanted spectators for this, of course. That suited Marcus. He went downstairs without complaint, and sat himself at the big table. Milinor and Movedhor pulled over chairs, and stationed themselves opposite him.

"We're going to help Dad win," Movedhor said.

"Really?" Marcus said. "And who will help me win?"

"You aren't going to win," Milinor declared. Marcus had the decency to squirm in his seat, though only to relieve the usual cramping.

Bunwadde arrived with the game, and sat to one side. Marcus obligingly shifted his place to sit opposite

Bunwadde. Pesh came down and stood with her daughters as Bunwadde set up the game.

They started, and the board picked Bunwadde to play first. He scarcely looked at his tiles before he laid six of them down the right-hand leg of the triangle, hitting three matching colors. "Twenty-three," the game announced.

Such a strong opening would have flustered the old Marcus. Now, he just studied his dish, and the board. The girls began to fidget. Milinor tried to peek at his tiles, but he ignored her, and Pesh told her to stand with her father instead.

Finally, Marcus picked up five tiles in one hand, and laid them up and right, joining with the third and fourth words in Bunwadde's play. Marcus looked at it, and nodded. Then he added the last three tiles to his sentence and hit "*Lustep*" without hesitation.

"Twenty-eight, and a free turn."

He saw Bunwadde's surprise, and heard that of the children. He enjoyed them both.

His free play ended up small, to use up awkward tiles, but it set him up for a fine score the next turn, consolidating his lead. Bunwadde made good plays his next few turns, which didn't rattle Marcus now. He didn't have to take blind chances. He could see the plays, really see them. He could see how the pair of parallel bars in one noun meshed with the bar in a following verb, or clashed with the backslash in an adjective.

It wasn't perfect. He didn't grasp all the rules yet. But there were moments when a grouping of words looked right, and only the next moment did he see why.

A few times, he even thought he had heard some likeness of the patterns in spoken words. It was nothing as easy as direct equivalence, or analysts would have noticed it before. He had to work on that--but first things first.

He made a middling play, setting up a line to an orange-red space. He had a big adverb to play there, and the tiles to reach it. Even if it got blocked, there was a second such space across the board he might hit.

Bunwadde did block it. Marcus had a possible play at the second triangle, but saw that Bunwadde's play had opened the way to a third. He got to it, with all four tiles going on their own colors. "Thirty-one," chirped the board.

Bunwadde said something Marcus couldn't hear. The children had drifted toward him, and started pointing at his tiles and making suggestions. Pesh hushed them, before giving Marcus a strange, nervous look.

Marcus saw something he wasn't used to: Bunwadde making risky moves. Not grammatically risky, but strategically, trying to open the board for eight-tile plays, playing short sentences that could easily be extended, hanging plays close to the triple-value white spaces. Marcus played steadily, taking advantage of openings when he could, extending his lead as the game neared its end.

Bunwadde made a small play back near the apex. Was he fishing for better tiles? Trying to keep lanes open to play all eight? Was it just the best play in a bad dish?

Marcus set the question aside. He had to worry about his own play now--until he spotted it. He ran six tiles down and right, hitting two colors, putting a medium-value tense-mark on the white, and making four more short sentences where it overlapped a previous play. "Thirty-four," the board said.

Marcus drew new pieces with a calm he had never felt over the board, not even in his best game against Milinor. He was ahead by fifty-five. He almost couldn't lose.

Then Bunwadde picked up all his tiles. His play put a valuable preposition on another white space, and ran to join a previously extended play. The sentence ran seventeen words in all.

"Fifty-one, and a free play."

Marcus managed to nod through his shock. "Excellent move," he said.

"Thank you," Bunwadde said, drawing the last five tiles out of the bag. If he could play them all with his extra turn, he'd lock up the comeback win. If he couldn't, he might still outscore Marcus in the stretch run.

It didn't really matter. Marcus had played his whole game without a mistake, without fear, without feeling like he couldn't win. That was victory enough.

Bunwadde took time making his play, and was clearly frustrated when he could only lay down three tiles for eleven points. Marcus looked over the board, knowing he couldn't play all of his. He made a partial overlap with four tiles, scoring a mediocre sixteen, going back ahead by nine. He could easily play his last words, if he got the chance.

Bunwadde studied his last two tiles. He laid them down, then picked them back up. The play would have scored seven, not enough. From the glimpse Marcus got, they were a tense-mark and adjective. They might fit with an existing play somewhere, if Bunwadde was lucky.

The board gave a time warning. Bunwadde's bristles were stiff and trembling, and his light-blue complexion had paled. Finally, just after the board's final warning, he bracketed the tiles around a short play up-board, and held his finger over the "*Lustep*" button.

"Dad?" Milinor said quizzically. Her father made a feeble gesture, and his finger fell. It spasmed away when the jeering little song began.

"Invalid sentence. You lose your final turn."

Marcus made his play almost before Bunwadde could take off his rejected tiles. "Nine. Second player wins, 299 to 281."

He felt no outburst of joy, but a release of tension inside him that had been there so long he had forgotten it existed. So much for it not mattering whether he won or lost.

Bunwadde met him with eyes that looked hollow. "Congratulations, Marcus. It seems you have learned quite a lot lately."

"Thank you. I have."

\* \* \* \*

Marcus had scarcely taken two steps into the briefing room before he found someone shaking his hand. He had no chance to extract it from the series of grips that followed, until a much gentler hand took hold.

"Welcome, Mr. Parrish," said Inez Quinones, director of the Language Section. "Good to finally meet you. Please, take your seat."

She guided him toward one end of a long oval table, then sat herself at the other end. Jun Hua, Marcus

noticed, was already there at her right hand. He hadn't been part of the congratulating swarm.

"Before we formally begin," Quinones said, "I hope your new accommodations are adequate, Mr. Parrish."

"Oh, they are," he said. "I'm learning to enjoy sitting down again." Several Section members laughed knowingly.

The Section had been ready to buy Marcus out of his service with Bunwadde, once he informed them of the breakthrough the night after his climactic game. Bunwadde was a step ahead, releasing him that following morning. A human had learned Vetra syntax in his employ. He was hoping to minimize the personal repercussions from that connection.

Marcus resisted the impulse to feel sympathy. Bunwadde had brought him there as a showpiece, maybe useful in other limited ways, but certainly no threat. That arrogance had gotten him what it often does.

Still, he'd give Bunwadde credit for two things. First, he wasn't making Tropic the easy scapegoat, yet. Second, Marcus had gone to sleep that night, in the flush of triumph, and woken up the next morning. Not all humans--maybe not all Kevhtre--would have let him do that.

Quinones started the debriefing with a few questions about the preliminary reports Marcus had written on his breakthrough. They seemed pointed beneath her mild way of asking them, looking for some weak link. His system still had a few of those, but he was forthright about them. If the Language Section had suspected some elaborate deception, their residual worries faded.

"It is excellent work," Quinones said, "but your work isn't close to over. We're going to need you to instruct everyone in the Section on the fundamentals of Vetra grammar, in intensive sessions. We need to teach all the diplomatic staff as well, but we may just start with a few critical personnel there. Once some of us are up to speed, we can start acting as teachers for the rest, not to mention spreading this knowledge back to Earth. We'll have--"

"Excuse me, Director," Marcus said. "I intend to give you full reports on the syntactic rules I've learned, nothing left out. I'll even add some work on the link between ideograms and vocables. But I've been indentured once lately. I'm not making it twice. I intend to go home."

"I see," Quinones said coolly. "Why this sudden drive to return to Earth?"

"It's scarcely sudden. I have a life to lead there. I have business to return to--and a new tool with which to get ahead in it. That is why I agreed to this program, after all."

"You were here to crack the language for all of us," one of the members said, "not for yourself."

"I have to concur with Mr. Okoye," Quinones said. "You made a commitment to the Language Section when you agreed to the apprenticeship with Bunwadde. You're shirking that commitment."

"Consider it repayment in kind," said Marcus, "for the level of support I got on-planet. You handed away my full collaboration, not me."

Quinones was perplexed. "Mr. Parrish, I don't understand what I've done to merit this hostility."

"It isn't directed against you, ma'am." He let his eyes creep over to her stoic aide. "Mr. Jun, on the other hand, was anything but supportive of my work. He made my life a lot harder."

Quinones turned. "Jun, what is this about?"



"I'd rather not have my humiliations exposed further," Parrish snapped. "I'll make it short. I want Jun Hua sacked, today, or my assistance will be as limited as I've already said."

"This is--" Quinones couldn't find words.

"Is that all?" Jun Hua said smoothly. "You'll cooperate, over my dead professional body?"

Marcus sneered. "Yeah, I think that's enough."

"Jun, I want to see you--"

"Done." Jun stood up. "Director, I'll be in my office, composing my resignation letter. You'll have it within ten minutes."

The shocked silence was broken by a single bark of laughter from Marcus. "What, that easy?"

Jun Hua turned dark eyes on him. "Nothing is easy with you, Marc, but it was necessary. Indeed, that's why it was necessary. I assumed so from the start."

This time, Marcus couldn't speak. "Jun, explain this," Quinones said.

"Gladly. I learned during the interview process how determined Marcus Parrish is, how ambitious and competitive. I knew we had to harness these traits for him to have a fighting chance at cracking Vetra. So I provided the goads."

He shifted his speech to Marcus. "I gave you String of Pearls, knowing you wouldn't have a fighting chance to win it against native speakers, and that you couldn't resist trying. Then, yes, I rubbed your nose in it. I couldn't risk having you accept defeat. I needed you to pour your whole spirit into making the breakthrough, as unlikely as it might be. But you did it. You beat the odds, and Bunwadde as a bonus.

"So let me ask you, Marc. Was it worth the pain to reach the goal? No," he said, raising a hand, "don't answer me. Think about it. For my part, I'll say it was always worth a high cost to have a human finally achieve mastery of the language. I got what I wanted. I won't shrink from paying a fair price. Gentlemen, ladies." He gave a short bow, and walked out of the conference room.

Quinones's eyes followed him to the threshold, then fastened on Marcus. He found all eyes on him now. "I take it," she said, "that you're on board with us now."

"I..."

"Let's be clear, sir," she said, all the gentleness from their introduction gone. "I just lost a very good man because of you. You said that was what it would take to get your fullest cooperation. I mean to hold you to your word."

Marcus said nothing. He didn't look at Quinones, or at anyone.

"We need this knowledge," she said, her tone changed. "The human race needs it. We have to get some leverage in relations with the Kevhtre Union. It's the same problem you face in your business dealings, magnified a million times. If you can't understand how--"

"You don't have to go on." Marcus could barely be heard across the table. "How soon can I start lessons for the Language Section?"

The whole table brightened, Quinones most of all. "I was hoping for tonight."

Marcus tipped his head. "My lesson plan will be a bit rough, but you're right, there's no point in delaying. Tonight it is."

"Done. I'll lend you a staff member so you can pick out a room and get all the materials there you'll need."

"Of course. And thank you, Director," he added, "for that last reminder."

She smiled, as he had hoped. Her appeal to their common humanity had been fitting, but it wasn't the reason he had gone along. Better that they think it was, so they would gloss over what really had moved him: Jun Hua's parting question.

Marcus had endured humiliations, and their sting would last with him. So, too, would the pride of his accomplishment. He wouldn't have that pride if he hadn't gone through the humiliation, been the kind of man who would feel it so keenly, and take it to heart. Jun had read him perfectly.

And Jun had been right: it had all been worth it.

No reason anyone else should know, though. It was hard enough that Marcus knew.

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