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Phoebe Oliver said, "*Divided by Stars.* God, I used to love that show. What was the opening line again? 'The Vardeshi have a saying …'"

I said, "'A story has a thousand beginnings, but only one ending.'"

Phoebe slapped the glass patio table. "That's it. I knew it had something to do with beginnings."

"What was his name—the blond one?" Aria Lewiston asked. "Sirrus? So hot."

"Sirran," Phoebe corrected her.

Reflexively I glanced at Tenley Fuller, who could be counted upon to skewer any hint of fangirl ardor with withering contempt. She didn't seem to be listening. She was

looking at her phone. Her drink, I saw, was virtually untouched.

"They probably don't even say that," Aria said.

Surprised, I said, "No, they do."

Dr. Sawyer paused in the act of topping off my drink to fix me with an intent look. Suddenly self-conscious, I went on, "I thought everyone knew that. It's in the first contact footage."

Phoebe shook her head. "I haven't watched those videos in years. I always liked the fake stuff better anyway."

It was one in a seemingly endless string of perfect afternoons, clear and cool, steeped in the late-autumn sunshine of northern California. I was a year into graduate school and discovering too late that it wasn't what I'd expected: less cerebral, more about gossiping and currying favor with professors. Particularly those with good publication records. Such as Dr. Sawyer, the English expatriate and celebrated linguist on whose patio I was currently sitting, drinking margaritas and talking second language acquisition theory with a handful of favored classmates. Or at least we had been talking theory, right up until a few minutes ago, when the first drink took hold and the conversation drifted sideways on an eddy of nostalgia.

Dr. Sawyer tilted the dregs of the pitcher into his own glass and rose. "Back in a moment."

When he was gone, Tenley angled her phone toward

Aria. "Look at this."

"Is that—"

"Sitting at the bar at the Dirty Dog. He literally just bought her a drink."

I looked too. I recognized the woman in the photo at once. It was Mackenzie Fay, one of our classmates, draping herself triumphantly over a blond man who looked vaguely familiar. It took me a moment to place him as an aging B-list actor, safely mainstream. I'd never really understood his appeal, but from the gasps around the table, it was clear that the others did.

Tenley said, "It's only a twenty-minute drive. He might still be there." She stood up and reached for her keys. The others followed, as they tended to do. And just like that, in the impersonal West Coast way which never failed to catch me off guard, they went off in pursuit of something better. Tenley paused on her way down the patio steps. "You coming?" she asked me indifferently.

Annoyed, maybe, at being so clearly relegated to an afterthought, I shook my head. "I'll stay."

Dr. Sawyer, returning a little later with a full pitcher of margaritas, looked only briefly surprised to find me sitting alone at his table. He set the pitcher down and seated himself again. For a few minutes we shared a companionable silence. He traced an idle pattern in the condensation on his glass. He offered me an espresso; I declined. I wondered if

he was about to ask me to leave. Through the screen door I could faintly hear his wife, Seline, clinking glassware in the kitchen.

"Avery," he said at last. "Since you're still here. I've got something that might be of interest to you. Wait here while I find it."

I pushed my drink aside and waited. At length he returned with his computer, an older model. He clicked around for a few moments, looking for a file. I surreptitiously checked my phone. No new messages. It was too soon, in any case; Tenley and the others hadn't even arrived at the bar yet.

"Here it is." Dr. Sawyer turned the screen toward me. "Listen to this."

I listened while he played a file, audio only, a few seconds in length. It was a recording of a language. The quality wasn't ideal, but I knew at once that I'd never heard it before. It was clipped, staccato, yet somehow elegant. I liked it. "Again?" I said when it was done.

He played it a second time. I looked from him to the screen and back again: the avuncular white-bearded face over the shabby Hawaiian shirt. There was an intensity to his gaze that I'd never seen there. Finally I said, "It's tonal. But that's all I know. I don't know where it's from."

"Farther than you think," he said simply.

And with those words something clicked into place. I

stared at him, doing a rapid mental calculation. Twenty-five years ago he had been in the prime of his career, a professor in the white-hot field of exploratory linguistics at NYU. In New York. Where a certain very newsworthy encounter had taken place.

"Can you play it again?" I said cautiously.

He obliged. Into the silence that followed, staring at his laptop screen, at a file that was indeed more than twenty-five years old, I said, "It's them."

He nodded.

I still couldn't take it in. "The Vardeshi."

"As we call them," he said. "It's a rough approximation. They're polite enough to let it stand. But I would expect no less of them. In person they're tremendously courteous."

I said weakly, "I think I'm going to need that espresso."

The initial encounter between humans and Vardeshi had indeed been universally publicized, as had every incremental step leading up to those first titanic alien footfalls on Earth soil. In 1993, the year of my birth, a long-range satellite picked up an audio transmission originating from outside our solar system. The quality was poor, but the English was impeccable and the message unequivocal: we had been discovered.

"We call ourselves the Vardeshi," said the iconic voice with its light, unplaceable accent. "We are a race of peaceful explorers. You are the first fellow sentients we have en-

countered among the stars. We have been looking for a long time."

The speaker asked our permission for a small group of Vardeshi representatives to travel to the edge of the Sol system in order to conduct radio communication in real time. The governments of Earth debated for a few weeks before coming to a nearly unanimous resolution in favor of the proposal. From there, events moved with remarkable swiftness. Only a few months elapsed between the receipt of that first transmission and the touchdown of the first Vardeshi ship on a hastily assembled landing platform outside of the UN headquarters in New York City.

The five Vardeshi representatives who stepped out of their spacecraft and into the glare of our flashbulbs looked like humans who had accidentally wandered out of an anime convention in full costume. They had two arms and two legs apiece, properly distributed. They appeared to have two genders. They were a few inches shorter than us, and a fraction slimmer. Their eyes were set a bit wider, their foreheads a bit higher, their ten fingers (and presumably ten toes) elegantly long. Still, any one of them alone could have passed for one of us. It was only in the aggregate that their strangeness became apparent.

They wore simple, practical gray and gold jumpsuits. Their hair ranged in length from a close crop to an elbow-length mane, and in color from brilliant white through dull

gray to inky black. Their eyes were gray or blue or black. Their skin was pale, with blue undertones, and it was presumed that their blood was blue as well. Each of them sported an intricate decoration like a tattoo, black overlaid with gold, on the back of his or her right hand. They carried themselves proudly, but their manner was gentle, reserved, almost courtly. Some people found them off-putting, claiming that their resemblance to us placed them squarely in a non-technological uncanny valley. Others—many others—found them very beautiful. And there were those who insisted that the likeness was too good, that they were actually human, and that the whole thing was a smoothly orchestrated hoax.

I didn't think so. I had grown up with the stories and the songs and the shows. My knowledge of them was largely fictional, but I had watched the first-contact footage a thousand times, just like everyone else I knew. It didn't look like a hoax to me. It looked like a handful of tentative, patient, immensely polite tourists visiting a third-world country despite rampant warnings about pickpockets and bad water. If you watched closely, a childhood friend asserted, you could actually see the moment—an exchange of glances almost too brief for the cameras to capture—when they decided they'd made a horrific mistake. A few minutes later, they rose collectively, shook the hands of the diplomats Earth had assembled to meet them, and walked back into their

ship. And left.

I had no idea what had prompted their decision. Neither did the governments of Earth, or if they did, they weren't reporting it. By all human accounts the meeting had gone perfectly, a textbook first contact, a diplomat's fantasy. Evidently the Vardeshi had seen something different. Within a few minutes of their vessel's liftoff they sent another audio transmission. It stated with unimpeachable courtesy, but also with conviction, that there would be no more such visits, at least not on any timeline of which a fragmented Earth could conceive.

"We thank you for your welcome," said the original voice in the final transmission we were to receive. "As a people you show remarkable promise, and your world is beautiful beyond our dreaming. Perhaps in the future we will stand beneath your sky again. But for now you are too young, too angry, and too fractured. We cannot share deeply of ourselves with such a volatile race. We will wait for the day when you have conquered the darkness within. Know that we wait for it with eager hearts."

And then silence. Our satellites tracked their ship as it departed from the Sol system. Within an impossibly short time it had passed beyond the detection range of our technology. Humanity was, once again, alone in the dark.

The reactions to our abrupt rejection by the Vardeshi took a variety of forms. A new religion of kindness and tol-

erance called, inevitably, Vardeshism leapt spontaneously into being and spread like wildfire across the globe. The visitors were hailed as prophets, literal angels of our better nature sent down by God to call us back from the brink of self-annihilation. In immediate response, an American right-wing neo-Christian group began rallying against the aliens, calling them "Var-Devils," a moniker that would have been laughable had it not so decisively proved the Vardeshi correct. The spacefaring industry exploded as companies competed to produce technological marvels that everyone now knew to be achievable: high-speed if not light-speed space travel, long-distance communication that maintained signal quality over immense distances, artificial gravity.

The world's governments rallied together to ready themselves for a potential war, forming a tentative coalition that would eventually become the planet-wide governing body known as the Unified Earth Council. Analysts in underground bunkers worked overtime on the scant data that had been collected on the Vardeshi, trying to reverse engineer an entire people—their anatomy, language, society, politics, and above all military capabilities—from a handful of interactions. While the aliens' conduct toward us had been peaceful, there were many who believed that their brief visit had in fact been a reconnaissance mission, and that they were now arming themselves for an invasion. There could be no doubt of their technological superiority. We had vir-

tually no chance of withstanding an attack, but we prepared as best we could. Invasion drills became commonplace in schools and workplaces. Those people who had already been stocking their basements against an undefined apocalypse redoubled their efforts. Others did a swift reckoning of our resources and those of the Vardeshi and decided to simply enjoy whatever time they had left. If the aliens decided to take Earth from us, they would do it, and there was simply no point in worrying about it.

This particular theory—that the Vardeshi would quickly return to claim our planet with the full strength of their hypothetical fleet—fell out of favor as the years ticked by with absolutely no sign of them.

It was suspected, though never proven, that we sent countless messages into the dark, pleading for another chance. If so, we received no response. The Vardeshi were gone. Their disappearance was as swift and thorough as that of a dream lost upon waking. All our satellites and telescopes, trained outward with a desperate and unprecedented focus, revealed nothing. Not a whisper of an echo. It was like the aftermath of the worst breakup in human history. As a species, we had been ghosted.

Within a few years after the revelation and subsequent disappearance of the enigmatic strangers, daily life on Earth looked much the same as it had before. The Vardeshists, like the devotees of so many other major world religions,

settled down to await the return of their messiahs. For most people, the impact of the Vardeshi resonated longest in one facet of life only: the entertainment industry. Virtually as soon as that first audio message was publicized, people were hungry for more, and in the absence of the real thing, they were perfectly willing to settle for fiction. The first wave of television shows, movies, novels, and songs about the Vardeshi proved wildly popular. More soon followed. Many, many fortunes were made by capitalizing on our collective fascination with our cousins from across the stars. The quality of these offerings varied wildly, but it didn't seem to matter. The human appetite for Vardrama was insatiable.

By now, a year into my graduate school career and twenty-five years into their silence, most people—myself included—assumed we'd seen the last of them. It was a bit disappointing, but Earth had undeniably profited from their visit. For one thing, we now knew for certain that we weren't alone: one of the great questions, answered. And our spacefaring industry had developed at an incredible pace. In two and a half decades we had put permanent structures on the Moon, Mars, and Titan, each home to a rotating staff of scientists. We had assembled a collection of functional spacecraft that might be called a fleet and trained personnel to operate them. Our engines were getting faster and our signals clearer by the day. We were still far behind the Vardeshi, laughably far based on the little they had

shown us of themselves, but the eyes of humanity had turned collectively outward again. After essentially giving up on our dream of space, we were giving it a second try. That was perhaps their greatest gift to us.

That, and a lot of really great TV. Which had to count for something.

"I don't understand," I said when Dr. Sawyer returned with tiny cups of espresso. "In person? You were there? But you're not in the video . . . Are you?"

He shook his head. "Not in the film released to the public. That one shows the first meeting with the Vardeshi, the highest-profile one, but there were a few other meetings that day. I was asked to sit in on all of them, to provide linguistic expertise, although what I was supposed to have done in the case of a communications breakdown is anyone's guess. I suspect I was only called because the NYU campus was close to the landing site and I could be got in at short notice."

He was being modest, I knew. In 1991 he had collaborated with a software engineer to develop a prototype Spanish-language learning program called TrueFluent. Based on extensive analysis of current Spanish-language media, the program claimed to introduce words and concepts in the most efficient and natural sequence possible, cutting average learning time in half. It was hugely successful: a true revolution in the field of language acquisition. The military

contracts alone must have run into the millions. Companion programs for English, Arabic, and a dozen other languages rapidly followed, and Dr. Sawyer might have been justifiably expected to take an early and lavish retirement. Instead, he stayed at NYU for a few more years, then sold his shares in the company to his engineer partner and took a position teaching linguistics at a small, selective graduate school in northern California. In 1993, when the Vardeshi arrived on Earth, he was already that rarest of things: a household name in the field of linguistics. To a United Nations looking at the very real possibility of needing to teach a new language on a planetary scale at extremely short notice, he would have been the obvious choice.

While I was working my way through all that, he sipped his espresso and said reflectively, "To be candid, though, I think there was another reason they brought me in. To make certain the whole thing wasn't a very, very well-executed hoax."

I thought for a moment. "The language. You asked them to speak their own language. To see if they could."

He nodded.

"It seems to me," I said, "that anyone with the technical expertise to fake an entire spacecraft landing on Earth could probably mock up a plausible artificial language."

"Oh, certainly. And I have no doubt there were personnel examining every detail of the landing, and as much of

their craft as they allowed us to see. But the language angle would have been an easy one to overlook. After all, they had already demonstrated that they spoke excellent English. There was no real need for them to speak their own tongue in front of us."

"They might have refused out of principle," I said. "Believably, I mean."

"They might have. But they didn't."

"So what did you think?" I asked.

He nodded at the computer. "Why don't you tell me what you think?"

I played the recording again, struck by its musical quality. I had studied Mandarin in college, and the likeness, to my ears at least, was unmistakable. "Do you have any longer samples? Any with multiple speakers?"

He opened another file, this one nearly a minute in length. I played it a few times, then slowed it down to eighty-percent speed to listen again. I started counting on my fingers. "I can hear—what? Seven distinct tones? Eight?"

He smiled slightly. "Nine, actually."

I blew out a dismayed breath. "Wow. There are three different speakers on this one, yes?"

"Correct."

"Their tones all sound effortless. Crystal clear. The vowels are pretty easy . . . The consonants are a little trickier.

Actually, some of them sound a little bit like Mandarin. But a human could make them. And did I hear an ingressive? Talking while breathing in?"

His smile deepened. "Yes."

I played it a final time. "I mean . . . Do I think a human could create this recording? Absolutely. Do I think three humans got together and concocted this very technical sample of a fake language and then learned it perfectly? Absolutely not. We talked about conlanging last semester. I know people have built artificial tonal languages for fun, but . . . These guys just sound too good. If you called me in and asked me to construct a fake alien language, I would have gone with something that sounded way more glamorous to a non-linguist and was way easier to speak. I think this is the real deal."

"So do I." He paused. "Do you think you could speak it?"

I played the first recording again. Then I took a stab at repeating it.

"Congratulations," he said lightly. "You just said 'You do me too much honor' in Vardeshi. Quite comprehensibly too."

I stared at him. This last revelation on top of the others was almost too much to take in. "You . . . know what it means."

"Of course. I've spent the last twenty-five years building

a TrueFluent program for Vardeshi. If you accept my invitation, you will be the first student ever to use it. After myself, that is."

"The first . . . But how? How is that even possible?"

"The program is a secret. As far as the government knows, it's still a work in progress. They have their own linguists working on a similar program, of course, and for all I know, they have succeeded. But somehow I doubt it. When I sold my share of TrueFluent to Watson, it was on the condition that he keep the algorithms confidential."

Something else came clear to me. "This is why you dropped out of the spotlight all those years ago."

"Yes. I needed solitude—plausible, unquestioned solitude—to construct the software. The language is immensely complex, and I'm not a programmer by training. I finished the work perhaps ten years ago. Since then, I've been improving my own command of Vardeshi. I am confident that the program works reasonably well. I've never had anyone else to test it on, you see. Until today."

"But why now? And . . ." I hesitated. "Why me?"

He took a moment before answering. "I suppose because . . . and this is perhaps the great vanity of my life . . . I had always believed that when the Vardeshi returned—and I do think they will return—humanity would be in need of someone who could speak their language. And I wanted it to be me. I spent three hours in a room with them, and it

was the pinnacle of my life. I have lived richly, but nothing else has ever approached the feeling I had that day. I have spent twenty-five years waiting—expecting, truly—that my phone would ring again. I couldn't bear to think that someone else would get that call. So I kept it to myself. I held it close."

I waited, watching his face. In the gilded air of his afternoon garden I thought I could guess the end of the story, but I had just enough grace to let him tell it.

"I'm old, Avery," he said simply. "I waited and I grew old. Ten years ago—five, even—I would have been ready. But my day is passing. I still believe they will come. But now I think that I will be the one who trained the first human speaker of Vardeshi. The conversations I dreamed of, the meeting of minds, human to Vardeshi, in our words and in theirs . . . I will never have that now. But perhaps you will." He paused. "So what do you think?"

"Yes," was all I could say. "Of course. Yes. But I still . . . There are others you could have asked. Some of them were here today. Any one of them would have said yes in a heartbeat. You know that."

He nodded. "I know. It helps, of course, that you speak Mandarin already. The tonal aspect of Vardeshi won't be a sticking point for you. But there is more than linguistic skill involved. The first human to speak freely to the Vardeshi needs to be someone with humility. Kindness. Patience. I

see all those things in you. I believe the human race could have no better representative. For some time now I've been waiting for the right moment to say so. This one seemed as good as any."

I didn't know what to say to that. Finally I cast my mind back to a few minutes ago and essayed the Vardeshi phrase again, haltingly: "You do me too much honor." Which seemed, in the end, to be the exact right thing to say.

Of course it had to be done in complete secrecy. Professor Sawyer was intensely protective of his life's work. There existed only one copy of the Vardeshi TrueFluent program and two backups, stored on three separate non-networked computers in three different safes. All of them were kept in his house. He wouldn't hear of transferring the program to any of my devices for practice elsewhere. If I was going to learn Vardeshi—and I was—it was going to be on his terms, which meant on his patio, or on the threadbare old sofa in his sitting room.

It was still early enough in the semester that I was able to drop most of my course load, keeping only the two classes required to maintain eligibility for my scholarship. I attended those often enough to keep reasonably current with the material, skimmed through the readings in the student center after classes for maximum visibility, and was at the professor's house by noon each day. From noon until six o'clock I immersed myself completely in TrueFluent Var-

deshi. At six I would collapse, engulf a superb vegetarian dinner prepared by the professor and Seline, and return to the tiny three-bedroom apartment I shared with two classmates, Erica and Sophie, to lie in front of mindless TV until my brain finally shut itself off for the day.

Despite my time in the student center, there were questions about my sudden disappearance from the courses required for second-year students. My graduate program was small, and any such absenteeism would have been conspicuous. I had done well in the first year; not first in the class, maybe, but close to it. Now I was enrolled in a mere two classes and barely clearing the failing mark in both of them. Questions were inevitable. To preempt them Dr. Sawyer invented an independent study that involved transcribing and analyzing several hundred hours of voice recordings that had been languishing in a drawer—on cassette, no less—for more than a decade. His colleagues, accustomed to farming old data and new graduate students for potential publications, accepted the fabrication without blinking. My classmates envied me or they pitied me, but they didn't ask questions, either.

There were moments when I wished I was doing something as mindless as transcribing old recordings of regional American English. I had learned Mandarin with ease; it took time and concentration, but that was all. I worked at it and I learned it. It didn't drill down into my dreams and jolt me

awake in a sweaty, trembling panic at three o'clock in the morning. Vardeshi was different. I gave it everything I had for six disciplined hours each day, nine hours on weekends, and after three months I had gained almost no ground. As I had predicted, the phonology wasn't the problem: the vowels were effortless; the consonants took only a little practice. The tones were harder. As with any tonal language originating on Earth, a shift in spoken intonation—from a querying "Hello?" to a curt "Hello."—conferred a total change in meaning. Instead of "tentative hello" or "irritated hello," it was "tentative hello" or "kitten." The four tones of Mandarin had been easy for me to distinguish, but Vardeshi had nine, and two pairs were giving me particular trouble. They were simply too alike. There was also a complex system of honorifics, so that a sentence spoken to one's social superior looked vastly different from the same sentence spoken to one's inferior. And the verb conjugations were bewildering. Altogether it was stupefyingly hard.

My one reprieve came in the form of the writing system, which was an alphabet: twenty-eight compact, clean, elegant letters and nine tone markings. The samples of authentic written script in Dr. Sawyer's possession, culled from the gifts the Vardeshi had given us upon their arrival, consisted mainly of a sheaf of poems by their most celebrated writers. The language they contained was far beyond my reach at present. To hone my literacy skills I studied Dr. Sawyer's

transcripts of his audio samples. When I mastered the alphabet he had me transcribe them again on my own. After that, I could read the poems aloud, even if I couldn't understand them.

I was glad I found reading so intuitive, because it was the only thing that was. Every day, every hour of my study of Vardeshi was an exercise in frustration. And humility. I had always been conscious that my linguistic gifts were modest. It was impossible to attend a small, exclusive linguistics-driven graduate school and not know it. I had conquered Mandarin, but I had classmates who had waltzed with ease through Japanese, Arabic, Russian, and more, sometimes simultaneously. Still, I liked to think that even they would have been—albeit briefly—rattled by Vardeshi. After three months, I could carry on the simplest of conversations, nothing more. And Dr. Sawyer still had to stop me and correct every other word.

My respect for him had deepened in proportion to my growing understanding of exactly how difficult Vardeshi was. Somehow he had learned it. Alone. With no one to correct him, no one to pare a sentence down to its core elements, no one to offer examples perfectly tuned to his level of study. He had done it with only a computer, a few recordings, and a handful of poems. I had known from the start that his talents exceeded my own, but by the time I had been studying Vardeshi for several months, I knew that he

was the real thing. A virtuoso. A genius. Had he been anything less, he would have failed. I still wasn't sure how he had done what he had. The more I knew about Vardeshi, the less possible it seemed to me that he could have learned it successfully in solitude from such a limited store of material.

Over dinner one day I said, "I don't understand how you even had enough language to build the TrueFluent program. You said you were in the room with them for three hours. That can't possibly be enough source material. But you have a Vardeshi lexicon that's—well, not complete, obviously, but extensive. Where did it come from?"

"In between the first communication and the last, there was a span of—oh, about eight months. Toward the end of that interval we recorded some radio communications traveling to and from the *Seynath*, the Vardeshi ship that eventually visited Earth. Enough, as you say, to assemble a working lexicon. Personally, I think they allowed us to hear them as a sort of challenge. To see what we would do with their language. If there was anything we could do. There wasn't, of course, not in such a short time. But I had twenty-five years with it, and that proved to be enough."

I shook my head. "But you were alone."

"Not quite," he said. "One of the Vardeshi who visited here was, I believe, in favor of opening a diplomatic channel between our worlds. You know his voice well—he's the

principal speaker on my private recordings, as well as the two public ones."

"Novak Takheri," I said.

"Yes. When I asked for samples of their speech, he guided the conversation, and I think he deliberately gave me the building blocks I would need to deconstruct the language. Introductions, simple questions, basic declarative sentences. A primer of sorts, really. I felt . . . it may be hubris, but I felt that he and I connected in some way. There was some likeness of minds."

I imagined Dr. Sawyer twenty-five years ago: silvery blond hair, mild blue eyes, those gentle, self-effacing English manners. He must have seemed familiar to them; accessible, even. I didn't think it was hubris. It made perfect sense. I said so, and he seemed gratified.

Before I went home that night, I listened to the recording again, the one he had referenced. It had sounded impossibly complex to me three months ago, but now I could comprehend nearly every word. Dr. Sawyer was right. It was a lesson. *What is your name? What is your profession? Where is your home? Where are you now? Why have you come here?* Whoever Novak Takheri was, he wasn't the one who had made the decision to sever all contact with Earth. I was certain of that. And certain as well, now, that I hadn't imagined the faint sadness in his voice when he said good-bye to our people on behalf of his. Perhaps he was simply waiting out

the long years of silence, like Dr. Sawyer, with an eager heart.

I found it difficult to gauge the passage of time in northern California, with its eternal amber cool, but suddenly it was December and time for me to fly home to New England for Christmas. I had wanted to cancel the trip. Vardeshi had taken hold of me with an almost hypnotic possession, and the thought of two weeks without those strange yet intimately familiar voices was repellent. But Dr. Sawyer was adamant. "You must maintain a pretense of normality," he insisted.

"I don't know what normality means anymore. I'm secretly learning an alien language. Nothing about this is normal."

He smiled. "A pretense, I said. Think of my career, if nothing else. As far as the government knows, the TrueFluent program is still incomplete. I should have informed them the moment I finished it. I'm not technically authorized to teach you a single word of Vardeshi. If anyone finds out that I have, my files will be confiscated, and your access will be cut off, perhaps permanently."

I sighed. "You're right. I just . . . don't want to let it go."

"It's for the best. You need a break. Two weeks to recharge. Think about something else. Go to a movie. Sleep. Come back refreshed and ready to work. This may help to lift you off your plateau."

I made a face. "You said the plateau was in my head."

"I lied," he said dryly. "Go home."

I did. I flew in late, took a taxi home from the airport, and crept upstairs in the dark. Crawling into my childhood bed that first night, three thousand miles removed from the inexorable march of new words across Dr. Sawyer's laptop screen, I sank into deep, longed-for, restorative sleep as if into deep water. Not even the ticks and groans of the ancient furnace, laboring to keep the cold of a Vermont winter at bay, could hold me on the surface for long.

In the morning I drank coffee with my parents, my first cup with their third, dodging their needling questions about my course load. Their worry was palpable. I couldn't blame them; one glance into the kitchen mirror had shown me how pale and tense I'd grown in the last few months. Dr. Sawyer had been right. My pretense of normality was cracking. My father made lukewarm jokes about spending more time out in the California sunlight; my mother flatly ordered me to drop the independent study, as it was clearly more pressure than I could handle. I swallowed the rest of my still-scalding coffee and went to take our old golden retriever, Major, for a walk. Not for the first time I wished I had a sibling. A second target might have served to diffuse somewhat the concentrated beam of their anxiety.

I continued my pattern of avoidance in the days that followed, spending the brief hours of pallid daylight skating on

the frozen lake or hiking in the woods around our house, and the evenings drinking bourbon with friends I hadn't seen since high school ended. Within a few days I had lost the haunted look. My parents began visibly to relax. On the night before I flew back to California I stayed in. We cooked dinner together, and afterward my father built a fire in the wood stove in the living room. I sat on a blanket on the hardwood floor, glass of wine in hand, Major's head a comfortable weight on my knee. My mother broached the topic of academic pressure again, more cautiously this time. I pacified her with promises to re-evaluate my course load. I didn't like lying to her. I liked even less how easy it was. I had always been a terrible liar. But then I had never needed anything as desperately as I needed Vardeshi.

Two weeks was long enough, but only just. A day more would have been too long. I drove directly from the airport to Dr. Sawyer's house. He had the laptop and headset ready for me. And, mercifully, the espresso.

It appeared that the holiday had been precisely what my mind needed to fit together some of the pieces of Vardeshi that had been giving me the most trouble. I didn't scramble so much as vault off of that first plateau. There were others still to come, in the spring that followed, but I had finally acquired some momentum, and I was feeling again what I hadn't felt since tackling Mandarin years ago: the deep, rich, private satisfaction of finding a message where there had

been only static. Vardeshi was becoming accessible to me. I was beginning to hear it, to really hear it, and better yet, to listen for it—to anticipate rather than react. When I went home for Christmas I caught perhaps one word in eight of all but that first and simplest recording. By March, it was one word in five. By June, one in three. And then my courses ended for the summer and I was absolutely free, for three glorious months, to do nothing but swim and run and fall headlong into Vardeshi.

By the time classes resumed in September, I had it.

I would never sound like a native speaker, but I had never had any illusions about that. The grammatical structures were quickly becoming instinctive. The tones, second nature. There were levels of complexity that I hadn't yet achieved—I couldn't say, "If it's not too much trouble, would you mind terribly doing me the honor of passing the bagels?" But I could say, "Honored sir, please pass me the bagels." It didn't matter that our lexicon was only partial and that we had no word for *bagel*. Dr. Sawyer and I were equally confident that slotting in the missing nouns would be child's play compared to what we had already done.

I could see him beginning almost imperceptibly to relax. Over the past year, I had done the real work, but the anxiety had fallen to him, the more so because there was so little that he could actually do; his was the role of the mentor, the observer. He had so much more invested in this than I did.

For me, this was at best a career-making gambit, at worst an unsightly dent in an otherwise pristine academic record. If it turned out to be a complete waste of time, I could retake a few classes and move on with only a few months and some pride lost. It was different for Dr. Sawyer. He couldn't unpick his life's work and start over. He had said it himself: he was old. If he failed with me, it meant TrueFluent Vardeshi was worthless. It would be the collapse of twenty-five years of hard, solitary, unrequited effort. He had been unfailingly patient with me, with my mistakes and frustrations and failures, but there had never been any question, really, of how much was at stake for him.

A day came in early October when there were no more new vocabulary decks in the TrueFluent program. I had learned all the words in all the levels. I went back and reviewed a couple of old lists. I recalled every word perfectly. Feeling a little lost, I played through the entire catalog of voice recordings. I understood nearly everything that was being said; the only words I couldn't interpret were the ones Dr. Sawyer hadn't been able to translate, those lacking adequate context. I skimmed over the written texts of a couple of recordings. Dr. Sawyer had had me transcribe them in Vardeshi script, then translate them into English, then back into Vardeshi, in order to compare the original and my translation. Everything was familiar, everything was known. There was no more work left to do.

I sat on the patio, staring out into the garden, and a gray emptiness crept over me like fog rolling in from the ocean. What was I going to do now? The drive to learn Vardeshi, to possess it, had carried me forward from the first moment, from hearing that first phrase more than a year ago now. It had been a consuming fire. I had scarcely thought about anything else—I hadn't had time. While I was immersed in it, it had seemed likely, inevitable even, that the Vardeshi themselves would reappear at any moment. I had been racing against their return, certain that they were poised on the threshold of our awareness, just outside satellite range, a long-fingered hand raised to knock again. Now that I had finished the TrueFluent program and they hadn't come, it suddenly seemed wildly improbable that they would. What if I had learned it all for nothing? I didn't care about the lost time. It hadn't been wasted, even if they never came back. Their language was maddening and lyrical and unpredictable, and I loved it. But I needed—I craved—more of it, real words from the strangers who thought and talked and wrote in it all the time. And there might not be any more words. Ever.

I heard the patio door open. A moment later Dr. Sawyer set down two glasses and a bottle of whiskey on the glass tabletop. He pulled out a chair and joined me. At first I couldn't look at him. When I did, I saw that I didn't need to say anything. He already knew the dark path down which

my thoughts had turned.

"How?" I said. "How do you live with this?"

"I've had hope." He poured the whiskey and pushed a glass toward me. "For twenty-five years. And then I had you. Seeing it again through your eyes has been . . . exhilarating. And now I have you to speak with, and I never had that before."

I shook my head. "I don't know what to do now."

"Now you wait," he said simply. "And in twenty-five years, if they still haven't come, you find a student and you teach him. Or her."

"It could be a century," I said. "It could be a thousand years."

"It could."

We drank our whiskey in silence after that.

It could have been a thousand years. But it happened that my intuition that they were already there, ships hovering silently just outside the range of our vision, was correct. And within three weeks the whole world knew it.