

First Was the Word

by Sheila Finch

Sheila Finch has written about a dozen stories concerning the Lingsters, including a passel of short stories and the novels Triad and Reading the Bones. She has recently assembled the Lingster short stories into one volume which is due to be published soon under the title The Guild of Xenolinguists. In the process of assembling the book, she was inspired to go back to the beginning and write the story about how it all started—and she was pleased to find out that it didn't quite originate in the way she'd always thought. We think you'll also be pleased to see how the guild originated.

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Jamal Lenana paused, his breath rasping. The ascent was harder than he'd expected. The antigrav lift-belt he'd let the cute shop assistant talk him into purchasing in Moshi at the foot of Kilimanjaro seemed to be an expensive fake; he was doing most of the work instead of the other way around. *When you gonna learn, bro?* he thought. *Always a sucker for the ladies.*

Stupid to attempt this in the sweltering temperatures of September, with or without a working lift-belt. A month ago, he'd been finishing up his Ph.D. in Linguistics at UC Berkeley. At the last minute, the committee had balked at his ideas about the emergence of language, something so fundamentally driven by biology he'd made the outrageous suggestion it might even control the development of alien languages—if humans ever had the luck to meet any. So he'd walked out, leaving his dissertation and his career on the seminar table, and gone to Africa.

Mopping his brow, he turned his attention back to Kilimanjaro's snow-covered peak. At least another couple of hours to the top, but unless the antigrav belt worked as advertised, he wasn't going to make it. He'd come up a long way from the scrub plateau of the plains, through the lower, cultivated slopes and the cloud forest, and had reached a more open section of grassy moor, yet he seemed to be only halfway. The incense of desert country laced with the wild scent of animals rose up to his sensitive nose. This might be Mother Africa, he thought, but there was too much American in his African blood for him to be comfortable with the fierce sun so near the equator. Getting to the caldera at the top of Kilimanjaro was rapidly losing its charm.

His gaze was caught by a dark bird circling on a thermal. Vulture, maybe, scanning for fresh kill. It flew toward him, following the path up the mountain. It grew bigger, and he could see it was a helicopter, not a bird.

The craft, painted a dull, unreflective black, made an almost silent approach. It bore no markings or identification of any kind. Now he could see the pilot and another man beside him—and if he hadn't known better, he'd have thought the chopper's occupants were looking for him.

“Dr. Lenana?” the craft’s PA boomed.

The chopper settled to the ground a few feet away. The blades slowed, stopped. A man in boots and a camouflage flight suit with no identifying patches slid down from the open hatch and gazed at him.

“You are Dr. Jamal Lenana?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Come with us, please.”

He shook his head. “You’re looking for someone else, bro.”

The man, with a bony face and tight mouth that looked as if it didn’t waste much energy smiling, adjusted dark glasses. “We were sent to find you specifically, Dr. Lenana.”

Damn RFIDs and GPS and the rest of the surveillance alphabet, he thought. Too easy to find anybody anywhere these days. It had to be bad news about his father. The old man would be almost ninety by now, and they hadn’t spoken in years. Lenana Senior had retired from the army as a two-star general and gone to work for the NSA. He had connections with the defense and intelligence gathering communities; he must’ve asked old friends to find his son.

“Please. We’re wasting time.”

Jamal was tempted to tell them where to go with their request. But it was hot, his muscles were complaining, he was tired of trail mix and hungry for real food, and he could always experience Kilimanjaro in VR. It had been a whim anyway, born in a fit of anger when he realized what he’d done to his career. The pilot leaned out the door and extended his hand. Jamal took it and climbed in. The pilot indicated a seat, then adjusted the safety harness. There were no identifying patches or insignia on his flight suit either. The first man climbed in behind him.

“Going to tell me what this is all about?”

“Your dissertation’s on the universal biological roots of language, isn’t it, Dr. Lenana?”

“It’s not ‘Doctor’ Lenana. This some kind of joke or what?” Since when did esoteric linguistics become important to guys who spent their time in unmarked uniforms and stealth craft?

“No joke, sir.” The man’s mouth moved as if it were about to smile, then thought better of it. “I understand your work is potentially valuable, given the times we live in.”

“I’m a theoretical linguist. There are plenty of talented translators coming out of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey. Enough to deal with any language or

dialect around the world.” Especially terrorist ones, he thought, the hot topic when he’d started graduate school. The old man had argued—unsuccessfully—if his youngest child and only son was going to move to the West Coast, he should go to DLI.

“Suppose we’re dealing with a language that we’ve not encountered before? Hypothetically, of course,” the man added.

Absurd. There were no more undiscovered languages hiding in unexplored jungles on the planet. Come to that, there were hardly any more jungles. “Not interested.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the man said. “I can’t tell you any more than that. You’ll be briefed as soon as we land at Fort Meade.”

* * * *

“I have to admit, Jamal, we haven’t seen anything quite like this before.”

The man whose sixth-floor office in Maryland he’d been ushered into was someone he’d known in his childhood. Tom Wang had often been a guest in the Lenana home in the Baltimore suburbs, one of the crowd of young NSA agents with hazy backgrounds and obscure career descriptions that Miriam Lenana took pleasure in feeding. He remembered Tom Wang in particular, seated on a straight-backed chair under the portrait of Jamal’s great-grandfather as a Tuskegee Airman, always laughing at some lame joke Jamal’s father made. Even as a boy, he’d recognized a kiss-up when he saw one.

Older now, heavier, black hair fading to silver, Wang had gained deep furrows in his brow. Unlike Jamal’s escorts, he wore an exquisite suit, a pale blue shirt, and a slightly darker tie. He perched informally on the edge of a walnut desk as if to set his visitor at ease. Jamal wasn’t fooled. The office had an ambience of comfort and informality—sprawling plants in corners, framed prints of sailboats on the wall—that seemed designed to cover a more ominous purpose. Behind Wang, a long window gave a view of the vast parking lot of the NSA compound. The windows were sealed, the pinewoods scent in the room coming from an air freshener his nose identified though his eyes couldn’t find it.

Jamal was tired from the journey and short on patience right now. He’d never had much liking for either intelligence gathering or what the military had become since his great-grandfather’s day. “Mind telling me why the NSA thinks I’d be interested in working for them?”

“Please, sit down.” Wang indicated two armchairs on either side of a faux fireplace. “I’ll have someone bring us coffee and then we’ll talk.”

When the coffee arrived, a young intern set the tray on a low table. Jamal made eye contact with her and she smiled. Coppery hair in a short, bouncy cut and bright blue eyes. Nice perfume, too. Sweet deal to have eye candy like that on your

staff, he thought, watching her pour the coffee. From the deliberate way she bent over, letting her white silk blouse drape away from tanned cleavage, he knew she was aware of his attention, enjoying it.

Wang waited until she left the room.

“We have here a puzzle,” Wang began. “Three days ago, a couple of Maryland State Troopers picked up a vagrant, a man they’d found stark naked on Highway 95 just outside DC. He didn’t respond to English. As the law orders, they called in interpreters. They expected he’d speak a European language, German, or perhaps Russian or something Scandinavian—logical, considering his blond features. When that didn’t work, they put out a call for speakers of languages with smaller speaker pools like Basque and Amharic. They got the same lack of result every time.”

“They tried sign?”

Wang nodded. “Again, nothing.”

“Mentally impaired.”

Wang hesitated as if he were weighing how much information to share. “Probably not in this case.”

Jamal shook his head. “Country’s full of homeless people—half of them totally nuts. Maybe the troopers just found another one.”

Wang had the grace to look uncomfortable, Jamal thought, confirming that he was withholding information.

“The secretary wants an answer ASAP,” Wang said.

“There’re still a few languages left in the world with only a handful of speakers. It’s possible to find something nobody in Maryland speaks, surely?”

“If that were all.”

“The DLI ought to be up to the job of figuring out the language of a vagrant. Why not pull them in?” *And I’m outta here*, he thought. Last thing he wanted was to get involved with the NSA. And secretaries giving orders—what was that all about? “I don’t get why the cops can’t solve their own problems. Overkill, isn’t it, bringing in the NSA?”

“Maybe not in this case,” Wang said. “I’d like to hear what you think.”

“My dissertation’s on how languages evolve, not how to speak any of them.”

Wang nodded. “I’ve followed your career ever since those early days when your mother used to feed the starving junior agents. Brilliant piece of speculation, I’m told. Something about ‘universal bionecessities’—I think that was your

term?—driving language evolution.”

“That’s all it was, speculation.”

Wang set his coffee aside and stood up. “Let’s take a look downstairs before we decide.”

Wang held up a palm to an armed guard who scanned it briefly, then opened the heavy door into an interrogation room. Jamal saw a long metal table holding a plastic water jug and a wrapped supply of plastic glasses, two chairs positioned on one side of the table, one on the other, and a large mirror. There was an absence of smell in the recycled air of the room that struck him as more artificial than the air freshener in Wang’s office. A young man who’d been in the room nodded at them and left.

His first view of the stranger took his breath away. *My God! It’s Michelangelo’s David!*

The man who stood staring into the mirror—which Jamal belatedly realized was probably one-way—was probably seven feet tall, and dressed in a T-shirt and sweat pants too short for his long legs. His feet were bare. His body was well muscled, but like a dancer, not a weightlifter, his skin golden; his hair was white-gold and almost luminous. The guy was stunning. Prenatal genetic tinkering was advanced these days, but Jamal doubted it could produce results like this.

“Our doctors did a preliminary, non-invasive examination when he arrived here yesterday,” Wang said. “X-ray and MRI revealed no injuries that might account for the unresponsiveness. There were some anomalies, slight, but rather puzzling. There’s something—let’s call it not quite normal—about him. He scored high on nonverbal intelligence tests but he doesn’t—or won’t—speak.”

The stranger was the most fantastic specimen of male humanity he’d ever seen. If he was human. Jamal thought suddenly of rumors he’d heard about secret medical labs on the East Coast producing experimental chimeras and hybrids, weapons for the ongoing defense effort. He’d never taken the rumors seriously.

Then the stranger turned and looked at him. His eyes were a pale, almost silver gray; it was hard to meet their gaze, but Jamal forced himself to do so. Some intelligence leaped the gap between them like a jolt of electricity, and he took an involuntary half-step back.

“How long have you had him?”

“At Fort Meade? Almost twenty-four hours.”

Abruptly aware of the one-way mirror and the potential presence of observers, he demanded, “Is he a prisoner?”

“No, no. He’s in custody for his own protection, until we know more about

him.”

Both men stared at the improbably perfect individual whose gaze never wavered. *Something about him*—Jamal felt a shiver of excitement run down his spine. Instinctively, he reverted to *Homo sapiens*’ oldest language, gesture. In the harsh light of the interrogation room, he held his right hand up above shoulder level, fingers splayed, palm facing the stranger, sending the nonverbal message: *Hail. No threat.*

No response. Yet he had the impression his gesture had been understood, but the stranger had not felt a need to respond—Or as if Jamal should’ve known he wasn’t a threat without being told—Or at least, he could be a threat but didn’t choose to—

His mind reeled with complexities he couldn’t have explained to Wang and wasn’t about to try. Already he was aware of some kind of subliminal bond forming between himself and the stranger: *Us and the NSA.*

He fought it. “You’ve got yourself a problem. But I don’t see how it involves me.”

“We need your help. We may be looking at a biological construct of some kind.” Wang hesitated, again seeming to weigh how much information to share with Jamal. “Not one of ours. We want to know who sent him to us.”

Jamal absorbed that information for a moment. So the rumors were true—and not only the United States was doing it. Something about the idea of creating life in the human image didn’t sit right with him; too many Sunday mornings fidgeting beside his mother in a stiflingly hot Baptist church had left their mark.

“I told you, I’m a theorist. I don’t do fieldwork. And I sure as hell don’t work for the intelligence community or the military.”

“I’m not asking you to. But you come from a military family. And we need a linguist with an open mind, someone who’s creative, not afraid to speculate.”

It went against his principles, but at the same time there was no way he could pass up an opportunity to work with this mysterious stranger. At the very least he might get a paper out of it for one of the professional journals, damage control for his self-sabotaged career.

“There’s one more thing you should know,” Wang said. “When the troopers found him on the highway, he suddenly appeared. One moment the road was empty. The next, he was there.”

He reluctantly dragged his attention away from the stranger and stared at Wang.

“We have no technology to do that,” Wang added. “We didn’t think anyone

else did either.”

* * * *

At ten minutes to six the next morning, Jamal sat at a desk with an untouched pastry and a cooling cup of coffee in front of him, thinking about the problem he'd been handed. He'd slept fitfully last night, although Wang had instructed the cute intern to find him a comfortable room and arrange for his meals.

If the U.S.A.—and everybody else, including its enemies, according to Wang—was incapable of creating a bioconstruct that could appear out of thin air, then what were they looking at? Wang had dodged the question when he'd asked after they left the interrogation room.

Whatever the explanation for the stranger's origins, the problem remained how to plan a series of language lessons. Nothing in his course work at Berkeley had prepared him for this. *You dropped yourself right into this one, bro*, he told himself. The dissertation that so defiantly claimed to know a way to decipher the basics of just about any language that turned up in the galaxy was going to be put to the test.

Pulling out the small keyboard he found in the desk drawer, he typed in his code. Immediately, a flat screen rose out of the desk, displaying the home page of his personal desk computer back in Berkeley. He accessed the dissertation and scrolled rapidly through, looking for anything that might be useful, pulling it out and sending it to the nearby printer.

Well, he amended half an hour later, he hadn't actually promised to be able to do it, just that it was theoretically possible. The committee hadn't been impressed. This morning, staring at his words on the screen, he wasn't impressed either.

Where did that leave him?

There were no undiscovered tribes with unknown languages left on Earth, so no call for people doing original fieldwork anymore. The last linguist who'd done that died almost a century ago. And he was too impatient to enjoy spending hours making recordings of ancient native speakers, last of their tribe or whatever. That was why he'd gone into theoretical linguistics. But he knew how it was done in the old days; he'd taken the first step yesterday with his gesture of greeting.

A knock on the door disturbed him. Wang's red-haired intern put her head around the door. A faint whiff of a floral perfume with darker notes entered with her.

“Did you need anything, sir? It's my job to take care of you.”

He sized her up. She was young, early twenties he guessed, with a fresh-faced innocence. But there was a hint of sauciness to her that lent more than one meaning to her words. He guessed she was one of those groupies hooked on the aura of power that surrounded the important men she worked for. How far would that power addiction go, he wondered? He had the impression she wouldn't turn him

down if he put the moves on her. But for the moment he was preoccupied with the stranger.

“Maybe later.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” she said, winking at him. “By the way, my name’s Corinne.”

When she’d gone, he looked back at the notes he’d printed out. Useless. He crumpled them up and tossed them into the recycling chute under the desk. This was a situation that called for playing from his strength, what his thesis committee had dismissively called intuition. Nothing wrong with intuition, but he preferred the stronger image of flying by the seat of his pants, like his great-grandfather. He opened the door.

The man who stood outside was dark-eyed and ascetic-looking with a shaved head; he seemed as if he’d be more at home in a priest’s collar than the impeccably tailored gray suit and tie he was wearing.

“Morning, sir.” The man saluted him with precision that spoke of a military background. Light in the hallway struck a small reflection from the tiny comm unit he wore on his lapel.

“Guarding me against the enemy?”

The man smiled. “I’m here to assist you, sir, and to guide you through the maze of corridors in this building in case you don’t remember the way. Whoever the architect was, he had a sense of humor. The name’s Glenys, Aldo Glenys.”

“Interesting combination.”

“My father was Welsh, but I grew up in Switzerland with my mother’s family.”

They shook hands. Aldo Glenys was maybe ten years older than he was. Jamal sensed something cool and focused in the man. Not your ordinary career soldier or intelligence agent, he thought; more like the NSA was doing its recruiting at the seminaries these days.

“You said, ‘assist.’ Are you a linguist?”

“Only in the amateur sense of the word, sir. Language has long been a hobby of mine. I taught myself to speak several.”

“And Latin’s one?” He caught a flicker of surprise in Glenys’s eyes and added, “Just a guess.”

“A good one,” Glenys agreed.

Score one for me, he thought and let it go; he had other things to think about.

“The interrogation room is equipped for both video and audio recording, fully automated. You won’t see the equipment, but it’s there,” Glenys told him. “We’ll be analyzing every word you can coax out of him.”

“That important, huh?”

Glenys glanced at him, his expression neutral. They made their way through corridors of closed, unmarked doors, past uniformed receptionists who recognized Glenys and waved them through, until they arrived at the door of the room he’d visited last night. Another armed guard stood on duty.

“Necessary security, sir,” Glenys said. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet.”

“And when we do?”

Glenys presented his palm to the sensor pad and didn’t answer.

When they entered, they found the tall stranger with his back to the one-way mirror which at the moment had morphed itself into a glowing portrait of a tranquil river meadow with lots of trees. Maybe the stranger knew there was someone behind the glass and that was why he’d turned his back. Jamal wondered uneasily if those odd silver eyes could see through the one-way glass. Today the visitor’s gray shirt and sweat pants outfit was almost the right size; it looked as if it had been borrowed from someone in the NBA. His feet were still bare.

There were two other men in the room, one blond, one—slightly older—dark-haired, both wearing dark suits; they had arranged folding chairs along one wall. They acknowledged his arrival with brief nods but didn’t identify themselves.

The stranger obviously wasn’t a normal human, so he had to be a bioconstruct—even if Jamal personally found it hard to believe any lab was capable of creating one, and no matter how he arrived on the highway in front of the troopers.

“Did this guy spend the night in here?” he asked.

The two NSA agents didn’t move a facial muscle.

“He has a room normally occupied by a junior grade agent,” Glenys said. “Do you see a problem?”

Jamal shook his head. “Forget it.”

The agents were an annoyance. He didn’t feel comfortable enough with his assignment to want witnesses. “I’ll ask you gentlemen to keep your thoughts to yourselves while I work,” he told them. “I do this my way or not at all.”

One of the agents—the blond one—nodded. The other stared past Jamal.

How was he going to start the session? “Bionecessity,” his dissertation called it, the need for an intelligent organism to control its environment through the assignment of symbols to objects, and to manipulate the symbols according to a set of strict rules governing the play of objects, causes, and goals. Physiology and environment affected world view. Whatever they were dealing with here, the stranger resembled normal humans closely enough: bipedal, opposable thumbs, air breather; he might come equipped with similar rules for language.

The stranger turned his face toward Jamal. There was an aura about him that inspired awe. Get the guy to Hollywood, Jamal thought, and there’d be a fortune to be made in VR. Maybe that’s what they had in mind, whoever constructed him.

Time to get started. He indicated the table and patted the back of one of the chairs, then pantomimed sitting in it. He took the other chair and repeated the patting gesture. Aldo Glenys leaned against a wall, arms folded, watchful.

The stranger came over to the table.

“Sit down,” Jamal said. He made a smile—universal sign of non-threat among humans and primates and even some dogs—lips curving upward exposing teeth but not aggressively, skin at the corner of the eyes wrinkling. He hoped it truly was universal. If not, he might be very glad there were other people in the room with him.

The visitor sat down but did not return the smile. He’d have to find something to call him besides “stranger” and “visitor,” if only to keep his own thoughts straight. “Man” was obviously not right.

Long before they reached the stage of deep structure his dissertation had speculated about, they would have to rely on some pretty basic fieldwork stuff: Ostension, the oldest trick in the linguist’s book.

He tapped his own breast with his right index finger. “Jamal.”

Would one of those old-time fieldworkers have said “man” first, not his own name? He doubted it; that would have necessitated a distinction between man and non-man that even conversing with a lost, stone-age tribe of the Amazon wouldn’t have required.

The visitor gazed unblinking at him.

“Jamal.” He repeated the breast-tapping gesture. “Jamal.”

“Jamal,” the visitor said clearly.

Off to a good start, he thought. He reinforced the first lesson by repeating, “Jamal.”

“Jamal,” the visitor repeated.

His hand rose to take the second step, pointing at the visitor to elicit his name,

then he paused. What if pointing was an insult—or worse—in the visitor’s experience? His own grandmother, the Tuskegee pilot’s daughter, had considered it rude to point. He saw now that far from being boring, fieldwork might well have been downright dangerous. It only succeeded because humans mostly forgave cultural faux pas in the beginning of a language exchange in return for understanding. There was a hunger for language in humans, but he couldn’t assume that would be true here.

If he didn’t take the risk they’d get nowhere. Careful to keep his arm relaxed, index finger loose, unthreatening, he slowly pointed at the other’s breast, and waited.

Nothing.

Back to step one. Turning the finger toward himself, he said, “Jamal.”

“Jamal,” the visitor agreed. But no sound came from his lips when the finger was reversed.

Leaning back in his chair, Jamal thought about this for a moment. He was aware of Glenys quietly filling plastic tumblers from the plastic water jug. The two agents were busy keying notes into small e-pads. At least they were obeying his rules.

He needed the visitor to grasp the idea that he was supposed to furnish his own word for whatever Jamal pointed at, beginning with the one that signified personal identity. Maybe he could bypass the problem by shelving it for the moment. Language acquisition began with the naming of objects as well as self, the arbitrary signs that paired sound with image. Might as well work on vocabulary.

He put his finger on the table top. “Table.”

“Table,” the visitor gave him back.

The pronunciation was surprisingly flawless. He thought of his own stumbling attempts to master a few phrases in Swahili before his trip to Africa, and the amusement he’d caused the cute girl in the shop where he’d bought the defective antigrav belt.

“Chair,” he said.

The visitor repeated the word. Then: mirror, floor, ceiling, wall, door, eye, hand, cup, water. All were successfully mastered. After an intense hour of this, he tried pointing to the objects and waiting. The visitor passed this test too, correctly naming each object indicated. So he was intelligent as well as beautiful, learning vocabulary faster than a normal human, baby or adult. Nor did he register any sign of strain from the exercise. But when Jamal tried to elicit the visitor’s own word for an object he was met with silence.

Either he had no preexisting language—like Frankenstein’s monster he was a

tabula rasa— or he chose not to share his language with his teacher. And if that was the explanation for the absence of two-way communication, did it indicate something sinister? Elbows on the table, his chin leaning on his hands, Jamal gazed at the visitor. The visitor stared back. Waiting for the lesson to continue or playing some kind of game? He was frustrated by not being able to pin it down.

They could go on like this all day, creating a vocabulary of English words for everything in this room—all week, if they ventured outside. He decided to leap ahead. Human infants learned around thirteen thousand words before they entered school, but they learned something more useful too, the rules governing how to combine and recombine the words, a generative grammar that underpinned communication. It would take numerous repetitions, but ultimately the visitor must grasp the rule of names and actions if they were to move forward, and the distinctive *subject-verb-object* order that English used to portray them.

“Jamal,” he said once more, pointing to himself. Then he stood up.

He was aware of the sudden, intense concentration of the two agents. What did they think he was going to do—attack?

“Stand,” he said, identifying his action. He sat down again and repeated the rising action. “Stand. Jamal stand.”

The inflected, third person singular ending, dinosaur that it was, could wait for another lesson. He figured it would slip out of the language one of these days anyway.

“Stand,” the visitor said and got to his feet.

They followed this up with “Jamal” performing a variety of actions, sitting again, waving, clapping, drinking, all immediately understood and repeated by the visitor. Then he branched out, first reviewing the names of objects: Jamal, eye—then an action: close—finally putting one together with another for the combination of actor, action, and acted upon that was basic to English word order.

“Jamal close eye,” he said, winking.

The visitor gazed at him for a moment till Jamal thought he’d moved too quickly from one concept to another and was about to retreat to something a bit simpler.

Then the visitor suddenly leaned over and seized Jamal’s right hand in his own—the first time their flesh had made contact—bending the fingers down tight against the palm until they hurt.

“Jamal close hand,” the visitor said.

He experienced a cold rush of fear. And something else, a blinding sense of *knowing*.

There was a blur of action; both agents shot to their feet. Glenys took a step forward. The visitor released Jamal's hand and Jamal waved them away, his heart racing.

Given the size of the visitor and his unknown powers, every bone in his hand might have been crushed. But more than that was the realization he *knew* what he was dealing with. Whatever he was, the visitor had recognized he'd been given a pattern and had adapted it correctly on the first try. That wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't possible he could've learned so fast—yet he just had. More disturbing was the realization the action had meaning on another, more metaphorical level. “Jamal close hand” signaled the end of the need for ostension.

This was more than a man-made bioconstruct. He couldn't prove it, but he was convinced he was dealing with something not from Earth. An alien.

Glenys coughed discreetly. “Everything all right so far, sir?”

“I think we're done for the morning,” he said shakily.

Glenys nodded and opened the door. The two agents had returned to their folding chairs.

“This is one hell of a situation,” he began as they went outside.

Glenys cocked his head warningly in the direction of the waiting guard.

His nerves still buzzed with the adrenaline jolt he'd received with that contact. It was freaking unbelievable, but how else to explain what he'd just experienced? It couldn't be explained—that was the point. But he *knew!* They were dealing with an extraterrestrial. Wang would think he was crazy if he reported that! So what? He'd already told them he didn't want to work for them. He didn't care what they thought. This was his opportunity. The professional journals would go nuts over the paper that was going to result from this experience.

He considered the implications of what had happened. As he understood it, a linguist discovered the subject's words and translated them into the language of the major culture, opening up the native's limited experience to the scrutiny of a wider world. The linguist had the skill and the knowledge to achieve that; the subject didn't. Later, the subject might learn the dominant language, but that was not the primary purpose of the enterprise. But this visitor had just turned the situation on its head—*he* was learning *Jamal's* language, not the other way around, a profound difference. How was he going to deal with an intelligence that obviously far exceeded his own?

“I think you might need a cup of coffee, sir,” Glenys said as they retraced their path through the maze of corridors.

“I need something a lot stronger than coffee. And stop calling me ‘sir’ like some freaking Knight of the Round Table!”

Glenys smiled. "I heard you didn't appreciate being called 'Dr. Lenana' either. I have a car outside. Maybe you'd like to get away from the compound for lunch?"

"Damn straight!" He was still jittery with the magnitude of what had just happened and what it implied.

They retrieved Glenys's cream-colored Mercedes Helio and headed for the gate to the compound. Guards raised the barrier and waved them through. The Maryland countryside, turning gold with the approach of autumn, slid silently by. Neither of them spoke. Glenys finally pulled into the crowded parking lot of a small roadhouse whose sign advertised softshell crabs and cocktails.

"Civilians," Glenys noted. "They have the leisure time to take late lunches."

The interior was dim, wood-paneled, with appetizing, homey smells from an unseen barbecue pit. In the booth, Jamal ordered a steak sandwich from the menu pad inset into the tabletop; Glenys had the crab. They both ordered beer.

"Farm raised these days," Glenys commented when the server arrived with his plate of crabs. "But reasonable."

Like the beer glasses, the plates were the new plastic type; he'd been so monastic on the Berkeley campus he hadn't kept up with the latest inventions. *Better eat fast, bro*, he thought, or they'd disintegrate from under his sandwich. The steak might as well have been hamburger; he didn't pay attention to the taste. If he was right, the visitor was an alien. The alien's language ability was vastly superior to that of humans—and language was what humans did best. What might that imply for the future of human/alien relations? And he'd been the first person to make contact—if that's what had actually happened between them this morning.

"Interesting session," Glenys said when Jamal's silence stretched to minutes, an obvious invitation to speculate.

"What if this isn't something cooked up in a lab, Glenys?"

Glenys gazed at him. "Tom Wang is under a lot of pressure to discover who sent him to us as fast as possible."

"And if he isn't a bioconstruct?"

"There's an old saying among SETI warriors: If we meet the alien on his world, then we have the edge," Glenys observed. "But if the alien comes to us, then he's superior."

The man's words penetrated his speeding thoughts. "You don't accept Wang's idea it's some enemy plot. You think he's an alien too."

"I like to keep an open mind."

Jamal absorbed this. This morning he'd been ready to feel morally superior to those who built human analogs. Now he was standing on the brink of something far more astounding—there really were aliens out there and he was supposed to communicate with one of them. “How superior must you be to come alone into hostile territory?”

“That’s what you’re expected to find out.”

“What if I discover he’s the scout for an invading horde from outer space?”

“In that case,” Glenys said. “I guess Wang will order him eliminated.”

And you’re the guy elected to do it, aren’t you? Jamal guessed.

Glenys ordered drink refills from the inset pad. After the server had set down the full glasses, retrieved the empties, and left again, he said, “We’ll get a map of the sky. See if he’ll identify home—if he’s an alien.”

“He’s just too goddamned *perfect* to be human or anything humans could come up with. But he never reacts to anything. What’s with that? Couple of times, I felt like leaning over and punching him, see if that got a reaction.”

“Probably not a great idea,” Glenys said lightly.

“I’m a theoretical linguist, Glenys. Way out of my depth.”

“If you’re right, humanity’s going to be out of its depth from now on.”

“Christ!” he said, swirling the lime wedge in his drink. Then he glanced up at his companion. “Sorry. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I have a feeling—”

“Don’t apologize. I started out in Geneva at a seminary, but I learned I was too worldly even for the Jesuits.”

“Quite a jump to the NSA.”

Glenys laughed. “Maybe not as far as you think.”

The alcohol slid pleasantly through his body, relaxing his tense nerves. “Wang seems to be losing it. Told me his secretary wanted the answers.”

“That’s the Secretary of Defense,” Glenys said.

On edge again, he stood up abruptly. “We need to get back.”

* * * *

The two agents were still in the room when they got back. One hastily picked up the remains of what looked like a fast food meal, sweeping plates and cups from the interview table and stuffing them into a plastic bag that he handed out the door to the guard. Jamal wondered what the alien had eaten for lunch. He had to have eaten something; everything living had to find nourishment. Maybe the agents shared their

cheeseburgers with him. With or without pickles?

For a second he felt hysterical laughter bubbling up and forced it back down. Anytime he allowed the thought to arise that he was dealing with a real extraterrestrial, he almost lost it. He needed to stay calm, in control of the situation.

The afternoon session proved to be no less astonishing than the morning one, and just as frustrating. The alien's ability to learn English was swift and accurate. Rarely did Jamal have to repeat a structure before the alien had it and made it his own. He had no doubt the alien understood everything he communicated to him. Yet all attempts to elicit words in the alien's own tongue were ignored. He felt the tug of competing emotions, awe, and a growing irritation. And cold fear when he thought of that moment this morning when the alien had seized his hand.

"Jamal stands and sees mirror," the alien said as Jamal demonstrated, proving his rapidly developing mastery of generative grammar.

The visitor had picked up the third person singular inflection from the brief bursts of human conversation around him. Unbelievable if Jamal hadn't experienced it for himself. Jamal judged it was time for a few pointers about determiners and prepositions. "Jamal sees *the mirror on the wall*."

The alien gazed at him without a flicker of expression. "The water fills the cup on the table."

In rapid fashion, Jamal demonstrated the usefulness of *in, out, up, down, with* and every other preposition he could think of, plus the negatives *but, not, nor*. The alien mastered all of them easily and used them in new sentences. Then came pronouns, *I* and *you*. The alien pointed a finger at Jamal and said, "You." But he made no move to use a pronoun for himself.

Maybe they should try embedded and recursive structures next, Jamal thought. But before he could start, the door of the interrogation room opened and the guard looked in. He spoke quietly to Glenys who nodded. The door shut again. Stepping to the one-way mirror, Glenys touched the glass. The river meadow transformed itself quickly into a stargazer's map of the night sky.

Damn, Jamal thought, *I guess we're taking this "alien" bit for real!* The bizarre situation caught him by the throat every so often. *You're talking to E.T., bro!*

One thing about the strange being opposite him was the almost total lack of what psychologists called "affect." He displayed no emotional reaction to anything that happened around him, not pleasure nor excitement, and not even boredom when the lessons were repetitive, just an unwavering focus. Jamal found this cold intensity unnerving.

But when he saw the map, the tall alien stood up and made a circling motion over the screen with his index finger.

“What do you think he’s doing?”

Glenys shook his head. “A circle? No, a spiral. Spiral galaxy? Maybe he’s saying the Milky Way is his home galaxy too. But where in the galaxy?”

“With his language skills he ought to be able to tell us straight out.”

One of the agents bent his head to his collar and murmured into his comm unit.

The alien turned away from the map on the screen. Whatever he’d intended to communicate, Jamal thought, he was done with it, and if humans were too dense to figure it out, that was their problem. Suddenly angered, he pushed his chair back and stood up.

“I’m done for the day. We’re getting nowhere.”

“I’ll have him supplied with recorded samples of conversational English this evening,” Glenys said as they left the room. “He wouldn’t be the first person to master a foreign language by watching sitcoms.”

“He’s playing games with us.”

“I suspect his mission is to learn about us, not teach us about him,” Glenys said.

* * * *

After dinner with Tom Wang in the executive dining room—with real china for the prime rib and real crystal for the California Cabernet—he excused himself early, and made his way a little unsteadily back to his room. Wang hadn’t eaten much, more interested in Jamal’s report, what there was of it. Wang’s questions had been probing. He’d seemed to accept the news the stranger was probably an alien, not a construct, better than Jamal had expected, and he wondered about that. *Humoring me because of dear old dad and my “military family”?* Wang probably figured Jamal would achieve the objective of decoding the stranger’s language even if his judgment was seriously impaired.

Either way, Wang must be disappointed with the lack of progress he’d made today. Extraterrestrial or enemy construct who was rapidly learning English wasn’t exactly what the NSA or the government would be hoping for. Location, intention, and capability were more like it, and he estimated his chances of getting those answers in the near future somewhere between highly unlikely and not at all.

He remembered a time in his childhood when the search for extraterrestrial intelligence had been a hot topic, but decades of no results had taken their toll; people had given up expecting E.T. to arrive or even signal his existence—or even the son of E.T., lord what a terrible sequel that was! And if this really was an alien they were dealing with, where was the mother ship? If there was one, NASA’s Near Earth Asteroid Tracking facilities at Maui or Palomar would surely have found it. A

society that put space hotels and telescopes and solar mirrors into orbit ought to be able to manage that much.

It scared him to think the future of humanity might be balanced on so small a thing as the first words an alien learned from an unprepared teacher. He was embarrassed to think his dissertation had even hinted the process might be easy. And what impression were they making on an obviously superior alien visitor by keeping him locked up, interacting with him in a sterile interrogation room—and who knew what else he personally wasn't aware of? Whatever happened here at Fort Meade, there were going to be repercussions down the line.

When he opened the door to his room, he found it lit by one small lamp on the bedside table. Warm shadows blurred the hotel-style furnishings, lending a cozy air of invitation to the room, and there was a heady scent he hadn't noticed before. The circle of light drew his attention to the bed where the covers had been turned back for him in best hotel fashion. But unlike any hotel he'd experienced, there was a woman in his bed.

“Hi,” she said in a husky voice. “Thought you might like some company.”

Wang's intern smiled at him. With one hand she slowly pushed the sheet down so he could see she was naked. Her body was lovely, full and rosy and inviting.

He had an instant reaction to her invitation. *Not so fast!* his brain warned. He'd halfway expected to get her in bed sometime, just not this quick. His brain was overruled by the spreading warmth of his arousal. *Don't question gift horses!*

“Come here and let me undo your shirt buttons.” She patted the bed beside her.

“Whoa, Corinne,” he said. “This is a bit fast, don't you think?”

“You deserve a little R and R.”

“Damn straight!” He dropped down on the bed beside her, aware of the Cabernet buzz that seemed to have unstrung his muscles, and let her fingers tiptoe over his bare chest. “You sure this would play okay with your boss?”

She pouted. “Why does he have to know what we do on our own time?”

That sounded reasonable. And nobody had told him not to fraternize with the staff. In fact, they hadn't told him much of anything. Corinne probably went to bed with any guy with power in the building, but so what? No harm in a little fooling around; he'd certainly earned it today. He could feel the tension of the day draining out of him at her touch. “That's great. You're wonderful.”

She laughed. “I bet you say that to all the women.”

“Not at all. I like women, but—”

She covered his mouth with hers, cutting off his protest.

That was the last coherent thought he had for a long while.

Afterward, he lay back sweaty and exhausted with Corinne in the curve of his arm. Wang was probably going to be pissed if he found out, he thought, but thinking was still a hazy process and the thought slipped away in his general sense of well-being.

“Whew!” He shook his head. “Wow.”

She propped herself up on an elbow and gazed down at him. “And I thought you were a language expert!” she teased. “Stay right there, lover boy. I brought some wine.”

He closed his eyes, content to be told what to do by this gorgeous young woman who apparently found him irresistible. He heard the sound of a cork being drawn and liquid splashing into glass.

A moment later she said, “Hold still.”

He felt her mouth close over his, gently forcing his lips to part, then a small stream of wine made its way over his tongue and slid like cool fire down his throat.

“Mmm. Great.” One word at a time seemed about all he could dredge up.

“You ready for more?”

“Wine ... or sex?” he managed to ask.

He heard her throaty laugh again, and he wrapped both arms around her and pulled her down on his chest, spilling wine all over himself and the bed. He didn’t care. She was right; he’d needed this.

“Poor Jamal,” she whispered against his skin. “You were so tense. They’re expecting too much from you.”

“They expect a miracle.”

“Do you want to talk about it? I mean, my boss obviously debriefs you on the details, but I’ll bet you don’t get to release the emotions you must be going through. Men never talk to each other about their emotions.”

He tousled her hair playfully. She might be a power junkie, but there was that indefinable air of innocence about her that appealed to him. “Real men don’t have emotions.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” she said.

The giddiness of the last few minutes faded slowly away and he lay back, his body pleasantly relaxed. “It doesn’t make any sense, Corinne. This guy—I have no clue what his name is or anything else about him—he’s got to be highly intelligent. I thought I was sharp, but I couldn’t learn a language anywhere near as fast as he seems to have done in just two sessions.”

“You’re getting him to speak English? Well, that’s progress, isn’t it? My boss thought he might be a mute.”

“He can speak all right, but he doesn’t connect. No reaction to anything. No emotion.”

“A real man?” she teased.

He punched her arm lightly. She rewarded him with another sip of wine by personal delivery. The combination of physical exhaustion, sex and alcohol was overwhelming. He felt as if he were floating.

“Seems odd that we’re devoting so many resources to a vagrant,” she said.

“Whatever he is, the guy’s not a vagrant. One look at him tells you he’s more than that.”

“I don’t have the clearance to see him. Wang’s keeping him under wraps.”

His head cleared suddenly and he was uneasy. If she didn’t have clearance to see the alien, maybe he shouldn’t be talking about him with her. Nobody had bothered to clue him in about who he could talk to and who not. Damn this cloak and dagger stuff. He hated it. But maybe he should be a little cautious what he said to an over-eager intern.

“Maybe Wang’s wrong and the guy’s just a nutcase,” he said, careful to keep his tone casual.

“Actually, he sounds autistic,” she said. “I live with my sister and her youngest is autistic. Scores high on IQ tests, but he shows no emotional connection to the family, even his mother.”

He rolled over on top of her. “Yeah, that’s probably it. Now. How about—”

“If that’s the case, we shouldn’t be keeping him locked up. Laws protecting people with disabilities have been on the books a very long time. And why’s the boss so secretive about him if he’s just a poor autistic person? My sister knows a lot of people around here who’d be upset about that if—”

“People would be upset if they thought he was autistic?”

“You know what I mean.” She made another pouty face at him.

“Let me show you what *I* mean,” he said, relieved to be back on safer ground.

* * * *

Aldo Glenys was waiting for him the next morning, seated on a lounge near the elevator. The agent glanced at his watch as Jamal appeared.

“So it’s almost noon. I’m late,” Jamal said. “Why didn’t you knock on my door?”

“You had company last night. I thought you might need some extra sleep.”

Corinne had left before dawn, early enough no one would be around to see her, or so he’d thought. “Can’t keep anything from the NSA, apparently.”

“It’s your business. Shall we get on with the government’s?”

He noted a cooler tone in the man’s voice and wondered again what exactly was Glenys’s role here. Obviously he had to be more than Jamal’s babysitter. He’d started to slip into thinking of the situation as “Us:” himself, the alien, and Glenys, and “Them:” the two agents and whoever was behind the mirror. Remembering his earlier suspicion about Glenys, he decided that might be a misjudgment.

“Right. It’s my business,” he said. “And while we’re at it, I’d like to request a change of scene. I’m tired of staring at my reflection in a one-way mirror, knowing some NSA wonk is probably staring right back.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Glenys’s face betrayed no reaction to the request. Almost as frustrating as talking to the alien, he thought.

“A trip to the mall. A visit to the zoo.” He was amused to see a flicker of disapproval in Glenys’s eyes.

“I doubt Wang will agree to a public appearance,” Glenys said dryly, touching the comm unit he wore. He spoke briefly for a couple of seconds, then touched the device to turn it off; he palmed the sensor pad to summon the elevator.

Neither spoke as the elevator moved. When the doors opened again on the floor where the interrogation room was located, Jamal saw the two agents waiting outside.

Glenys’s comm pinged. Jamal walked on ahead, conscious of the murmured one-sided conversation behind him.

“Yes sir—Of course—No, not at all—Yes sir.”

“You tell Wang I’m not working on this any further if I don’t have full control,” Jamal said over his shoulder. Fighting words the Tuskegee airman would’ve approved, no doubt.

The guard nodded to Jamal and opened the door. He went into the room.

“Wang wasn’t happy about it,” Glenys said as he came in, followed by the agents. “But he gave permission for a brief outing on the grounds. We’re to make sure our friend doesn’t take his clothes off.”

Jamal howled with laughter, startling the alien who was sitting at the table this morning.

“Wang doesn’t want him attracting attention,” Glenys said lamely. “And we’re to have an armed escort.”

He stopped laughing. “What for? An alien that can suddenly appear in front of state troopers can just as quickly disappear in front of an armed escort.”

“Maybe it’s for *our* protection.”

“If he was going to harm us, he’s had a lot of opportunity to do it already!”

The alien was staring at them—taking it all in, understanding every word no doubt. Jamal felt disconnected this morning, further away from understanding than the day he’d started. If what he’d just said to Glenys was right, why was the alien still here? Presumably he could leave any time he wanted. His presence meant he still wanted something. *His mission is to learn about us*, Glenys had said. But what was he learning? And he himself was no further along. Without a single example of the alien’s language, he couldn’t begin to test his hypothesis. If this was the way things were going to be in the future, a series of confusing, frustrating encounters with aliens, he didn’t want any part of it.

“Let’s go,” he said abruptly. It came out *lezgo*, and he was perversely glad to see by the alien’s brief hesitation that he didn’t immediately grasp the ellipsis. *Humans one, Extraterrestrials zero*, he thought sourly. “And you can tell Tweedledum and Tweedledee they’re not wanted on the expedition.”

Glenys started to argue, then stopped and made a small motion with his hand to the agents. They stayed behind as Jamal escorted the alien out of the room.

He saw right away he’d only won a partial victory. Two young soldiers in paisley camouflage fatigues with automatics bulking black against their hips fell in with them as they walked to the elevator. The alien towered over all of them. Five crowded into the cab’s small space was claustrophobic. Nobody spoke. He was aware of his arm pressed against the alien’s arm. There was no electric tingle, no sensation of power conveyed one way or the other in the contact today. Reassuring, but also disappointing.

Outside, clouds raced across the sky, pushed by a cool wind laced with the smell of wet earth promising a storm before evening. One on either side of the alien, Jamal and Glenys walked ahead of the soldiers who dropped a few paces behind. They headed for a small stand of immature fir trees. A hundred yards away, a group of men in dark suits and women carrying briefcases and bright umbrellas hurried

toward a bland stone building, its roof bristling with antennae and sprouting dishes like ears tuned to the world's secrets. One woman in a pink raincoat reminded him of Wang's intern. Overhead, a dark, unmarked chopper tilted quietly in, heading for an unseen landing site, its rotors churning the damp air, chilling the back of his neck. He pulled up the collar of his parka.

New scenery meant an opportunity for new vocabulary, and he supplied it. Tree, cone, grass, stone, rain, dirt, sky, cloud, bird, wind, car—all either pointed at or pantomimed. But no amount of effort brought even one alien word in return.

“The rain that falls is cold,” the alien said suddenly. “But all things that live on Earth need water.”

They both stared at him. Jamal became aware his mouth was open and shut it hurriedly. “Where did he learn embedded structure?”

“The videos I gave him to watch last night, probably.”

Jamal shook his head. “Do you ever think this might not be such a good idea?”

“All the time,” Glenys said.

Ahead of them lay a small ornamental pond, dappled with the light rain; it appeared to be a recent addition along with the spindly trees, a green breathing space, an afterthought in the middle of all the concrete. The pond was occupied by two ducks and an opportunistic seagull. A stone bench had been placed under firs that needed another couple of years' growth before they'd provide shade; beside it, a trash receptacle. It was a place where staff could eat lunch, forgetting for the moment they were in the middle of the fortress of Fort Meade, its high wire fence just a few yards away. A very human kind of place, he thought, kind of like Planet Earth itself, small, insignificant, surrounded by a vast and hostile space.

He sat with Glenys, watching the alien who had moved to the water's edge and was apparently observing the birds. What was he learning about this planet he'd landed on, Jamal wondered, and what would he do with the information? One thing was certain, he didn't see any need to confide his impressions to his hosts.

The soldiers loitered a few paces away; he heard one murmuring into his comm unit. Thunder rolled briefly in the distance; there was an electric urgency in the air. Going to be a wet afternoon, he thought.

“Why can't I get through to him, Glenys? He's obviously intelligent enough to understand what we want.”

“Dangerous to make assumptions. It's a disadvantage that he looks human.”

The alien was squatting now. The ducks approached him hopefully through the gray mist of rain, trailing long vees in the water. The gull took flight, circling his

head, squawking harshly.

“Hard to believe this is really happening, isn’t it? Here we are with a real freaking alien, and people going about their business outside that fence with absolutely no idea.”

“Just as well. Not a lot of sympathy for us from civilians at any time. We have a full-time protest group outside the main gate.”

“What’re they protesting?”

“Anything and everything. Our existence, I guess.”

Jamal felt unsettled, as if he were about to come down with the flu. “You know what really bothers me? Where are the others? He can’t have come any great distance through space all by himself.”

“We’re working on that.”

“‘We?’”

“NASA, mostly. Other agencies I’m not at liberty to name.”

He glanced at the two soldiers who were carefully not looking at them. “We keep coming back to the same question: Why is he here at all?”

“To learn our language? It may be the only thing we have that’s worth taking right now.”

“If that’s the case, he had the opportunity to learn several before I got to him.”

“His race is obviously far ahead of ours technically. They’re not afraid to drop a live being in Maryland for the initial contact instead of an automated probe.”

“Damn lucky choice! Showing up naked in public some places around the world would’ve got him killed immediately.”

“At least we ask questions first,” Glenys said.

Jamal took his frustration out by lobbing small green pine cones into the trash can. The rain came down harder. “Time to go inside.”

When he looked back at the pond, the alien wasn’t there.

“What the hell? Glenys—Where’d he go? Where is he?”

Glenys spoke rapidly into his comm unit, then pointed. “He’s heading for the main gate.”

The alien was loping steadily in a straight line across the parking lot toward the

high, armored fence surrounding the NSA compound. Jamal was astounded at how far he'd gone already. He'd only taken his eye off the alien for a moment.

"The guards will stop him at the gate," Glenys said. "They have orders not to let anyone in or out without authorization."

"That's what I'm afraid of. He'll walk right into their weapons!"

Alarmed by Jamal's outburst, the two escort soldiers had unholstered their guns.

"Just catch him," he shouted at them. "Don't shoot him!" He broke into a run, yelling: "Wait!"

Not a word he'd introduced yet. Damn. He was afraid that any minute the alien would get shot or repeat his stunning appearance in reverse. Wang was going to nail his hide to the wall if he let either happen. Panting, adrenaline flooding his muscles, he pounded across the tarmac. He could see the main gate in the fence and a dark-colored limousine making its way through into the compound. The guards apparently hadn't noticed the alien running toward them yet; their attention seemed drawn to something happening outside the gate. Now he could see a small crowd of people gathering out there, some of them unfolding a banner.

The alien had almost reached the gate before the guards noticed him. Jamal saw their weapons swing up into position.

"Don't do it!" he yelled. "Friend!" He was breathing heavily, slowing in spite of his urgent need to keep going. There was a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth.

Glenys streaked past him, one arm high displaying his ID, shouting something Jamal couldn't make out.

The black chopper reappeared overhead and circled the gate. He caught the glint of a gun muzzle through the open hatch. *No!* he thought. *They don't understand!*

The small crowd surged toward the guards, shouting, the banner dipping up and down. Now he was close enough to read its hand-lettered message: Rights for the Disabled. The barrier had not had time to come all the way down after the limousine went through. And the alien stopped suddenly just inside the gate, holding his arms out wide as if to embrace the little crowd.

One of the gate guards went down under the protestors who clambered over him to get inside. With his last burst of energy, Jamal leaped forward in a futile attempt to reach the alien. He collided with a burly man who knocked him down and fell on top of him. His head smacked against the concrete, and for a moment his vision blurred and he went deaf. His arm flared with pain.

Then sound returned and he became aware of a female voice saying over and

over. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean for you to get hurt!”

He looked up into the panic-stricken face of Wang’s intern kneeling beside him. Her short red hair curled damply over the collar of her pink raincoat.

“I told my sister this morning—we share everything with each other,” Corinne said, tears streaming down her face. “But I didn’t mean for this to happen. I don’t want to lose my job.”

He tried to pat her shoulder reassuringly but his muscles wouldn’t obey him. He felt woozy, his eyes not focusing properly as he stared past her at Aldo Glenys.

Glenys had his gun drawn.

He saw a flash and heard the crack that split the air.

* * * *

The room was dark, cold, smelling of rubber and antiseptic. Jamal heard something humming quietly to itself in the silence.

One arm was in a cast from shoulder to wrist, and his ribs were taped up. He became aware of an intravenous shunt on the back of his free hand.

“You were very lucky,” Aldo Glenys’s voice said in the darkness. “You have a concussion, but you could’ve been killed.”

“The alien?”

“Gone.”

He made an attempt to sit up and groaned as pain flared in his ribs. “You killed him?”

“By the time we got it sorted out, he wasn’t to be found.”

“Disappeared? Like he suddenly appeared? Dammit, Glenys! Give it to me straight.”

“Lie still. You have a couple of cracked ribs as well as a broken arm. The official word is there was no one here to disappear. A false rumor set the disabled rights activists off. A misunderstanding, no basis to it!”

“We killed him and his friends took the body.”

Glenys gazed at him for a moment. “I’m not confirming any part of that. But you have a more immediate problem. Wang’s not about to forgive you for letting this opportunity get away. He went out on a limb with the Agency by bringing you in. The Secretary of Defense advised more traditional methods of interrogation.”

He thought of Corinne in the pink raincoat, a rain of tears on her cheeks. “What happened to Wang’s intern?”

“I believe the young lady has resigned.”

“It wasn’t her fault. That demonstration—”

“The demonstration had nothing to do with it. We get them all the time.”

“So then?”

Glenys shrugged.

“What’s your role in this, Glenys?”

“I didn’t shoot him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

But you would’ve, given the chance. Jamal lay back, feeling defeated. He hadn’t asked for any of this, but being in, he’d wanted a better, less ambiguous outcome. “I did the best any linguist could.”

“Not good enough. We’re going to have to do better.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Time for a new specialty,” Glenys said. “We’re going to need *Xenolinguists* next time.”

“You really believe there’ll be a next time?”

“Don’t you?”

“Not if we keep shooting the messenger.”

It had seemed so easy before he met his first alien. He’d been showing off when he speculated about universal language as part of his dissertation, never expecting to have the opportunity to test his hypothesis. And he *still* hadn’t tested human ability to crack an alien language. Maybe communication wasn’t possible.

Light streamed through the door as a nurse entered with a tray, and he shut his eyes against the painful brightness. She turned on the room lights, making it worse.

“Glad you’re awake, Mr. Lenana,” she said. “Got to take your meds now.”

“Morphine would be good.”

She ignored this and handed him two pills and a small paper cup of water, waited to see him take them, then left.

“Wang can’t prevent me from writing up a paper on the problem,” he said when the door closed behind the nurse.

“Nothing happened here. No journal will take it. You’ll be just another blog nutcase.”

“This was still a free society last time I checked, bro.”

Glenys stood up and retrieved a raincoat from the back of his chair. “I think you’ll find you’ve come to a dead end.”

“I don’t accept that!”

“Don’t sweat it. Better that you put your skills into the needs of the future.”

He could neither trust Glenys nor bring himself to distrust him. He suspected there was a lot more depth to the man than his agency training alone would suggest.

“Aldo—” he began.

“I’ve decided to retire from the Agency. Going home to Switzerland.”

“Giving up,” he said harshly. “Well, I don’t give up! When I get out of here, first thing I’m going to do is finish climbing Kilimanjaro. Can’t let not finishing things become a habit. Then I’ll test your hypothesis about publishing a paper.”

“Do that,” Glenys said. “And when you’re ready to admit it’s useless, come and see me. I’ve put my card on your table. Forget what happened here, Jamal. We’ll talk about how to prepare to handle the next visitors—whenever they show up. We may not get off so easily next time.”

After Glenys had gone, he lay staring at the ceiling, thinking it over. Even if he personally never saw another alien in his life, he knew humanity’s long isolation was over. Someone had to be prepared to deal with the aliens who would surely come.

And who better than himself to figure out how to prepare—What was Aldo’s term?—*Xenolinguists*. Awkward word. But given the way languages evolved, it would probably be simplified before too long.

Even there, he thought as the painkillers started to take hold, the future began with one word.

—*For Denaire*