

THE USUAL DISSERTATION

M. FROST

—*Doctoral Student*—

Mark rested his eyes on the impressive rings of the moon orbiting Beta Colony before he continued proofing his master's thesis.

Beta Colony was—as you might expect—the second ever founded when the people of Earth traveled to the stars. While it was a busy port now, before the accelerator network was developed, transit from Earth had been long and expensive.

Mark frowned at his thesis title: “Colonization and Language on Beta Colony.” *I need something snappier.*

He leaned back in the folding chair on the narrow balcony of the temporary apartment he was leasing, thinking of the work he had just finished. *You really can see the history of colonization here—how the languages went in their own directions for a while, then how they re-integrated linguistic elements from Earth when contact became more frequent.*

Mark noticed a flash on his pad. As he opened the message, the blue banner of the Oxford University linguistics doctoral program glowed in the dark.

I got in.

His heart skipping, Mark stood up. *I want to celebrate.*

He twitched. *Who would celebrate with me?* His family were gone, and Mark had given up on serious relationships when his master's work enforced constant travel.

He stared out at the rings of the moon. *Maybe once I get settled at Oxford, I should start dating again.*

#

“Mark, are you watching this?” Juan called.

Mark turned off the shower, then pulled a towel around his waist to join his new boyfriend. “What?”

“Seems Ninneth had allies.” Juan paused the newsvid.

Mark shuddered. “Didn't they hear the war ended a century ago?” He didn't agree with how Earthforce had handled the Ninneth secession from the Coalition. *Why annihilate an entire Colony based on a political decision?*

“I suppose not.” Juan agreed soberly. Then he looked at Mark. “You finally shaved.”

Mark bent to run his smooth cheek against Juan’s. “I should grow a beard, *non?*”

He felt a pang as Juan frowned. Mark’s mother had spoken French with him, but Juan didn’t like it when Mark lapsed into the language patterns of his youth. *Something about the colonialism of it? He’s tried to explain how it relates to the Pre-Pox history he studies, and to his own background, but I’ve never understood.*

“I’ve just been working so much, I forgot to shave.” Mark’s hunt for a dissertation topic had led him down a rabbit hole, exploring order of colonization on Colony language dispersal.

Not that this is precisely xenolinguistics—but with the Colonies so far apart, and with no real aliens to study—John says it’s close enough.

Which reminds me. “I’m running late to the meeting with my advisor. See you for dinner?”

At Juan’s distracted nod, Mark hurried to dress and flag a transport. Xenolinguistics wasn’t in the historic Clarendon Institute but instead on a new campus. *Interesting choice to co-locate us with planetary defense.*

Mark knew the real reason was the money. He’d found out after he started the program that most Xenolinguistics faculty were funded by Earthforce. His advisor Dr. John Thakur barely had to lecture because Earthforce demanded—and paid for—most of his time.

If Mark had a vision for what the office of a Professor of Philology should look like, this wasn’t it. Instead of a dimly lit room in an ancient building crowded with hardcast books, John’s office was inframodernist with only a sitting area, spartan work benches, and the highest-quality technology.

Mark started to softcast his presentation onto the wall template, but John waved him off. “Mark, I have a surprise for you.”

John insisted on first names. At their first meeting, he explained, “There’s an implicit hierarchy in any training program, but let’s be pragmatic. We’ll be colleagues someday.”

“What surprise?” Mark asked.

“I have your doctoral dissertation on a silver platter.” John draped his arms across the back of the lean couch.

Mark leaned forward to avoid any chance at contact. He recognized there was no universe in which either he or John might act on their attraction. *Even though his husband died a few years ago, he’s too professional.*

Mark’s heart rate quickened anyway.

John stretched to pick up his own pad. He softcast a Coalition starmap. “You know about Ninneth.” As he gestured, the sector that once housed the rebel Colony lit up.

It’s grade school history. Who hasn’t heard of Ninneth?

“You’ve heard about the new group?” John continued.

Mark hedged. “Just a newsvid.”

“Sector 71301. I don’t think they’re related to Ninneth, no matter what the newsvids say.”

Mark turned to John in surprise. *He might know. He has Top Secret clearance.* “Why?” He stumbled.

When John touched the pad, the template changed.

These are language files.

“These popped up in some of the nodes we Xenolinguists use to share large files across the Colonies. My guess is they planted them.”

“They?”

“Whoever they are in 71301. There was only one planet colonized in that sector, GU41-M-B.” John pulled out key files. “There’s no way they’re related to Ninneth. The languages are too distinct. Anyway, this Colony was founded far earlier.”

“Why haven’t I heard about them?”

“They were believed lost within a year of colonization.” John replied.

“So the languages have evolved in a completely distinct way without any contact?”

“That’s the question. If and when did they have contact with Ninneth?”

Because the language would show it.

“This is incredible.”

John looked delighted. “So what do you think? Or should I give it to Emily?”

Mark gave him a dirty look. “I’ll take it.”

“I thought you might like it.” John said softly. Then he started. “Did you shave?”

Mark made a dismissive sound.

“You’d look good in a beard.” John said.

#

The usual dissertation would rely on existing language databases. Mark regretted his decision to take on the languages—plural—of Sector 71301. *I have to translate them into Olympian first.* It was the meta-language used by all translation programs.

Olympian never had been spoken—it was code designed and curated by linguists throughout the Coalition, based on earlier models that went back to the 20th Century. When Xenolinguists encountered a new language, they only had to make one translation—into Olympian—then the algorithm would translate out every known language or dialect.

Complete with idiom if the input is good enough. Take John's use of 'silver platter.' That would be rendered as 'betrothal gift' among the Felzins of Beta Quadrant.

Mark's heart raced as he wondered if the innuendo had been John's intention.

At this point, he agreed the Colony itself must have leaked the files. *They're too complete to be a product of espionage.* But what they offered was pre-Olympian Xenolinguistics.

I think they really were cut off right after their founding.

He frowned. *Technically, nothing I'm doing is Xenolinguistics. It's clear these are Colony languages that have evolved. One of them even has remarkable fidelity to English of the 24th Century.*

"At least some of them are aliens." John assured him when Mark raised the subject at the end of their meeting the next day. As he waved his hand, the wall template sparkled with picfiles.

"What?" A moment later, Mark realized these were marked Top Secret. *John made me get my clearance. I guess this is okay.*

Mark studied the abnormal facial structure, long hair the color of blood. "Humanoid." He observed.

He and John had been discussing gender hierarchy in language, so Mark tried to be more specific. At first, he thought the being androgynous, but changed his mind. "Perhaps a female if the phenotype is like ours."

"The building blocks of the universe were dispersed throughout the galaxies." John shrugged. "Why wouldn't evolution have convergence?"

There was an interesting linguistic theory about convergence that he and John had discussed recently.

"What if the Colony stopped transmitting because they encountered an alien population?" John speculated.

"Why retain Earth languages?"

"Earthforce identified humans with the aliens. Subjugated perhaps?"

Mark shook his head. "Why not give us the alien language too?"

"Perhaps they know their enemy." John made a self-deprecating gesture. The wall template went dark.

With the lights in the room on automatic dim with the late hour, Mark could see just the outline of John's face framed by his shoulder-length dark hair. Mark couldn't read his eyes.

What if he kissed me—

John stood. "Time for both of us to go home." There was something flat in his voice.

When Mark got back to his apartment, Juan wasn't there. Instead, there was a note.

It's short and direct. Mark considered the breakup letter, strangely relieved. *He always was better than I am at communicating his feelings.*

Mark stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. He realized he hadn't shaved in weeks.

Might as well grow a beard.

#

—Earthforce—

John produced a cake with handwritten letters in red icing
'*Congratulations Dr. Mark R. Smith.*'

Mark scratched his beard absently, raised his prosecco.

Emily gave him a sweet-angry look. He'd won their private contest to see which of them would defend first. Emily had followed up on the work Mark hadn't—colonization order and language dispersal.

For a moment, he envied her because John had pressured him to work so quickly, he'd set a record for the shortest dissertation.

John guided him away from the party. For a second, Mark wondered if John had been waiting for their official relationship to change.

Now that I've defended, he's not my supervisor anymore. Did he rush me because he doesn't want to wait?

Instead, John asked, "The postdoc you mentioned, are you committed to it?"

Is this his way of seeing if I'm interested?

Mark's heart began to drum. "I don't have to take it."

"Come with me," John said.

However small the offsite campus was, Mark never had considered the doors of planetary defense. John walked him in right through the main entrance.

No, Mark thought—pathetically—when John ushered him into a room that reeked of military power. *This isn't what I wanted.*

“This is General Greene.” John introduced a dark-skinned man whose uniform was emblazoned in the military language of leadership. He turned to a woman next. “This is Lieutenant General Patel.”

Mark shook their hands, but inside, his heart plummeted.

“That rogue Colony you’ve been studying is on our doorstep. We need you.” General Greene said.

Feeling numb, Mark nodded, understanding now why John had pressured him.

#

Mark barely caught a glimpse of John—whose back was to him as he spoke to General Greene—when Patel guided him out of the room to an aerial transport.

“Where are we going? Don’t I need to pack?”

Patel grunted. “Main base on Earth. You’ll get uniforms.”

As she briefed him, he was proud of the work he had done, felt the way John had driven him related to the seriousness of the threat. *I think the aliens mean to attack Earth.*

Or aliens and humans—it seems there are both. He studied the images she shared. It was clear the rogue colony had captured Earthforce ships and subverted Earthforce personnel.

“It may be mind control.” Patel warned him as she produced military vidfiles.

Mark shivered as he reviewed one from the command deck of an Earthforce ship that had been attacked.

There were two aliens—one who looked like a taller, perhaps-male version of the perhaps-female from John’s picfiles—and another, more clearly male, who had darker hair and skin. Mark had no idea how they had arrived, and he ultimately had no idea how they left, but what they did in the interim left him breathless.

Their weapons were blue-silver blades that sliced through metal equipment, leaving a cut that looked slightly melted, the way cold butter would if the knife was hot.

Is this some kind of advanced technology?

Mark watched the alien with darker hair take out one soldier after another using his long knives. He rewound the vidfile. *Patel might be right about the Psionic abilities. It’s clear these two are well coordinated, but they don’t speak—or even look at each other.*

Eventually, the one with blood-red hair spoke to the Earthforce crew in modern English, although he had an accent. He demanded surrender and confirmed his planetary origin—GU41-M-B.

He didn't pronounce it the way anyone from Earth would—[ˈgu : ˈfɔ : ti wʌn]—he just spelled each letter and number.

When the dark-haired alien put his hands on a control console, the surveillance vid ended in static.

#

Word spread quickly across the base. “They’re here.”

Mark looked up from his terminal in shock. Given their last position, the aliens should have taken months to reach Earth using the fastest route through the accelerator network. That they had advanced technology for transport had been clear from the briefings, but this seemed impossible.

Mark thought of an ancient fantasy story he’d read. *Sounds like a tesseract.*

As he reviewed how the aliens interacted with the diplomats, he thought their use of modern English had improved. *The accent is less, the pronunciations more appropriate.*

“I think they have advanced computing.” He suggested, feeling that—unlike his crazy tesseract theory—this was something he could share. “The language improvements are most similar to how artificial intelligence learns, putting the most common elements into predictable patterns.”

It’s only because they chose modern English—specifically Earth New Era English—that I recognize this. Word order in English is so important.

He thought of John’s theory for why the aliens had leaked human languages. *Of course they chose modern English. It’s what Earthforce uses.*

#

—Observer—

Mark was aware that the negotiations between the aliens and the Coalition Parliament—a stand in for Earthforce—had occurred only because of deep concern about the alien technology. *From the language in the briefings, Earthforce isn’t at all sure they could win a direct confrontation.*

Unexpectedly, he was given orders. It felt like he blinked and found himself on the deck of one of the Earthforce ships captured by the aliens, having been named something called an “Observer.”

Earthforce invented the title—what they really want are spies.

Before he was sent to the ship, Patel had taken him aside. “I’m sending you to GU41-M-B because I want detailed reports on what they say. You know the languages better than anyone.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Better than the translation program.”

It was disconcerting to be among the enemy, but Mark closed his eyes to concentrate on the voices. *All the languages I hear derive from the human Colony. Even the aliens only use those.*

When he opened his eyes, he recognized the petite alien female from John’s picfiles. Mark realized that she was one of their leaders. *Cease-fire? Is that all they want?*

During the negotiations, the aliens had displayed images of an Earthforce Mothership above their world. Mark knew that, no matter how extraordinary it was for the aliens to have reached Earth so fast, there was no way Earthforce could have attacked GU41-M-B if the military strike had launched *after* the first newsvid reports. *After John found the language files.*

Earthforce must already have been on the way. Mark concluded. *But why?* He’d found no linguistic evidence of contact with Ninneth.

Mark started to explain what he did, but the alien female cut him off, her tone gentle. “I know what a Xenolinguist is.”

When she said it, he knew who had planted the files he had studied for his dissertation. *John and I guessed they did it on purpose. Perhaps they erased evidence of their alliance with Ninneth.*

She gave him an almost-human smile, but the look quickly faded to distraction. Mark wondered if she was communicating Psionically. *She looks like my colleagues when they have their earpieces in, but I don’t see any parallel technology here.*

After she excused herself, Mark glanced around, his eyes finding the dark-haired alien he’d seen in the vidfiles—the one with the knives.

The knives were strapped to his body in plain view. Mark’s heart raced. *He noticed me.*

The male alien held out his hand in an Earth convention. “I’m Gengi.”

Without thinking, Mark stammered. “Eleventh Century Japan Gengi?” He remembered an ancient tale Juan had talked about obsessively. *Did they choose names from our databases to seem more relatable?*

He asked that question, then instantly regretted it, worried he’d made a mistake. *I’m not trained in diplomacy.*

The male pulled his hand back, gave Mark a blank look. “Tegengil, Gengi for short.” Then he chuckled, which Mark had not known the aliens could do. “You speak our language.”

Fuck. Mark thought. *Patel told me I needed to be a spy. I think this is the opposite.*

#

Mark could see GU41-M-B. He knew how to translate the designation—*geopositioning unit, planet class, order from the sun*—but he had no idea how they had arrived. One moment, the ship had been in orbit above Earth. The next, this green planet replaced blue Earth on the vidscreen.

The aliens vanished from the command deck. After they left—Mark didn’t know how or where they had gone—only humans remained. *Presumed to be descended from the missing Colonists. Are they subjugated?* Mark wondered.

But all he saw them do was gesture, speak a few words. *Military code?*

He soon was ushered into a waiting transport ship, where he closed his eyes against flashes of entry fire. When he emerged, blinking at the bright sky, he found Gengi waiting. Sunlight revealed traces of red in the alien’s dark hair. “Dr. Smith, will you come with me?”

Mark noticed his language was more formal. *I think I made a mess of things.*

At first, Mark was nervous to be alone with him, although he was relieved the knives were gone.

All Gengi did was guide him to a suite and show him the amenities. *Far more spacious than my flat in Oxford.*

Gengi pointed to a small button. “Hit this if the water isn’t hot enough. There’s quite a distance between the boiler and the tap.”

“What is it?”

Gengi laughed. “Just an electric heater. The button activates it for a short time. Maybe not long enough for the showers I prefer, but most people find it sufficient.”

It was so mundane, but what Mark found extraordinary was that it suggested the aliens lived with the humans. *They take showers too.*

A moment later, he wondered at the need for such rudimentary technology, given what he’d seen the aliens do.

Mark pushed past his fear. As they shook hands, he really looked at Gengi. In person, his features seemed less dangerous and more refined.

He was wearing his hair down for the first time that Mark had seen—it came to the middle of his back. *With that much hair, I imagine it does take him a while in the shower.*

#

Mark stared at the latest orders, increasingly concerned at the language Earthforce was using.

Why do they want to repeat Ninneth here? It's clear the people of this world just want to be left alone.

Language doesn't lie. It reveals truths.

What Mark had learned was that there were millions of people on this world, the vast majority of them human. *The aliens are among their leaders, but they seem celebrated in the way a powerful dignitary might be honored. Not in a way that suggests the aliens have mind control.*

Mark was studying how language and social hierarchy were linked on this world—one of the most fascinating discoveries was how little gender hierarchy there was, but how much familial honor was present, especially for parents.

He'd sent it to Earthforce but also had dropped his findings into the universal node where John had discovered the original packet of data. *Perhaps John will find these too.*

Mark was increasingly skeptical of Earthforce—and by virtue of the connection to planetary defense—even his old advisor. *John hasn't reached out since I left.*

Mark realized he'd felt isolated for quite some time. *Perhaps since the day John turned me over to Earthforce.*

He left the suite he had been assigned, intending to find a common area to help ease his estrangement. He remained surprised that no one limited his movements, which always had been restricted on the Earthforce base.

When he rounded a corner, he pulled back quickly when he saw the petite alien female. There was a darker-skinned human male with her. Mark was surprised to see how the human looked at her with affection, how gentle he was when he touched her shoulder.

Mark recognized a voice. As the pair turned to embrace Gengi, there was something powerful in their exchange.

He's their progeny. The honorifics, the nonverbals—fuck, even his hair.

For a moment, Mark couldn't breathe. His parents had passed away in an accident just before he started university as an undergrad. Watching the

tenderness Gengi had with his parents brought back Mark's own loss in a way that was startling.

To have a family again—

Another thought shook him. *If they have interbred, they are not alien.* Mark remembered what the Earthforce biologists had said. *The reproductive boundary is the definition of species.*

He must have made some sound because all three turned towards him.

"Dr. Smith." Gengi fished in his pocket, produced a slightly rumpled envelope. "I was coming to deliver this."

The calligraphy was beautiful, the parchment thick and rich. "What is it?" Mark asked.

"An invitation—" Gengi started in one of the GU41-M-B tongues Mark had learned. Then he waved his hand, continued in modern English. "I'm not sure what the exact parallel is for your culture. It's a party."

"A party." Mark felt slow.

"Would you come?" Gengi's voice was soft.

Mark met Gengi's beautiful, dark eyes. He realized his heart was pounding.

He managed a nod. "Please call me Mark."

#

—Xenolinguist—

Mark was thrilled by Gengi's touch.

I think he's the most talented lover I've ever had. Mark was relieved to discover they were not so different in terms of physiology.

"I like how soft your beard is." Gengi stroked Mark's face.

Mark ran his hands through Gengi's hair. He felt these caresses formed a universal language. *I don't know if it was losing my parents, John's rejection, or what Earthforce did that left me in pieces, but I'm starting to feel whole again.*

Later, he asked Gengi, "What are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Human or alien?" Mark was emboldened by what he and Gengi had shared.

Gengi's eyes sparkled with humor. "Does it matter?"

Does it matter that I'm only a Xenolinguist if you are an alien?

Otherwise, I'm just a Philologist. When he thought of it that way, Mark decided he didn't need to know. *It's not like two males can reproduce together biologically, regardless of species.*

But Mark had another question. "What about Ninneth?"

"Ninneth? Who is Ninneth?" Then Gengi pulled up in mock shock. "Are you dating someone else?"

He said 'who is,' not 'what is.' Mark relaxed, knowing how revealing language could be. *Clearly, Earthforce invented the story they were allies to cover something else.*

Mark had a quip on his lips—*I'm all yours*—when he saw Gengi's face change.

"That's not what you meant, is it?" Gengi asked softly.

Mark's heart thudded. "Earthforce said you were allies of Ninneth. It's a colony they destroyed."

Gengi was sober. "We only came to Earth because we wanted to live."

Mark had guessed this already. When he reached for Gengi—he had not intended to break the mood—he enjoyed their kiss. *I wonder if love is a kind of mind control.*

To his surprise, Gengi pulled away, laughing.

At Mark's frown, Gengi explained. "I can read emotions and thoughts. I try not to pry, but you were thinking so loudly—"

"So you were laughing at the thought that I'm in your thrall?" Mark joked because he wasn't ready to jeopardize their new relationship.

"The opposite," Gengi whispered in Mark's ear. "I was laughing because I'm in yours, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Mark must have stiffened, because Gengi asked. "Didn't I say it right? Was the context wrong?"

How long has he known about my mother?

"Just a few weeks." Gengi replied to Mark's unspoken question. "But it helps that I can read your mind."

#

Mark was terrified by the whine so loud, it made his body shake.

"We knew Earthforce would come again." Mark could tell Gengi was trying to be reassuring about the ships entering orbit. "They think we're tainted."

I expect Earthforce considered Ninneth tainted too.

"I'll protect you." Gengi kissed Mark before he vanished—navigating space the way his people did, like it was just taking a step. Mark recognized his

tesseract theory had been close—it wasn't technology, but instead something biological. *Perhaps Telekenesis.*

Mark wanted to call him back. *You shouldn't have to do this.*

No one should. Mark knew Earthforce, knew their language. His grip tightened around Gengi's youngest sister as the tone of the whine changed, wondering if they would die as the ceiling caved in, or if instead they would be engulfed in fire.

Suddenly, the whine disappeared.

In the silence that followed, his own heartbeat seemed loud. He thought about Gengi and his language of knives. *What did he and his family have to do to save us?*

He was surprised when what he felt was relief, not horror, at how Gengi and his family had stood up to Earthforce. So when his lover finally returned, Mark hefted a bottle. "Let's celebrate."

Gengi's tired face creased with a smile. They went out on the balcony, where the planet's twin moons had risen, the second one low and large on the horizon.

As they toasted quietly, Mark considered the path that had brought him to this moment.

Not the usual dissertation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By night, a creative writer: The fiction, poetry and essays of M. Frost appear in Antipodean SF, Plott Hound, Roses & Wildflowers, Strange Horizons, and many others, including poetry chapbooks Cow Poetry (Finishing Line Press), Constellation (collaboration with artist-brother), The Women of Myth (Island of Wak-Wak) and The March (The Arcanist, coming soon). Explore more at mfrostwords.com. By day, a scientist and academic: The guest essays, peer-reviewed publications, and other works of {name redacted} appear in the The New York Times, Journal of the American Medical Association, Science Policy Forum, and many other venues.