



The Guardians of Br'thn

A Day in the Life of

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proofread
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EDWIN

Nelbin [27 light years from Earth, 0.92 Earth gravity, 85% N₂, 8% O₂, 7% CO₂]

A long barren expanse of hard packed dust, sand and wind smoothed rocks stretches to the horizon. A gentle but warm breeze is flowing, just enough to be noticeable, but not enough to provide relief from the heat or raise the dust much. Only a scarce hint of a cloud high in the greenish blue sky. The larger first sun is well up as the second smaller and yellower sun is setting. A lone figure in an off white robe is squatted down examining something of interest on an outcropping of barely visible wind worn rock breaking the surface of the sand. A large, make that very large, orange enhanced pop cat is laying on his back absorbing the heat from the suns. There is a three meter transport sphere near by. A small campfire is starting to burn what ever is hanging over it.

Your breakfast is way past edible.

“Not now Garfield. I am busy.”

It is starting to stink.

“Shit!” I drop what I am doing, “Shit, messed that up too.” I scramble over to the fire to put out the meal on fire. “I guess that means ration bars again.”

Make mine mouse flavored if you please.

“Not lasagna?”

What is this stuff you keep referring to? Is it good to eat?

“A distant ancestor of yours thought so, but I think that was just a joke. It is why we all call you Garfield instead of your cat name though. You resemble him. Now, if you can roll over far enough to reach your food, it is ready. You can get sunburned too you know. Especially in the first sun. There is enough UV present.”

I can't help it, it is something I have to do. After wolfing down a broken up ration bar he does get up to sit in the shade near the ship, but promptly gets bored and falls asleep again.

I pull an instrument from my pack. A microscope of antique design, 19th century by the old reckoning. Carefully I scrape some material off the rock and place it on a glass slide to examine it. Interesting. Important to make careful records in my notebook. Look at that. The specimen is making it's way very slowly off the slide and down the side of the microscope by some unseen means. Good. The life here is not crippled as it was on earth. I pack up the microscope and the notebook. Still, it took the specimen several hours to makes it's journey. Maybe still plant centric. I am patient. No visible predators, speed is not needed here. This small plantimal would only need enough speed to stay in the sun or hide

in the shade when it was too intense or dig it's way out of dust that had settled on it. The only sound heard is my boots crunching the soft dusty sand as I walk to the next low outcropping to repeat the process several more times. Of course Garfield snoring would be heard if I was close to him. It is important to repeat all observations to be valid.

Garfield rolls over, watches for a few minutes and then falls asleep again.

“This certainly explains why I cannot make contact with the one mind here. Too simple and lacking in the necessary mass as of yet. Well, at least she seems to be proceeding as expected. Both animal and plant components are present and integrated. Not one of our spawn anyway. Really too early to see any of those this far out. Maybe in a couple of million more years. We will just have to wait and see.”

No way I will wait. I would die of boredom.

“Ah, too slow to keep you interested or too fast to catch and eat. You suffer so much.”

See if I purr for you any more.

“Well you are in luck, though I never can understand why I accepted you as a companion. We are leaving. Get ready to depart.”

Who accepted whom? Garfield gets up, stretches slowly, then DSs into the inside of the ship to curl up on his seat. We then proceed at a leisurely pace to the northern continent, this time closer to the sea. “I really should not have expected much that far inland, but there was always hope I would find something more closely related to my precious lichens. Looks like only Earth will spawn them though.”

If you can't eat it, what's the point? Garfield yawns.

Even without a moon, the two suns exert enough tidal pressure to make for large waves to be seen crashing against the eroding shore. There is life here, but it consists of only a thin crust of yellow green slime covering the barely submersed rock. The atmosphere does not have a high enough oxygen level yet to support much movement from the developing plantimals and the surf is too rough for anything to move except when totally submersed.

I scan the interior of the planet. The core is cold. All warmth comes exclusively from the two suns and the high carbon dioxide in the atmosphere then. If the plantimals take too much carbon out of the atmosphere, the temperature will fall to the point where they cannot survive. A homeostasis of sorts has set up. The cold core means there will be no continental drift either. At some point the waves will erode the large land masses completely leaving a very shallow sea. This is a world frozen by circumstances. Unless there is a catastrophe of some sort, this world will not change for a very long time. There is evidence of some impacts from comets or meteors, but time, wind and waves have smoothed over most of them. Nothing resembling a mountain here. The

craters may even be remnants from when the world was formed. Nothing scans as recent.

I writes these observations in my note book. This world may make a good candidate for terraforming. The only problem is it might have the same effect on the colonists. Making them too lazy and set in their ways. The lack of any appreciable concentrations of metals would limit warfare at least. An agricultural or aquacultural planet? Not an easy life. No exports, just enough to keep going. And with the carbon dioxide this high they will have to live in domes or be adapted themselves. There are always other worlds. Not all make it.

“Best get inland. Come along Garfield. You have hibernated long enough.” I can hardly wait to get back to Running Snake to tell her all I that have seen. Garfield is not much company. I wish she would come with me once in awhile, but she feels it is necessary to stay with the people. They lost so much when the white devils, present company excepted, destroyed their culture. Seem to be making a strong comeback though. A lot of sharing and mixing and matching. Then time and distance to bring back cultural differences. Up that ravine there. “Garfield wait for me. Don't scare anything here away.”

Like anything could move that fast on this planet. He turns to give me a dirty look.

Actually, judging from the 'wars' that have already occurred among the native nations, there may be enough differences now. Not on the scale of the old times, but enough to mess with quite a few people's lives. We never learn.

Stupid monkeys. But his interest is nearer to his nose.

“You are right there.”

I miss my precious lichens. What a change during the ice age! Some of the foliose forms were amazing. I still use the old classification system even though psiotics upset what the geneticists before them did, who did it to the morphologists before them. No one speaks Latin anymore. Everything scientific is required to be in Standard. And all this stuff that moves around on you gets to be a bit disconcerting. At least here they are not intelligent enough to play tricks on you like on New Earth. More than once I got bit, stuck, or sucked by something there. Often times unseen. Garfield did not stand a chance.

“What have you found?”

Not edible. A few are mangled.

“You are supposed to wait crazy cat.”

But this does look more interesting though. Just had to get away from the surf, but not so far that the rainfall was lacking as was the case in the interior. Look at that, must be nearly six centimeters tall. Fruiting body of some kind. Sort of a bryophyte with detachable roots that act like legs. Moves faster too. Probably stores up oxygen for later use, or having both

surfaces exposed helps. Those sacks scan as having hydrogen in them. Probably a waste that also gives some lift. They seem to sense Garfield and are trying to move out of the way. That would suggest something bigger than they are would normally track them. They would not need to move this fast just to follow the suns.

I stop to scan my surroundings. Visually nothing, just a bunch of greenish rocks. But switch to psiotics and bingo! Those are not all rocks. Quickly I grab one of the slowly escaping bryophytes. They are not that fast yet. Garfield is watching every move I make. I need a new naming system for every world it seems. What was it they were called on New Earth?

“Watch this Garfield and learn why I am the scientist.”

I hold one of the stalked creatures near the rock that is not a rock. Garfield is practically nose to nose with it. The rock opens up with a rapid snap and leaves me holding the stalk, nearly removing some of Garfield's whiskers as he jumps back a half meter.

“Whoa! That was fast!” I am laughing up a storm. Well, not that fast, but the fastest thing I have seen here. Not that it would take much to make Garfield look slow. Glad I still have my fingers. Hate having to make new ones. “Be glad they have not invented teeth yet.” The rest of my captive is gone into the “mouth” of the petrophytozoan or rock plantimal. I am the first scientist here, I get to name them. Not that the name would last. Flat plantimal for the victims. Something like that anyway. Too many worlds and too many creatures.

Sunset will be soon. Only a few hours of darkness before the smaller sun rises again this time of year. Daily rotation is only fourteen hours, but that gets complicated depending on where the two suns are in relation to each other. We both retreat to the ship and make sure she is sealed. Don't like surprises. Garfield sits looking out at the rocks in classic cat stare down mode. Now that I know they can be fast, I would rather observe first, act second. *I agree.*

Usually on these light dependent creatures night is a quiet time, but there always seems to be some exceptions, at least as far as movement is concerned. Migrate during the night when it is cooler and less likely to lose all of your water. Here they will use the oxygen storage trick. Easy enough to scan for. I will continue to scan from my safe house however. It has been a productive day. “The sunset should be very beautiful over the sea. Not that you will care.”

Well, time to do a micro scan of our carnivorous friend and finish my notes. At least I don't have to dissect everything any longer to see how it works. Garfield is still staring out the side of the ship. “You are welcome to go out and play if you want.” He gives me a scared look, then turns back to the outside. I am not giving up my microscope though. Glad I found it in the old abandoned museum after the fall. Of course, now I

know it so well I could make it again in a second, but it would not be the same. I scratch Garfield behind his ears, "Don't worry. I would not let any harm come to you. Even if all you do is eat and sleep. Isn't it amazing how each creature seeks out paradise and how different that definition is to each?" He gets into the scratching and massaging of his back. Or folds of fat. I have to hide my thoughts. He is kind of sensitive on that subject. How did I ever agree to take you on? But I know why. Being alone on a planet light years from any of our kind is hard even on me. "We are not in Kansas any more." Garfield starts purring to emphasize that my mind should be on him and not my studies. If I drift too far I will even get a nip on the back of my hand.

After he is asleep again, I set up the microscope at my desk. From here I can DS specimens in to observe. I have set up a few jars with holes to the outside, so the higher oxygen level in the ship does not upset them. To them it is poison and usually they wilt and die within minutes.

I DS the rock creature I have fed into one of the larger chambers. Nicely digesting its meal. I scan the overall structure. The mouth is the largest section of its 'body' and also its stomach. Sort of like a pitcher plant from the jungles of earth. As moisture is precious near this salty sea, the volume around the prey is reduced to a minimum by collapsing around it. I suspect that it will collapse more as it reduces the volume to finally look more like a venus fly trap's trap.

This one does not appear to have sexual organs. We will see. They may appear later. The chance encounter of a meal may mean, like a rain storm in a desert, that everything will happen quickly. A few hours should tell me.

I take a sample of the stomach contents and examine them under the microscope. The cell walls of the smaller plantimal are starting to break down. Cellulose makeup. I scan the petro specimen carefully. Ah, different linkage in the cellulose molecules. Otherwise the juices would just end up eating itself. Can't be cannibals in this world then. Wonder if they protect their young?

Next I check for parasites. There are comensules in the gut. Cyanobacteria that have lost nearly all of their pigment. On a sunny day with no food, they could make enough to get by, but with food they are reproducing quickly. Ah, the petro is eating the bacteria as well. A symbiote then. Provides protection and a food source for the bacteria and feeds off the excess population and exudate in turn. Hmm, there are some worm like nemotodes in the sap. Lots of them. This specimen looks healthy though. I scan the DNA, same as the host. Blood? Then why worm shaped? Ah, when the bag mouth collapses around the victim the blood has to be able to make it's way through narrowing capillaries. It is amazing how nature always finds a solution. Not always elegant, but definitely workable. No heart either. The blood moves around the body

rather than the fluid itself. Not very efficient, but then they are on a slower time base.

I check my mail while waiting. Several from Running Snake. I save those for the moment. I like to savor her mail. Rachael wants to know if there is anything that she can learn from here. Of course there is, just not anything that would improve your fighting skills dear. Hmm, Petro Zen Style. Been done before. That blood is interesting though. Could possible help during slow time.

Barb sends a message via James that she stopped a group of whalers off the coast of Africa. They know of the prohibition. Must be something happening there to make them desperate. I send a note to Yingui to check it out.

Ron reports on some new tech he has found in the Jordanian empire. Probably a weapon knowing them. Nope. A way of increasing yields on aucki farms by using a measured frequency response that subdues the animal part thus making them put more energy into making edible mass. Ron may like that stuff, but way too spicy for me. More food for the troops I would guess.

That's it. Now what does Running Snake have to say? The first letter is all about the tribal council proceedings. Boring to me. Same old infighting. Looks like Swift Feet is going to try for a coup to take over the Red Cliff tribe. Not everyone is behind him though and there is talk of a split. There are enough people on each side, it is likely to be approved. Meaning there are enough people to provide a viable starting population with the necessary skills to make it on both sides. I guess it was bound to happen. The Reds and the Browns have been bickering for generations. Actually surprised it has taken this long.

There was one young Red, what was her name? Bruised Reed or something like that. She was very curious and likes to go with me when I was earth side to study lichens. Running Snake was jealous till Ms Reed found a husband when I was gone to a meeting and stopped going with me. Time is so fleeting with the norms. I was only gone eight years. Nothing happened with Ms. Reed of course, but since we can't do sex, time is guarded in TK couples. All right for me to be alone with Garfield though. His nose is sticking up in the air and his front paws are folded over. Cute in a cat sort of way.

The next and last letter is telling me how much she misses me and to hurry home. I just got here a few days ago and already she wants me back. Ah, oh, a list of chores she wants done. I know dare well she can do them just fine, so this is really saying she just wants me near her. I write back to her that I will come as soon as I can and give her a summary of what we have found today. I will have to preserve some samples in case they might have medicinal properties. The UNA still prefers natural healing to TK. Not enough of us to be there when they need us. Better to

have something more reliable around.

I look back at the petro. Bumps are starting to appear on the lower base. I scan these. Buds. Almost identical to the adult, but much smaller. The base of their 'mouth' is lower to the ground in relation to their size. Better able to catch crawling plantimals. Looks like a cave and a safe place, then surprise, you are dinner.

“Garfield, there is a letter for you.” He opens one eye and glares at me.

“Myrtle says she had five kittens. Two males and three females. Congratulations, you are a father again. What is this the eighth or ninth litter you have sired?”

He yawns. Not important. He rolls over to ignore me.

“Do you want me to send a response?” I can hardly wait till they can do this on their own.

That thing cannot send smell messages, so what is the point? Till I can smell them and know they are mine I will reserve judgment.

I laugh, “Okay, I will send the usual best wishes and prayers for fast growth, health and good hunting.”

Food?

“Lots out there, go for it big guy.” Meaning he has had enough handouts for now. Now that we are in a region with more diversity, if he brings back a new plantimal in good condition, he will get more chow. Everyone has to work.

Not hungry.

Yet. He will be soon enough. Have to cut down the exchange rate some.

The smaller yellow sun is coming up. The brief night is over and time for a new day.

LISA

Earth – central coast range in former California

Yingui and Running Snake said this was the best place for me to learn and get answers to my questions, but already I am getting annoyed. First they said I had to walk in. I was not allowed to use TK. How absurd! And this was from the Pacific coast yet. From the exact location where Yingui was attacked by the parasite so long ago, in which a few days later my father would die protecting us. Yeah, I had heard them talking about this place for eons, but I have been sitting outside this gate now for five whole days and nights and no one seems to notice or care.

This gate looks old, very old. Looks like it was made from the stone of the area. I am scanning no tech of any kind. Even the rest of the surrounding areas have crept their way up to near level four standards. Granted the tractors run on biodiesel, not middle east oil, but the tech is the same. No where near level seven of course. We would not allow that yet. Good people, lots of recovered skills and knowledge and lots of resources to draw upon. But not here. Could even be level two or lower. I wonder why? They are not that far away. Even by horse, stuff could come in. So, how would they know if I was TK, I have sensed nothing above normal here. There is not another TK for hundreds of kilometers in fact.

They said that this place was founded before I was born. That makes it thousands of years old. I don't look a day over fifty if I say so myself. Okay, I cheated. About to do that here too if something does not happen. Maybe this is the wrong time. Places change. Yingui said to give it a week. Not sure I can last that long. Two more days and I am out of here. At least a week off from duties is nice. Glad the lunar evacuation is finally done. My talent still seems to work best with regards to bad things happening. With that many ships there were some near misses. Nothing here so far thank goodness.

Look at those two birds cursing each other. Bright blue with a black crest on top of their heads. Pretty. Oops the female bird just stole some food from one of the male monks. I smile. Now he is holding up some food for the bird. It is resting on his hand. A pet? Nope, the other female bird chases the first one off and is begging herself. Who was that old Christian saint that was supposed to be so good with animals? Francis or something like that? Doesn't matter. Christianity is so dilute now it is more a myth than anything else. People sort of lost it when it failed them after the fall.

Ants have found me again. I use a little TK to keep them away. Also works to take care of bodily needs. Two more days and my mind is going crazy. So many thoughts. You would think in this quite place with no

duties or responsibilities I could finally find rest. Only the bells throughout the day and chanting in the morning, but no such luck. The monks themselves are very quiet. Why am I here? Aaaaaaagh!

Now the sun is in my eyes and I am starting to get hot again. What else? Two more days! I hear a crunch of rock and look up suddenly. Did not even realize that I was looking down at the ground. There is a single person in a black robe facing me. I scan. She was very quiet to be able to do that, or I am very distracted. When she sees that she has my attention she bows with her hands together at her chest. Must be where Yingui got it from. I bow in return from my seated position. That part I know at least. Finally someone has acknowledged that I am here. I make to speak. She motions to be quiet and then beckons for me to follow her.

I am led through the symbolic old gate that could not keep out a fly and then across a small empty stream bed over a wooden bridge only one can cross at a time. Must be for effect, too small to be practical. The sounds of the nearby running stream are beautiful though. A couple more of those blue colored birds squawk and chase each other past one of the buildings. The building's base is made from carefully arranged river stone. Looks like they get everything they need from nearby. Wonder how they handle the food? Those fields in the upper pastures are theirs maybe? I came in at night and did not pay much attention. That distraction problem again. After my husband's death so, so long ago, you would think I would be over it, but it still hurts. It is weird to me that I miss him more than my own father, as most of the time I knew him it was as a sterile TK.

An orange cat casually walks by ignoring us completely. Reminds me of Edwin's old companion. What was his name? Too many years ago. I wonder how many worlds he has seen now?

We reach our apparent destination. I scan only one person inside. There is a porch, but my guide motions to me to remove my sandals before stepping up on it. She then turns to leave. I am guessing I am supposed to enter? Or wait to be called? Always better to wait. A few minutes later, the door slides open a crack. That's my cue.

It is dark inside, only a single vegetable oil lamp and a few small windows. The person I am to meet is sitting on a low round cushion on a larger cloth pad, both filled with cotton, both jet black. She is also dressed in black with a few gray accents. They really like black here. My off white robe must really stand out. I bow as I have been taught and she returns the bow, then motions for me to sit on an almost identical setup. We wait. They really like waiting too I am seeing.

Another person arrives without notice and places tea in front of each of us then departs. More waiting. When she moves to pick up her cup, I do so also. Herb tea of some kind. Cinnamon, cloves, etc. Very good. Reminds me of the stuff Yingui used to serve. I am sure now he spent

time here. Too many similarities even after all this time. Tea gone, the person returns and removes the cups and departs. No signals are given for any of this that I can see or sense.

We wait.

“Why are you here?”

Yingui warned me about the possible questions. “To study.” You can't really say the real reason and never refer to your 'self' as that would set off a whole host of Zen jousting which you cannot win about what exactly is 'self'. She must be close to being a mind reader judging from the look she is giving me.

“You have no home or work?”

“I have no home, but no lack of work.”

“What is your work?” They did not want freeloaders and people with nothing else to do obviously. You had to be serious about wanting to be here and no where else. Fair enough. Probably part of the reason for the wait at the gate. How does a normal person handle that?

I answer, “Whatever needs to be done.” True, but vague also. All of us are reluctant to acknowledge what we are. Too many times people got hurt because of that knowledge or expected special favors. This time her slight smile is like a cat who has seen a mouse. I must have gotten close to one of 'those' places. I show no expression and hope it will pass.

“How long do you wish to stay?” It always takes longer than you think. Better to be vague again.

“As long as needed.” She bows and raises a large bamboo stick to strike me. It is I who is taken back. I must have flinched. Why would a nice quiet norm priest want to hit me. Yingui and the others did not mention the stick to me. Surprise!

“Hmm, some time then. An assistant will take you to your room.” I don't need sleep, so why would I need a room, but rather than get into more trouble, I accede and bow. On the outside the same person who served tea is waiting. Male, early thirties I would guess.

I am shown my room. A simple affair. Small bed, wash bowl, cupboard space to put personal things. Did not have any. Now what? I immediately get antsy and decide to leave. I have been sitting for five days, but I am drawn to the meditation hall all the same. At least I hope that is what it is. It was where they all seemed to meet and sit. A place with lots of those cushion arrangements all in a row. I watch from outside to see the method for entering. Everyone enters at the same door, even if they come from other directions, but leave from the opposite door. Okay. I walk up to the door. No one else knocked, so I slowly open the door. There is an altar of some kind in front of me. When in doubt bow, so I bow. Once inside I am met by a new person. He instructs me to be quiet, which I had already figured out, and then to follow. I am shown a place on the floor with another of the expected cushion arrangements. There are

setups for about ninety people. Three others are present at the moment, scattered around the room. I sit. The guide returns to his place near the door.

At hourly intervals, two of the four get up and stand for a few minutes before sitting down again. I cheat. Too bad. I just want to sit. Not in it for the pain. I know I will be here for a time. Nothing to hurry. A few deep breaths to begin. Shit! My internal alarm goes off. I scan without looking up and drawing attention to myself. A monk is cleaning a dorm hallway and will soon run into a burning oil lamp. I concentrate and move the lamp out of the way just in time. This place would go up in a few minutes with all the dry wood it is made of. Surprised they haven't gone solar. Surely the TKs would allow them that luxury in order to maintain the place. Okay, breathe in, breathe out.

An outside bell rings after a few hours. Much louder than the one inside. A few minutes later the hall is nearly full with bowing monks all slowly walking to their assigned places. Bowing again at their cushion, I forgot to do that, then sitting facing in. Okay, I got that right. More bells, this time inside, and lower in pitch, and all is silent. We sit for about an hour more. A bell rings and everyone gets up. I follow. We bow to each section of the room, including those near us. A bit confusing at first. Then we go out single file. Okay, now what? Ah, dinner. Smells good.

The meal is silent, just like everything else. Simple food, but good. Reminds me of the stuff we used to make when on the road at the very beginning of this grand adventure. Wonder where they get the flour from? The rest I can scan as being local. The bowls themselves are made of lacquered wood from local species. Black lacquer of course. I would have said Chinese, but the chanting I heard earlier sounded more Japanese if I remembered correctly. A culture that is very long gone. They may be the last place that still speaks it, or at least chants it. Wonder if anyone knows what they are saying? The meal is eaten quickly. We all place our bowls in the tray, bow and leave to our rooms.

Not me. Time for a walk. I have been sitting too long now and it is now dark. Since I can 'see' in the dark I can sense the paths just fine. Looks like they have been kept up, but not paved. Spent too much time with the UNA. Don't like paved even though it has made a comeback in many places. Not asphalt at least. No oil. I kick off the sandals and TK them to my arms to carry. Ah, that feels good to feel the earth again. In about twenty minutes I reach a meadow of sorts. Surprised they have not planted it as it is so close and not up or down a hill to get here. All the other areas appear to be with crops or at least furrowed. Good for me though. I have to laugh. There are a couple of owls watching my every move. Okay, I still don't like bats, though I leave them alone when they go darting for bugs. I whirl around like I am fifteen again. It feels wonderful. Before the plague, before the TK, before all the

responsibilities.

Guardian Lisa, incoming gate travel.

I am on vacation, get someone else. You are being very rude!

No choice, everyone else is off planet.

You would think with so many generations now they could find at least one of them.

Fine, but they come in here. I am not going to the mesa. Technically it works, but it also means some disorientation from what is expected and they have to make their own travel plans from here.

Prepare to receive in ten seconds. Not much time. I sit, assume the position and concentrate. They are coming in fast. Gotcha! Five travelers and Pr'thn. Must be a practice run for her as it is usually still Br'thn.

A little more warning would be appreciated next time control. Must be a new TK7.

Sorry, we were caught off guard as well. Thanks for helping out. Will try not to let it happen again.

Well, what have we got? Four beta newbies and Susan. Does Yingui spend any time with his kid?

“Susan, over here. Field trip?”

“Lisa, what are you doing here and where are we?”

“Emergency I am told. Was supposed to be on 'vacation'. You are at some monastery just inland from the east Pacific. A Yingui recommendation.” I roll my eyes and smile for effect.

“California. I know what the word means. We must be at the Zen Mountain Center. Good choice. You should like it here.” Her smile looks genuine. I am getting cynical. Better watch it.

“Sorry, I am so used to being vague so as not to offend anyone. The first five days were not so nice. Left me at the gate. Ah, Susan your wards are starting to wander off.”

She gives a shrill whistle and they all stop where they are and begin their return.

“This is a monastery Susan and being night they will be meditating in their rooms. We need to keep the noise level down.”

“Sorry, still a little messed up.” She starts looking around as if missing something. “They do that to all the TKs by the way. Norms have it a little easier.”

“How would they know that? I have not sensed any psiotic activity. They use sensors? Haven't found any of those either. No tech at all in fact.”

“Look I need to get these four back to camp. We were traveling with Meep. She is probably wondering what happened to us. If she shows up here tell her we went to the mesa to pick up things from there.” She has her group and DSs out. Pr'thn follows before I can ask her who Meep is. And how can this Meep be traveling separately from the others. Aren't we

all bound by the same rules? Only 'thn can travel the gateways alone and then only after they become sentient. That leaves out Pr'thn and the other younger 'thn.

I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck. Not a bad thing, but my special sense is on high alert. I slowly turn around to gaze on the weirdest sight, a rainbow of glowing spheres and twisting tubes all in motion. Kind of nauseating really.

Excuse me honored one. Have you seen five travelers and a 'thn recently?

The movement changes its pattern but does not stop.

Are you Meep?

How would you know that? Have we met before? I am sorry, but all of you look alike to me. It is very difficult. I mean no offense.

No, we have not met. Susan, Pr'thn and the others have gone to the original meeting place. You should still be able to reach them there.

Thank you honored one. The movement sort of evaporates all of a sudden. I will have to ask later, but my best guess is Meep is a non parasitical dimensional being. I always suspected they would exist, glad it has finally happened.

“You have some impressive friends.” I jump and turn around. Second time today someone has snuck up on me. I don't like this. The head person I met earlier. Okay, not much honor lost to her. You would expect a Zen master to be able to be quiet, real quiet.

I bow, “I am sorry for the noise.” Then it hits me, “Meep was not a friend. I have no idea what she is. Never seen a being like her before.” Then it hits me, “This, ah, does not frighten you?” Most norms would be basket cases about now. Guess Zen masters are made of sterner stuff. I am impressed anyway.

“Why would it?” She rises into the air several meters continuing to look at me.

“That explains why you did not need sensors to know what I was. I was not hiding from other TKs. But, how did you hide your identity from me? The only ones who can are nines and you could not be a nine or I would have heard of you and certainly have sensed your 'thn.”

“There is much you need to learn. Come, let's get back. Everyone here is a TK, from level two on up. The ones being too immature for meditation study.”

“A TWO! How the freep did a two hide from me?” I am really losing it. I am shaking like a leaf. Me, a guardian and the oldest living gateway and I could not sense a two. A girl could get killed by people who knew this trick.

“Come, all will be explained.” There is that cat like smile again. Too much time with pop cats. I am becoming suspicious. Poor Owa. I wonder how she is doing after, the ah, you know. Okay, pay attention. Follow the

Zen master before you make an even greater fool of yourself.

When we get back to the meditation hall the others are waiting. The master escorts me to a place next to her. Everyone is sitting facing inwards so I do the same.

“I would like all of you to welcome Lisa. Lisa is the prime gateway and a TK8.” All good so far. Everyone bows to me from their sitting position. I bow in return. So much for being anonymous.

“Lisa is in training to be the new Abbott of this center. I expect to retire a year from now.”

“WHAT?” I exclaim.

“Maybe two years.” I hear a few giggle. The Abbott is smiling also. Great. I don't suppose that I will get away with the short stint, seeing as how everyone already knows that I am essentially immortal. That means a minimum of one hundred years.

“Your mission will be to train the entire TK contingent the methods we have worked out here to hide our abilities. Lives are at stake. To begin we train Lisa.” A moan goes up, then a giggle. Zennies with a sense of humor. Just what I need. It will be different anyway. I may be here for much longer than a hundred years. Will have to think of something really good to leave to my successor. Something really good.

Mei Ling

I left known space eons ago in non relativistic time. Only a few days by our time. Sy'thn and I are alone in the vastness of space. My heart is overwhelmed by the beauty of our surroundings and of our adventure.

I was getting bored just jumping from one system to the next hunting for more homes for humanity and the curious. There had to be more. With the hunt slowing down, having far more possible homes than can be filled for thousands of years and many more TKs to take my place, I decided.

I needed to know.

So, here we are.

As a Guardian and Bearer, I am allowed to do whatever I want. Same as all the others. We each had the responsibility to follow our own instincts. Our needs. We just did not know what ultimately would be important.

As time progressed, I was able with Sy'thn's help to have significantly increased our speed. Beyond, in fact, the ability of most 'thn to catch up with us to investigate. The 'thn do not understand the “curious monkey” syndrome as the pop cats call it. But they let us proceed. At first we got an occasional TK12 as we invaded their territory. Now they ignore us rather than suffer the time lost to working their own regions of space by ramping up to our time frame.

I had Ron plot out the fastest and safest course as well as work on this ship design. That meant going through Meep to make sure we did not mess up their dimension when we DSed as well. I checked in with the rest of the original Guardians. Even Yingui smiled and bowed to me. Don't entirely trust him. He knows something. That smile means he knows something.

Meep said huq [The pronoun for Meep's gender. Complicated, involving sixteen distinct types.] dimension was very similar to our own, only smaller. That is why we saved time by DSing through it. But the weird thing was that all the stars and galaxies were in the same place relative to each other, only different in key properties. Huq lifespan and way of life are totally different from ours. So much so that huq cannot fully emerge into our space any more than we can into huq. When we DS, we can see the possible portals back into our own space but cannot see the actual “Meep” space with our senses. We can 'feel' some things with TK, like where stars are, but that is all. This same limitation is imposed on the 'thn as well, their being from and of our space. It is a wonder that we can see anything of each other or hear each other's thoughts though our mutual TK abilities. Glad we can though. Meep has been big help in understanding the other dimensions and the physics involved. Of course

huq is just as curious about ours.

To make this journey possible, Meep worked with huq people to warn everyone what I was doing. Turned out that being so far away from most stars I really was not likely to be noticed in huq dimension either. Still, at the speeds I am going we did not want any accidents. There have been a few bumps, just hope it was nothing sentient. My mass is HUGE going at these speeds. Very little can stand up to it.

It will be time for me to relieve Sy'thn soon. We can each only do this for a couple of hours at a time. The constant hum from going back and forth from the two dimensions is tiring to say the least. Without using this method it would take me ten times as long though and with the universe still expanding, I might not even get there till it compresses again. Scientists used to think that the universe would expand forever and eventually die out. Second law of thermodynamics, but they did not recon on psiotics. It turns out that as the universe ages, more and more beings reach TK status. As more and more beings do, more and more of the psiotic energy we use to do our heightened tasks get used. When the revised laws of thermodynamics take psiotics into account, it is apparent that as psiotic use goes up, expansion goes down. Eventually reversing and collapsing.

It is said that some of the oldest 'thn are from before the last collapse and rebirth. Most get wiped out by the collapse, but a very few manage to make their way into the correct dimension again to pass on the knowledge of universes past. That is why they are the Keepers. Even they do not know how many cycles ago the first 'thn came into being. No 'thn is from the first time. The odds are just too low of this happening when you think about it.

Rest time.

“Yes, you rest now Sy'thn. I will take over. We should be there soon. Maybe the next cycle. Stay aware and bring me out if we get close. I don't want to over shoot. I don't trust Yingui. I would hate to come all this way to die splatting against some sort of dimensional wall.”

Splat bad.

“Yes, bad. Rest now.” A baby 'thn was a baby that took millions of years to grow up. Come to think of it, Sy'thn will be way behind the others when we return. I will continue this log when I come out again.

Next Cycle

Ship is still intact at least. I review with Sy'thn what part of the course I covered while under. The ship is barely bigger than the two of us. Sy'thn is just above my head. I reduced my body mass to just under forty kilos to help keep weight down. We do not have much extra mass and depend on TK to keep my body going. The idea was to be very small and VERY fast. When not 'driving' we each continued to push with our TK ability. Being out in space has meant constant acceleration closer and

closer to the speed of light. We reached turn over early this morning and have been slowing down since, depending more on our DSing and less on our speed in our own dimension. Already most of the stars were behind us, judging from the brightness of the red glowing spot behind us and the ever fainter blue spot that was in front of us.

I am a little sick to my stomach, but attribute that to my growing nervousness over completing our mission. The spot aft of us is now small, non distinct, almost yellow and very very faint. We have slowed down a lot, stopped in fact. Hard to tell. In front of us I see nothing. I turn again. Just watching it, it is getting brighter. The spot behind us IS the physical aspect of the universe! We are seeing it nearly at the time of the big bang.

Not feel well. Tired, very tired.

I am having trouble breathing. The CO2 level is up, way up.
AAAAH! THE WALL! OF COURSE!

“TURN AROUND! GO BACK!”

So tired.

“COME ON Sy'thn, WE HAVE TO GET BACK. I'M HELPING.”

There is only a very weak psiotic field here. Sy'thn will be in trouble.

“Sy'thn, shut down. Hibernate. Conserve energy as much as possible.”

I am having trouble myself, but my life force is less dependent on the psiotic field. There is enough with Sy'thn drawing less for me to maintain my own physiology and little more. Are we stranded? The psiotic field will eventually catch up. All we have to do is hold on. I am so tired. It would be best if I slept too. So tired. I will have to let time and momentum carry us.

Rachael

New Europe

“Senora, your work is so beautiful. You must show me the equipment you used to produce such images. Please you must.” Ah youth, so easy to excite. A photography student at the university having spotted my portfolio case stopped to see what was inside.

“I don’t know what you mean. I am only doing what I was taught. I am afraid that I am not that creative or original.”

“Then tell me who was your teacher, I would study under him. I want to be able to do work just like this.” Oh boy, I doubt very much you would want to do that. Ten years it has taken me. It was either that or study under Lisa, who is the abbot of some Zen monastery now. Lesser of two evils in my opinion. Still had to spend a couple of weeks with her to learn the new shielding method. Worked great except for the one big draw back of making you completely vulnerable. Seems to have worked for her though. She is so much happier than when she was, ah, losing it.

Back to reality, “Translated into standard, his name would be Silver Ghost.”

“No, no, tell me what was his name really?”

“That is his name. At least the only one he ever gave me.” What was his pre Chinese name? I have long ago forgotten.

“Silver Ghost was one of the best photographers to have ever lived and that was hundreds of years ago. I am sorry, though you look older than me, even you are not that old.” I smell a setup. That trickster has been here before. I knew it! Learn photography and then teach at this great university. It would do you good to get out of the TK rut. Do something different he said.

“Well, then it must be a mystery. I would be happy to show you how.” Not that hard, once the equipment is made, and the film, and solutions, etc, etc, etc. Besides, she will already have a basic understanding of the process from her other instructors. I came in with zero.

“When can we start?” She is serious. The only students I have ever had where ones forced to be there, martial arts or TK training. I am not totally comfortable with this. Though it has been a very long time, I am still upset over that one I raised up the levels only to be betrayed by her later. So long ago, but the pain is still fresh. Oh, I put on a good front, but she hurt me to the core. She and her boy friend. But I came here to teach and to watch. If I get the position this new student will get college credit as well.

“How about this afternoon? Here is the address were I am staying. Everything we need is there.” I hand her my ID which she mates to hers

to transfer the information. Just IR, but it works. Or so Ron has explained to me.

“Oh, thank you! You will not regret this. I will study hard. I will not disappoint you.”

“Until one then.” She waves goodbye and leaves. Now maybe I can finish my breakfast in peace. I eat most meals out. Making your own food, even when you know how is just not the same. As I said, I am not that creative. Freep I have to hurry. Took too much time letting her see my portfolio. I am nervous. I guess I wanted someone else to see it before I went in for my interview. Best just get this over with. I pick up the portfolio case and the my bag. Purse, whatever. It is not intuitive to not use TK. I have to be careful and maintain my awareness now. So far okay. Have spent nearly two months getting ready. No slip ups yet.

The photography department is only two blocks away. I scoped out the whole place months ago. I don't like to be unprepared. I ignore all the possible photography subjects I walk past, even for possible future work. People are really the only valid subject material, though my portfolio has the requisite landscapes, stilllifes, nudes and wildlife expected of an interviewing professor wannabe. Yingui was adamant that I learn all the subjects and styles. All the work in the portfolio was consistent mind you. Just had to know the rest. Any teacher would know it was all done by the same person. We spent months visiting museums and going to shows. Constant discussions of the merits and limitations of each. I thought my head was going to burst. The worst part was being out in the desert carrying that huge camera without TK. And I had to use it. With TK you see at near infinite detail and the view camera was the closest I could get to that feeling. Though any time I can spend in the UNA is fine with me. I guess we spent so much time there at the beginning, it feels like home.

This is it. Room number 351. I double check my time piece and my letter of introduction. The current culture is very strict on time. You would think they invented the clock. I knock. Weird how something so simple as a knock could survive all this time. Another anachronism. They are trying very hard to throw off sexism, but have a long way to go. Only one other female faculty member. Just coming out of a period of women at the bottom again. One of the reasons I got picked for the interview I am sure. Being an older women, they are more likely to let me in without feeling threatened. How much longer would I be around? The ones who don't go along with the “new” way don't have to put up with me for long and the ones who are not sure can see this as an experiment without much risk.

“Enter.” I slide the latch and push open the door. No door knobs here. Inside is a gentleman about forty years old sitting at a large empty desk. Portfolios are stacked on a small table to the right. The other candidate's no doubt. I hand him my letter, which he sets down without

looking at.

“Professor Thornthrip?” he waves in the affirmative, but remains silent. Shit, it is obvious he is just doing his duty, but does not believe there is any point in the exercise other than that. I place my portfolio on the desk and step back to wait. He stares at it for a moment, then looks up at me and waves his hand again, apparently indicating that I am to open it for him. What a pig. I am half tempted, but don't. Not yet at least. As a TK you had to be careful with your thoughts.

Always start with the best image. That way they want to see more. I have noticed from the images on the walls that he is a landscape artist himself. Fine. I rearrange the portfolio so my best landscape image is on top. He does not know this of course. Amazing what I have learned to do with DS and TK over the years. I slowly open the cover to a cover sheet. Okay, I am not above playing a little. Treat your own work like it is the most precious material in the universe and others are more likely to respect it too. Even Yingui liked this image. Too cliché for me. Waterfall, reflections on a lake, tall trees, mountains, animal in the front. Okay, only a small chipmunk, but in a cute pose. Yeah, I staged it, but it still took months to work out and wait for just the right light. I am not up to moving the sun just yet.

He stares at it for the longest time. No mind reading. Not right. Finally he carefully covers the image up and closes the portfolio himself and then pushes it back to me. He looks straight at me for a moment. I hold my own. Too much time with James and pop cats. I try not to look threatening. Just a friendly little old lady. He waves me off. That's it, not even one word has passed his lips after he said enter. Oh well. I leave and latch the door behind me. Can't expect success the first time, but still, it stings. I sure would like to know who does get the position. I have scanned the other portfolios while he stared at my image. Fortunately gray scale is easy to scan in TK. Glad they have not gotten to color with silver based material yet. Hard to tell the difference between the other's images though. Nothing like what I had. Maybe that was my problem. Too different. Never outshine the people who hire you.

As I leave I see a few bicycles go by. Most people live within walking or bicycle distance. There is public transport for the infirmed, the aged, or for longer distances. There is no personal transport using non muscle energy. All roofs have solar tech, insulation and passive designs facing south and built into the side of the hill. The solar looks even better quality than what the TKs used to trade to them. Water is conserved and recycled through gardens and natural areas. Because this is a university they have a total of ten knowledge nodes. A lot of places only have one. They are lucky.

I have leased a place a few blocks from the university. No one owns land. I was expecting to spend a number of years here, so equipped it

well. A large darkroom in the basement, studio space upstairs, seating for thirty or so. Workers have been working on it for the past few months to get it ready. I could have used TK, but that would have made for suspicious neighbors and officials who did the innumerable inspections. They wanted to see ALL of the paper work. Large place by current standards and obscene by the standards that I grew up with. The university may have merely been curious. Who was this person with no gallery recognition and very rich? Should have taken Yingui's advice and shown a few times. Too late now.

I feel like a ride. Somewhere I can go fast and hard. I have designed what I think might be the fastest bike ever made. Ron helped me design it, knowing more about alloys and such. I have a few hours before the inquisitive student shows up, if word has not gotten to her already. I suspect that she will leave once she finds out that I failed. Have to get my mind off that.

Once inside my temporary home I quickly change and bring the bike out of storage. An upright design for speed and hill climbing ability. I really stick out among all the recumbent versions meant more for hauling stuff on a gradual slope. Once outside I have to observe convention and go much slower than I want to. Okay, fine, to avoid drawing attention to myself by ending up in the local jail. I make my way through small streets, following the flow and people going about their business. It is certainly quieter and oh, more odoriferous. When everyone is under the same pressure, you learn not to notice. No air conditioning either. Hill coming up, the bike shifts into a lower gear. Most buildings are designed for passive cooling and heating, but that does not help the cyclists and walkers outside of them. All buildings are built in the narrow space between the flatter farmland the steeper hills. Better than paving farmland at least.

Finally! I take a short cut through a business access area. Not strictly allowed, but it is the off hours for deliveries and no one will complain if I don't get in the way. Before me is Mount Diablo. Not it's real name, just what I call my favorite challenge. I have about a kilometer ramp up to the base before the grade gets steep. I build up as much speed as I can to attack my foe. People were very surprised to see a fiftyish lady riding up this hill with such determination on her strange bike, but over the last month they have gotten used to it and pretty much ignore me now. At the red gate I start my recorder. I am determined to beat my best time today.

When I pull up to the house after my victorious ride I am pumped up and feeling good. Five seconds off my previous record. My student is early and has brought friends. I am suddenly brought back to reality. No matter, I can beat this. University recognition would have been great, but I can work without it. Will just take longer. My goal is to become part of the artistic community as a way to get in better with the leaders to hear

their thoughts and watch their actions. As an artist I would be invited to social occasions without being expected to participate in the actual decisions. We still try not to interfere, being more observers. Not my strong suit and one of the reasons I am here. To learn how not to react instinctively to everything. Only when we have to, do we step in, and even there it helps if we are already present, using night and one on one persuasion to do our deeds. Lack of knowledge leads to mistakes.

I am dripping with sweat when I make it to the entrance where Lea and the others are waiting. "Go on in, the door is open. Give me a moment to get cleaned up. Please speak in Standard. I am not that good in your native language yet and you won't know the others I can speak." Like Hopi, still largely a TK language, which is fine with me. Not all TKs have TP ability and it makes things easier to have our own language. Cleaning up for norms would mean a sponge bath to conserve water, but I do a quick TK instead. When I come out, this time in a dress, yuck, they are all touring the studio remarking about the images on the wall. I hate dresses. Still prefer pants. Appearances sake, sigh.

"You were right Lea, this work is more amazing than I could have imagined."

"I want to know how she recorded this one. It looks to be at least 150 degrees of angle. I know of no lens capable of achieving that wide of an angle without severe distortion. And look at the depth of field. This must be fake."

"Talk about fake, look at this one. Does not look like any place I have seen before. Look at those rock columns. It is like it is from another world."

"I really like this still life. Even though it is in black and white, I feel like I could reach in and grab a slice of bread. The detail is amazing."

"I hate to interrupt, but it would be best if we get going. I assure you all the images are real. All done with lenses and silver based film."

"Silver! Whoa, that explains a lot. None of us could afford silver. Only the very rich or the masters are allowed to work in that media. I have never been this close to an actual silver print outside a museum."

"But the detail. None of the other prints I have seen show this much detail. How can that be?"

"The film I used in that case was twenty by twenty-five centimeters in size." I am confronted with silence and stares. Half have mouths open in disbelief. I am beginning to see why the interview went badly. I would guess he did not believe the images were real either.

"I can prove it. Lea, I will pick on you since I do not know the other's names yet. Please open that cabinet near you." She wakes up and complies. As she opens the doors, I hear sighs and awes. "It will swing out on the stand. Acts as a tripod for studio work as well. This format is not easy to lug around as you might guess from its size." Speaking from

personal experience. Without TK to carry this beast I was definitely discouraged from going any larger, much as I wanted to.

“The film holder in the top drawer is empty. Have not had a chance to reload it. Go ahead and take it out to see.” The last session I did was a portrait of one of the construction workers. I still prefer 'real' people over the well off.

“This thing is huge!” A male holds it up and then passes it around. There is always one who opens the slider to confirm it is really empty. Probably would have died of shame had it had film inside, though it could be recycled.

“Okay, let's set something up so I can prove the lens is real too. As I ask you to do a task, say your name and tell me what photography subjects interest you the most to record.” They nod and I have everyone's attention.

“You bring that table over. We will do a simple still life maybe?”

“Robert is my name. I like nudes.” He blushes with giggles from the rest, but at least he is honest. So many males get into the arts so they can gaze on naked ladies. Takes awhile to wash that out of them. Hard work on both our parts is the cure.

“Fair enough. We will do me then.” I slip out of my dress and assume a position on the table. “Bet you were thinking more of Lea or her weren't you? Well, everyone is nude underneath their clothing. Don't be prejudice and think it only means twenty year old 'perfect' females. You need to be just as comfortable recording a male as female too. All of you, pay attention. This is very important. You have no right to ask anyone to pose, if you are not willing to do the same for them. If this group wants to do nudes, that 's fine, but you will model as well as record. You need to experience both sides to understand the process. No exceptions. Got it? Now, just me or props?” I strike a cliché pose.

“Nonina Master. How about an apple? Oh, ah, I would like to learn how to do children.”

“Not as much experience there, but we can learn together. Apples will be in the kitchen. Through that door. And I am not a master.” Leas looks at me questioningly. I nod my head no. That leaves two I don't know, both males. Even now, males out number females in this art. Lucky to have two females in my group.

“You, the one not paying attention. Yes, you. Loaded film holders are in the second drawer down. Please take out one and place it in the camera. Goes in the same way as smaller silicon camera backs you have probably used in class.” I had to adapt my system to make it easier on them. Both ways are equally effective.

“I have only used a silicon camera in class. Never a silver one. Oh, my name is Tom. Where was this image taken?” The one who thought it was fake. His eyes are on the image and not me. I am not in that bad of

shape, pretty good actually judging from Robert's stares. So, that means his heart is in landscapes. Good for him.

“A mesa in the south west region of the UNA about five years ago. A break in the storm and I got lucky. Ah, Nonina, good choice of apple. This one will look great in gray scale. Black and white for the rest of you. Now what do you want me to do with it? Oh, almost forgot, you will have to focus the camera and set the shutter. See if you can figure it out. Work as a team.”

They play with the camera some and finally get it. Focusing, with each taking a turn to see what everything looks like upside down and backwards. I ham it up some to more giggles.

“Okay, set the shutter to one second and the aperture to F11.” I am really surprised that those conventions are still used. Took me forever to get it right. There had to be a better way.

“You don't need to make a light level reading? With film being so expensive I would never take the chance.”

“Well, Lea. Normally you would be correct. But even the best previsualizer will not replace experience. We will not be using them here. You will become so good that unless you are in a totally new situation doing something you have never done before, you will not need one. Besides, film is more forgiving that your silicon based camera backs. And I have made many images in this room or similar ones with this camera and film. Trust me. All set? Close the shutter and let's do it.”

Exposure made, after much discussion as to who should have the honor of setting off the shutter. It went to Lea, who 'discovered' me. I quickly get dressed, before Robert loses any more of his eyesight. “Now, follow me to the darkroom where we will develop the image.” They follow me down like ducks all in a row following their mother.

“There is one who has remained silent. Would you mind flipping that switch?”

“My name is Jason. I don't care much for imaging. I just enjoy the mechanics of the process.”

“Good for you for figuring that out. The rest of you, make Jason your friend. You will need his help repeatedly. Now, with this film, we are able to use a red safe light as you can see. I like using it for demonstration purposes so you can see what is going on. Not everyone can see in the dark.” A giggle and some comments about another instructor whom I have not met.

“Since we only have one plate to develop, we will use trays. Normally I use tanks that handle six at a time. Tom please pour the chemicals into the trays they are next to.”

“You don't use a processor? What about silver loss? What about the toxic materials?”

“This is a demo. The processor is underneath, when we are ready for

it. The developer is based on vitamin C and non toxic. The silver recovery system is built into the water system. All of the water is one hundred percent recycled. Nothing goes into the ground or leaves this building. Any more questions?" Nope. Never mind that I 'empty' the processor with TK. Hey, I did cut a few corners. Hopefully not so many as to raise suspicions.

"First tray, four minutes. Timer up there, if you will Nonina. Thirty seconds in the neutralizer and then two minutes in the silver recovery." Jason ignores the process and is nosing around trying to see as much as possible under the red light. Each has a gift and they will ultimately be a good team. Speaking of which, they will be getting hungry soon. As they are developing the image, I sneak out and send a quick message to the local store to deliver some supplies. Bread, cheese, etc. I would guess they would not be amused by TK chow, no matter how nutritious it is.

When I turn around to go back, I see Jason has followed me out. He is looking at the books of images I have collected about other artists. A necessary teacher thing. Too bad it won't last longer than today. At least they will remember today. I take a chance. "Jason, do you like Wizards and Rogues?" His eyes light up, "You mean Rogues and Wizards?" "Ah, right, you will have to show me how to play it. I picked it up recently and have not been able to figure out the instructions. I will trade you lessons for lessons." He nods enthusiastically. I know Jason is a common name, given their history, but I am a sucker for it all the same, after that day anyway.

After a contact print is made and brought upstairs, we all return to the studio to discuss what we have done and prepare food for ourselves.

"That arm looks weird."

"Why?" Make them work it out.

"Does not look normal. No one would have their arm in that position." Good, was not easy holding the pose they put me in either.

"Maybe I am not normal." Another laugh. They are beginning to suspect? No.

"Five people all around one camera is not going to go very far. There is lots of studio space here and of course the wild area just out the back door, only don't go too far. Therefore each of you will use your own camera. A smaller, easier to transport version. The five view cameras, as they are called, use 10x12.5cm film, or one fourth the area of the larger camera." I open another cabinet to show them the cameras and silicon recording backs. "The same rules of depth of field and stopping motion apply to these cameras as to the ones you are used to using. If you want to produce work like what you see on these walls, you will need to use an aperture of at least F16. That will mean longer shutter times. Compose carefully. Film is not infinite and you will be using film if you stick with me. The silicon backs are only for a brief period of time, till I am sure

you won't be using up film like crazy. Let's get to work. Oh, no nudes yet, unless you want to go first Robert." He blushes and shakes his head no. Good. "You need to study much more before you are ready. The worst thing in the world is to be fusing with your camera while a model is waiting. Makes them real nervous. I will walk around to watch and advise. Don't be afraid to make mistakes, that's what you are here for."

Soon the place is bustling as the five each set up in a different place. Or almost. The two ladies are right next to each other working cooperatively. Sigh, it never changes. Jason has already taken the shutter apart. Must have tools in his pockets.

A knock at the door. I scan. Shit, that professor who dismissed me. Do I let him in or let him go away. Heck, I have nothing to lose, he was not going to hire me, thus can't fire me either. "Enter!" I go to Tom to check up on his progress. The 'professor' can make his own way.

He runs into Robert first, "I am looking for Senora Watanabe." He does not say it right, but it is not a common name here. Not too many people of Japanese ancestry left. I can't hold that against him. He notices the contact print on the table and picks it up. I don't think he is amused. Nothing important showing, but they saw plenty while it was set up. We have all stopped to watch him. They are just as curious as I am to see his reaction. Lea and Nonina come in from their work outside and freeze. He reacts to the noise and looks up, "Lea what are you doing in this house?"

"Papa, I am leaning photography. Real photography."

He throws down the print, "You will come with me at once young lady."

My turn, "Excuse me. You came to speak with me?"

"That can wait. All of you should leave."

"And why is that Senor?"

"A teacher does not model for their students."

"Ah, so a pretty young nervous poor girl is okay to gaze upon. Might even drum up some business on the side. But an experienced master of photography who can help them with the camera, setup, lighting and posing should not. Interesting. Is this how you run all of your classes? I bet you would never let Lea model would you? They haven't by the way. Only me. But someone else's daughter would be fine I am sure."

"We are a proper institution. We have standards." He is just getting madder. My usual effect on his type.

Lea speaks up, "We saw nothing we have not seen at the baths a thousand times."

"It would seem to me it is their choice, is it not? I charged nothing for their learning and I provided all the materials. I am also guessing they will learn how to do better work here, judging from the quality of the work of the others that were under consideration." Oops, I am not supposed to have been able to have seen those.

He is too mad to have caught my slip though, “Lea come.” He makes to grab her hand, but she pulls away.

“No papa. I want to learn how to do this kind of photography. I want to be as good as Silver Ghost.” Not a good response Lea. Women have their place and it is not as a master photographer like Silver Ghost. Think of what could happen all alone out there in the wild? Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! And you don't have the TK advantage either dear.

“As long as you are in my house, you will obey me.” Oh God, how I hate bullies. I could easily force this, but it is her choice. She is shocked, but also mad. Not a good time to make decisions.

“It is not my place to influence the outcome here. This is not about the image you helped make, but something else entirely. You will have to ask the professor what I am talking about if you want to know. For my part, I will continue to do my artistic work with or without university sanction. I am an artist no matter what he says. If anyone wants to study under me, they are welcome. Simply be here tomorrow at one. I will clean up the cameras and equipment, you are free for the day. I do, however, suggest that you continue this discussion elsewhere for the benefit of those who are not willing to risk their educational opportunity at the university. Even if he can do nothing legally to prevent you from studying here, he can make your life at the school very difficult. You will get no degree under me. Think about it.”

He looks vindicated and at least affords me a brief nod. Which also affirms what I have just said. He feels he has made the right choice in turning me down and retrieving his daughter from the wicked witch. If I had known, I would never have agreed to have her here. It is not my place to break up families or start art wars. Nor is it part of my mission to piss off the very institution I was supposed to be joining. If the others are like him, I am better off where I am. There is more than one way to catch a pop cat. I will just have to be more creative now that the easy path is blocked. I have the advantage of time however.

With the other's gone, it is a simple matter of using TK to put everything back in its place. All except the lens that Jason was working on. It is in pieces all over the table. Never thought when I duped it from Yingui's that there were that many pieces to it. No matter, it will be easier for me to dupe one of the other lenses than to put this one back together. That can wait. I dissolve all the pieces laying about. There is a lot of left over food. I concentrate for a moment. It is easy enough to find a poor family literally on the other side of the tracks, or in their case, higher up the hill. I wait till they leave their kitchen for a moment and DS the remains to them. Done.

Well I don't expect to see either Lea or Nonina again. The three males possibly. It will all depend on what their schedules are. Patriarchal societies have never kept very good tabs on the male students and really

don't care much. The women though, must be 'intact' for the wedding. Surprised that these two have not already been married off. I think I am seeing things right at the point of change. There have been so many ups and downs during my journeys. When things are bad, it goes all male dominance. When things get better, they relax and women finally come into their own. Stupid really as the good and bad all depend on their choices now. Holding steady at one billion we are not over taxing the biosphere any longer at least. Most in New Europe, New Asia and Baja Americas.

It will be dark soon and time for the second half of my reason for being here. We have been keeping tabs on the underground since before Fiona and Onna left on their mission with Mother. Though I have heard that she now prefers the name Cath or was it Elle?

A knock at the door. Not again. I am ready to burst out to chew on the professor for real this time, when I remember to scan. There are lot of people outside. What no torches to burn the witch? I don't recognize who they are, but a majority are female. I get ready though and shield. Never again.

I open the door myself to see a well dressed women about forty in the front. "Senora Watanabe? Have I pronounced your name correctly? We don't see many Japanese names any more." I am amazed, finally remembering to nod.

"Please come in. We can all fit in the main studio, if you don't mind sitting on boxes with cushions." About eight women and three men come in. All well dressed and very polite. I am about to close the door when I hear a "psst" and scan the dark to see Lea trying to get my attention.

"When they leave come out to talk with me. It is important." I nod. Don't like it though. I really don't want to be part of a family mess. Daniel being the only family member still related to me is enough. He sure gets into enough trouble.

I find the group in the studio reviewing the images. One of the men comes up to me, "My name is Senor Parrillo. May I ask a technical question? The work is incredible by the way, no matter what the details of the method." Is he playing me?

"Of course."

"May I see the camera used to make this image?" He points to a still life. Not the landscape that caused my failure at the interview or the nude still on the table face up.

"Certainly. It was made with one of the smaller ones that I let the students use today." I pull out one of the four still intact cameras. "Students use silicon backs for practice and test exposures, but they will use silver soon enough, as this one was made with." It seems to answer his thoughts.

"I would like to see the rest of the images. Please allow me to

introduce you to the others at the same time.” He takes my arm in his. “You met Senora Thornthrip, Lea's mother.” She nods with a smile. Hard to believe she married the jerk. We go around the room and meet the others. One of the women is Professor Hatch, the only female photography professor. The other women are wives of male professors, including Parrillo's wife and the three males are all professors themselves, though only Parrillo is a photographer. One is a historian and the last is a geologist. Both are glued to the landscapes. One because of where it is and the people in them and one because of the rocks they portray.

I comment to them, “Those rocks have been weathered by the wind for millions of years. The local population that lives on top of them has been there for thousands of years.” Trying to give something to each of them.

“Senora Watanabe, what made you chose this person.”

“Professor Hatch. I chose him because I knew his mother well and always looked forward to visiting with the family. For people, I usually work with people who know me. Never felt it was right somehow intruding on a stranger's privacy.”

“Call me Terry. Nice lighting. You certainly know how to use your equipment. Not many people would attempt portrait work with a large format silver camera.”

“Call me Rachael, please. Not many people could afford it. I come from a well to do family. Not that working does not help some. I sell a print once in a while or work at teaching when I can get sponsorship from a school or university program. I teach even without the sponsorship however. It seems to be something I have to do.” Can't hurt to use a little honey this time.

“I can understand that. As a woman, I know full well what you have to go through to get recognition. And I understand the need, even if it just to show the men that we are not dumb cattle.” I smile and nod.

One of the other professor's wives holds up the nude we did, “Is this the image that caused all the problems?”

“No, that was the image that was used as the excuse. The problem was that I am a women who is older and better than he is.” She smiles.

“Yes, well men do have that problem don't they.” She rolls her eyes and sets the image down face up like she found it. If she found it offensive, she certainly showed no indication. I feel somewhat vindicated by this group, but not sure why they are here, except maybe curiosity.

Just as I think I may need to send out for more food, Professor Perrillo calls everyone together, “Has everyone seen enough then?” The others nod. A few raised eyebrows and knowing nods. “Ah, one last thing Rachael, if you would be so kind. Would you answer one question for us. Please describe your interview with Professor Thornthrip.”

“I would not want to offend Senora Thornthrip or speak ill of someone who is not here to defend his actions. There could have been any number of reasons he behaved the way he did.”

Senora Thornthrip speaks up, “Rudeness is never conscionable my dear. Please proceed.” She does know him of course.

“I knocked and heard him say enter. Once inside I am directed, after giving him my letter of introduction, which he does not read, to place my portfolio on the desk then to open it to the first image. Upon careful examination of the one image, he closes the portfolio and waves me and the portfolio away. That's it.”

“The only word you heard from him then was 'enter'?” I nod.

“Any idea why he did not ask you to leave your portfolio? Were not the other portfolios present in his office?”

“The others were there, all in one pile. I am guessing that he thought that my work failed to meet his minimum standard of even being considered. Happens sometimes when someone is of a style the interviewer hates.”

“Did you see any of his work to know what to expect.”

“All I saw were the images on the walls in his office. I don't know if they were done by him or not, I just assumed they were.” That gets a round of laughs.

“Oh no dear, those were not done by him. As chairman of the photography department he is entitled to use that office. The pictures come with the office. They are over three hundred years old. Original Silver Ghost images in fact.”

“And he does not like the Silver Ghost style.”

“Rather, he is unable, after twenty two years, to come close to their perfection.” Another laugh from the group.

“Your work, as exhibited here, is remarkably close to the Silver Ghost images, but there is something more as well. A certain fire that a lot of the Silver Ghost images lack.”

“You mean hers are not so boring.”

“I was being polite, after all he was considered to be THE master.”

“Anyway, we have taken enough of your time. We will be in touch. Please do not give up on us yet. We need you here. We will work something out.” He offers his ID to link in with mine to transfer his particulars. This sounds hopeful, though I am not sure what they can do. My understanding is that heads of departments wield a lot of power, even in this culture.

Senora Thornthrip is the last to leave, “Please help my daughter if you can. I know she is outside. I will do what I can from my end.” I lead her out the door and then stand at the door waiting for Lea. Sure enough a few minutes after everyone has left, she comes out of the shadows cautiously.

“Senora, I need your help.” She puts on her best sad puppy dog look.

“Please, come inside. It is starting to get cold outside and is already dark.” She scampers in.

“Your mother is nice at least.”

“Yes, I adore her. It is my Papa that I have trouble with.”

“Well, it would appear you are not alone there.”

“No. He basically inherited his position from my grandpapa, who received it from his papa.”

“That does not seem quite right. So, the reason I did not get the position was because I was not related to anyone important. An old boys club.” She nods and sighs.

“That and you are a threat to him, being a better photographer. I am sorry you had to be in the middle of it. A lot of us want to see change, but this is not so easy. Normally studying under an outsider would be frowned on, but is not forbidden.”

“Why are you here? Your mother mentioned that I should help you if at all possible. What is it that you need? It would seem you are well connected and guaranteed a position, if they ever accept another women in the club.”

“I am an only child. My father wanted a boy, but was at least happy till today that I had chosen photography as a life path.”

“Go on.”

“As you might have guessed, the discussion did not end when we left. The short version is that I am free to study under whom ever I want. I am of an age of responsibility.”

“But will get no support from him.” She nods yes.

“And I am homeless. Oh, I can stay with friends. Not everyone lives at home. Most are in dorms or have found places close by, being too far away from their homes to live there.”

“But that will only work for so long. You need to be able to contribute as well.”

“And places are not allowed to have guests for longer than a week.”

“And this is where I come in apparently. Are you opposed to working? I mean real work, not just the fun stuff.”

She nods enthusiastically.

“Cleaning toilets, rooms, kitchens, etc.?”

Not as happy, she nods again.

“Maintaining the photography equipment, the darkroom and the studio.”

She brightens up again. What I need to worry about is my night activities that I am going to be late for if this goes on much longer. I will also have to be careful about TK use in my own home now.

“There is plenty of space here, including at least one unused room that can be fixed up for you. The problem is, is that I was not expecting

you. Can you stay at your friend's house tonight and then move in tomorrow morning?" That room is full of junk left over from the remodel. I have work to do.

"Yes, that would be easier for me as well, as I did not bring anything with me tonight. I did not want to appear too certain."

"There are some things you should know about me before you decide. I do not require much sleep. I come and go as I want, even at night. You are not my mother and are not to judge whom I associate with or don't. I am used to being alone. There will be a period of adjustment for both of us. I am much older than you and am used to being free. Likewise I am not your mother nor your protector. Your mother may expect me to shield you. That is between you and her. I will not stop you from doing foolish things if that is your choice. You said you are of an age of responsibility. [between maturity and senility] Some things only seem to be learned by experiencing them the hard way. I will not stand in the way of your education.

I will leave a list of what I expect on the kitchen table in the mornings. Some days will be light, some hard. You will not normally know in advance. If something requires funds to accomplish, I will transfer more than enough for the task. You will keep the left over for yourself.

Our rooms are private enough that I don't expect any problems with friends visiting either of us. They are not to move in though please. I enjoy quiet and don't want to have to entertain groups of people.

If I so choose, I have the right to ask you to leave at any time, with no explanation. Likewise, you may leave without notice for any reason. Your tasks will never be so onerous that I can not do them myself. Failure to do them however will be a signal to me you are not coming back. You understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"One last thing, never, ever lie to me. Always tell the truth, no matter how embarrassing. I have seen it all, nothing you could experience would shock me. Now I am late for a meeting. Call me Rachael or Rach, not master. Do you want me to walk you anywhere? It is dark now and whereas I am not in any danger, you could be." They don't usually pick on little old ladies wearing black. Too easy and not a real score.

"I would be grateful. Thanks. It is only a few blocks."

"Best we get going then. Anything else? No. Let's go."

We exit out the front door. I do not bother locking the door and she seems about to ask, but does not. No one would dare raid my home. I am not without tech devices. Some are not allowed here, but I am licensed for them by virtue of my TK status. The workers adapting the house were not the only ones busy though they added some legitimacy to my changes.

The place she said she was staying at looked like typical student housing. Lots of individual rooms with central eating areas. There seemed to be more males than females by a large number. I did not think they would normally be housed together, but as I said, I would not question her choices. She waved goodbye and ran up the steps to disappear inside. The male student area is also closer to the poorer area of town. Guess they felt the men could take care of themselves.

Now, on to my own meeting. If I jog somewhat I should only be about ten to fifteen minutes late. This group is a bit more careful, having rotating locations and times. Strictly speaking they are not an authorized club, but are much older than the current culture. Funny how what was once highly progressive becomes ancient so fast.

A patrol officer sees my running and looks at me questioningly. "Sorry, just late for an appointment. I have no need for assistance." I am let on without interference. One advantage to being an old lady in this culture. I go into stealth mode, as taught at the monastery. This is one meeting where being a wizard would likely be detected. Not a bad thing, but not how I wanted to start out. I always like to get the lay of the land before making a mess of it. Today has not been good to me.

The meeting is scheduled for the east corner of the largest green space. Lanterns have been set up. Any group of people could reserve the space without question and other areas of the park already have people interacting. We would not look in anyway out of the ordinary on a night with a nearly full moon, lots of stars and a pleasant breeze. I am panting somewhat when I arrive at the first check point. Something the other groups would probably not have. The middle aged man looks like he belongs. A glass of something in hand appearing to be casually watching the others. I have been briefed however.

"Good evening Senora. May I have your name and purpose?"

"Rachael. Freedom"

"Please proceed to control." Only a new person they did not recognize would be told this. This group had been persecuted at times in it's past and kept up some appearances. Part of the test was knowing what to say and what to do. For instance I needed to find a lady in a particular shade of green tonight. Another occasion, another shade, gender, etc. Only those in the know, knew what to do. People trying to "sneak" in would be "labeled" by the group and nothing important would happen near them. If the group tried to get rid of people overtly they would only draw curiosity. People normally got bored and left when they realized this group was boring to outsiders.

As I walk by, I hear conversations on house plants, oil painting and other mundane activities. You are labeled until officially unlabeled. It takes me a few minutes to find the lady in green. She is with a group of others. I do not go straight to her, but go to the serving area and make

myself a glass of water. I was actually not that bored by the conversations that I could overhear. Maybe I should try oil painting next, or better yet watercolor. Yingui said that his mother had been quite good at it. Back to the task at hand.

I side up to the group with the lady in green and wait. She will approach me and after a few minutes does, much to the relief of the others no doubt. It is hard to keep up a boring conversation without starting to repeat yourself and starting to bore yourself as well.

“Good evening. I don't believe I know you. Welcome to our area of town.”

“Thank you, may I exchange in blue?” Any other color would have left me out.

“Ah, blue, such a nice color. Certainly.” She pulls a special ID link out of a fold in her dress, not the one everyone wears around their neck. She reads my ID and looks satisfied. She must have made some kind of knowing gesture to the others. Nothing out of the ordinary, as I certainly did not see it. Might even be a time lapse between the signal and their opening up, so I would not learn it.

“My name is Margarette. Welcome. Where do you hale from?”

“Of late, I come from the UNA.”

“That explains the slight accent. Your standard is quite good. Would not have thought that of someone from the UNA.” We invented Standard sister, you are the one with the accent, not me.

“Time and distance make differences.” A non committal stock response.

“You are late. But no matter. I will introduce you to the others as they check in. Stick with me tonight. I am your best friend from a long time ago and we share a mutual interest in photography. Not professional, strictly amateur. I can't handle the technical language of the truly professional.” I smile and nod. In the past I would never have met the others of course. Times are easy for them at the moment.

It was boring I am afraid. The only peculiar thing was that each person gave their name as one of the names of the Guardians or other players. Quite a few Rachels in fact. Not one Yingui, but that could be because his name was so unusual. Only the lady in green did not fit. Could have been a name from their own past.

“Well what do your think of our little group?” she asks.

“Nice enough I guess. So, you just sit around and talk?”

“Not exactly. How many of the people you have met are Rog?”

“None that my sensor picked up.” Behind my ear. I could not use my TK sense without setting off their sensors, which I had been warned they would all be wearing. Not something I was ready to do. But I HATE being so vulnerable.

“I was afraid of that. Thought is was just my sensor. We are

expecting one to show up, but were not given an exact date and time. Four of the people, are, like yourself, new to our collection.”

“And we all scan clean. Don't you have some kind of artificial device to check the sensors?”

“Yes, of course, but if I used that here, they would all scatter thinking a level five had shown up. The designs are old, when we used to have to worry about a five. I will check things out after I leave and can put some distance between ourselves.”

“How is the Rog situation by the way?”

“There is only one four and a handful of threes left running wild in our area. One of the threes was supposed to give themselves up. Mostly they stick to deserted islands away from others now. They will eventually have to come in. They can't make their own food and being that isolated wears on you. We live better than they do. Scratching an existence on land no one else wants to be on is hard.”

“Even their increased life expectancy will eventually wear out. They don't live forever.”

“How a lot of them went actually. But then they were living in a colony and could care for each other. It is the limiter that scares them. No one wants to die and having your lifespan cut by even a few years keeps them away.”

“Even if the last few years here would be a lot better than where they are?”

“Yes. Well it looks like it will not happen tonight and it is getting late. You know when the next one is?”

“I have the schedule algorithm.”

There is a commotion at the edge of the group. Someone has come in running hard and skipped the usual check in. The mass is making it's way here. My night vision is not that good and I can't make out what exactly is going on. Too dependent on TK. I am guessing that the person is not TK or the group would have scattered instead of helping. But if they were expecting a Rog, the limiter must be near by too. That makes me nervous.

The enlarging group finally makes it's way to us. I know that face.

“Jason, what are you doing here?”

He is out of breath, “Senora, please, Lea is in trouble. She has been hurt.”

“I would guess that a hospital would be better than me. What can I do?”

“I know who, or rather what you are Senora. Please, you must help.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to be Jason?” Where is this leading?

He pulls an object out of his pocket, a lens. Not that unusual. I can't scan it without alerting everyone though.

“I am part of this collective Senora. They know me and I know what

this lens is made of.”

“Glass? And please call me Rachael. I am only called Senora when I am in trouble.”

“Not glass. Keeper shield material. Only transparent material with that high of a refractive index and hardness. Aspheric too. Even if we could grind the material, we would never be able to make this shape. That was how you were able to make a lens with the extreme angle of view with no distortion. And you made this lens, as it is in no catalog that we have, including antiques. No way a normal could make one, not to mention five of them.” Shit, Yingui, you have gotten me into trouble again. He whispers “You are a Guardian, are you not?” Only a few heard, but when they kneel, the rest get worried and follow along. “It is okay, we are sworn to protect and aid you at the cost of our own lives if necessary.” He kneels as well.

I get down so as to not direct outside attention to me. “It is going to look funny if anyone sees us. Pass the word, I am going leave in ten seconds. When they sense that, everyone is to stand and casually go about their business.”

“Understood.” They get to work whispering to each other.

“You really are a Guardian?” Susan asks.

“Afraid so. I would rather keep a low profile, but apparently my cover is blown. Three, two one.” I ramp up. As I said, I don't like turning it off. Feels good to not be pretending any more. Everyone gets up, a little startled but pretty good considering they probably have never met a Guardian knowingly before. Why couldn't that lens have just been a normal lens like everyone else uses? Shit! He keeps doing this to me. Also means they are trying to emulate a photography style they can't achieve. Interesting. A trick played on them. That rascal.

“We must hurry.”

“Show me in your mind where she is Jason, just the outside of the building.” He does so, I quickly locate it about six blocks away and DS us out of the park to an empty room in the hospital.

“Where are we?” Jason asks. Not frightened outwardly, though his pulse is much higher.

“I think a cleaner's closet judging from the supplies. 3rd floor near the stairs. Open the door will you please.”

He nods, gets his bearings, and slowly opens the door. Fortunately the night shift means a reduced number of people about.

“This way.” I wish I had paid more attention to Lea when she was with me, so that I could have memorized her psiotic signature. Just did not think it would happen this fast. He takes me to the intensive care ward. The image he had shown me of her was not pretty. When we go in a nurse is adjusting some equipment near her bed. She is beat up bad. Yeah, that too. Why do men always go that route? Women don't think

that way. So stupid.

“I thought your culture was pretty safe. Why did this happen?”

“It is not safe for anyone to be on the wrong streets at night Senora, I mean Rachael. Especially not a young women of apparently high means. There is a lot of hatred towards those with more.”

“Then why was she there, in the poorest part of the city? Surely she knew this.”

“You will have to ask her. When I suspected you, I noticed that Lea stayed behind. I watched too. I thought you would attend the meeting with the collective, so I knew I could catch up before it was over. I expected you to introduce yourself to them, not be trying to hide. Assuming my suspicions were correct. Anyway, I saw Lea come out of the house after you left her and walk down the street. I decided to follow her instead. Figuring she was part of your group and to be watched and protected as well. Three men jumped her before she got two blocks into the bad area and dragged her into an alley. I am not one who could protect her by myself, so I called in what happened and then ran to the park to get you.”

“Why didn't you stay with her till help came?”

“A Guardian can do more than our doctors.”

“That is not our way. She chose this path. She was warned. Had she not lied to me, she would not be here now.” He looks at me like I have suddenly turned evil on him.

“Think about it. What would happen if she got up and walked out of here or disappeared even. All hell would break loose.”

“Can't you do anything?”

“I can make her recovery a little faster, and insure she does not become pregnant, but that is all. She is not hurt seriously, but she will feel it for some time. Mostly the shame. That never wears off. I know, personally. One thing I can do is take care of those who did this to her. I need a quiet place to do a city wide scan. I have their DNA pattern. Not easy to hide that.”

He nods, “Follow me.” He takes me up several flights of stairs to a small chapel. This one overlooks the city. Chapels have certainly changed. No outward signs of any religious faith. Not the small dark musty places I was raised with.

“You watch the door. Click or snap your fingers if anyone comes. Should be quiet at this time of night, but sometimes the less serious cases may come in for prayer. Let them.” He nods and I sit. He takes up a seat near the door and soon nods off. Norms are not used to staying up all night.

An hour later, I shake him awake, “Come, we go. They are in the hill district.” The poor section of town as I suspected. The rich lived near the cooler waters of the lake, nearer to town and lower on the hill. No one

lived on farm land in the valley or too far up the hill, as it took too much to get back and forth to town, walking or biking. Did not stop them from pushing the poor up as high as possible. As he stands I DS us out of the hospital. The training the collective gave it's members must be good, Jason has not let out one remark about DS travel. Lea will make a remarkable recovery, but the staff will account it to her being less seriously hurt than they first thought. Her mother is coming up the stairs, so she will wake to a loving presence. Her father has another reason to disown her. Soiled goods. So stupid.

The dogs sense us before the people do. A few lights come on and faces at windows. What are a nicely dressed pair doing out this late at night in this neighborhood? Gone are the nicely manicured gardens. Most have planted vegetables and anything edible they can. The paths here are less maintained, the night lighting less adequate. The houses are much smaller and packed closer together. My world before TK. Not Jason's though. He stays close. He does not understand that the well off have already done more to these people than they could ever do to us.

"The three have split up. One is in this house here. He is the eldest son of seven, not all directly related. Everyone else is asleep. He has apparently been throwing up since the incidence. I suspect that remorse has set in. Only two in the family have work and get the quieter room. Three of the youngest are sick with the flu. You can hear them coughing. All suffer from lack of an adequate diet. The two that do work have calluses on their hands from manual labor and appear much older than their years would lead you to believe. None will ever see the inside of a university, even as help."

"But he raped her! There is no excuse for that." Ah the rage of the well off when the tide is turned.

"What would you have me do?"

"Turn him in to the authorities at least. We do have a justice system." Oh yeah, a separate one for the rich and the poor. Which never takes into account social injustice.

"On what proof? Most people do not even believe in the Guardians any longer. We are only a myth to scare children into behaving. They are not likely to believe me now unless I perform a miracle. Blowing my cover with the collective is a whole lot different than coming out to your entire culture. The ramifications would be horrendous. Besides, do you even know what a DNA sequencer is? Your culture does not have that tech yet. How could I prove he was the guilty one with the level of understanding you have?" Level four point six.

"There must be something. How about, you know, confronting him or something, or at least making it so he can't have children or something."

"You mean bash his testicles in? Rape is not a crime about sex, it is

about power.” And the poor do not have it. Naturally.

“No, too violent. We don't do that here. Isn't there a simpler way?”

“Already done. We Guardians don't condone this behavior any more than you do. We just take a more subtle route. His violent genes will not be passed on. Fortunately he has no children. There was a certain amount of pain involved in the process however. He will remember before he tries this again and not likely to go through with it again no matter what 'incentive' the bullies provide.”

“How will you prevent that?”

“This is where you watchers come in. Have to give you something to do now that I am in town.” He nods. Not just fun and games. It will mean twenty four hours a day. No fun at all. And their watching will teach them a lot about what it means to be poor. Nor will their watching be limited to the poor. A rich and powerful person can disrupt more lives with a single thought than a poor person in their entire life. Nothing like a dose of reality to help even things out.

“What about the other two?”

“This way.” We walk for a few more minutes. If the other house looked bad, this area looks really bad. Holes are visible in the walls and broken glass. Few lights here. More from neglect than lack. There are a few expensive items inside. Possibly stolen? Jason stays very close. I scan rats and other creatures of the night near by. Even they don't look to be in good shape. Something scurries by and into the night.

“They are two brothers. Between them they have several children from several women and run the local gang here. Real nasty characters. Repeat offenders. Surprised the last Guardian here did not pick up on them. They have terrorized this neighborhood for many years. Even as children they were feared. Our first, the remorseful one, probably did it to avoid trouble from them or gain some kind of favor for his family.”

“Or out of fear of them. So, will you do the same to them?”

“They are on a more extreme path. They were clearly the instigators in this. The children have been made non reproductive as well. We don't like to do this, but have found that the genes and nurturing together that they have received leave us no choice. If we don't do something the process will be repeated. Many more would be hurt. We have a special place for this group and others like them. A moving cart will come tomorrow for appearances, but they will already be gone. At the moment they are in a holding cell in a space station orbiting above us. From there is not important.”

“A space station! May I see them?” I nod and DS us up to New Hope. Before us, shielded by a 'thn shield sit a group of very scared pathetic people. I don't do the direct confrontation stuff any more. Always use shield material or other means. Never again will I be totally dependent on TK. The two brothers pace back and forth, till one of the

children notices us. Everything falls quiet and motionless. The children stare at us. The brothers stand up and pretend to not be scared. Inside I know their pulse rates and adrenaline are both high. Fight or flight.

“You wanted to see them. Here they are. The shield is impenetrable.” Beyond them the large window shows everyone we are above the earth, not on it.

“I see. No chance of escape either. And you did all this by yourself.” It was not a question. He needed proof, he has it.

“There is one last group who was at fault.” We are directly over his home now.

“The well off. We helped lead these three and all the rest to a kind of desperation and hatred. A new Greed Age, at least the beginning of one.” I nod. He is smart. Most don't get this right away unless they are near to the understanding already or have had more experiences than one of his age should have had. Maybe the collective does more than I think.

“Will you sterilize us as well?” A logical conclusion.

“Would not do any good. The “greed” gene is too much embedded in the human genome. If the roles had been reversed the outcome would likely have been the same. Humans are not to be blamed for that and the one who is guilty is long gone. We would have to sterilize all humans to get rid of it. That does not let you off the hook though. The genes and culture only steer you, they don't entirely control your behavior. You still have a choice. Your culture has become very unbalanced, no where near as bad as the Greed Age, . . . yet. While you have done a lot that is good, like energy and environmental conservation and education, there is much that the collective and the watchers can do to help re-balance this culture again. My own interview at the university was an example. I may not have been the best candidate, but that was not the reason I was rejected. Nor was I treated with any semblance of respect. The collective has gotten fat and too entrenched in the dominant group. If necessary, we will break up the collective. The Rog threat is gone, your purpose has been fulfilled. Time to change or move on.”

“And you got all this in one day?”

“Not by any means. I and the others have watched your culture for thousands of years. The documentation fills many data banks.”

“You are not just a Guardian are you?”

“We are each unique, but no, I am the first Rachael. I was in the cell next to Jason when he died and nearly died myself. I was taught by Silver Ghost, whom we know as Yingui, to do the style of photography you have seen. He could not have come here himself though, as that would have caused too many questions. Nor will I stay beyond what is fit for a normal to endure. Another will take my place after that. Most likely one you will never know about. We don't make the same mistake twice. I am not totally cold. I could have denied my TK status, but that would have

meant more harm to Lea. Even I could not do that.” Wish I could say this for myself.

“Silver Ghost, the photographer, was a Guardian too? Why are you telling me all this and what are you doing to us?”

“Yingui is first human Bearer as well as a Guardian, the mother of a 'thn, a Keeper. We do this because there was a great evil done to all humans a very long time ago and we are trying to undo it.

As to you, there is a position available at my place if you are interested. It would be much simpler for that person to be someone who already knows the situation.”

“What about Lea?”

“She lied to me, I can not trust her. Certainly not with my true identity. You will be out if you try the same. At which time I would disappear completely. Don't worry, she will be taken care of, but her life will never be the same. She will lose the path of privilege. This is the best thing that could have happened to her actually.”

“I don't understand. How did she lie to you?”

“I left her at a safe place. But apparently that was a ruse. She left, as you said, immediately after wards. She had plenty of opportunity to come clean, but chose not to. My home was unlocked, which she knew, but she did not attempt to go back there. Pride is one of the worst faults of any dominant culture or group. It was why her father could not accept me as an equal and for that reason allow his daughter to study under me. It was why she could stand up to her father, thinking the consequences were of no importance. It was why she could not admit to anyone, even herself, how much trouble she was in. She is used to having her way and being taken care of and could not even imagine what life would be like without someone to watch over her or even that anything bad could happen to her. Bat her eyes and play nice and she gets whatever she wants.”

“I am not convinced you are right. I don't believe that of her. I heard her and Nonina talking. It is considered polite to offer a teacher a gift once they have accepted you as a pupil. And you had even gone as far as to charge no tuition, no material costs and even to accept her into your home. She would be under enormous pressure to do something in return. We all have classes in the morning, so she could not go then. Her only time was tonight. And it could not be an ordinary place, as they are all closed by the time she left. She would have to know a source. Something special. My guess is she was there, because that is where a lot of the best art is done. The well off, as you call them, produce junk. Oh they think it is great, but it is junk. Why do you think we were all with you today? Because you had a university position? No way. Never would have come if that was the case. They only hire more of the same. We knew before you went in that they would reject you.” He smiles at me wryly. “Some might even think of you as a bully. Coming here with superior

technology, more time than any 'normal' can commit to any project, and more resources than even the most well off could afford to devote to their craft.”

I nod, “You may be right about Lea and me. If I am wrong, there is room for both of you. It would not be the first time that I made a bad decision based on lack of information and jumping to conclusions. TK and long life does not make you wiser. We will see. If she is what you say, then being a maid at my house would be a perfect cover for our actions. You saw much tonight, but there is much more to be seen and done.”

“You are not really a photography teacher are you?”

“No, I teach thinking. Photography is merely the means to that end. I really did make those images with camera, lens and film, by the way. But, it sounds like you and Lea will be my students and I yours for the real purpose of my visit. The rest, though real, is my cover.”

“Then, let us begin.” He sighs and I smile. He will make a good TK given time and the proper training. Yes indeed. That's one secret we have not shared with the collective, how we recruit new Guardians. I look up to the stars. We are on dozens of worlds scattered over fifty light years. Are we ready? I shake my head. Even this two thousand year old Guardian is still making mistakes. Too many.

Ron

Earth, Jami Protectorate.

Hard to believe it can be so peaceful here at night, when during the day it is a madhouse of activity. I hurry down the alleyway and make my way to the beach. There is a lone figure standing next to an over turned boat smoking a cigarette. My contact I hope. I can't believe that smoking has survived all this time. But a lot of vices have. Alcohol is very easy to obtain as are a host of other drugs. Not strictly legal, but no one cares and the enforcers usually look the other way. Only when they want to pick you up for something do they notice and make a stink about it. They would have a hard time with me, but there are other concerns at the moment.

“Smoking is bad for you.” I say as I get within easy hearing distance. Nobody would say that to anyone anymore.

“Wizards are losers.” Don't ask me why it was decided this was to be the signs we would exchange. Someone with a sick sense of humor I guess.

“Do you have another one?” Don't get the wrong idea, just our exchange continuing.

“I doubt you would like my brand.” There are no brands any longer. You grow your own if you want it. He probably has no idea of the meaning of what he has said.

He hands me one anyway and then continues up the beach. The 'cigarette' is the memory storage unit of course. I slowly make my way to some thick brush high enough to conceal me and then DS back to the office. No one takes any notice of my sudden appearance.

“Okay, look lively. The package has arrived.” I hand it to Olivia who pops it into the reader to see what we've got. The others gather around the viewer. Still not up to the resolution of the pre-HelperV tech, but getting better. We could dupe what we have in storage of course, but if anyone broke in, we would be found out. For that reason, all ground stations in nations other than the UNA use local tech. At least it has to look like that on the outside. In the UNA of course, we are allowed no tech other than what we can carry or totally hide from the locals. That means caverns deep underground that only a TK6 could get to. At least here we can be a little more open. Adapt and work with what you've got.

On the screen a short time stack, what they call movies here, appears. Looks like the inside of a lab of some sort. The recorder scans around the room. A variety of instruments are visible with people working at them. “A bio lab for sure. That instrument to the right of the power support complex is a sequencer for sure.” Harin says 'for sure' so much we all want to strangle him, but right now we are focused on the next image. A

close up of one of the vari-readers [screens] shows the code for the sequence they are working on.

“Transfer that code to the database and run a search please.”

“Already processing. We should know in a moment.” One thing we did change was the speed and size of the database. Most of it was hidden in the support structure of the building itself. We could not afford to have that walk away from us. I recognize the code of course, but wait for the confirmation.

The room goes black and all the vari-readers go dead. Just as I thought. System goes dark if the info is above a certain sensitivity level. This qualifies.

“Okay, people you know what to do. I want a full sweep. This is too hot to let out. TK3s at the macro level, everyone else go nano. If they have this sequence, they are much further along than we thought or they claim to be. They could not have been told about this, so they have rediscovered it. We can't take the chance they are watching us. Don't forget to pair up. Anyone of us could be 'bugged'.” A totally ancient term. I use it because only those present would have any idea what I was talking about. Nor does the current culture have any idea what a TK is or the levels. Former South America, because of the natural network, did not develop along the same lines as elsewhere. At least not on the surface. We have always had agents placed here. Most did nothing other than collect information. Most were norms, like the agent I met this morning.

I pair up with Anglea and we scan each other down to the nano level. If the local culture is this advanced, who knows to what level they have gone. Everyone here is TK, so modesty is not an issue. Someone to the right of me, Mavell, a TK3 I believe, yells, “Bingo, L5” Means he has found a level five listening or recording device. They meant for us to find that one. Just like the nesters all over again. Everyone knows the routine and continues. The current culture is level six, though on paper it pretends to be five to get the shipping benefits. They will have to petition soon or risk sanctions. The benefit of going public is that they would no longer have to hide their tech in labs and government offices.

Two people simultaneously yell, “L7!” There is no way they should have that. We have not allowed any L7 on planet outside of our control and no one here is able to get off planet yet. Even the Jasons, who were once L7, have been reduced to L6 as the rogues were cleaned out and they had no way to maintain it.

“Embed?” The Jasons, as part of their obsessive control measures, hid a serial number on the chips themselves. Only a TK could read them of course, so the locals never knew. Prevented a trade in stolen materials anyway.

“Clean.” Shit! That means it is recent tech, not found or salvaged. Doesn't mean they did not model it on something older, but even that is a

feat.

“Flavor?”

“Vanilla” So far only audio, but we really cannot take the chance. If they had a vid and saw me enter.... My call. I have been burned too many times. It is a hassle, but I call out, “Razzle”. Short for razzle-dazzle. Everything comes back on, except for the reader we were watching. Someone smacks the side for show, but of course nothing happens. We go about our business as if the chip has never arrived here. All show. This site will be abandoned completely. Not on the surface of course, but we will trade the secure material work with some other branch. To the outsider it will appear as if nothing has changed. The same people will come to work each day and leave each day.

Except for one thing. “Okay, folks, how did we do?” It was all a drill. The reason we had these drills was because in the last several thousand years, stuff like this has happened and we have been caught unawares.

Lauren comes out holding a white clipboard. Common enough. So?

“Scan it for umbelliferone.” Those of us who know the material find the clipboard is saturated with the stuff.

“Everyone who touched this clipboard became contaminated with the fluorescent dye. Everything you touched transferred some of the material. Two things to think about. Our finger prints, which are not in any database, are now easy to record. Second, if that had been a poison or infectious agent, they would be wondering why none of us got sick.” For effect he turns off the lights and walks around with a portable UV lamp. It is everywhere. All over our faces, desks, switches, walls, etc. The lights come back on.

“Good job Lauren. Anyone else?” No one responds.

“My turn then. Please welcome Nikky.” An older looking woman comes forward and takes a bow.

“She entered before I did and was able to walk around and observe all of you without anyone raising an alarm or even questioning her. You were so wrapped up in my arrival you paid no attention to her. Had she been an agent instead of a new recruit, we would have been had.”

“But a norm could not DS in here.”

“Tell that to the Chinese. They could have DSED projectiles in here over two thousand years ago. I think they may have figured out how to do something bigger by now. You cannot assume anything, low tech, high tech or psiotic tech. Now how do we prevent this from happening in the future?”

“We could color code or some other symbol the people here. In the know and you would have the correct color or marking. Someone who did not know would likely guess it wrong.”

“And? Remember always go things in at least twos. Chance sometimes goes against you and there is too much at stake.”

At this moment someone appears in the DS alcove where most of us appear to avoid bumping into people moving around and not expecting us. People turn to see who it is. Out of my view, so I scan gently.

“Ah welcome One Who Eats Crow.” A large all black pop cat walks in like she has eaten a crow recently that no one thought could be caught. We have been breeding the pop cats and manipulating the genes to give them more mass and intelligence. There are a lot of places a pop cat can go that would be hard for us to go unnoticed. Though she is large enough to attract some attention. A trade off to be sure.

She bows before me, a Guardian and ignores the others. *Honored one. I have news.* Cats will always go to the highest ranking person, unless they are mad at that individual. Usually because the required gift was not up to standards or something else equally trivial.

I bow back. Cats can be so fussy about protocol. “It is I who is honored by your presence. Please to accept this humble offering of inferior food.” I make some intensely mouse flavored TK rations and present them to her, eyes down the entire time. I have already scanned her belly to know she is full and likely not interested. The gift has to be good none the less. Others in the room are turning up their noses at the smell.

She sniffs the kibble as protocol demands, but then ignores it. Now if it had been caviar, but then she really does not need the extra calories. *The one whom you met on the beach is now lying on the beach as food for scavengers.* She means dead. She then yawns and makes her way over to a couch to kneed the cushions, curl up and sleep. And the morning has just begun.

“So, what is on the real memory core.” I had placed a dummy in the reader the first time to set off the exercise. I place it on the reader and a tech starts to try accessing it. Nothing happens.

“That's strange,” he says. He opens up the capsule by hand. Normally you would not do this except in a clean room. Easy to do even for a TK3. Inside is not what he expected. He hands it to Shirl at his side.

She scans it with TK very carefully and announces, “Level Seven.”

“Nikky, come on over and have a look.” I then say to the others, “Nikky is a level seven expert who apparently arrived just in time. And how come no one noticed the level seven device in my pocket during the exercise? Reluctance to scan the minister is no excuse. I could have been an impostor or compromised in some way.” We actually did better than last week, but a lot of room for improvement.

Nikky waiting her turn holds up the device, “This is a projector, not simply a memory core.” She fabricates a screen. It is made up of very tiny spheres on a titanium dioxide covered plastic sheet. She uses TK to hold it rigid in place in the air. Again using TK, she holds the device at the proper location and activates it.

The images shown by the projector are weird. Odd shapes, bulbs and curves, intersected with metal rods and clear wires. Very strange indeed. A large array of these shapes is sitting in a large otherwise empty room. No one present, other than whoever made the recording. Though I suppose with a recorder this small it could have been hidden in the room. Which is apparently the case in the next view. A smaller room showing a person interacting with one of the shapes. Head shaved bald and wearing a black robe, the gender is not apparent. The figure places one hand palm against the end of a clear rod, the left hand is palm up without making any contact. A wire disappears into the robe. A smaller shape rests on the shoulder, draping over the back and front as if it was melted on.

Nothing happens for what seems to be a minute, then slowly at first the shapes move. Increasing in speed the convolutions appear to be random. Bulbs are formed and are then reabsorbed. Holes appear and disappear. Then very suddenly the shapes all pull into a sphere about three quarters of a meter in diameter. The surface is transparent with lots of shapes inside, now all motionless. The person pauses, taking a few deep breaths, then concentrates again. This time after a few seconds the shape suddenly disappears entirely, followed a second later by the person. The image remains on, but nothing more appears to happen. After a few minutes the scene is jostled as someone picks up the recorder, which then goes blank.

“Psiotics”

“Obviously”

“Nothing I have ever seen before.”

“I don't think any of us has.”

“We need to know more.”

“What about the dead man? They may be on to us.”

“I think we can assume they are at least worried about us. The Ministry of Teck would not be expected to approve of this excursion into a forbidden area of study.”

“Excuse me Minister, there are two men waiting in the lobby to see you.”

“They say why?”

“No, just insisted it was important.”

“Okay people, while I am checking on what they want, everyone else, two things. One, clean up. All level six and above, remove from the premises. Clearly something is going on, I don't want us to be caught with stuff we should not have. Second, obviously all possible resources concentrated on what we just saw. Call in other Guardians if you have to. Someone volunteer to go to the Galactic Regional Center to inquire there. Take the recorder with you. Satisfies both requests. Let's get to work.”

On the way to the lobby I go 'blank', my term for turning off all TK abilities. It still feels to me like turning off the lights. Not that I am

without resources. A former mech would never go anywhere without pockets full of stuff. It is amazing what they can do with ceramics now.

Sure enough, there are two men wearing the stereotypical black pullovers of the thugs of this time and place. Black seems to be a universal requirement. Like I am going to be impressed with this.

“How may I help you gentleman?”

“If you would come with us Minister, all will be explained.”

“Certainly” Yeah, I know, I am supposed to object and then they insist with some kind of method that prevents any other choice. Just thought I would skip that part. Even without TK, I can see the bulges of illegal projectile weapons. The rings they are wearing could be TK detectors. Or not. Can't tell without potentially setting them off.

“What no black limo?” They look at me like I am speaking Hopi. “Never mind, old joke.” We walk the two blocks to the train and get on headed south west, towards the government area. Once there we go around to a back alley. This is where they beat me up and tell me to stay out of what is going on. Not the first time I have had to endure such to keep cover. Instead they knock on the door and when it opens lead me inside. Down a corridor, around a corner into a larger room. At the center of the otherwise empty room is a pair of chairs and a small end table with a flask of clear liquid and two glasses. Someone is sitting in one of the chairs. The thugs leave me and close the door.

“Sorry about the guys, but I wanted this meeting to be secret.”

“No problem. A telerequest would have worked as well.”

“I don't trust them for this. But I suppose it is time to get to the point. Please enjoy some water. Imported from the Fastow Glacier. I have saved it for just such a possibility.” He pours me some which I accept.

“I believe our leaders are playing with technologies that they should not.”

“So, that explains why you called me. What's up?”

“I am not sure entirely. Being the minister of finance I see many reports and things are not adding up in the research department. Research is a major export for us, so it has a rather large budget. I have been able to follow this trail as far as Bird Island.”

“That island is too tiny to hold more than the birds it got it's name from.” I am tempted to do an immediate scan, but hold off.

“I know and thought maybe they are using it simply as a cover. Then I noticed that there was a lot of excavation and caving support material supposedly shipped there. I believe they are not on the island, but in or rather under it.”

“That would require water pumps and sealants in large quantities.”

“It's there. One thing does not fit though. Large quantities of precious metals and ultra pure carbon.” That fits with the shapes we saw clear as diamond. Bird Island is an isolated little nothing place several hundred

kilometers off the coast from here. Near some of the shipping lanes. Might explain why it was never noticed. Governments hide all kinds of things though, including perks for ministers. Glacier water was not cheap. Tasty though.

“I thank you Minister Ghardi. I will have my staff look into it.”

“One thing though, this meeting never happened and I don't care what you find. Don't try to contact me on your own. I just want the records to work out straight.”

I smile, “I understand.” We both rise and bow to each other. I take a different route back, stopping to do some shopping for the center. It is amazing even in a paperless society how many supplies we go through. I am sure I was being followed, so I hope they got bored following me around. I suspect everyone from the ministry is followed.

I can't resist. I walk into a shop, look over a few items and then go out the back, up the alley and into another shop before I see anyone following. This time I wait a bit, getting some soup to eat. Sure enough a frantic person comes in, sees me and then ducks out again. Her cover is blown. I do a pulse scan. She is armed. So stupid. I could call in a major violation just for that. I pay up and thank the chef. This time I walk out causally.

Waiting for the train takes fifteen to twenty minutes. The sky is partly cloudy. Wish I could be up there now. I choose a car with sky lights so I can watch them as we go. The woman gets on the train and sits a few seats behind me. When she sees that no one else is getting in the car, being the slow time of day, she comes up and sits next to me.

“Minister, you are in grave danger.”

“You can call me Ron. May I know your name?” Hers eyes widen, then she gets serious again.

“Call me Pam if you must have a name.” Clearly not her own. I have memorized her face though. Should be easy enough to find.

“So, why am I in danger.”

“The people you are investigating are Salmids.” A fanatic religious group, not known for their gentle ways. We would clearly have to do something soon before more people were hurt. Can't depend on a culture to take care of everything. Wonder which politicians had been bought off or frightened. “They were the ones responsible for your contact on the beach.” So, I was being watched by more than one group.

“And which group do you represent?” I can guess of course.

“The Keiggers of course. We mean you know harm, but will defend ourselves if you side with the Salmids.” I'll bet. The other fanatic group of course. They would probably fight each other till the end of time or their mutual extinction, whichever came first. Not the first groups to choose this route. The Jews and Arabs are still at it. The nucs killed off most of them, but there were enough dispersed though out the world to

keep the hate going, each blaming the other for the war and the plagues. So stupid.

I hold up a device from my pocket, "Know what this is?" She looks at me with a mixture of curiosity and fear. I press the button on it's side. "Your pop gun is now rendered useless." Her hand immediately goes to it's location. She looks around nervously. If she believed me, and I think she has, she is now defenseless. Any Salmid who recognizes her could be a potential executioner. She gets up and leaves without looking back. I really don't know any more than before she arrived. Either one of them could be responsible for the informant's death and they may or may not be involved with those on Bird Island. Both groups are well funded and have infiltrated the government. As I said, we should have interfered long ago.

Back at the ministry, everything was going well, though it now looks as if we had all dropped to level four tech. I did not go back on full TK till I had entered the ministry itself. We had screening devices hidden in the walls. Knowing what they were playing with on Bird Island, even if we didn't know what it was, meant we all had to be much more careful.

"Listen up. I want paired scanners posted all around Bird Island. I want to know what is going on without letting them know about us. That means paired micropulse scans. Get with your partner and spread out. Different distances please. Just like the practice runs." Pairs of people stop what they are doing and leave by different exits. It would not do for all kinds of people to suddenly appear being nosy at once. Some will pop into holds of ships going in the right direction. The stronger ones can be quite a ways away and still 'see' what's going on.

"What have we gotten on the recorder?"

"A TK3 scan says it was made in someplace that only goes by three characters, 'U' period, 'S' period, 'A' period. Never heard of that place. The letters are in old style script too."

"That makes it at least 2400 years old and being level seven, not much older. Must be from the last of the super secret stuff made just before the fall."

"Wow, how can stuff that old still work?"

"The electronics would be fine, just the power supply would have to be adapted. That explains why the area around the improvised one looks much cruder."

"Then we know they used recovered old tech and likely did not make it themselves. That does not explain what we saw though."

"Amplifiers of some kind? Jen should be back here soon from the GRC, maybe she picked up something. Br'thn was on duty fortunately, so the trip should be smooth. Daniel will return with her." We did not use the Guardian honorific when under potential surveillance.

"I need a volunteer to take what we know up to New Hope. I want

this archived. They had an entire warehouse full of those shapes. If they have the means to activate them all, then who knows what would happen. Everyone else get ready for a raid. We know enough to put a stop to it, Article 16 paragraph A of the psiotic infringement pact. This culture signed on, they have to suffer the consequences.”

“The people themselves were not aware of what was going on or we would have heard of it earlier. Sending everyone back to level one doesn't seem right.”

“They are certainly far too dense in population to support each other at level one. Most don't even know what to do to survive, all other aspects being taken care of.”

“Maybe the kindest thing to do would be to disperse them among people who are already at that level.”

“Not fair to the others to have to take on so many. They live so close to the edge even a few extra mouths to feed could put them in danger.”

“Come back to reality folks. Maybe it is not psiotics at all. None of the 'thn have shown up, so they are apparently not worried about whatever is going on. The recording could have been faked, never forget Hollywood. It could be an elaborate trap to get us to reveal ourselves. First we need to get the reports back. Even if we go on a raid, it would be years before a sentence is pronounced. Just be ready.” Youngsters!

The waiting part is the worst. As each pair comes back, they add their information and suspicions to the growing model we are building in a cleared out area of the room. The complex is three levels deep with the main chamber holding the potential psiotic devices in the bottom floor and center of the complex. The entire shape of the complex is highly symmetrical based on a modulus of seven. Hmm, the Tramfadoxans liked to base everything on seven. Just like we are obsessed with twos, threes and fours. Each galactic culture had its own finger print. Or maybe it was just a requirement of the process or even the personal whim of whoever is putting this together.

The weird part is that none of the pairs coming back report any feeling of psiotics at all. Neither the shapes nor any of the people present are giving off a signature. We could mask ours of course, but it has taken thousands of years for us to perfect our abilities and training methods. Hard to believe that they could do it so quickly.

“Look here. The emblem Mercy has added to the floor above the chamber. A tri-radiate trident inside of a circle.”

“Salmids.”

“Tell me more. Who are the Salmids?”

“Salmids were a splinter group of deconstructed Christians who followed the teachings of Aloni Salmid, a prophet of the thirteenth century AF. Matriarchal, they believed that all sex was evil and only used artificial insemination to reproduce in genetically approved ways. The

computer was a major advancement for them. They kept it to themselves for some time, but eventually enough of the fallen away, who did not 'disappear', were able to transfer the sacred knowledge to the others. Not that we had any part in that, right?

Anyway, the Keiggers were a splinter group of Salmids who thought that a minor daughter to sixteenth heir to the title of Ma was the "true" leader instead of the one the main portion of the Salmids had accepted. The dominant culture, mostly Irphanites, led a bloody raid on a Salmid high festival to attempt to eradicate all the Salmids from this land. They failed, but did manage to kill off most of the other potential heirs. Big mess. The main difference was that the Kieiggers allowed more say on the part of their men than the Salmids did. Both groups still accepted however that it was men who were responsible for the Fall itself. May be right there. The Irphanites just wanted the killing to stop and accepted both groups as long as they kept their stupidity out of the public view."

"But why seven fold symmetry for the entire structure then?"

No one answers.

"We need someone who knows Salmid mythology."

"They are not likely to tell us themselves. They are secretive and if we go snooping around that will likely tip them off."

"Depends on how we snoop."

"You are volunteering?" Before he can answer though, Derby is back from the Galactic Center with Rhea and Ly'thn in tow. I quickly move up to Rhea and give her a hug.

"Welcome Rhea." She gives me a dirty look for being so formal. I love teasing her though. Notice I did not say Bearer, her official title as she is with 'thn. Paranoid.

"What have you got?"

"Tech way above the level they are allowed to have or should be able to produce. Psiotics of some type we have never seen before." We look to Derby.

"I showed them what we had and no one has seen anything like it either."

"Sounds like we are on our own then. Anything more on the scans?"

"There are only eight people there at the moment. The size of the operation suggests it once held much more."

"There are only eight of those devices left also. The warehouse is nearly empty compared to the recording we saw."

"What was the time stamp on the recording?"

"Seventy one hours ago, nearly three days."

"If they are all leaving to somewhere, why is that our problem? Sounds like they are doing everyone a favor. No more trouble between them and the Keiggers at least."

"But where are they going?"

“Ah hum. Anything I can do to help?”

“Sorry, Rhea. Could you do a micropulse scan of the remaining eight to get a search image and then contact the net to do a planet wide search?” Her TK is ten fold higher than mine, so better able to do a scan undetected and easier for her to contact the others as well. We had done this before, usually searching for a missing TK, but the principle was the same. Usually Yingui actually. What a pain he is.

“Sure thing Captain.” She salutes and pops out.

“Do we even have time for this? They are down to eight from who knows how many. We may lose these soon.”

“There is no place on earth they can hide. We will find them. Why don't we search the node for any references to the Salmids. If we understand them, maybe we can figure out why they are doing what they are doing.”

“Oh, and what is the reason the structure is seven fold symmetrical?” They all look at me smiling. “Okay, I will search node for that aspect, since I seem to be fixated on it. Derby, if you will assist me. I would like you to see if there are any references to psiotics and seven fold symmetry. Might be that is the reason and not their culture.” She nods and moves to her station.

“We got trouble boss. Suits have just entered the front and are talking to the reception.”

“Not again. Someone volunteer to do my search and I will go see why they are here.” They are better at it anyway. Back to the lobby. Not called that any more of course, but I am not very good at keeping track of all the changes approved for Standard. They laugh at me at times, saying I talk like an ancient. Only one or two know how old I am. Oh well.

In the color vision of normal sight, I can see they are from the safety department. Unlike my time, safety covers all aspects, fire, food, ergonomics, environmental impact, everything. No one gets out of a safety inspection in under five hours. Talk about bad timing. Even we cannot say no to them and still be allowed to have our offices here. I check my time piece, 13:10.

“Good afternoon, I am Minister Ron. Where would you like to begin?”

“This is Inspector Walker and I am Inspector Herman. We generally like to start at one end and go to the other. It is a bit unusual for the head of a ministry to walk us around. Isn't there someone else you could have do this?”

“I don't mind and everyone else is busy. A good ministry can run for hours or even days without my input.”

“Well, it should not take that long.” Giving me a wry smile. Meaning it could be close. As if on cue, One Who Eats Crow comes from around the corner to see what is going on. She is not a small little house cat.

They instinctively back up a step with mouths open.

“Never run from a cat, they love to chase things.”

Food?

I am not sure yet. Why don't you come with us. I expect it might go a little faster with your help.

“Merrow!” Nearly a roar. She come up to the two and sniffs them as they stand frightened and very still. Then she rears up on her hind legs to get closer to their faces to see if they got better food than she had.

Considered polite in the cat world. Hey, she could have gone for their behinds.

“Ah, maybe we could come back when it is more convenient.”

“Yeah, tomorrow would be fine.” Meaning they would not be the ones who got the duty.

They turn to go.

“Walk slowly. Show no fear and you will be fine.” As soon as they get out the door, they high tail it out of sight.

I bow to her and say, “Thank you very much. You are a life saver honored one. I think we can find some caviar for you.” I am ready to burst into laughter though. The receptionist covers his face. One Who Eats Crow is a regular here and truly is a pussy cat. She has not eaten a person in ages.

Black Sturgeon? Now how did she know about that?! We saved that for special occasions.

Sigh, “You earned it. It will take a few minutes though.” These more intelligent super cats were better at getting the good stuff out of us.

That taken care of I get back to the research room.

“What have we got folks?”

“No connection to the Salmid religion itself. Sorry, in reference to the seven fold symmetry, I mean.”

“There were eight TKs at the first gateway plus the gateway herself. No other reference comes close.” Yes, I was there, after all.

“The Salmids have been going down in numbers recently. In fact only eight have been seen consistently in the last month.”

“But we saw one leave on the recording. That means that the recording is likely much older than we thought.”

“Can a time stamp be faked by anyone other than a higher level TK? No, I think they retired to the island gradually, but left almost all at once from the island itself three days ago. These eight may have been the last, maybe even coordinators of the evacuation. We need to move fast, if we are not already too late.”

“I concur. No reports have come in of the artifacts being scanned anywhere else on earth.”

“They could not have reached the moon could they? And how would they get the ruins up and going again with out oxygen, suits, etc. We have

seen no evidence of that going on. Very little tech above four on the island itself other than the psiotic devices.”

“Gone already? The others have taken the equipment? These eight are just closing the door?”

“Let's go.”

“Wait! Barbara just checked in. She and her pod have the island surrounded.” She has been raising some of the greys to TK status with some success. We all figured if it worked with cats, then surely it would work with cetaceans. Probably better, but I dare not even think that with you know who around. “They are forming an array to do a continuous micropulse scan.”

“I want everyone to leave now. We will stay one kilometer out and watch from there. If anyone goes in, it will be me. ONLY me. Understand?” They nod. Besides Barb, I was the only other TK8 present, Rhea having gone back to her other duties. And Barb could not enter the temple or whatever it was without resuming her human form. I respect her desire not to have to do that. Still not fun even after all this time. There are thirty one of us present, plus Barb's pod of fifteen. Only two were TK7s, nine sixes, rest fours and fives. This was not a place for beginners. We needed at least fours to see some of the finer aspects of the tech we had been running into or shield against a projectile weapon.

It is late afternoon before we take up a circle around the island. The trip out being beautiful, but quiet. A small pod of dolphins have come out to see what Barb and company are up to. There is always the hope of fish.

Barb relays what the pod is getting. We see images of the goings on as they are transmitted to us. The eight are gathered around an altar in a chamber above the storage place of the artifacts. One is in front of the rest facing them. The seven apparently subservient ones are prostrate on the floor facing her. We already know it is a matriarchal group, so this fits. The seven are all male. Seven again. What is it with seven? Probably her private attendants.

The image zooms in on her. About forty, and whoa! She is really loaded with a private arsenal. Looks like mostly projectile weapons with poison tips. I do my own micropulse on one of the needles, very small and loaded with a cone snail toxin derivative. Manufactured, not extracted. She knew her poisons. Not easy either. Cone snail toxin was a complex mixture of several peptides. Hers had additions to the side chains of the serines to make them even more potent. Nasty. Bet that hurt before your died of suffocation as you were paralyzed when your lungs and heart stopped.

They are on the move. Heading towards the stairs leading to the chamber.

I am going in. Cover me. Okay, cliché, but I could not help it.

I get to the chamber first. All is quiet. A moment later I hear their

footsteps approaching. I am fascinated by the artifacts. I can't help but look into them with my talent. As I do so, the artifacts respond to my inquiry and start their moving and changing. Was it that easy? I am so struck by what is happening I nearly miss their arrival. When they see what is happening all hell breaks loose. The leader orders her minions to 'get me', but I have already gotten the artifacts to the sphere stage. They are openly afraid as they surround me. My guess is that this was normally done one on one and not eight at once.

Seeing that her underlings are not going to do anything, she raises her arms to fire her darts at me. So theatrical. I shield and then reach into the sphere. I was not going to miss out knowing what this was all about. I experience a massive dimensional shift. This is way beyond what I normally feel and see during a DS transport. It seems to last for nearly a minute. Not a problem for me of course. The 'exit' seemed a long way away as a small point of light. Just as we are approaching it, things shift again. I don't exactly lose sight of the light, but a shift has definitely occurred.

Finally we pop out of DS space. The minions double over gasping for air. One is out cold. Oops, make that two. The leader is fine and pissed. I sense several of her darts on the ground near me. Sorry your highness. Ignoring her, I look around. Looks like nothing has changed. Same empty room we left from. Have we just gone in a circle? There are only three darts on the floor and I know she fired more than that. The walls are not quite the same either. Not as well done, cruder. Weird. I reach out and scan the rest of the complex. There are about eleven people present. Two females. Eeeuu! Three of the males are not intact in the nether regions. Okay, doesn't matter to me, after all, I don't use mine, but I have an excuse. Some TKs above five even remove them, saying all that stuff between the legs only gets in the way. Call me old fashioned I guess. The point is, is that they were not here when we left. I reach out further. I am alone! No TKs, no whales, not even the dolphins. I am not where I was or something called them all away. No way they would have abandoned me. The island looks a little different too. More plant life and not the same species of plants. No ice plant, that ubiquitous stuff that got planted all over the place for ground cover and still comes up in most places.

I am on a parallel universe version of earth! It is the only explanation. Reaching out further I find a settlement on the mainland. Not the city we left this afternoon. Level two tech. Well not entirely. The altar in the tallest stone building has a special chamber below with level six stuff. Ah ha. Bet only the most trusted know about that. Way to keep the masses in check and maintain your power base.

Well the queen bee is not any happier by my waiting here shielded to look things over. Time to move and I want answers. You and me baby. I

DS the two of us to the surface as far away from the others as I can get and still be on the island. It will not take long before they come looking for her and this is a small island. Oh, and I remove all her toys as well. If they were going to play with psiotic tech above what even I knew about, all holds were off.

“You are disarmed. Talk to me or suffer a much worse fate than you can imagine.”

“I do not talk with old pigs. Bow to me and I may allow you to die quickly.” She does check though to make sure she really is unarmed. She smiles. Have I forgotten something? I remain shielded. Not that I could not neutralize anything she could toss at me, but I don't like pain, if I can avoid it. I don't have the same genes as Rachael and James I guess. She performs some kind of weird dance with her arms. Decorations on the sleeves come off and come at me at high speed. What do you know, she is a TK1 at least. Only small stuff, almost microscopic needles, but if I was not shielded it would have hurt. Instead it bounces off to be dissolved by me before it hits the ground.

I dissolve her clothing completely. She stands there naked with sagging breasts and belly. She has eaten well. More than I can say for her assistants. “Did you think that getting to the surface was an after shock? You have no idea who you are playing with.” Not the way to win friends, but I don't want her to think she can keep trying to get me.

Not pulsed she bites back, “Nor you. Did you think this is earth you are on? We rule here, not the old guardian pigs.” She smiles, but I had already figured out what had happened, just not how to get home. Wonder if they have 'thn in this universe? The others are moving underneath me. Time to move again. I am sure that we are not on earth, even without her announcement. No sats in orbit either. But what is that? Not a bird, too big. It looks like a morphed pterodactyl/bird combo. Back in time? No, the chances of an island exactly the same in shape and size rules that out. This island would not have even existed above water then. Parallel means things happened differently at some point here. Looks like it must have branched way back. Pre Sauron?

Problem is, what happens if we allow the greed gene to rule here. It will mean another world 'infected'. I need to get back. The only place that is likely to have answers is that altar, but it would also likely arm her again to bring her there. I like her better naked.

Here they come and here we go. This time way away. Somewhere I can think before jumping again. There, a nice open plain. I can see for some distance before anything else gets here. We pop out. The queen has stopped showing any emotion. I make a robe similar to what she had, only without any thing other than cloth. I am tempted to use itchy wool, but don't.

“I am not abusing you on purpose. Just don't trust a TK1 with

weapons.” She nods slowly looking around, but her small smile returns. She has figured out where she is. She thinks she is dead already, just waiting for me to fall into whatever awaits us here and die myself. Her only hope now is that she will have the pleasure of seeing that happen. I scan my surroundings. There are creatures about. Guess this world got the defective One Mind as well. They are not plantimals. Wonder if I could link in here? Not safe yet. She is not going to talk and I don't intend to extract it. More fun to figure it out on my own.

“Where would you like to be? Tell me and I will send you there if I can.”

“How about where we started, from earth?” She smiles. Most people are not so stupid to play this game with someone who has their life in their hands. Maybe she knows of our code.

“How about the nest of carnivores two kilometers from here? I bet the young are hungry for fresh meat. Being only fifteen centimeters high right now, I am sure they could make their meal of you last a long time. My not being on Earth any longer, means I am not under the code either.” A deception, but this is getting tiring.

No more smile. Good. “Any place in the city on the shore near the island would be fine.” I nod and DS her to the shore itself about one kilometer out from the city itself. She will be able to see where she is all right. I just want time before she raises an alarm. Now some place safe. Dinos don't like cold, but I need lots of plant life about to connect with the one mind. Sort of a catch twenty two. A tropical island might do. At least the larger animals would not likely be there. I can shield, but you never know what might make it's way through even a 'thn shield. You are very vulnerable when linked with one mind. Your response time being near infinite.

Something coming. Strange. Sort of like a raptor, but a short stubby tail instead of a long one to balance with and a smaller mouth and teeth. A tool belt? Now what would a dino be doing with a tool belt? Ah curiosity killed the pop cat. I hold my ground and wait. A male, judging from an internal scan of his anatomy. Hemi-penises intact. The tools on his belt are fairly high tech. Early electromagnetics along with the usual pliers, cutters, etc. Higher tech than the human settlement anyway, except the altar of course. He has seen me and makes his way closer.

When he is a few meters out, he settles back on the short tail to make a tripod of his legs and tail. Looks comfortable actually. “Salamne fa sa lanse.” Not Standard. Not unexpected. I will have to use TP to be understood.

Please forgive me, but I do not know your language. If my speaking into your mind offends you I will leave.

Not at all. I would have done the same had I known you could speak this way. You are different than the other soft skins. I am sorry, but we do

not allow soft skins past three sussin inland. I am afraid I have to ask you to leave all the same. No idea how far a sussin is, but we are past it obviously.

I will leave. I beg that I may I ask a few questions first though.

Questions? Definitely not like the others. Are you a scientist? The others never ask questions, just bark orders and demands. Never polite. Please ask. I am as curious as to what you would ask, as I am sure you are curious as to my answers.

I am not like the others. You are correct. My name is Ron. I am here by mistake. Please do not judge all of our kind by the behavior of the few you have met or heard about here. That is part of the reason why I am asking my questions. Why are these humans, as we call ourselves, here and where is here?

My name is Dessan. You are a very long way from home for your kind. He pauses to think about what he said. Or possibly very close to your home. It is somewhat hard to explain. What do you call your world?

We call it Earth. I believe what you are trying to say is that this is also earth, but in a parallel dimension. When we came I took note of the dimensional travel. A bit difficult to follow the first time through though. I had passengers with me and did not want them to separate or attack me again.

His eyes widen and nostrils flare. You can 'see' in the void? You are different. What you say about our two worlds is consistent with my own understanding, though I have never traveled the lines myself. Nor do the people I know who have traveled the lines speak of anything but blackness.

Do you have an individual here known as Sauron? Don't want surprises. Yingui may have defeated him. I did not want to try. The trick might not work here with this one.

Sauron? No one currently by that name. We do have a Sauron in our mythology. He was a warlord of unbelievable strength and ruthlessness. He removed all the soft skins from our world eons ago by eating them himself, one by one, or so it is said. I am not convinced that soft skins ever lived here, before the recent arrival of the 'humans' that is. In the old tales he called them smiggle, but we prefer the more modern term as it is more descriptive, more scientific. It is said that he ruled for millions and millions of years. That is impossible too of course. Myths often stretch the truth. I believe the soft ones did exist here, it was his people who ate them all and lived for millions of years, not one individual.

A reasonable conjecture based on the understandings you have. Do you have any evidence for a meteor or comet striking this earth, say, sixty five million years ago or so?

We are just learning how to read the layers. There is evidence, according to our rock scientists of such things happening several times

much earlier, but nothing that close to the present has been found yet. There is the fear, of course, that it could happen again at any time. Our sky watchers do keep a keen eye on the night sky.

Ah, that is the difference then! It makes sense. I am guessing that our two worlds diverged when the meteor struck my world but probably just missed yours or broke up before hitting the ground. Would explain the shift in day time if it didn't hit. On my earth the meteor did strike, about sixty five million years ago. The impact probably slowed down or speeded up the rotation slightly. Compound that difference by time and we have the shift in the sunrise/sunset times.

For me that was the time of our version of Sauron. It is thought that the resultant climate changes induced by the impact was what brought about the extinction of the ah, we call the ones similar to you, dinosaurs, but maybe scaled ones would be more familiar or polite? Our Sauron survived though with a few of his kind and did some very nasty things to the soft skins to make us into what we are today. The others were not as enhanced as he and after several generations died out from inbreeding problems. He used us to fight another entity that he decided was an enemy. We were changed by his ways and his anger, definitely not what we would have become had he not interfered. Our Sauron was also alive till quite recently, having lived nearly sixty five million years.

Amazing! We refer to ourselves, my specific kind, as the Enlightened Ones and the others collectively similar to us as the end types. Being the end of changes as we so far know it. Some of our scientists insist that they have found remains of the soft skins, but the bones are not that different from the smaller of the earlier end types. Most are skeptical. Your skin or the lesser scales covering your head and skin would not survive the decay of time. Until we get lucky in our searches, if possible at all, it will remain a mystery.

I am sorry to be rude, but I want to get back to my primary concern. Do you know why the humans are here and how they got here? The technology for that type of travel should not have existed with the people who came here.

Nor with us. We are not responsible, and no offense, but we would rather they had not come. A dimensional being brought them and negotiated a treaty with our leaders. We agreed to let them use a portion near the shore in exchange for advanced technical knowledge. It is too cold for our liking near the shore and lacks materials and life forms that would be useful to us. We were curious at first about you humans, but most of us quickly lost interest and went back to the daily troubles confronting our lives. Of course being far enough away and no communication between us helped. I had resigned myself to never actually meeting one of your kind. Not easy for the curious. We are not the leaders, scientists that is.

We are not in our world either, normally. Even with my extra skills, I have to stay quiet. Would you know the name of this dimensional being? I am getting suspicious now. I only knew one by name.

Let me think. Smeep or something like that maybe. I am not entirely sure. I did not pay much attention to that part of the stories. It was not a common name for us, nor easy to pronounce.

Meep possibly?

Could be. As I said, I am not sure. Do you know this sMeep?

Oh yes. Normally Meep works with us, but Meep's kind are so different from either of us, who can tell what goes on when we are not around. Do you know how to reach Meep?

No, I am field scientist and far from the tendons of power. If you did not have to leave, and I wish you could stay so I could talk with you more, you could go to the city and ask. But if you are seen here, then the blood bringers will kill and eat the settlement on the shore. You really need to leave before you are seen by anyone else. You risk the others of your kind.

Well, it would seem that I have a choice. Either change my appearance to blend in or try and call or find Meep myself. Even looking like you, I doubt I could remain hidden for long. Too many cultural differences I could be caught on, not to mention the language. It would likely get you into trouble too. I don't do that to others intentionally.

You can change your appearance? Like a flaslsa?

A what? Imagine one in your mind so I can see what you mean. He does so. Ah, similar to what we would call a chameleon. No I could go much further and make myself identical to you in every way except the mind. Not important. Probably should not have even told you and no, I will not demonstrate. I have said too much already. He steps back a step and lowers his head to look at me more closely and give me a short sniff.

I will not bite you, but I do need to concentrate to try and reach Meep. Do not be alarmed, I know Meep well enough not to attract any other attention. He bows his head. I hope that means he understands. I concentrate and send out a huge psiotic pulse. If Meep is anywhere on this earth, haq will feel it. I repeat this at ten second intervals for several minutes.

"Sron!" Huh? I come out of my trance.

Sorry to disturb you, but others are coming. I traveled with a small pod. They are probably just looking for me, but will surely see you as well. I have been separated from them too long because of our talking together.

If they are also scientists like you, they would understand?

Unfortunately not all are sympathetic. Lasi is a believer. He bows his head low. Must be a gesture with many meanings. I am guessing a believer is some kind of fundamentalist.

I understand. I will leave. I know you now, so if I learn how to come here again, I will find you when you are alone.

I would like that very much. Good hunting Sron!

I laugh. Just like a pop cat. Good Hunting Dessan!

I do a quick scan of the altar area. No one at all in the basement. I DS in. Alarms start to sound, but I quickly disable them. Still, I suspect I don't have much time. Probably sounded above too. I want to see what they are doing and choose to risk it. I would hate to confront the humans of the city, but may have no choice if Meep does not show up for some time, if ever again. Haq may have only done this deed in passing, not thinking much about it. Just my luck. I could probably get to another parallel world easy enough, but which one? I could spend the rest of eternity looking for home. Kind of surprised that no other TK has done it by accident. Hmm, there have been a few strange disappearances in our history. Could be. Nah, Qaletaq died in the collision. That was not strange.

What have we here? No psiotics at least. So that must have all come from Meep. Would certainly explain the way the shapes changed. They really were not true three dimensional objects, but six dimensional ones like Meep haqself. Looks like tech level five stuff here. Not the level seven that the finance minister was talking about. Too bad. It means if I get back, I will still have to find it. Not surprising. No way the local government would back the Salmids with illegal tech. They don't really trust them any more than the Keiggers. On the other hand level five would be easier to maintain in the field. They can't go home to get parts.

Oh, this is stupid. Lathes, numerical mills, explosives. Partially built product. They are making projectile weapons. I bet they only agreed to the 'treaty' to prevent a war before they were ready. They fully intend to take more land by force. So stupid. They just get out from their war with the Keiggers and here they are back at it. I should not be so quick to judge. It is possible that it is purely defensive. After all, how would they know the Enlightened Ones were trustworthy. Blood bringers does not sound 'enlightened' to me either.

You do not belong here honored one. I spin around and see Meep undulating about two meters from me.

Thank goodness! I am here by accident. We were investigating the transport devices you lent them as possible violations of the psiotic protocols. I was apparently too much for the devices to be near and was brought here along with the last of the Salmids.

You need to return to your world immediately. You will upset my experiment.

I may have already done that. The eight who came with me know I am not a normal human. You know what these machines will make I hope? Look at the nearly finished ones.

They said it was necessary for their religious rituals.

Meep does not understand laughter, so there is no point. *These tools and supplies will make enough weapons to easily destroy the Enlightened Ones.*

Meep gets very agitated, with the shapes moving very rapidly. We have learned haq moods.

They lied!

My kind are very good at that task yes.

Please make the materials go.

Gladly! I spend a few minutes dissolving the tools, supplies and weapons to water. Meep goes over the result examining it. *Keep them away from pure metals and you should do fine with your experiment. They can still make weapons of wood and rock, but the Enlightened Ones should be able to handle that with their own higher tech weapons and personal strength.*

Humans coming. Home for you. Yes? I can hear them too. Took longer than I thought it would.

Yes, please. As soon as I finish the thought, we are back in DS space. Normally I would take this opportunity to examine Meep in haq native state, but I want to know how to get back here. Does not look that hard actually. I doubt a TK7 could do it though. As we go up the levels, it gets easier for us to remember fine details. Like making a new body when needed. Meep does not stay. As soon as we arrive on the shore outside the city, Meep leaves. No doubt to keep a more careful watch on the Salmids.

I quickly DS myself to the surface of the island where the others are gathered. Pitch black of course. Well, at least Yingui is still here.

“Where is everyone else?”

“Doing a world wide search for you and the others.”

“But not you.” He smiles. He is standing with his characteristic robe, staff and the latest version of pop cat. Huge now. His 'hobby' of sorts. Looks just like Owa Moosa, only bigger, much bigger. Come to think of it, they have all been gray females for some time now. Never paid attention before.

I am Owa, stupid monkey. She stares past me without any apparent emotion. I crack up.

“Only the best ones pick you Yingui.” I am still smiling.

“She is correct. She is the original Owa Moosa.” My mouth falls open.

“How can that be? She would be nearly a thousand years old by now. I had always just assumed it was a different cat as she got bigger and bigger.” He smiles. Well, we are not that young either, so why not?

“How was your trip?”

“Interesting. You would not believe where I was.” Ah, finally I have

one on him.

“Did you meet any of the Enlightened Ones?” He puts on his poker face. He is good.

“Is this all a game to you, watching us go through the motions?”

“You misunderstand. I have never met one myself. Meep told me of them and the parallel worlds.” Looks worried. Freep, I did not mean to offend him.

“You do not even go off world anymore either, other than New Hope. Some day you will have to tell me why.”

“Someday.” Back to poker face.

“Shall I call the others?”

“I have already told Pr'thn. She is telling the others. Most will just go on their way, happy to know you are safe.” Not unexpected behavior.

“I still have to find the level seven hoarders the finance minister told me about.”

“Remember the game of telephone. Stuff gets bigger in the telling. Barb said to try Produce Square.”

“Yeah, but the hunt is fun even if we don't catch anything. Thanks for the tip.”

Fiona

E93873 in the Hylek sector.

Dione and I each had four children before we went TK ourselves. The TKs set some of Onna's sperm aside so we could have the last three. At our last "civilized" stop, the first generation finished their upgrades to TK7, thanks to Rhea and Ly'thn. They really went the extra light year to meet us this far out. We in turn upgraded the second generation to TK6 and the third generation to TK5. Civilized was really pushing it. I spent my entire time with Elle. Counting Elle there were twenty eight of us and we do count Elle as one of us.

Oh at first we were really nervous around her, having just come from one control freak, but she has proven herself one of us time and time again. She was funny when Dione and I were pregnant. It did not seem right, in her new role to be called Mother, so picked a name for herself, which I forget. But we objected and said that no one gets to pick their own name [Yingui excepted], as the oldest female I suggested Eleanor, after my grandmother. The others were all for it and she did not mind. Then the kids came and Eleanor was too hard for them to say at first. Soon we were all calling her Elle and it stuck.

I am supposed to be doing this as a diary, not a history lesson, so I guess I had better get on with it. Day 216 of year 1271 after the start of our wanderings and now our 59th habitable planet.

We spend, on the average, about twenty years on each one, with a couple of years between hunting for the next one. In the old days they would spend far less time, but then never got to know a planet and it's occupants well enough. Then when colonists showed up some surprise would appear that could cause everyone to be evacuated. Not all one minds were open to the idea of invaders. We did our best to soften them up to the idea.

Now we came in, announced ourselves and our intentions. A few years later we would help the one mind achieve spawning with whatever life form she wanted us to work with. Elle was very good at the genetic manipulations needed to achieve seed formation. Once spawned the one minds were much nicer to outsiders. They had fulfilled their purpose and the rest was gravy. Much more open to experimentation. Lastly we set up a marker buoy to let the others know and prepared for the next planet. TK chow gets old really fast, so we usually fill up the ship with our favorite foods by whatever means we could preserve them.

Here we are on number fifty nine. We have only been here a week, surveying everything we can from orbit. Maps filled out and flora and fauna in this case located, usually plantamals. This is interesting, as it is the first planet with the plant animal mix other than earth we have found.

Earth was supposed to have been a mistake, but apparently there is a weak spot in the one mind starting genome that is more likely to break this way. Too bad they did not collect a few spores when greenman spawned. Or maybe this is the only break that is still viable. No matter, nice to be back to something more 'normal' even if it is not our normal.

I was raised in a confined space and spent all of my pre TK existence in one. I am still not used to wide open skies with no shelter set up. Therefore I stay on board ship until we are granted permission to stay and they have set up living quarters. Yes, we can land the ship, but that really makes most one minds very nervous. A metal sphere that large in diameter on a non tech world smells like invasion from the start. Of course she can sense us up here, but as long as the ship stays here till invited she will leave us alone.

Now normally you would expect that sooner or later we would run into world at the tech level of existence. Surprisingly though, that is usually a very short time period and the odds of seeing it are very very small. That and we are likely to have met their TKs at the center in the first place. Best to stay away from tech cultures anyway. They usually have weapons and we are unarmed except for our TK status. Even twenty seven TKs is not enough to stop a determined tech culture.

The others have gone planet side, suffering from something called 'cabin fever' according to the references Elle maintains. Even a ship this large is not very private and I look forward to these few days of peace with only me and Elle present. Actually mostly just me. Elle is in constant communication with everyone planet side, which keeps her pretty busy. Of course, if there was an emergency, I could be down there in a second. Knock on counter.

I have taken to spinning yarn out of a flax like plant fiber and then knitting sweaters. With my TK7 status it is trivial to look up various dyes in Elle's database and then apply them to the spun yarn. I am making a dark green one for Onna now. In twelve hundred years we have all had plenty of time to learn every task needed, but we each maintain our own preferences. I still prefer cooking and now making clothing. Yes, I could just 'dup' it as the old TKs called it, but somehow it is not the same and it is not like we don't have the time. Too much in many ways. We stretch each planet out for twenty years, but it is easy work. We spend a lot of time basking in the sun, swimming and hiking.

I do a lot of wood carving when planet side. Not all of the planets have had wood like materials though. Then I do basket weaving or pottery. I have gotten pretty good at each, laying every more intricate patterns or scenes. We can't keep it of course. It all gets melted down before we go, so who ever comes here next does not find evidence of our having been here. Who knows, it may not even be a human descendant, but some other intelligent species. We would not want to give them the

wrong idea about what had lived and evolved on a particular planet. I have been known to hide little artifacts, just for fun though. Don't tell anyone. Imagine the surprise on someone's face or whatever, upon finding a small clay figurine or metal sculpture millions of years from now. We all have our fantasies I guess.

We still receive messages from the larger human collective occasionally. Those are becoming rarer as people forget who we are and as we get further out. The turn around time for slow mail is too long for most to care, at least for norms. We could have invested in a faster com, but then it would hurt too much to watch friends grow up, get old and then die. This way we are less attached. I suspect that soon they may stop answering at all, figuring it would not have any meaning by the time an answer gets here. It does though. We are all intensely curious about what has happened at home. Certainly Jason country has changed a lot. Hearing about Rachael's teaching at the University was funny. I can just picture her there butting heads with the stubborn elite. Humans certainly have not changed much yet at least.

Imagine what it was like for Ron to have found another earth! So close and yet so far. A land ruled by intelligent dinosaurs, although I guess technically they aren't really dinosaurs any longer, being fully warm blooded like us. Similar in weight too I hear. Still, to talk with another intelligent species that evolved on the same type of planet. Maybe we will be lucky and find something here.

Night down there now. Soon it will be morning. Not that we sleep. Oops missed a stitch. I can't get too distracted or this will be a mess. I have to undo the last eight stitches to correct my mistake. There we go. Where was I? Night. Just means they are all using their scanning ability to see what creatures venture out at night that hide and sleep during the day. Randy, a third gen, or 3G, found a most interesting snake like creature all covered in fine fur, except on it's belly of course, where the hard almost teeth like structures helped it move along. On stone or rock it must be quite noisy, but on soft soil it is very quiet. Put it on sand though and it sounds very eerie. I won't even attempt to describe it. Listen to the sound tapes Elle has if you are interested.

Instead of insects they have very small flying jellyfish like creatures. A thin protein shell keeps them from drying out. When they land on prey, either plant or animal, they open up to expose their soft parts that produce digestive juices to dissolve the prey's surface. Our group would find all these welts all over any exposed flesh till they figured this out. Nearly neutrally buoyant from stored hydrogen, meant they needed very little energy to move around like a typical jellyfish. Of course, it also meant that the wind moved them easily too. Probably why they are pretty much all over the planet. A fierce storm would kill billions of them and the place would stink for days afterwards.

Ah, I see some reports are coming in about first contact with the local one mind. Does not look encouraging. Never does at first. Hmm, seems much more suspicious than even the other one minds. One minds are certainly the most paranoid creatures I have ever met, if you can call them creatures. Must have had something to do with the first makers. Sneaky too. They don't outright lie, so much as withhold information and mislead. This one claims there is nothing wrong here that time will not cure. Already has a sentient species on the path to spawning. Okay, where? We picked nothing up even with a high res telescope that can see down to two centimeter resolution, nor with psiotic scanning. Night and day too. Lots of creatures, but nothing I would call intelligent. No tools or large social groups even. Now we are down here, still nothing.

So where is this sentient species? Well, tea time for me. We do the best we can, but tea is a subjective thing when you have different starting material every twenty years. This one is interesting, a slight pepper taste with smoky undertones. Okay, not my favorite, but then anything gets boring after twenty years. Hopefully we will find something new here.

Lars is into making books, the hard way. Well, not totally the hard way. He makes the paper by hand and binds them by hand, but uses TK to place the print on the page that Elle lays out on the monitor. I am reading a classic now while I enjoy my tea, Don Quixote. Seems somehow related to our own quest. Hmm.... In this chapter he and Pancho are about to do battle with the evil dragon disguised as a windmill.

"Fiona, a problem has developed on the surface that needs our attention."

"Yes Elle, please describe the situation."

"As the sun rose, Lars, Dione and Onna, along with the Gen Twos were trapped by the one mind and can't get free. The Gen Threes have been ignored for the time being. They bubbled and are trying to free the others. As soon as they get part of the plant life free, more attaches. They are making no progress."

"What do you think if the Gen3s bubble the trapped ones and raise them above the surface. It might free them from further attack anyway."

"Good idea, I will also instruct them not to go near any life forms unbubbled themselves. They may be noticed now that they are taking an active part." Not the first time. Main reason they don't mind that I stay behind. Always leave someone in reserve. So much for my book.

"Best we get down there ourselves. The one mind should not be able to do anything to you at least."

"Depends of what is causing the others to be trapped. If she has worked out some organic way to disable the psiotic link field, she may be able to affect me as well. A fall from even a few meters would do significant damage."

"We need somewhere she can't touch us to figure this out."

Somewhere besides up here of course. I really want to be in an air breathing environment if it goes bad.”

“The desert should work. No plants means no psiotic abilities for her.”

“Show me on the map where you are thinking.”

She brings up a 3D map of the planet with a flashing red light in the desert space nearest everyone else.

“I have been told they were successful in removing the others from the plants by the bubble method. I will tell them to meet us at the spot I have chosen.”

“I never noticed before, but it looks like either desert or water goes all around the equator.”

“That is correct. The temperature is a little higher than old earth. Too hot at the equator to allow much plant life. There are some animals though.”

“How do they live without plants?”

“Drift material from the winds. Creatures that venture too far and die there. Not much lives there however, mostly hard skins and a few others that burrow during the day and come out at night.”

“Snakes?” I hate snakes.

“The only ones here are covered in fur. Does not work well in hot sand.

The others will be there in about one hour.” TK5s are not that fast under load. They have to be careful and monitor their passengers as well. I have scanned the whole group. Onna and the others are fine, but unconscious.

“What about the storm coming in? Does the one mind control the weather?”

“She may be able to influence it some by adjusting the wind through the trees, but no fast changes. You remember what time is like in her world frame.”

“Yes. One of the many reasons why they are suspicious of foreign TKs.”

My turn. As we land in the sand, I raise an additional mini storm and create a shield of sand over Elle. I don't want to be visible from the air. One mind can use bird like creatures as look outs. Of course there are a few minutes where we are visible, but I scan nothing close by. There is plenty of wind though. I can hear the sound even inside Elle.

I TP the others, *Hide in the sand. Cover yourselves and go with the flow as much as possible. We don't want her to know where we are. Zero in on my TP. I will continue to stay in contact till you get here.*

Now we wait. The sun rises higher in the sky and the heat begins. I

create some spun glass from some of the sand to act as insulation between the surface and Elle. Even she would over heat in this. Not easy to turn here in a gravity field either to keep a new face towards the sun. Though powered by an extensive array of TK power supplies, it is not infinite. I go back to my book and use that as material to transmit so they have a way of locating us. The old fashioned radio has trouble in this much sand. High iron content is the problem. Along with the wind it acts like a generator causing a lot of white noise.

They approach the air lock and use TK to open the hatches. Only way since we changed it. That way no one but a TK could get in or even figure out how to get in. Normally we don't even bother and just DS in, but of course the Gen3s can't DS.

Put the bubbled ones in cargo hold one and then seal the doors. DO NOT unbubble anyone until the seal is intact and tested. We don't want to get what they have or we are all doomed. Especially here, away from food and water, assuming we could eat or drink it. Every world is a little different in makeup, especially the proteins. Bad allergic reactions would set in, in about a month.

Don't forget to decontaminate yourselves. I am monitoring the patients, so you can relax. Standard procedure actually. You need your full attention for the procedures involved. Not pleasant ones either.

Elle is following along on all this. I type in what I am saying to the others into a terminal for her benefit. She has shut down all light in the hold. Plants need light to survive. It might make a difference.

“Shit, they are taking their energy from the patients instead of from the light. Elle, can you send a probe in there to get a sample to analyze?” I add more psiotic energy to balance out what the attacking forms are consuming. There are a lot of people in there. I will be in trouble soon too if I am not careful.

“No problem.” I sense a little scutter probe make it's way towards Lars. It has expertly taken swabs of Lars' skin and withdrawn a blood sample. The DNA of this plant critter looks familiar somehow. Where have I seen it before? Elle has a better database than I have memory. I am counting on her for this one. Till we know what we are dealing with, all I can do is keep everyone comfortable and quiet.

Two of the Gen3s come up to control where I am. Mary and Robyn. Good kids. No, not kids. Hard to think of them otherwise, but they are nearly my age and both over a thousand years old. Hard to break old habits. Especially when under stress.

“Fiona, what can we do?”

“This is very hard on me to handle this many at once. I don't know how you did it.”

“Barely. We are all exhausted. Most of them are crashed in the rec area now. But we thought we had better check in first.”

“And you drew the small leaves.” They nod and give half hearted smiles.

“Go, get some rest. I may need all of you later. Go on, out of here before I change my mind.” They get lost without much urging. Just you and me Elle. She has the samples by now. Takes longer for her to run an analysis. I have to be patient. No book this time. I need to concentrate. The infection is stopped for now, but only because of my concentration. Very tenacious little things. Eucaryotic. Normally something that size can be filtered out fairly rapidly, but I am watching eleven people at once. If I concentrate enough on one to clean them, then the others could suffer permanent damage.

Seems like it takes forever, but Elle finally chimes she is done.

“Fiona, it appears to be a variation on the greenman genome.”

“I was worried about that. Unless we want them to become spawners, we need to do this right. Where is that sentient species that the one mind should be doing this to?

“Elle, was there any indication of a civilization? Houses, monuments, farms, anything?”

“None were detected. Remember not all civilizations are destructive to the environment. The UNA would leave no trace after a few hundred years either. The Africans even less time now.”

“True Elle. James' report was very thorough and interesting. Out of character for him.” Concentrate, concentrate.

It seems like forever before I feel the Gen3s coming in to relieve me.

“Fiona, I believe I have come up with an antibody to the algae viroid that is attempting to change them to greenmen unsuccessfully. Normally it would not have incapacitated them this much, but they don't fit the profile of the animal life here.”

“That makes sense. Too much time between us and we are all TK. That was not expected either. Hmm, though they should have helpers shouldn't they?”

“That would be the normal protocol. The psiotic sensors have not sensed anything stronger than the expected life we have seen.”

“So, either the one mind is delusional or they were here and now are not.

Let's try the antibiotic now that we have the Gen3s awake. With all of us watching. I don't want to lose any one.”

“Affirmative.” Elle shows me the structure she has come up with. A variation on the antidote the old “mother” has worked out with changes we have learned about from some of the plantamal worlds. Much easier when you understand how it was supposed to have come together. I prepare the material. Still easier for me to make using TK. Fewer steps. I place the completed serum in the receptacle. Elle draws it in. I follow its course with my scan. I watch it enter the bot and make its way to the

resting family. The antibodies are attaching themselves to the algae-viroids as expected. Slowly, one by one over the next hour I watch the titer drop to zero.

Okay folks, they are free of the infection. It should be safe to go in now.

The Gen3s will go in first. First lights go on. No more algae to worry about. Looks like Margo and Lens lost the toss. I DS my way down to the observation area to be with the others.

“Over here Fiona. You'll get a better view.”

“Thanks Aneor.” I squeeze in beside her. Margo and Lens go over to the reclining ones, checking each one.

Over the intercom we hear their conversation.

“So far so good. Lars, Dione and Onna are resting comfortably. Proceeding to the Gen2s. Fiona, how long till they wake up?”

“I would have expected them to be awake now.”

“Margo over here. Gerti is irregular. Fiona help us!”

I can't DS in. That could risk us all. I go into my TK only trance. Gerti's energy levels are falling fast. It is like she has passed the point of no return. I will lose her if I don't move fast. I am only a TK7 though. I have never done a transfer by myself.

“I will need everyone's help. First we need enough mass to make the new form.”

“Use the chairs in here. Heck, use the empty table. Doesn't matter. I feel like I am holding together wet pasta.”

The rest of us link hands and concentrate to pool our abilities. I will use the gen3s to make the form and keep it going. I will concentrate on the transfer. Gerti's psi is very weak. I add some chi energy by using my psiotics as a channel. When I feel she is strong enough I check on the form. Almost ready. A little younger, but we can correct that later. We all have a preferred age we like to be perceived as. Younger forms are easier to make. She will lose all those scars she has accumulated in the field.

“Let's do it. Margo and Lens, hold on to her new form. The shock of an unexpected transfer can undo what we have done. She will need to see you two to orient herself to our existence again.”

I concentrate and nearly lose it myself. Very draining. I am a bit rough, not wanting to chance failure for finesse. Her new form shakes a bit as her psychic self settles in. She opens her eyes with confusion. She coughs a few times to activate her breathing on her own. The rest of us relax.

“She will need to rest a bit. Place her on the scanner so Elle can see what is going on.” They roll her over and make her carry to the psiotic med table. I sit on the floor and lean against the wall.

“What about the others? Why haven't they woken up?” They are all a little shaky too.

“Everyone else is stable, but no one else is showing any signs of coming to.”

“Aneor, tell me what happened down there. There must be a reason why you were not attacked like the Gen2s and first gens.”

“We all assumed it was because we are Gen3s and either not susceptible or of no interest to the one mind.”

“Just start at the beginning.”

“Fiona, look at this.” Lens says over the com.

I make my way slowly back up to a standing position and look through the window.

“What are those?”

“Air jellies.” Remember I was never down on the surface.

“What? Were did they come from?”

“They appeared on Gerti's old body and then launched themselves.” Her body is covered with the scars from the previous landings. I watch closely and see one appear as if emerging from a scar.

“Zap those jellies now! Protect Gerti too.” I yell. A few have jetted their way closer to her. All of the sleeping forms have the scars too, but Gerti's old body has the most scars by far.

They do as I ask, making a game out of it, using the blue light beam method. Waste of TK if you ask me. Each one they hit goes up in a little puff of smoke. More keep appearing from her old body though. I take some mass from a nearby drum of water and make a shield to cover her corpse with a tight 'thn shield. No more jellies appear. I watch the others. No jellies. Must be because the old body has died. It is as if something was feeding on them.

I come back to my own environment to think. Aneor bends over me. I am dressed but everyone else is barely covered. Of course none of us care, but clothing is more than modesty. Makes a nice sun protector at least. There are no scars on her arms. Weird.

“Aneor, how come you don't have any scars?”

“Huh?” She looks down at her arms confused. “That's weird. I don't know.”

“Everyone else, watch for more jellies. Protect everyone inside storage. Margo and Lens, I am afraid you are not coming out till we solve this. Can't take the chance you are not infected. Now, Aneor, tell me what happened down there.”

“Just the usual walk about. Collecting samples. Psiotic scans. Boring. When the Gen2s and first gens thought it was time to contact the one mind we had all had enough. Since we were not needed we decided to check out our surroundings a little.”

“This was before or after the jelly attacks.”

“Oh, after. Those happened to all of us the first day planet side. Gerti was the first. She ran into a huge swarm of them. We could hear her

screaming before we came to her aid. Easy enough to zap. Problem is, is that they have some kind of anesthetic too. It was not till we zapped all in the area and started shielding ourselves did we notice that all of us had been affected.”

“So, you were all covered with scars from their bites.”

“Yeah, only Gerti had the most. We accepted the new scars as proof that we have been here and thought nothing more about it.”

“So no symptoms or fatigue?”

“Nope, we all felt fine. We assumed it was just a surface thing. We did scans of course and did not sense anything.”

“Go on. You were bored.”

“Once they went into the one mind contact mode, we took off. They are shielded fine and we thought nothing could go wrong. Maybe if we have been TK6 and 7 we would be like them too.

We scanned as far as we could and easily noticed the desert. Of course, we had seen the maps while in orbit and had our pads as well. Just on the other side of the desert here, is a really deep blue lake. We decided to check it out.

I think it was Janette who suggested we cool off there. The desert here is awfully hot, even with TK abilities. The lake is really deep, so the water stays cool even here. There are only plants at the north end, so went there for the comfort of having living things around us as well.”

“Did you run into any jellies there?” I am starting to get suspicious.

“I didn't see any, but we were much closer to the equator there than we were at zero station. Right on the edge of life really. If it weren't for the deep lake, I doubt it would have been that close. We can check the maps if you think it is important.”

“She is correct. The north side of the lake is the closest to the equator for any living things. Why do you think this is important?”

“Thanks Elle. I am not sure yet. I will let everyone know if anything more comes up.

Then what did you do Aneur?”

“Well, as you know, being in the matrix of the one mind is time consuming to say the least. We decided to wait till sunrise before returning. When we arrived back, they were still in trance. Not unexpected. As it got latter and the sun came up, we got a little concerned and decided to scan them to make sure. That was when we noticed they were not in the theta state at all, but comatose. We immediately called in.”

“So, you really don't know how long they were out?”

“No, I am sorry. We should have stuck around, but it seemed so routine.”

“Well, as you have learned now, it is never routine.”

“What do we do now?”

“I want to take a chance. I want to take Onna out of here and take him to the lake where you were.”

“During the day? Why?”

“Maybe we should wait till night to be the same, or it may not matter, or it may be too late.”

“We can't afford to have you infected. Nor would it be wise to leave here with so many in need. It would take us longer, but let three of us take someone, say my mother instead. It may sound cruel, but we risk less and I would not want to risk anyone else's parent.” You always know who your mother is. They did not all have the same father. Elle thought it would be best to have as wide of a genetic spread as possible. Except for the first child, it was all done by artificial means anyway. We were all family anyway. No favorites.

“Your logic is sound. Who will you choose for the other two?”

“My sisters, Kalin and Yaspret. That way the risk is totally ours.”

“I have made a vessel for you with two chambers. I will transport the three of you into one side and your mother into the other. Go. Come back as soon as you can. It may take time.”

“What should we do?”

“Try and re-trace your steps while you were there. If you went swimming, immerse her in the water. If you stayed under a tree, do the same again. Keep aware and try and figure out what happened. There is some reason why your scars are gone and those in the cargo hold are not. I believe that all of you were infected, but somehow the fifteen of you were cured, though through no action on your part.”

“Makes sense. We will try our best. Take care of the others, whom we love no less.”

I DS them to the craft and they take off. 'thn's speed! I go back to watching the others. Everyone is resting comfortably. We have dimmed the lights again to help them rest. We do still have basically a human physiology.

“Elle, can we get closer to the lake without drawing notice?”

“By making a hop to orbit and then down again. I can use DS to make the jumps without the one mind noticing I believe.”

Attention everyone. I believe that there is a possibility of a cure at the lake. We will wait till Aneor and her sisters get there. As soon as we know Elle will take all of us there as well. Please prepare for DS travel.

Elle's DS engines are not exactly as smooth as an individual TK, especially in an atmosphere takeoff and landing. A much larger object to move, so this is not totally unexpected. Preparing means stowing everything in a safe place. We can repair most anything, but it takes less time to stow it than remake it, even for us. Oh, we lose a few things anyway. Even I have lost a few of my more delicate sculptures. I have nurse duty, so I will have to depend on the others this time though.

“There is something going on outside. MPR shows life forms approaching us from the south.”

“I am occupied watching the afflicted. Keep an eye on them Elle.” Life forms would not pose a threat to us inside Elle's shell.

I am still outside the cargo hold when Gerti wakes up screaming! “The TERROR returns! The TERROR returns!” Margo and Lens are on her and help her calm down assuring her she is safe. At least her new form seems to be working fine. I hate doing that kind of thing under pressure. Are there any other times? She keeps screaming though.

Margo and Lens, you had better give her a sedative. Here is the structure.

She finally calms down and I can concentrate fully again. Everyone else is stable. I sneak a peak above us and sure enough, there are bird like creatures pecking away at my sand shell. Under that is 'thin shield and below that a meter of insulation. Not a chance. I go back to the others.

I feel something on the back of my neck. “Not now. I'll be ok.” I swat at it when the feeling does not go away. Nothing there.

Why have not any of the others come around? I can find nothing wrong with them, but I am still applying psiotic energy to each of them. Every time I lower the levels, they slip further from me. I dare not try again. I feel myself growing weaker. It has been hard to maintain this for so long. Maybe I should let the Gen3s take over for a short time. I forget there are only twelve here now and two must stay away to take care of the physical needs and watch over all of us. We need a cure now or we are all lost.

I hear in the back ground, “Get her into the water. Hurry.” I feel myself being slowly being enveloped in wonderfully cool water. Water? we don't have that much water on the ship. I relax into it though. It feels so good. The effect is temporary though. The weakness returns. I am being taken out of the water. I try to open my eyes.

“Fiona, remain calm. We are taking care of you.” I want to protest, but I am so tired. I finally open my eyes for a moment and see a blue sky with clouds and green leaves of some kind over me. That is all I can manage.

I have no idea how long I have been out or even if I would ever wake. I certainly did not want to awaken to find everyone else dead. I could not face that. Peace comes and I sink into oblivion.

I see a face above me. Onna, my beloved is smiling. I smile back. It is nice to see him again, even if it is in this new life after life. Maybe this is just happening in a millisecond before my brain shuts down for good, but I don't care. I am happy to feel him again next to me. So much has happened. It was a risk we took when we signed on so long ago. A risk is not a risk if the bad cannot happen. Good bye my love.

“Fiona will you get off your lazy back and help us? Enough is a

enough.”

“Huh?” I take a deep breath and open my eyes. I am propped up against a tree of some kind and Onna is smiling down at me.

“Come on dear. Time to get up.” The sun is low in the sky. It will be dark soon. I turn my head. There is a lake to my left. To my right is the ship nestled in a space between a lot of trees. I must be facing west. I look down at my hands. There is a small creature with huge eyes looking up at me. It squeaks or chirps. Whatever. Cute.

“And who are you little one?”

“She is the one who saved you as her kind saved the rest of us.”

“What is her name?”

“The Gen3s call them squeakers after the sounds they make. She is watching you to see if you have any more air jellies in you.”

“In me? I was never on the surface and I thought they only attacked the surface. Oh wait. I remember them coming out of Gerti's body. You want to explain to me what happened?”

“What and keep you from the pleasure of figuring it out yourself.”

“Look, oh great Jason. Stop playing games and just tell me. I am still tired.”

“Oh, starting to use bad language. I guess I had better come clean.”

Gerti's face shows and she waves hi. She looks fine now.

“The jellies are the 3d interface of a new kind of small non sentient psiotic parasite. They apparently evolved on the southern continent.”

“What? That's impossible! Our universe cannot spawn a transdimensional life form.”

“While linked with the one mind, she admitted that she had done just that. She was using them to protect herself specifically from helpers. We don't understand everything yet. Apparently there was a sentient here that achieved helper status, but for some reason they turned on the one mind and killed off all of the spawners. She was just reacting to us as she did to the first helpers she had met. She apparently was successful in killing them off.”

“How long ago was this? You said that you found no evidence of a sentient having been here.”

“We didn't. So, it must have been millions of years ago at least. We were pretty thorough, but we are not archaeologists.”

“That does not explain my hero though.” I reach out and she hops on my hand. I stroke her with my other hand. They are cute.”

“This psiotic ones are only in the south. The north developed defenses. This is one of them. The squeakers that is.

When we were attacked in the desert, flying creatures carried a larger variant to the surface of Elle. From there they could attempt to DS the short distance to the inside. You were the one they were interested in. Only one had to make it. Rogert saw it land on your neck, but zapped it

too late and only succeeded in removing the visible portion. It could not attack another, but it did not need to. With you taken out, the mission was lost. Of course the one mind, having never developed mech, did not know about Elle or understand what a ship was.”

Elle comes in over a com, “Since our original intent was to reach the lake I thought it best to take us there. As I emerged from the sand and insulation shell, it was obvious that a battle was going on. Apparently forces from the north met the southern forces that had attacked us. There were dead bodies of the fallen scattered all over the ground. I DSD to orbit to shake any remaining creatures and to insure we would be out of range of the southern attack.”

“That explains how the desert creatures live.”

“Precisely. My calculations state that as little as one battle every few years would be enough in any one region. The dry air would desiccate and preserve the bodies till they were found.

I arrived at the lake, only a few minutes ahead of the Aneor and her sisters. Together everyone got you and the rest out of the ship to be placed in the lake.”

Gerti takes over, “We had to hurry as we did not have enough strength between us to maintain all of you for long and I was still too tired to help much with the psiotic aspects. Unfortunately it was not the lake that was the secret. We nearly lost Neri, but he is okay now. Don't worry.”

Aneor, “It was then that we remembered the trees and what happened when we first sat under them. The squeakers came down by the tens and making quite a racket, even in the night, hovered all around us. We thought they were so cute, we held out our hands to greet them. They landed and then walked all over us curiously intent on something we could not see. After a few minutes they all flew away again. We thought nothing more about it till we started to put the story together ourselves.

Sure enough, once we brought all of you over to the trees they descended again and went to work. We thought nothing had happened till we saw all the scars slowly disappearing from everyone, including the much bigger one on you Fiona.”

“The one mind could have come up with the jellies fairly quickly once the transdimensional part was solved. They are fairly simple in design. But why come up with the complex counter agent? These squeakers are obviously highly evolved. Not an overnight job by any means.”

“We have not worked it all out yet. Nor do we understand the constant state of apparent war between the north and south. Also, the squeakers must feed on something else when they can't get the psiotic parasites, but we have not seen them eat anything.”

“This may be obvious, but the north and south are all but separated.

What would happen to a one mind under those conditions?"

"Well they certainly were not always separated. Surely continental drift meant they were connected at one time."

"Still are, it is the desert that keeps them apart, not the land or sea masses. And the desert would move with the drift because of the extra heat at the equator."

"True. So, if there are two one minds, either by two infestations or twining, it does not explain what happened to the sentients and the helpers and why there is now a war between them. After all, cooperation would have helped them both much faster than warfare."

"Tell that to our own past." Yes, do. Try as we might, except for possibly Pots and James' work in Africa, war is still very much with us. Ah, my own TKness is kicking in again. I can feel my strength returning. Feels really good.

"It would appear that the only way to find out would be to contact the one mind on this side of the planet."

"Maybe that should wait a bit. I would think we should be more careful this time."

"Yes mother!" We all crack up. We only call Elle mother when she is trying to act like she used to. Helps keep her in check. Though in this case I happen to agree with her.

James

Earth – South Sea Baldrige Memorial Avian Reserve

“Dude you are way too stressed out. Lay back and relax. Soak in the rays.”

“Marty we are in a protected area. We all agreed to leave it alone. We should not be here.”

“Chill out. We are below the high tide, so technically we are not in the reserve. If you want, we can catch some more waves. Then we will be even further out. Besides this a bird reserve. Do you see any thing other than seagulls. No, therefore we are not disturbing them.”

“I need to be someplace with action. This is just too quiet for me.”

“Hey, you were the one who said you needed a change. And stop throwing things at the turtle. She wasn't doing anything to you.”

“New Hope is overhead. I'm going up. I need to work this out.”

“Don't worry James. I am sure a war will start again soon somewhere.” He laughs.

War still seems to be universal, but our efforts do appear to be making some progress. They are fewer and less intense. Not like the good old days. We sure had some good ones. The campaign against the Phlovians was something else. Ten thousand troops in gleaming armor. Took years to get ready. They sure looked funny when we dissolved that armor to urine. Ten thousand naked men stinking of fear standing before a few hundred old men in robes.

Nobody home. I check the message center in the control room. Nothing there either. Just too quiet. I admit it. I am bored. I log on to the terminal to see if anything else has been posted. This looks interesting. The New Earth betas are something else. Maybe Mother was right. They could easily be the replacement for humankind. They work together so much better than we do. Sort of a cat vs dog thing. The pack is stronger than the loner.

It says they have successfully controlled the flood water and diverted some of it to the wet lands and some to the aqua culture and farming areas where it will help rather than harm. And all of this with level four tech. It would have taken us level six at least. Hmm, last time I visited though they just sat and stared at me. I was either a curiosity or a monster, depending on your point of view. They have no conflicts on New Earth, at least not since the alphas, ah, left or died out. Hmm, I guess I do sort of look like an alpha male. I certainly was not born one. It could be a disadvantage if they ever ran into a competitive culture with superior tech. Hopefully we can prevent that from happening. We have not run into a single space faring sentient without TK or psiotics so they should be fine.

I DS down to the surface as New Hope is over former Montana. Wolf my companion runs up to greet me. It is dark, but there is a nearly full moon and lots of open space.

Run with pack! Run with pack!

“Sure Wolf, let's go!” She takes off at a sprint. Faster on the start, but can't run long full out without getting tired. In a few minutes my steady pace catches up with her and we continue together. I switch to TP to save on breath and keep the beautiful silence going.

Wolf, I need an adventure.

Go home.

There is nothing there. You have been there with me. The society in Neucalif is stable and boring.

To beginning. Origin of all.

Origin. Not the origin of the TKs, of me, or of my family. The origin of our kind, of all humans? Where Sauron bred us to be who we are. Africa. Home of my ancestors. Home of all human ancestors. Out of bounds. I have never been there, though other TKs have, just to check up on things. Last thing we needed was to have gone to all this trouble to have protected them only to have that turn on us. The rule was, anyone who went, could not say what they had seen or experienced unless it was a danger to the rest. No one ever said anything in all this time. I have resisted.

Of the Guardians, I am the only one of African American descent. Somehow to go back there seemed wrong to me in particular. To the others, it was just another place, another adventure. But to me, I felt should know something about my own people and culture before I just showed up. As time passed it was less and less likely that I would ever learn anything before I went. How could I? No information leaked out, even among those TKs who had visited.

Think too much. Run!

I rub her back. “You are right Wolf. I think too much. Want to go with me? Huh?” She is excited. She comes on most of my trips. I bonded with her as a pup as I did with generations of her ancestors. I rarely leave her. Marty and his stupid idea to go surfing. It just doesn't work for me. Wolf would have disturbed the birds for sure.

Origin. Ethiopia? Serengeti? I was not much for schooling and what I got was a very long time ago. We know Sauron's people were not close to here after the meteor. After they died out, Sauron wandered about trying to find a method to vent his hate of the 'thn. Somehow he ended up in Africa. There were those finds of Lucy and others. There may not be a specific place. I am sure Sauron had multiple lines going at once. That was his way, to pit groups against each other and see who won. He wanted the toughest, but no TKs to threaten his own superiority. Over and over again he used this method.

Yingui told me once, that when I was ready, to go to a specific place. I don't remember the old names for the place, just where it is in the map of my mind. Sounds as good as any. I can always jump from there if necessary.

Wolf has fallen asleep at my feet. Too much thinking. I gently DS us to New Hope. There we wait till we are over Africa. Though technically it is possible to DS through the planet, I have never felt comfortable with the idea. About thirty minutes later we are close enough. I DS us down to the spot. Bright sun. Takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. Wolf stretches and then starts a low growl.

“Sorry. I should have warned you what I was doing. It is all right girl.” She doesn't stop though. I turn around and look to where her attention is. There is a huge man with a white robe standing on a narrow path facing us. I am apparently on the same narrow path. It is a long way down on either side. I scan the bottom to see what is in store. Skeletons. Lots of them. The figure is still there.

“Hello, my name is James.” Duh, there is no way he is going to know Standard. Remember where you are James. If I use TP will that freak him? Not exactly blending in either.

“None shall pass.” What? How can that be?

“Who are you and how do you know Standard?” He is the right color, but there are black people all over the planet still. Not just in Africa. Granted most are being diluted out by merging with the local colors. He is definitely not diluted. Maybe even darker than me. Maybe I should have stayed on the beach longer at the reserve. Not that it helped before.

“I am Protector of the People. No one from the outside may pass.” We are not exactly at the edge. Of course I am speaking standard and not exactly dressed as a local. I have heard that term before, but where or when?

“Do you want this one, or shall I Wolf?” She looks at me and whimpers. Sigh, as usual, I get all the big ones. She is not very good at anything bigger than her unless is it potential dinner or threatening us directly.

“You are on. What are the rules?”

He drops his robe. Only wearing a loin cloth underneath. More than I am. Lots of scars too. He has done this before. Might even be fun after all. With a rush of air, I fabricate a matching cloth for myself. Not as comfortable, but when in Rome... I drop my robe. I can easily match him scar for scar. Hmm, more like two for one. Some self inflicted as part of some initiation or another. Still have the ones from the first sun dance even. Now that was pain.

“No rules.” My favorite! Wolf stays where she is, ready to high tail it if I lose. As she remembers that I never lose, she settles down for a watch

or a nap. Normally it is a nap. He has about ten kilos on me, but that never stopped me.

We meet in the center of the narrowest part of the path about twelve meters long. Very melodramatic. We lock arms. He is strong. Good.

“Now it begins false Guardian. Join the other pretenders.” Guardian? How would he know about us? Even those who come here hide their identity so as not to upset the culture. No time to think, the dance begins. Back and forth we go. First he has the advantage, then I do. It probably would have been better if I had not gone for that run. This is getting serious. I am not sure if he cares if he wins, only that I lose. Wonder how many of those bones are from other 'protectors'.

We are both getting tired now. This is when mistakes happen. I hate to have to use 'enhanced' methods. No fun in that. And how do you explain it. He throws dust into my eyes. He said no rules. This is supposed to blind me and I fake it has happened. When he reaches for me, I trip him up, but he does manage to grab me, throwing me off balance. Shit, we are both going to go over. Can't break cover. I can have a new body waiting before we hit. But I can't have such a worthy opponent just die like that. How many people can beat a Guardian after all? No time left. I stop our fall and set us down gently among the bones.

“Good fight. Not very often someone beats me at anything physical.”

“Well James, you did not think I was goofing off the entire time did you?”

“What the freep? How do you know me? I have never been here before.” He falls over laughing.

“James, you are the last one of the Guardians to take this road. The rest were easy to push into using their skills. You were the toughest, though I admit, Rachael was good for her size. Sneaky and tricky. She has become an expert at hiding the fact that she is TK.

We should get back up to your companion. I think she is getting worried.”

I look up to see her looking down at us. I need to know something first. I pick up one of the bones and scan it. It is bone and certainly looks human in shape, size and internal structure. I scan the DNA to see what race the victims were. I try to scan the DNA that is. Wait a minute. I pick up another one. None of them have any DNA. They don't look that old. I have picked DNA out of bones thousands of years old. They are fake. 'Protector' is grinning at me.

“No James, we don't kill people. 1st TK law remember. Come on. I will drive.” We lift off the ground. I freak. Reminds me of the first time when it happened to me by accident. He is TK and been trained well to hide it. There are other black TKs of course. No way of knowing a TKs age of course. And I certainly don't remember them all. He must have seen my image in training. All of our images are on the walls of the

training centers. Kind of embarrassing. We may have been the first of Qr'thns doings, but certainly not the last or even the greatest. Just were in the right place at the right time.

Wolf has learned not to growl at TKs, so when we come up she is well behaved and jumping around like a puppy happy to see us. I make a treat for her, which quickly disappears.

“What's her name?” She is licking his face. He creates a treat and gives one to her. Okay, that means at least a four, maybe a five. He is watching me amused.

Just Wolf. I got tired of naming them. Their life expectancy is so short.

Come on James, I have lots to show you. Let's get off this ridge. He DSs us down to the valley below. DS means six and TP means seven. So either he PSs, TK8 or a baby 'thn shows up, TK9. How come I did not know about this?

“Come Wolf.” Her attention returns to me. “How did you know I was here?”

“The ridge is well within scanning distance. And an unshielded TK8 is pretty easy to sense. I am the Protector of the People, but only Guardians or pretenders show up at this particular spot. This is a known challenge spot. Of course the pretenders walk up, not DS as you did. Mostly I just guard the edges when my turn comes along as with everyone else. But even there, it is rare than anyone shows up. Single people never returning discourages others. Those that do not die outright from all the various poisonous plants and animals at the edges are given a chance to join us. A few make it. Larger forces have tried. Military from desperate countries mostly. The usual TK contingent takes care of those fast enough. Hard to hide that many people and they don't move very fast. Very few outsiders see what you are about to see. Even those who do pass the test are required to spend their last days on the edge, never in the center.”

He picks a few items from various plants as we following a trail down the side of the mountain to the valley below.

“Herbs for the healers and tea.” I nod.

“That title, Protector of the People, is familiar. There was one among us who had that name. In Hopi, an ancient Native American language, he was called Qalataqa, which means the same thing.”

“I know. I am he. Sort of.”

That stops me in my tracks. “WHAT! Qalataqa died in a crash with some object between here and the moon thousands of years ago. And I am sorry, you don't look anything like him.”

“Any TK above five can change their appearance. However, he did die as you say. Or so I have been told.

What apparently happened was this.

I was making the trans lunar trip in a hurry. My previous assignment took longer than it should have and I was expected to help in cleaning up Luna City after everyone had left.”

“Nothing is ever that important with us. Especially cleanup duty.” He smiles.

“I had to maintain my reputation for cleanup duty intact.”

“Right, Mr. Pots. I will resist tossing your hair this time.”

“Thanks.

“I was in a hurry and going fast. Faster than I should have. Being distracted my reaction time was down as well. When the object hit, I only had a split second to react. I was not able to fully PS myself and the ship in time. Part of what I was reacted with was the mass of the object. Probably some space debris or piece of a meteor.

My TK status saved me, but could not replace what was not there. Matter from the shield was used to replace body mass, but nothing could replace missing memories.

I drifted back to earth and landed near here. Basically a baby again, in larger form. I ran on instinct and self preservation for a hundred years or more. Learning from the animals around me and occasional encounter with the cultures still in chaos. Mostly I learned to avoid humans.”

“Just like the book by Kipling, The Jungle Book.”

“Yes, in many ways. Though not the Disney adaptation I have been told about. I ate raw meat and stole from humans as much as from other animals. All the same to me.”

“So what happened? You look and act fine now.”

“Yingui and Lisa found me. Cleaned up I looked like this. My body had changed to adapt to the current environment. A red man would have stood out here and been hunted down. Not that I wasn't hunted even looking like this. But DSing and TKing my way out of every crisis made me a legend. An evil one though.

Yingui eventually heard the stories on his visits to check on things. He decided to see what was going on and spent years tracking me down. I had become quite good at hiding, even my TKness when necessary. When eventually he caught up with me he immediately called in Lisa for the final search. She could not handle what had happened to me, preferring to accept that I had died and left as soon as possible. Yingui was not as bothered and he studied what I had done and then taught a group in a monastery on the coast of California the TK hiding method. They in turn taught the rest of the TKs this method, including Lisa. I have heard it has saved many lives.”

“That's true. The Guardian Lisa learned from the Zen TK master who refined the method taught to her by Yingui. Lisa went on to teach the technique to the rest of us over several hundred years. It allowed the entire TK community to go underground. The legends of wizards and

rogues still remain in the cultures of course, but no one actually believes we exist any longer. That single new ability has allowed us to watch and steer the human species in very positive ways. We all owe you a great debt.” I bow to him. He bows low in return.

“Yingui could not figure out where I came from, though he had his suspicions. That alone was all Lisa needed to leave. Understandable really. She has never returned either. Anyway, a natural TK8 was not something anyone expected. He worked with me for some time to 'civilize' me. Teaching me Standard and the sign language used by all of the cultures here. You will pick it up easy enough don't worry. He soon found out after I had picked up some language skills much faster than I should have, that I had no memory of ever being a child. By tracing back local historical events that I might have experienced, or caused, we worked out a timing.”

“That could be coincidence. How could you be sure?”

“Two things. I kept a piece of the ship with me, a shard really.” He hands it to me from around his neck.

“Another TK could have left this around.”

“Not with the decorations though. Shoshone.” The patterns fit what I know about them. Qaletaqa. It really is him. He was the only one who decorated his spheres with totems, though I was tempted. Just too lazy.

“And the second thing?”

“Even as a wild TK, I thought of myself by the name 'pots'.” Yeah, it is him. Yingui always called him that and it sort of stuck.

“So, why stay here? You should be with the rest of us, back in the community.”

“Qaletaqa is dead. I remember nothing from that time, other than the name. I didn't even know what the shard was, except it was pretty. This is my life now. Remember I have spent nearly as much time as a wild man as I had as Qaletaqa the Guardian. All that I know of you is what any TK would know. Taught to them in classes. I like it here. This is my home and my life now. Would you deny any TK that right?”

“No, of course not. We do miss you, or rather Qaletaqa.”

“Do you not also miss Pushy Paws and all the others who died in the service of human kind? No different. But, come. I want to show you what we have done.

During my 'dark ages' the continent was not a whole lot different than I was. For hundreds of years the decimated culture was wild. Bullies ruled. The slaughter was horrendous. Farming was forgotten as people just tried to stay alive and on the move. The population fell even lower than what the plagues had accomplished. At the lowest point it was estimated that there were fewer than one million hunter gatherers left. If you accept the idea that even at the beginning of humankind it was estimated that there were ten million humans world wide, with most in

Africa, this was way below the carrying capacity of Africa. The blessing was that people stayed away from the cities as being hard to find food in and easy to get killed in. Too many traps, some intentional and some just because of the rusting decaying conditions of the cities.

When the bullies finally died out from lack of victims close enough together to maintain their life style, the farmers and thinkers made a slow comeback. Pockets of people had hidden out, hoarding skills and information. The cities which everyone had avoided were treasure troves, but still not safe to live in. There were no armies to worry about, so placement of the new cities could now be where they worked best in relation to water and farming resources. Where it was nice to live. No longer based on what was easy to defend.

Information was shared, no longer hoarded. If your neighbor did well, they were less likely to attack you or you them. Mistakes were made of course, but it eventually worked itself out to what we have today. English was the only language in common and most of the records found on the computers and written works were also in English. When the first contacts with the TKs were made we were introduced to Standard and were told of the prohibition against others coming here. For years the ramifications were discussed and debated. It was decided to move to Standard ourselves. We still think of ourselves as human after all. Besides, in spite of the prohibition, we did not believe it would hold and we wanted to be prepared. As you know this was not that great a task, as Standard was largely based on English with some Spanish and Chinese blended in. Of course, having different plants and animals than the rest of the world meant we did keep some of our local terms. Really all we were doing was the same thing we had figured out ourselves. Share or have it taken by force.

The TKs, respecting our wishes, even set up a node for us that was hidden as far as location. We have been helping with farming methods and scientific discoveries for over a thousand years now. As well as learning from them of course. People who have enough to eat are less likely to look to Africa for opportunity.”

“Wow! This is impressive. People are spread out, but still have access to community centers. Is this society primarily agrarian?”

“A higher percentage than before the fall, about thirty percent. Everyone has a small plot for plants they especially like or specialize in. The rest do research, art, coordinating, handling disputes, and so on. We are especially proud of our life sciences. We have gone way beyond the materialist age in this regard.”

I laugh, “We call it the Greed Age. Everyone out for themselves. The materialist part was just a means to an end.” He smiles. “You did not mention police or military.”

“We don't have any. Or, everyone is one. Depends on your point of

view. Any unpleasant task is shared. That way no one feels as if they get all the nasty duties and others get off doing easy ones.”

“How do you handle the economic aspects of that? Surely you don't pay garbage collecting as much as the head of research.”

He laughs heartily this time, “We don't have garbage and we don't have money.”

“How do you do that?” I really can't imagine. Well, K! and his people do it, but then they are very different.

“You really have to see it to understand. The previous TKs have had the same problem. Come, we are almost there.”

At that moment a large female lion comes across our path and growls at us.

“A friend of yours?” I hold my ground as if nothing is wrong. Wolf stays behind me and stays low. *Doesn't work that way Wolf. Pop cats are more afraid of big things.*

Not pop cat.

“We don't have pop cats, as you two call them. She is a real lion.”

“I can tell by her color. No pop cats that color that I have ever seen. They do look similar though. Might explain where Yingui got some of the genes. Dangerous? I don't see you running.”

“We have an understanding with them. Being TP helps. You should know that the people we are about to meet do not know about me in that way. By the way, she wants to know if your companion is livestock.”

“Huh?” I walk up to her and start to massage her behind the neck. Wolf stays behind Pots. A loud purring ensues. She lays down and exposes her belly, but even I am not willing to go there without using TK.

“Smells like she is in heat. The males will be near by. We had better leave and warn the others.”

“So, what is this understanding?”

“Anything but people and livestock.”

“So pets are ok.”

“We don't have pets. We do sometimes encourage animals to associate with us, but only for temporary pleasure to teach children. Not good to make a wild animal dependent on you.”

“Wolf is livestock then. Why is the lion so close to your living areas?”

“We are forbidden to hunt by our understanding. All wild animals are in bounds for her. Antelope are notorious for eating our crops. It works out to mutual benefit.”

“Large rats you have here Pots.”

“Precisely. Almost there.”

“I don't hear any dogs either. Most of my training about Africa says there should be dogs.”

“No more. Extinct here. Eaten or bred with the wild populations and

no longer associated with humans. It was rough for awhile as I said.”

“You did mention livestock. But I don't scan any herds of cows.”

“Smaller stuff. A breed of sheep that is smaller and easier to maintain and . . .”

“No more cows either. Things have really changed.” He shrugs and smiles.

“Show time?” Judging from his look, he does not get the reference. Oh well. People have seen us and are moving to meet us. Friendly. They are carrying food and gifts. Still a few meters away we hear this horrendous scream followed by yelling. I scan quickly and notice a small child cornered by dog looking creatures. Only not dog. Wolf does not wait and tears off at full speed.

“It is all right for me to use TK?” I hope so for her sake.

“Yes, it is expected in fact.” I nod and DS to where they are. Wolf is chewing the tail ends off the pack that had surrounded the easy prey. Now they are the prey and are not happy about it. I go to the little girl, who is backed up against a wall the people cannot get to. She has a few cuts and bruises, but mostly frightened. I pick her up and heal her. She falls asleep in my arms. The pseudo dogs run off, but Wolf only chases them to outside the hut areas, then returns to me. She sniffs the child to make sure she is all right.

“Good Wolf. Very good.” I create a treat for her which she swallows nearly whole. “You are allowed to chew your food. Don't blame me if you get an upset stomach.” People come running to catch up. I hand the girl off to what must be the mother. She thanks me.

“Not me you should thank. Thank Wolf, she did all the work.” The mother is not sure what to make of my companion. Hesitantly she reaches out and touches the back of her neck. Patting her in thanks. *Sorry Wolf. I will give you a real massage later. They will come around. They just have never seen anyone so beautiful before.*

Sleep now?

Pots and the other finally catch up. He sees every thing is fine. People are all talking at once to tell him what they saw. He hushes them finally. “Talk among yourselves and pick a teller. We will have a telling tonight. I too have a telling to share.” *Does this mean I have to take a turn also?* He smiles a big grin. Oh well. Not the first time or the first culture. Just have to pick the right one.

Just keep it simple. We hope you will be here for awhile and can relate lots of stories while you are here. No problem there.

“What next?”

“Look behind you.”

The lioness again. “Does she have a name?” The lion in the mean time is following the trail of the pseudo dogs. Not livestock and now partly 'tenderized'. I smile.

“Just the generic term, 'scarecat' for the service she provides. She will eat well tonight if the males don't get it all.” Ah, that part has not changed then. Lazy males. Not that I should talk. I smell food cooking.

“A light snack? I can always eat.” Some of the older children have decided that Wolf is cool and are staying near her as a sign of bravery. She will let them know if they get to be too much. I don't have to worry about her. She is more dog than wolf after all the tinkering that I did in her line. Just still looks like one. I would not change that.

I am introduced to way too many people, and this is just the nine-set that Pots lives in, with his wife? She acts like one anyway. He does not look a day over thirty. About forty for me. Thirty does not have as much dignity and older they start to dismiss you as near dead. Do I look near dead? No! The other weird thing is that I am the whitest one here. I need more sun definitely.

“Okay, explain something to me Pots. Do you have a wife and why are those women looking at me that way?”

“In Africa since time before time, a man without a woman is considered sick and to be avoided.”

“A loser.”

He thinks for a moment, “Yes. Not used to terms involving competition. But I think I understand the context.”

How do you know, ah, keep her happy?

Same way you would expect. You did not think that creating a new body was the only thing you could do with all that talent?

So these ladies expect me to do the same?

Not all of them. Three or four should do it. He smiles. Great. The food that was handed to me does not look so appetizing now. At least I could control the genetic package, as in sterile. I wasn't expected to produce children was I? Pots just keeps smiling. Oh, he is definitely having a good time. I may have to duck out and ask some of the other male TKs who have been here. To hell with the prohibition about talking about it. If I was the last to be here, then everyone else has been here and knows the routine. No chance I would be letting go info to a new person.

Pots is about to burst. *Don't worry. You only have to sleep with them, not have sex. Nobody will ever ask or tell. We do have some privacy here, though less than you are used to I should warn you.* Well, sex and toilet are the only reasons I can think of and it sounds like I can avoid both.

“After this light meal, people usually take a nap. In the heat of the day, not a bad idea. I usually use the time to meditate, but I am sure you have more questions. Let's go up that rise over there to talk without disturbing anyone.”

“The ladies will not be disappointed?” A few are still eyeing me like a cat watching a mouse.

He laughs, “They'll live.” We walk up the small hill and everyone

else retires to their rooms in the underground housing complex. Designed really well to stay cool even in summer.

“So how does this work with no exchange system? Don't some people hoard and others never do any work? What about bigger projects?”

“Slow down. There is plenty of time. Name one large project that does not impact the environment negatively.”

“Well, dams and such are out. So are large buildings. Transport other than maybe horses and carts are out. Even heating food can be a problem. The Tamas really did a number on their forest. Almost any industry is out. You don't make it easy.”

“Even horses can be a problem as some cities have found out. But there aren't any here anyway. Now name one thing that all this industry is necessary for, except to concentrate a large population in a small space.”

“Ah...” My jaw drops, “Hygiene?”

“Low population density takes care of infectious diseases. So do a handful of TK5s spread out as healers. You have spent a lot of time in the UNA. Why did they not have all the trappings of 'western civilization'? And what eventually happened everywhere 'civilization took place'?”

I nod. “What about crime? Wars?”

“Crime is when one person wants what another one has. War and murder are really extensions of that. One person is willing to kill to get what they want. What would happen if no one had any more possessions than what they could carry on their backs and these were easily replaced?”

“Crimes of passion? Either over lust or anger?”

“I do admit they happen, but far less than you would think. We have no marriage. If someone wants to stay with you their entire life, that is a day to day decision of which you have no say. If you can't handle that someone you love might spend time with another, then don't spend time with anyone.”

“What about sexually transmitted diseases?”

“All the lethal ones are gone. The distance between people and time took care of that. Pregnancy? The fecundity here is very low. The more matings you have the higher the odds. And not knowing who the father is means that all children are treated equally.”

“Art and sciences?”

“Look around you. Each house is different. Each person wears different clothes and ornaments. There are carvings in every object we use. Life is good. We have plenty of time and everyone is an artist.

Science? We have probably taken the understandings of life forms far beyond even what the pre fall times did. Granted it is more on the side of psiotics than genetics, but the results are proof of what we have accomplished. You saw our 'sheep', really a cross between a true sheep

and a large rodent. How you say? I told you we were good. Our crops are the same. All done to maximize their usefulness to us and yet minimize their impact on the environment.

The physical sciences. True. We do a lot with hand tools and carts, levers, etc. But most of the heavy stuff is to build heavy stuff. We don't need it."

"Trade?"

"For what? Shiny metal? No use. Weapons? Again no use. We have enough TKs spread about to thwart anyone even thinking about war. Only half the continent is occupied by people. There is still room to spread out if a group feels crowded. We are really close to replacement levels and this has not come up in some time."

"Climatic variations can cause people to move, causing conflict."

"Only if they are close to the carrying capacity of their area. Only in extreme situations is that ever exceeded and the TKs help move entire populations when it happens. Floods, fires, etc. We are pretty good at thinking ahead and planning for the worst. Brush is never allowed to reach danger levels. Water has alternative channels ready in areas with heavy flooding. Backup supplies of food and water. But just like anywhere, life happens. Is there anywhere life is risk free?"

"Definitely not. Not even for TKs. Eighty six have died now, not counting the ones that Sauron got before he was out of the equation. Ah, eighty five, though you are still on the roles as having died."

"Qaletaq is dead." I don't push it.

"What about exploration? The need to see what is over the next hill, the sea, the stars."

"People are free to go anywhere they want. Very few have left Africa of course. We do not do well in your world. We are very easy to take advantage of. The TKs keep a watch and bring them home when they have had enough."

"Where are all these TKs coming from? Certainly not from our rolls. Only a few could be here at any one time."

"Same place your TKs come from. We make our own. It was not that hard to figure out." He looks up at the sky. Almost time to go back in. "I do miss the stars though. Maybe someday, we will be ready as well. Come, time for some work. We don't sit around and play all day. A group of young people has asked for their own lodging and the last one to be vacated is too far gone to repair again. We will build the new homes and the others will tend the crops and livestock." I nod. It will feel good to use my muscles again. The wrestling match was too short to get much of a workout.

People are coming out of their naps when we arrive. Several large males will assist. Ah, rather I will assist them. I have no idea what I am doing. I scan the other homes. They are carved literally into the ground.

Several meters of earth for a roof and insulation. The rooms are small to avoid cave ins, but all open into a central walk that is open to the sky. Larger open areas for people to be in the sun, grow ornamentals, fish ponds, gather as we did for lunch, etc. I get the idea, I think.

“Gamba and Uba will lead the construction. You and I will get into line here to help with the transport of the material coming out.”

“There is only eight of us, this will take awhile.” He nods. *Sure I can't help?*

No. You will see.

Not much happens at first. Gamba marks out with charcoal where the doorway will be. He is careful to take into consideration the distance from other homes, the walkway and the sky above. Being a younger group, they can handle a little more heat than the elders could. Finally he finds the spot and marks on the path where the new home will start. The rest of us spread out all along the path to the nearest abandoned home. We will fill in as much as possible. Of course it will not be as compact, but then we won't have to carry it all to the surface either. Though Pots has helped many times, he stays with me in the center of the line. We can see what is going on, but don't have to guess at what to do.

Using metal rods with pointed tips the ones at the front start. It is soft earth, but still takes effort. Hoes scoop out the earth falling to a safe area to fill buckets. The buckets quickly fill and are passed on. Very soon a rhythm is achieved. Slowly a song starts. I don't recognize the words, but get the repeating pattern and join in. I suspect they are African in origin. Probably thousands of years old. It does help. I watch, or rather scan, as the buckets are brought to the old home and are ram packed in to make it as tight as possible. Would not be good for this room to collapse later.

“Break!” We have been working for about an hour I guess. The ladies bring cool water and buckets are placed strategically to remove waste, #1 and 2 kept separate. No one shows any modesty. Everyone has seen everyone else without clothing many times. When hot, people will even go about their days with nothing. A place a TK would feel at home in.

“Come, others will take our place. I want to show you one that is further along.” I follow Pots down the path and up. We go several hundred meters to another nine pattern of homes. There will be approximately nine nines of homes per settlement. Back down into the inner path to another group of three men and one woman. The woman appears to be supervising. A large pile of flat light colored river stones sits in a pile near the door. Not dropped either. Each carefully placed so as not to mar them. On the open door of an occupied dwelling there is a white flower hanging. Looks like Susan's orchid. I guess we each leave our mark here.

“Lehana, may we see the inside before you start?” My attention is

brought back to the present.

“Of course Chike.”

Chike?

My African name in this village. They think it is cute to each give me a different name and see if remember. As you know, not that hard for a TK, but I play with it too.

We look inside. I go first. Inside towards the back is the fireplace/stove arrangement. A shaft above it goes all the way up. A ring of stones on the surface extends the chimney so sparks do not catch the brush on fire. Though this place has been chosen for a lack of trees, small dried plants and dry grass can be a problem. Fired clay lines the oven and shaft.

“How do they line the shaft?”

“Pipes are made about a third of a meter in length, just like the sewer pipes of old. Copied from excavations actually. The are lowered from the surface through the shaft onto the already completed cooking complex. You can see where they overlap at the ends. The pipe itself does not contact the shaft all the way around. This allows a layer of air to return and goes into the oven here. This sets up a current of air to keep smoke and fumes out of the cook's face and of course the room itself.”

“So the stove is not ever used to heat the room?”

“Not in this climate. Being underground like this means the temperature is pretty stable. In colder areas a different design is used. Most places have gone to underground homes, except where there is a danger of flooding.”

“So what are all the stones for then?”

“The floors. If we get out of the way, you can see how it is done.”

We watch for a bit as Lehana directs the placement of each stone. Rarely does she make a mistake and take back a stone. Very little space exists between stones.

“How will they fill in the cracks and what about the walls?”

“A plaster is made for both. All the light colors allows more light in as does the placement of the doors never facing each other. The opposing wall reflects light into each door.”

“Water, night soil, bugs, food storage?”

“Each nine has a fountain filled from pipes coming from the nearest river and exiting through underground pipes hidden under the gravel paths. Night soil is collected heated with solar cookers and then used in the gardens. No standing water, the right plants that bugs hate keep the insects down. The rest are eaten. There is no need to store fresh food. That is prepared collectively daily. The small ovens are really only for small meals like breakfast and when it rains. Most meals are prepared in the communal areas outside. Grains, beans, dried vegetables are kept in ceramic pots for times of need.

Of course there is much more to what we do. Placement is meant to minimize impact on the wildlife, but at the same time be comfortable to the people.”

“Okay. What do you do for fun?”

“Hard to believe, but to maintain this way of life only takes a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the late afternoon. And even when we work we make a game of it for the kids and sing as adults.”

“It did make the time go by faster, but I was watching how and what was happening too.”

“Let's get back to the home we were helping with.”

We make our way back. Everyone is doing something, even the children. It all looks so coordinated and efficient.

“How do you know what needs to be done and how to keep it all going so smoothly?”

“No leaders. We use coordinators and volunteers. If a coordinator is not good, no volunteers will appear.”

“So no top down management.”

“Or abusive tactics. You missed the meeting this morning. The coordinators and everyone else meet in the center to discuss what needs to be done and how many people they think they will need.”

“They do the same thing at the TK monasteries, but coordinators are chosen by leadership and people are more or less not given a choice, the last to volunteer end up on the worst jobs of the day.”

“In our case if a coordinator does not get any volunteers, then a new coordinator volunteers until a full group is formed.”

“Doesn't that make the former coordinator mad?”

“No, it is a point of honor for the former coordinator to be the first to volunteer for the new one. This shows that there are no hard feelings. Who knows, they may even learn something. Of course most tasks are not that complicated, so nearly anyone can lead. We encourage the young to volunteer for leadership positions on the simpler projects for this reason. Sooner or later everyone will lead. That also helps keep people's pride in check.”

“Wow, they really have made progress. How many people will live here?”

“Sleep. We spend very little time indoors unless it is raining. At least two, but sometimes more. No one sleeps alone unless they are upset and need to.”

“So, when someone is bad, you all avoid them.”

“Oh no. That is when we all want to be with them. Being alone is a choice not a punishment.”

“What about reproductive acts?”

“Sex? No problem. No will pay any attention to you. Remember we have all seen everything there is to see.”

“Even in front of children?” I am not a prude, but always felt children should be left out till they were ready.

“Sure, better they learn from watching than from being awkward about it when the time comes. That would be even more embarrassing.”

“What about sex with children?”

“Most people stick to their own generation. When you can have as much sex as you want, there is no desire to go after children. Children would not be as much fun either. Though they have watched, they are not as skilled. It is sort of like everyone going naked half the time. Once you have seen it all you don't see it any more. Once you can have sex all the time, you don't need sex all the time. I doubt anyone here is any different than anywhere else in fact.”

“Quantity instead of quality. What about same sex?”

“Rarer, but does it matter?”

“Nope. So the cook station and chimney goes next, then the floor. What becomes the bedding?”

“Well, we do raise sheep here. For other regions, other substances may be used, but here is it mostly wool. North of here it might be cotton, inland it would be hides.”

“And in each area the scarecats know what is game and what is livestock? How to set up territories? I mean if your sheep were allowed everywhere, there would not be enough grass for the antelope for the lions.”

“Then the lions would rebel and we would have a problem. Hasn't happened in quite some time. We learned the hard way. Major reason no more than a nine of nines is in any one place.”

“How about genetic mixing? You could have some severe inbreeding with such small communities.”

“When the young reach a suitable age determined by consultation with others, they go on rotation. They are required to visit at least three locations before deciding where they want to stay permanently. Well, not permanent. We are allowed to move as much as we want, but most want to settle down, have some kids, friends, etc.”

“How do you know who the father is? How do you know any of the kids are yours?”

“You don't. Can't play favorites that way. Mothers will breast feed any hungry child. The best way to make sure you have kids is to stay in one place long enough. But most really don't care. You probably have a greater impact on the young by what you teach them. Not by what you give in your genes.

Now with our livestock and plants we are much more careful. The ewes that come into heat are mated with precision to the ram we want them to be with. I said we were good with genetics. Wait till you taste the meal tonight. It won't be long now.”

“I don't want to appear to be rude, but where will I be expected to stay tonight? Not that I need to sleep.”

“Oh, you won't be sleeping and don't worry about where. Just hang loose brother.” His grin could split his face.

“Are you sure the others went through this?” I am not convinced. Barb would never. Rachael might. Yingui, no possible way.

We did not have to wait long for our next meal. Normally I would not need to eat much, depending more and more on TK. Just lazy really. On the other hand, when in Africa.... It does look good. Lots of mutton of course. Looks like they don't waste anything. I see they also smoke a share for hard times. I find that every time I sit down, I am between two ladies. They are subtle. Never the same two. How do you seduce a TK?

“Pots, there you are. I have more questions.”

“Later James. The 'entertainment' is about to begin.” Entertainment?

“Look Pots, I am not like the other TKs. I am afraid that I am getting, well, ah bored. All this is nice, sort of like the Garden of Eden. But I like battling the serpent, not strolling the garden path. Don't get me wrong. You have all done an incredible job, but the part I enjoyed the most today was the beginning.” He smiles.

“Wolf does not seem to share your feelings.” She is being feed morsels, getting a massage and pets all at the same time by a large group of children. Turncoat!

“You are going to make Scarecat jealous.” Pots laughs at that thought.

“Maybe I can offer some help.” A diminutive woman about twenty something is before us.

“I would presume that you do not mean a wrestling match young lady.” I smile. I must weigh twice what she does. Thin, with long legs.

“My name is Helima and I challenge you to a race. No Guardian tricks allowed.” The rest of the people have become silent and are paying attention with smiles on their faces. More like smirks.

“And the prize?”

“Oh I will think of something.” A few ladies giggle. Shit. Now my honor is at stake. Maybe if I exhaust her she will not be able to collect.

“You have me at a disadvantage. I do not know the area or the course. Will be dark soon also.”

“There is a full moon and it will be easy to follow. I can show you in my mind so you will know as much as I do. A straight run to Blue Creek and back. I will even give you a ten second head start, since you are so worried that you will lose.” I don't think I am going to be able to get out of this. Pots' smile suggests that also. I probably should take the ten seconds also, but even a TK has some pride.

“I assume there is no one faster in this nine of nines?” She smiles and the others laugh. Hmmm, it extends farther than this village. “One last

question. How far is it to Blue Creek?" Another one of those face splitting grins on Pots' face. Shit.

Well it was about ninety eight kilometers. A little over a double marathon and half the night. That was the only saving grace. Less time to deliver the prize, me. It was worth it. The run was great. Fortunately she did not say I could not use TK to revive us after the race. Oh, and it was not even close. Turns out that the nearest node is twenty or so kilometers away. Kids run there once a week and back the same day. By the time they are Helima's age they are fast and she was the fastest of the fast. A set up of course. My body was redesigned over the years for battle, not exclusively running. Now I know how Wolf feels when I always beat her over long distances.

As to delivering the prize. It was not that hard to figure out again, even after all these years. Should have paid more attention to those undercover lessons. Not the first TK to have to do their duty for the good of all. The affection aspect was nice. Not used to it with a norm, but not that different. No TP of course. There is something really special about seeing and touching yourself through another's body and senses.

Helima is fast asleep at my side. In spite of everything, I am not sleepy of course. I DS up to the hill facing the village. I scan my surroundings. An abandoned village of old. Looks identical to the current one. No not identical. There are some items here that were scrounged from the cities. Pieces of pipe, several plastic bowls. This is weird. Tools. Hammers, wrenches, crow bar, that sort of thing. Even a saw for wood. I would have thought the metal hammers would still have a use. It doesn't look like anyone has been here in a very long time, yet even a three year old could make it here from the current hill.

Run with the pack!

"Not this time Wolf. Sit with me. I need to figure this out." She knows what that means and curls up to sleep at my side, with her head on my outstretched legs as I sit. Soon she is dreaming. I don't peek. Sometimes it is an ancestral memory of chasing humans.

I scan the surrounding hills and valleys. The humans are spread out, but always in these hill like complexes. Funny. The nearby forests are empty of people. Oh an occasional path, but no people live there. Monkeys abound. I would have thought they would have been eaten. I scan only two species, so most are gone. I scan the plains. No baboons, elephants, giraffes, water buffalo. Antelopes, zebra and rabbits are present. No rhinos. A severely depleted ecosystem. Scarecat is allowed to eat anything but the humans and mini-sheep. Lions traditionally don't like forests too much. A panther's territory. So, what eats the humans? Or is the reduced fecundity enough?

That's what happening! The humans are devolving!

"Precisely grasshopper." Pots has popped in. He sits and calms down

Wolf with a good neck massage.

“Hey, reading others minds without permission is not allowed.”
Though I am not upset.

“I could not resist a peak at the happy couple. Much to my dismay, you had abandoned her already.” I look to defend myself. “Don't worry, she will not wake for some time. Though it will not be long before the others do and they will be curious.”

“I get your point. So, am I right? Are you devolving here?”

“Tech took us in a wrong direction. Away from nature. We need to find the sweet spot where we are one with nature again and then grow from there. A fork in the road. We took the wrong one the first time. All we have done is go back to where we took the wrong turn to try the other path. And we have not given up tech completely. We all use the node and genetic screening.”

“Except for people of course.” He does not acknowledge my statement. “People too?” He nods.

“Soon we will not need to of course. We are trying to breed the aggressive territorial aspects out. It was what Sauron breed into us to work his world domination trick. Simple implant keeps the women barren until we add the stuff we want them to have.”

“And the tech? Not that I really care, but it is part of us. The natural curiosity aspect anyway.”

“That is the hard part. They may be linked. Each village is a different genetic pool. By mixing genes from different pools we hope to come up with the perfect mix.”

“Beware the monoculture! Look what happens to crops.”

“We know. We have full access to the node. There are even scientists from the outside working on our 'hypothetical' database. From what we learn, it is hoped that the high tech scientist's help we can implement our strategy much more rapidly.”

“Speaking of which, how do you keep them out? Some of the cultures are tech six now and your coast line is very, very long.”

“No humans live within twenty kilometers of any coast. We have TKs scanning the coasts day and night. Since you thankfully have not allowed aircraft even at the higher tech levels, the best they can do is landing craft.”

“An assault vehicle can make twenty clicks in quick order.”

“Not through our forests they won't. They have been warned. Eco traps all over. Keeps us in and them out. Very nasty stuff actually. We have learned a lot from the out worlds.” He has a very evil grin. “Some almost make it, as I told you when you first arrived. Come. People are getting up.”

“I think I will need to see and visit more villages before I can believe in this experiment.”

“Of course. That is expected. You can also help a lot training other protectors. They have gotten soft and I can't be at every training center. Though when I am, they rarely forget the experience.” He is grinning again. Maybe I can find some fun here.

“But one thing bothers me. This culture is pretty close to what has become to the UNA, with some small differences. You don't fight each other constantly. A good thing. But, the people here are way too dependent on the TK for tech and healing.”

“We want to be able to make the turn back up the tech ladder when we are ready. We won't have to retrain everyone or deal with superstitions about tech this way.”

“Good point. The UNA is so anti-tech that we have to be really careful what we use and where we use it. Being anything but united, they lack direction except in their hate of all things tech. We are doing little more than being baby sitters and border patrol agents.”

“Well, there are times when I feel we have no right to manipulate any of these people.”

“Then what? All TKs take off to a deserted planet and wait till some accident or insanity gets us? No, we are here for a reason. To undo Sauron.”

“And don't forget the diversity imperative.”

“Amen!” We both laugh.

“One thing I do have to admit. They are happy. I certainly cannot say that of very many cultures I have seen. That everyone is truly happy, not just a select few.”

Susan

Efemia, 4th planet of the Sentarie system

“Oh Sherm, do we have to have them on the same street with us?” Says the one with the fancy lace work. Work clearly done by slave labor.

“Who would do all the tasks that need to be done then? You?” She has at least a clue.

“Certainly not! Sherm forbid! But there must be something they can do about the smell.” She fakes gagging and then they both giggle.

“Come, there are fresh wallongs at the Emporium.” A small sweet fruit. Expensive of course. The Emporium is this huge monster stone building half finished. Again by slave labor. Totally unnecessary. Done just to show they can make us do it. Probably tear it down afterward, just to rub it in.

“A little early. If this gets around there will be a crowd. We had better hurry.” They take off walking a little faster. Not running mind you.

We smell this way because the only food you allow us is high in pickle weed, the only native plantimal we can eat. Nutritious, but makes you smell like rotten garlic. Bitter too without a lot of cooking. The rich make me sick. Why do we humans always stratify this way? I have been on more planets that I can count and sooner or later this always happens. No wonder I either spend most of my time on New Earth or at least with the sisters from there. There are no leaders, no rich and no poor. Just one cohesive functioning unit. Nothing like that on these primitive worlds. I bring my students here and the other places so they can see for themselves why New Earth does things the way we do.

I admit, I try and do a little bit on each field trip to bring some order back. After all I am probably closer to the people here genetically than to the betas on New Earth, in spite of the TK aspects. Just that my heart belongs to New Earth, and Ju'thn of course. I would never forget you dear. I pat her in my pocket and she gently purrs a response. A floating sphere would bring too much attention so she must remain hidden for the moment. Can't use TP either as she is just a new born and way too loud and non specific. Would freak everyone around for sure.

I am on my way to Croaker's Field. We have a surprise planned for the well off. Guard coming, I lower my head and walk slower, trying not to draw attention to myself. I wear a robe of the Eonites and as such have no rights. Of course if they knew I was a Teacher, as we are known here, they would treat me very differently. But then I would never be allowed to get close to the Eonites. I would be hidden behind palace walls with many trying to curry my favor. Makes me sick.

“Move along stupid filth!” As he laughs, I am whacked on my back with an inducer. A flat hardwood stick that makes more noise than pain,

but does remind any other Eonite to stay away or they would get a lesson too. We walk barefoot, causing most all Eonites to be eventually infected with a local parasite that saps your strength and makes the mind fuzzy. Most are infected before they reach puberty. The ones that aren't stand out and "disappear" as "lost ones". All it takes is a few tests to see how you react and even the most careful are caught. Some will purposely infect their children to save them.

There is plenty of material to make shoes, but it is forbidden of course for an Eonite to wear shoes. Oh, they know exactly what is going on and what happens when one walks barefoot. It was trivial for us to work out a remedy using local herbs to rid the system of the parasites, but walking barefoot only means they would be re-infected quick enough or be found out. The treatment, though effective, causes one to be incapacitated for a day. Most cannot afford to take a day off, ever.

"Teacher. All is ready." Sidel speaks softly to me. We were first called Teachers on New Earth, thanks to Cilan and Marty's work. If anyone had been close, she would have used our hand language or if necessary the excavator dialect. That might have drawn attention though, all those pops and whistles. Not a sound heard here. We walk slowly together and turn left at the next intersection. We walk hand in hand to indicate that we are assigned a task to be done together. Another humiliation indicating we do more than work together. But, if we did not, a guard could split us up and disrupt our work. The Eonites accept it without complaint. Beaten enough times cures you of any feelings.

Sidel nods to Megger who disappears around a corner. Slowly women come out in pairs and without a word, join us. We continue walking without comment. Something about the fact that on New Earth, all betas, male and female, are descended from sex workers means we are particularly sensitive to the abuse in other cultures. It is the first group we rescue each time, if they exist. This time we are working it all closer together. Too easy here for the authorities to get nasty. People end up dead that way. We hope to pull this off without anyone getting hurt.

The Eonite situation is still relatively new, only a few generations old. The result of a corrupt Eonite king and a decadent people who got lazy and fell easy prey to a neighbor willing to use terrorist tactics to topple them. The first generation of the vanquished had their noses rubbed in their sins [the reason for their fall]. From then on constant indoctrination perpetuated the new belief in both cultures, even if no Eonite alive now had anything to do with the ancestor's mistakes. Of course, the fact that the Garreds benefited enormously from the situation helped. Now the Garreds controlled the water from the Three Sisters and the rich alluvial plains at their base. The same water denied them by the Eonite king. What goes around comes around. I am not saying the Eonites were not wrong in what they did, but as usual, the entire

population is being hurt for the sins of a few.

There are only a few places on the planet with a low enough copper concentration, enough water and weakened local plantimals which of course took back breaking work to remove. And there is the local One Mind. She has let us use this area, as locals are not healthy here and we provide some competition to increase their evolutionary speed.

Of course, likewise, the Garreds will become soft in their turn and the Laffics south of them are already looking hungry. So stupid. We have another plan, if we can pull it off. I smile to myself and then quickly lose the expression. The easiest way for an Eonite to be severely disciplined is to smile. Pleasure for us is strictly forbidden of course, given the story of how it happened and all. Still we manage to “breed like mountain kots.” No baths in the water scarce district means most do it with clothes on. Still it happens enough.

The parasite has the unfortunate side effect of undoing what HelperV did to the human genome millenniums ago. Better to propagate the parasite too of course. One of those weird freaks of nature where a parasite that did not evolve with humans did not kill before it adapted, but actually improved the situation. Not that it would not be a problem later, just as it was on old Earth. Another reason to fix the situation. A million people starving to death was not a better way to die than during a war or a long endured slavery.

This is a tech three culture, but they do occasionally get visitors from other worlds, so they know of the higher tech and do not fear it in a superstitious way a culture who had never been exposed would. Of course, if they don't get their act together, they will not be allowed the higher tech, but we do not tell them that directly, preferring to work more in the background. Oh we play the diplomatic channels too, just not my normal mode. Ellen the seventeenth is currently at the high court deflecting their attention. Shaped as she and her ancestors are, the local stupid males do not stand a chance. Hey, if you have it use it. Bigger and stronger does not make you smarter. Never get to tech four till you learn that one, at least not while the Teachers are around. A name that hides our TK status until needed. They have had so little contact with us, we are not feared so much as respected as representatives of the higher tech cultures.

Law, how goes the permissions? She came on board from the local population. A sympathetic from an underground group of Garreds who do not agree with the oppression going on. Sneaky too. I smile, then remember and wipe it off. Hard to change.

I am with the directorate of land use right now. A slight problem with a sub clause of the third directive on water transport across the kings lands. The Eonite directives of course.

But we are not transporting the water.

Precisely. Usually this can be solved with a small favor. A bribe is what she means.

In the inner pocket of your weather wear. Let me know if there are any more problems.

Got it. Nice work. You think of everything. No, I just have abilities you don't know of.

We are getting close to Croaker's Field. I am not quite ready to make an appearance though. I want to be someplace high, but not draw attention to myself. Flying or DSing is therefore out. Oh, of course I could DS far enough away and high enough, but I like to use the old fashioned eye sight.

“Sidel, who owns that tower overlooking the field?” We all depend on each other. Sidel is the setup manager for this operation. I am glue. I fill in the cracks and solve problems as they come up. Anticipating is best, but there are ALWAYS surprises. Working as a team fails, if it is not flexible enough to work around unexpected problems.

She checks a hand held database. Even we can't remember everything. Tech 7, but as off worlders we are not held to the local limits, as long as we don't try and sell it or give it away. Not likely, no one here could read beta anyway. “It is a bit convoluted. We only had a couple of months to scan the records. Records they were not too happy to let us at, even with our credentials. Looks like it belonged to the Hersut family originally. Eonite of course. After the war it changed hands a few times and now apparently is owned by a group of families. Hmm, there is more. The families have sublet the tower to more groups of families. It could take some time to sort this out.”

“I scan the tower as empty of anything. Weird. But then it is close to the field. Nothing at the field itself but dry rock. Which is why we were able to obtain it, in spite of its supposed historical significance. Amazing what three generations will do.”

“Why do you even need the tower? Your scanning abilities should be sufficient.”

“Scanning is not full proof. The Teachers have been fooled in the past. Always have redundant systems in place.” She nods her understanding. “However, having seen how Eonites are treated who are not where they belong, we will stay here.”

“Any Eonite caught being idle is subject to discipline.” She knows the local rules. Good. Sidel has been with me for what is it, eight missions I believe, and my chief manager for this one after Heami retired last year. Takes about a year to determine our next mission and set things up. I expect to be here a couple of more years before turning it completely over to locals and then still have to check up on it occasionally.

“Over there. The buildings this close to the field all appear to be

abandoned. Into the doorway. We will not be noticed right away at any rate. You watch the others as they come to the field while I watch the field itself.” She nods. We move to the corner and go up the few steps. It would be better to have a cover story, but I have unlocked the door and we can go inside if it looks like trouble is coming.

Over the next hour, hundreds of Eonites slowly pass us going to Croaker's Field. During the last week we did preliminary work and placed the necessary supplies under camouflaged tarps that look like the surrounding rock and dirt from a distance. Again, to not draw attention to our work. This will only work if the authorities are caught unawares. Of course the more Eonites that gather in one place, the more likely someone will raise an alarm, even in an empty abandoned field that is too far from water to be of interest. The problem when you oppress people is that you have to be forever watching your back.

This field used to be a paradise. An Eonite paradise. A water garden. After the overthrow, the water was diverted to Garred agricultural fields by a series of dikes and canals, built with forced Eonite labor. Then the garden was destroyed down to rock and dirt, again by Eonite forced labor. Three generations later it is barren. A monument to hate.

“Teacher, look over there. She is heavy with child and appears to be in difficulty.”

“There are many pregnant women, which one?” How do you describe someone who looks like everyone else? All of us wear the same off white smock.

“Third from the right of the group of two men holding the hands of a single female child.” An unusual combination.

“Got her. Cover me while I concentrate. She is getting closer, this should not take long.” She looks worried, so she knows there is something wrong. I scan her first. Appears normal, albeit thin. Her baby will be low birth weight. They lose a lot because of that and no health care. I scan the child. A male, even worse for survival. Ah, there it is, heart murmur. An easy fix. Almost immediately the heart starts beating stronger.

“What did you do, she is looking straight at us?” Huh? I open my eyes and look. She is not just noticing two Eonites caught in a stream of Eonites. I nod to her and she rubs her belly with questioning eyes. I nod again and then put my finger to my lips to not say anything. She nods in return.

“Find out who she is, she knew it was me that healed her baby. She may be low TK.” I had not thought the need to shield here. Sidel nods and leaves me, weaving her way through the crowd. She does not go directly to the woman, that would likely scare her off, but goes to a junior member of our team to explain, also dressed as an Eonite. The beta sees who it is we are talking about and nods. It may take some time, but we

will have the information. Of course none of the betas can ever be TK, but they understand our need to find good candidates. Accidents do cause a toll even among us. Sidel returns to my side.

“Lori will inquire carefully.” I nod.

“We will need to get structures up soon. The day will be warm.”

“All arranged. They have been training in small groups for each of their tasks. Not an easy group to train. Like herding pop cats.” I smile. No one tells a pop cat what to do unless they have something really good to eat or trade for the task. And it had better be something they can't steal from you easily. I miss my Xie. I will have to be adopted by another one at some point, but I only allow the ones from Earth to do so and Earth is a long way away even for a TK9 with Ju'thn in tow at the moment.

Sidel pulls my arm and points to a sister perched up on a small hill inside the field, Yassing I believe. Can't remember names, hard to believe I was once a school teacher. Anyway, she is using our hand code to tell us that several enforcers are headed this way.

Law, I need those papers now!

All ready. I have just now placed them in the transport box as directed. I scan the metal box next to her. Metal is very expensive and so provides a good cover for my discrete DSing of the contents to my pocket. No one would presume to casually look into it.

Thanks. Got em. Now get out of there in case there is a backlash. Better safe than sorry. It would not be the first time things got messy before we were able to correct it.

Understood.

“We need to get into position ourselves. Looks like the enforcers will beat us to the gate.”

“If we move too fast, it will be us they suspect.”

“You are learning their ways too well Sidel.” She nods with a worried look. We saunter towards the gate with us playing the game.

Ju'thn purrs in my pocket. I warn her not to use her “voice”. *Quiet Ju'thn, we are busy.* But she does so even more forcefully. I pull her out of my pocket and lift her to my head. *Very quietly Ju'thn tell me what you want.* Sidel notices my lack of attention and she stops to find out what's wrong.

Metal on men

Okay, not very quiet yet. “You get that Sidel? Any idea what it means?”

“Enforcers have metal swords and knives. They always do.”

“Yeah, I have already scanned that. Ju'thn knows that is normal also, so it is not that.”

“Scan wider out. There appear to be a few trying to make their way to the front of the group.” I scan them.

“Shit! Zealots!” We take off at a very suspicious run now.

“Quick what are the zealots called here?” I almost just yelled zealots which would have caused more confusion than help.

“Merdehentes!” She shouts. Sort of a bastardized Spanish for the death of man.

I take up the shout. As we get closer the enforcers hear us and pull out their swords just in time. Unfortunately they will not be discriminating about who they attack. One Eonite is the same as another. The Commander emits a high pitched whistle. No doubt calling others. They set themselves up with their backs to the inside. We are all “enemies” to them.

“This is not going well!” I dissolve the knives of the zealots who stop confused in their tracks as they find their hands empty. They melt back into the scattering crowd. Can't be helped. Save the people first. Suddenly an old woman lurches into the space where the enforcers are and raises her hands as she is about to fall. I suspect she was pushed. One of the enforcers sees this as an attack and whacks off the front of one of her outstretched arms, spraying the entire line with blood. While they are distracted by this another zealot forces his way through the crowd by slashing his knife and manages to stab an enforcer from behind with the same ceramic knife. I keep forgetting when metal is scarce, glass composites are used. There is blood everywhere.

“STOP” I use the VOICE. Everything stops for a moment. Won't hold, but gives us a chance to finally reach the others.

“Sidel, stop the bleeding of the woman. I will get to her in a moment. I need to help this man or he will die quickly. His injuries are extensive.” Sidel knows what to do and gets to it. I don't need to worry about her.

The other two enforcers are with their fallen comrade as the people wake up and start towards them again, angry that they have hurt an innocent. Several actually, all minor except for the woman, not to mention the ones the zealot sliced getting to his intended victim.

“I am a healer!”

“Too late Eonite. He is too far gone. You will want to be gone from here too. Back up will be here soon.” They have some respect for healers at least, even an Eonite one.

“He will be dead for sure if you prevent my help. Now move aside.” Nothing happens. “Now!” I put on my best face and they back off. They have nothing to lose. I start to concentrate.

“What kind of healer are you? You are not even examining him.”

“To you he is dead already, so Shhh!” I begin again. The ceramic knife I missed has punctured a kidney and the intestines in several places. Blood and partially digested food and bacteria are everywhere. I patch the holes in everything first and add some phosphate buffered saline with some glucose to his blood supply to bring his blood pressure back up. I add a mild sedative to insure he does not wake up on me too soon.

The new enforcers arrive. "Commander, we have the muga." Moral equivalent to pig, a hybrid rodent used as a food animal. Eats garbage. Efficient anyway, but against the Eonite religion to touch. Two armed enforcers have the one who did the stabbing tied up well with ropes. He is not going anywhere.

"Sarg, there were at least five others. Merdehentes mugas." He nods.

I turn my attention to the zealot. "You idiot! You have no idea how much damage you could have done. People are here to help you and you spit in their faces. What possible reason do you have?"

"Answer the healer muga!" He kicks the man in the side.

"Death to man!" They put a cloth in his mouth. I just glare at him.

"I ought to make you feel his pain. You truly are a muga." I scan him. He is missing the parasite. Of course. This explains the lost ones, they went underground. I should have known, but I was concentrating too much on getting this all set up. I DS a parasite out of a nearby Eonite to my closed hand then hold it up to his nose. "I hear that they are particularly painful if they go into you from some place sensitive." He gets my meaning and his eyes open in horror for a moment. Good, I have finally gotten his attention.

"Susan, you need to concentrate on your patient." Susan? No one calls me that but another Guardian, but I sense no one. I turn to face a man in a Eonite robe.

"Who are you?" Not emitting TKness, but we are all good at hiding now.

"Who do you say I am?" I can barely make out a smile. Oh my. My heart is about to burst. It couldn't be.

I bow down. I had thought he was dead. It must be him.

"Your patient Susan. I will work with the other injured. I am with you always. Don't worry. We will talk later." I nod and return my concentration to the man who is doing better, but an infection will kill him soon if I don't clean things up. He is back! I can't believe it. It does not take me long to finish. God, please let it be him. I remove the sedative and add some caffeine to wake him up. He comes around.

From behind me I hear, "Eeeuu! The muga ate the worm!" One of the enforcers exclaims. A real nut case. I should know better than try and get through to a zealot. What was it Yingui called them? Fundamentalists. He said it meant no fun, a lot of dam and very little mental. Fits. They don't need the worm to fuzz their minds.

"Commander, your man should be fine now. I need to help the others."

"I am sorry, but you are a material witness. I have to ask you to come with us to headquarters. The others will have to take care of themselves." Meaning he does not give a freep what happens to them after the attack. Probably not before either. Nor to me. Didn't help that I was one of the

two yelling that they were here. How did I know that, if didn't already know them. I really need to learn how to think ahead during an emergency.

“You don't understand Commander. I need to be here. I am under orders as well.”

“You don't understand healer. Your presence is not optional.” I have probably already blown my cover in so many ways, but during a ruckus a lot of things can happen that are not believable. We get up to go as yet more enforcers arrive. This time in numbers. If I DS now, they will just have their way with the others here. I could not live with that.

“All right everyone. Time to move along. Clear the field. You don't have permission to be here, so unless you want to spend a week in confinement....” They move in to “assist” in the dispersal with inducer sticks.

“Commander.” I implore.

He moves to strike me, “Don't think I won't. I appreciate what you did for my man, but healer or not, you are still Eonite.” Not exactly. I bow down and hold out the papers to him.

“My mistress' orders Commander.” He takes them roughly. I remain bowed. There is some disturbance behind me, up the road. I scan. A procession of sorts. Four muscle bound males and a female in the cart. A very important Garred for sure. That's weird. No one of importance would be anywhere near a field of Eonites, especially this field right now. I scan her. Seems familiar. I wish scans were closer to seeing. I do a DNA scan. Only way I can recognize people for sure by a scan. Beta! The cavalry has come!

She arrives on the scene, “Commander. What are you doing with my servant?” I remain bowed, but am smiling now. “Do you realize how much it cost me to set this up? Not just the hiring of all of the workers, but the compensations to the various ministers were immense. Look at the orders please sir. I am under a very tight time table. I will hold you personally responsible if you don't let her go.” Not that one Eonite would make a difference. But, I hear him ruffle the papers.

“You have only till sundown to set your primary structures in place. But how can that be? You don't own this field.” He is smiling.

“Check page three paragraph five, line one.” That sounds like Law. She was supposed to be in hiding, but I am glad she is here. Why not just use line numbers? Lawyers are the same everywhere. “I have my identity papers, if you wish to examine them.” Ellen again. An upper class Garred would be insulted to have to carry ID papers. She has beat him to the insult and turned it on him.

“That will not be necessary. All is in order.” Wise move grasshopper, she could have your head. “I will insist on my men remaining. One of them was attacked by a merdehente moments ago. Most of them got

away and are still about. I would not want to put you or anyone else at risk." Oh, heaven forbid an Eonite should be hurt. However, a squad of enforcers could present some problems for our more unorthodox construction methods.

I wait to see what happens.

"I think you have misunderstood Commander. I am not the owner, only the cosigner, as is required by galactic treaty." Oh god, the high card. Here it comes. It was hard to believe that we would pull this off totally quietly. Not my call, I am just a member of this team like everyone else.

"Tell me Commander, how injured was your man?" Stringing him out. She is enjoying this game. No wonder Sidel picked her for court.

"He was a gone for sure. Only a matter of time."

"And have you ever seen anyone heal another without touching them this near death?"

"No Senora." He sounds nervous now.

"Don't you think it is a bit rude then to have her bowing down before you when in fact it should be the other way around?"

"I don't understand?" Confused are you?

"Think, it will come to you. Galactic treaty, does a healing that no one here can do."

"Teachers?"

"Good boy. Ah, she is still kneeling Commander."

"Please Teacher, get up. I did not know." I rise finally to meet him coming down.

"Rise Commander. You were only doing your job." I look around. I shake my head at Ellen over her choice of cart bearers. They are pleasure betas. Hunks, very impressive and could probably have the entire squad of enforcers for lunch if their testosterone levels ever rose high enough. Pussy cats in reality. But here I guess it is the looks that count. I look around for Jesus, but only see Sidel covered in blood standing near by. So, he is finished at least. I look down at my own robe. Lots of blood from where I was kneeling.

"Oh, one last thing Commander. What happened to the other merdehentes who attacked? Seeing as how we have a Teacher here to protect us, maybe your men could find the others as a useful activity?" Meaning he is being dismissed and was not doing his job.

"Yes Senora." He bows again and signals to his men.

"Or, if you really want to stay around, we could put you to work. Only seems right, seeing as how you have cost us so much time already. The merdehentes were not interested in us now were they? We could make it a contest. You and your men against the slowest Eonite grouping, say the pleasure girls?" They giggle and look silly. Why this is attractive to men I will never figure out.

“And what would be the wager?” Now what is she doing? And why is he having anything to do with this?

“I am open to ideas. Those pleasure girls do look good don't they?” Nothing like her however. The men don't mind though. May even be regular patrons on pay day.

“And if we lose, though I must warn you that is a very unlikely possibility? We do have construction experience.” Probably during the off season.

“Then it should be a commiserate exchange. Hmmm, you could join our group permanently.”

“And become an Eonite? Too high a cost. I would rather die in battle.”

“How about say, six months then. Not exactly a life time. And you keep your current work, just patrolling inside our field instead of just outside it. I'll even pay your normal salary and clear it with the current contract owner.”

“Are you on the menu also?” I was wondering when that would come up.

“Only for you Commander. Only for you.” And the real reason he stuck around. Men!

“Agreed! Only no tricks from the Teacher.” All they know is myths and legends and I am afraid they are not all nice.

“Agreed. They would not be allowed to interfere by treaty anyway.” Right. Who would stop us?

Law steps in, “I have a contract already drawn up. If you will both sign here and here we may proceed.” The Commander laughs, but signs.

Sidel comes up, “The other teams are ready.” Please get her a new robe someone.

I step in, “It would not be fair to the Commander to go into this cold. Allow him to review the plans for a few minutes at least.” He looks at me confused. No lust in his eyes for me.

“We can do better than that. Your men and you can be responsible for the smallest structure. The security housing. Where you will be staying during the next six months. Here are the plans. A straight forward structure used extensively on New Earth.”

“Where?” He is getting suspicious.

“New Earth, an earth like planet about forty seven light years from here. Though the original design comes from Earth Prime and is over four thousand years old, with a few adaptations of course.”

“You are not from here?”

“Don't be silly. Of course not. Ever seen anyone like me here before?” Ellen smiles coyly and arches her back some. Please!

He shakes his head then looks over the plans, “This whole day is getting to be really strange. I have never seen a structure like this before,

though it does look fascinating. It would be helpful to see how it looks completed though.” I see him stealing glances at her.

“No problem. The betas will not be participating in the contest. That really would not be fair, as we build these things all the time. So we will demonstrate to everyone how one goes together. Come girls, let's show the men how it is done.” When she gets down off the cart and exposes more than she should, I expected cat calls from the men, but they behave. Only they may not be able to see or breathe again for a week.

“Betas?” But he is soon lost in watching them get ready. Ellen sits on the side lines near where the first structure will go up and offers running commentary as to what is going on and what to pay particular attention to. The twenty betas go to a small hill of dirt and rocks and remove the cover revealing the materials needed underneath. His eyes widen over seeing that. The foundation is already in place, with the materials in the sunken center. Each woman grabs several of the three meter struts in each hand, then circles around to take up her position. Each lays one strut down in front of them and locks it into place with the neighboring struts on the foundation. Then in perfect synchrony, they each raise two struts to connect together at their peak and snap into place. The last strut ties the peaks of the first layer together. Then things really speed up.

“These women are ah, very long. I don't think we can reach the tops of those struts.”

“Don't worry, even they can't reach the next layer. See how they do it and you will get the idea.”

By working in groups of three, they use the remaining struts to hold up other struts and lock them into place. Once the third layer is in place, they start to climb the struts themselves, now having enough support to carry their weight. The apex is done and they scramble down the sides to start placing the centers into each triangular space. The centers are off white in color on the outside and white on the inside, about twenty centimeters thick. They sort of squish into place. The gaps between the centers are filled in with smaller strips that also seal the inside walls against wind. Going to the outside they start up at the top and do the same to the outside. Finally they take the cover that was used to hide the entire pre-construction pile and cover the entire structure, pulling it tight this time.

“Gather around the entrance Commander to see how they do the remaining aspects of the inside.”

A lantern is lit to see by. Internal walls are snapped into place. Plumbing and digester gas lines are already incorporated into the walls. The human waste recycling center plugs into the ports in the already completed floor. In fifteen minutes total the structure is ready for occupation.

“And the neat thing is that the necessary connections are at multiple

places in the floor, so walls can be moved to make a variety of configurations very quickly.”

“This is amazing. What are these walls made of? The support struts?”

“All natural materials. Most of the piping is ceramic, the struts are laminated nana reeds from near the river. The walls are fluffed cotton hardened with liquid ceramic dust to make them fire proof. Everything is assembled by teams before hand and carefully arranged in order for each building.”

“And the foundations? How did you do this without our knowing about it?”

“Ah, we have to maintain some secrets. You did not agree to the permanent joining of our group after all.”

“No I didn't. So where is the one we are to build?”

“Come with me.” Sidel leads them further into the center of the field. “You too girls.” The pleasure girls giggle and saunter in line. Teasing the men as much as possible without getting into immediate trouble.

“Commander, this is your building.” Not as large as the one just completed by the betas. “And ladies, this is yours.” A larger structure by maybe thirty percent, which means roughly twice the floor space.

“Hope you boys can handle that itty bitty little project.” One of them suggests.

“How much experience do they have making these things?”

“This is the first time they have seen one, same as you. They have known for some time that they would be working together however, but then you and your men have worked together for years also.”

“But they have never seen one before.”

“Nope.”

Sidel speaks up, “We do not have time to waste people. Everyone get to the structures assigned to you. We will all be doing this together. It does not count if you beat either the ladies or gentlemen, so take it easy and do it right. Betas will be available to all groups if you get stuck. If materials are defective or damaged at any time, bring the bad part to me here and get a replacement. I need to see the exact part to make a match, so don't forget to bring the exact piece or pieces you need replaced.” There should not be any, unless they mess one up. All parts were triple checked ahead of time, but accidents happen.

“GO!” The teams run to their respective 'piles' to begin. The men struggle against each other to pull the tarp off, finally succeeding after the commander takes the time to name each person and their role. The ladies spread themselves evenly around the tarp and slowly roll it towards the center from two sides using hand gestures to communicate and then cart the tarp off to one side. They then follow the example of the betas and ring the foundation with the first strut.

Seeing that they are behind only serves to exacerbate the men's

situation. By the time they get to the struts they have toppled most of the them from their carefully arranged order. Sure enough, they find that they are in fact different sizes and have to go back and forth finding the right size for the bottom support. Some of course, try to force theirs. Two are then directed to bring several broken pieces to the betas for replacement, which takes time as the betas are placed at an equal distance between the two teams. Someone else has to run to the surplus pile to get the right part.

The ladies do a strange thing. They stop every thing to discuss what they are about to do and solve problems among themselves, trying different ideas on a small scale first. When the ladies finally get to the point where they are stretching to raise supports, lots of flesh is showing. Does not take the men long to notice and make even more mistakes. The commander barks several orders and admonishments I won't repeat. They are soon hopelessly behind.

“Call to Prayer!” Everything stops at the Eonite sites. Everything. The commander stops momentarily and then keeps going. Meanwhile everyone else, betas and I included drop to the ground facing north. The direction of Earth from here. Towards Mecca, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, whatever. The Eonite religion is very eclectic, drawing on most of the old Earth ideas, but they borrowed heavily from Islam on the idea of how many times to pray and in which direction. When they were top dogs there was plenty of time for this, but being on the bottom they maintained it I think more to piss off their 'owners' and maintain one thing in their lives over which they had control. We participated because we had more sympathy for them than the Garreds and it was a good spiritual practice. What the hey.

Meanwhile the men do not have access to either help with problems or replacement parts. They do the best they can and appear to make some progress.

Prayer over, Sidel goes over to the men's structure. “Ah, commander, this is all wrong. You will have to take this back down to the foundation and start over.”

“No way! Looks good to me.”

“Suit yourself.” She goes back to the center.

The men are behind and getting more and more impatient. Cursing each other. A fight breaks out, which the commander breaks up. There is no way they will win and a moment later we hear cheering going up from the Eonite ladies. The men collapse not talking with each other.

I see what I think is Jesus talking with Ellen. I wait for them to finish, but then immediately he leaves taking a few other Eonites with him. What are they up to? He never even looked this way. Maybe I am mistaken. It is just that it has been so long.

“Ellen, what's up?”

“Huh? Oh, you mean Jo? He is my cook. You can't believe what he can do with the simplest ingredients. He is going to do us a treat by making the supper for everyone here.” Lifting her breasts with her hands, “You think these things would be what gets me noticed, but I swear his cooking had more of an impact on negotiations than anything I did directly.” Now he is a cook and a healer and Ellen has no idea who he really is. Must be all that time he spent at the center. Maybe I should learn a few things. Most people would not be pleased if I served them TK chow, no matter how good it is for you. Hmm, I do have one idea however.

“We lost fair and square. Even had the advantage on the size of the structure, strength and time and still could not beat them. How did they do it?” Implying there was some sort of deception going on.

“Quite simple Commander, they were trained over the last two months on how to work as a team. A team that depended on consensus not authority. No super heroes, no leader, just team work. A standard beta tactic.”

“So, they really did not have training on building these things?”

“No. There was not time, nor could we have raised a structure without drawing attention. Look up at the towers surrounding the field. If we had tried anything before we had permissions the whole project would have been lost.”

“So, what do you want us to do now?” He has accepted defeat gracefully at least. Thank goodness the girls have covered themselves up and are not teasing anyone any more.

“We can talk about it, as is our way. We will not require you ever to do something you don't want to do. We work by everyone coming to an agreement. Often times it is the smallest voice who has the truth. Don't look so worried Commander. It takes time to learn this method.

For now, what do you think are the best ways you could help?”

“I see two problems. One, the crowds on the outside could be trouble. We need to make sure operations can be completed without more interference.” He point to the Garreds gathered outside the field area. “And two, the merdehentes. They did not just hurt my man and even if all they do is try to hurt us again, more innocents are likely to get caught in the middle.”

“Sounds reasonable. We will meet again tonight after the evening meal. That's when section leaders chosen by the various sections meet to discuss problems and solutions. For now, you can be your section leader.” Implying that it might change at some point. He does not look happy about that, but accepts it for now. Wait till you understand the situation. Your men are likely to re-elect you for some time.

Normally on most systems, the enforcers are not giving this much autonomy, but here, unless there is a threat from the outside, they are free

to make their own associations and contracts. All that will be needed is for Ellen to negotiate the buying of his contract and a bribe as compensation for the inconvenience. Will not be that large. After all, they were on patrol around an empty field. That can't be high on the wage scale. I would imagine that at first they will be relieved that so many Eonites were taken off their hands. They breed like kots remember.

“Sidel, how come you are still wearing that bloody robe?”

“Jo said so. Makes sense. We should not wash away the sacrifice and pretend it did not happen. I will change the robe at the usual time.”

Meaning three days from now.

“Okay people, there is still a lot of work to do. Ask your section leader what you can do next.” She dismisses the others and then turns to me. “We need to fix this mess before sundown.” We have made a good start. The main structures are up, but there is a lot of detail work to be done.

“You want my help?”

“I would rather you helped with the water supply. That is at least out of sight and won't get us into any trouble from the lookieloos.” I nod. She is thinking straight. Good. We only have another hour or so till sundown. I quickly make my way to the water shed. It will certainly be easier to work now that there is a structure over it.

Inside there are several lamps set up and a discussion going on from down in the pit at the center.

“Hey down there. What's the problem?”

Fek looks up at me along with two Eonites brought in to help. “Lam, the local Caller, says we have run into hell runners and that it makes this sight unsuitable for habitation, nor can we take the water from here.” Shit. Excuse me. Hell runners are a local squirrel like creature that normally only comes out at night. They are relatively clean for rodents, but any rodent is a problem with the Eonites. A Caller is their local equivalent to a teacher or priest. It was probably his voice that called us all to prayer. His wife, if he has one would share his position. Backup for each other. Makes more sense that the old celibate priests I was used to anyway.

“I am coming down.” I make my way down the ladder into the tight area below.

“Lam, there must be something we can do. We have come too far to back out now.”

“Unclean. Even if we could remove the runners, the ground would be contaminated. The water would be considered unclean.” Talking about unclean, none of us smells that good. Oh well.

“Can some kind of barrier be erected to seal them off from the water supply?”

“Mercy! It would take all the gold in the kingdom to do that. No way.

And then we could have to sterilize the soil and consecrate it. We will just have to move to a different site.”

“Do you mean real gold or just how much it would cost?” I force myself not to smile.

He sighs, “Gold itself is the only metal that does not corrode over time. Cerams, even if we could make the entire chamber in one piece would not be good enough. They are still of the soil and not as pure.”

“How about gold coated ceramics?”

“If the gold was thick enough it might work. Would need to be monitored. But this is silly to even be discussing.” Lam looks to us for approval but both Fek and I are smiling. He looks confused, “You are serious? Are you that rich? Where would you find it in time? Not to mention all of the metal smiths needed.”

“We would also have to paint the outside to hide the gold from the inspectors. Would not be good for them to think we can get anything we want. Lam, would they likely know about these prohibitions?”

He laughs, “They don't give a Shem about our beliefs. They just throw up their arms and roll their eyes.”

“Good, if you two will step aside I can begin. Only takes a moment. You can wait outside if you want, otherwise I will need to do some lifting.”

Fek answers, “I'm fine with it, you Lam?” He looks confused, but nods. Hee-hee, Fek must be enjoying this. No wonder Sidel sent me here. They love my doing my thing in front of newbies. Sigh....

Suddenly the ground around us rumbles like an earthquake. Lam is visibly upset. I shake my head. Fek is the one laughing now. “Gret.” I am smiling now.

Lam is not amused. “What is a gret?”

“Gret is the name of an unusual beta. She did most of the excavating to set this site up. Must be doing the final touch up.”

“Actually, I think she is doing a mound around the periphery to give us a little more privacy.”

“Back to the task at hand.” I am not going to freak Lam out any more by describing to him that Gret is a class zero excavator. Huge. Must be giving the locals more to talk about than I would using TK. I am sure they have never seen a living thing that big before, must less a sentient. “Sit, it will be easier and you are less likely to fall over.”

I concentrate and lift the three of us into the air about ten centimeters. Just to give me some working room. I will use the earth itself, minus the runners, as mass. I gently push them down their holes and seal them off, so I won't have to worry about one of them running back at the wrong time. The lining itself is easy and straight forward, even without Ju'thn's help. I pat her and get a purring response. I have neglected her so much during the days lately.

“All done.” I open my eyes to see Fek smiling. Sigh, Lam has passed out. I shake my head. “Well, wake him up and let's get his approval. I'm going back topside. Oh, the pipes all the way down to the aquifer are lined now as well. Don't want to have to do this twice.”

As I am leaving I hear Fek, “Wake up Lam, she is gone. Wake up.” He is really enjoying this.

When I emerge from the water site I can see what Gret and the others have done. Impressive. Of course, I have seen her work before, but still a pleasure to see each time. Like having a sentient bulldozer. Boy, those have not been around for a long time. Thank goodness. I remember the stink they put out from those diesel engines.

As I walk towards the communal kitchen area, I can see each group working on what will be their garden area. Eonites have not been allowed anything but rock gardens for generations. They will have to be taught again how to take care of plants. The paths and service roads are all laid out. The plants will come tomorrow. On Efemia, earth life is the definite minority. We are squeezed between the toxic sea, too much copper, and interior past the coastal mountain, no rain. All the rain falls on the coast side of the mountains, almost none on the other side. Like the salt in the earth seas, the copper concentration is not high enough to cause problems in the run off, only in the concentrated seas.

Now, as to local life forms. Earth and Efemia life forms are mutually toxic. Too little copper to be nutritious when they eat us and too much copper when we eat them. Oh and we taste bad to them. Imagine a meal with no salt at all. Not a nice way to go either way. The three cultures here, the Eonites, the Garreds and the Laffics were of course all one culture at the beginning. At landing, as they call it. Soon though, people took offense at one thing or another and now there are three. As the population slowly increases there are likely to be more. Current population is about 34,000. Total carrying capacity for earth life forms is estimated at about three million. Not much, but enough to keep it going.

Maybe we will learn something this time, maybe not.

Ah, the kitchens. Now, where is he? Just as I open the door, the Commander is coming out.

“There you are. We need to talk.” Shit.

I sigh, “Let me have it.” I knew it was coming. First they think they are better, then they are proven wrong, then they have to find some way of saving face.

“There are so many violations here it is not funny. Even a blind and deaf inspector would shut you down in a second.” He looks concerned, but probably very happy inside that he has found a way out of his humiliating contract.

“Oh, tell me about it.” I have to play my part too.

He goes on about the water, gardens, private rooms, the baths, oh

God the baths. I let him go on for longer than I should.

“Commander, you can stop now. I don't need to obey the rules. I make them where I go. Being a Teacher gives me that right. As long as I purchase the land and don't impose my will on those outside my 'territory'.”

He looks around and quickly figures it out. “But you have enough land here at the current building density to house pretty close to every Eonite in existence.”

“Actually more.” I can go down and up as much as I want. Not to mention new sites on other parts of Efemia.

“Why?”

“You want to be an Eonite?”

“Hell no!”

“Why not?”

“They are the slime of Efemia. The lowest of the low.”

“Ah, and this is because they are not human.”

“No, they are human, but a different breed. Dumber, weird religion, lazy too.”

“And breed like kots.”

“That too.”

“So, if they are so different, then you could not have a child by one. Say like a muga and a kot could not.”

“No, there have been instances where that has happened. Pleasure girls do get pregnant occasionally. But even a half Eonite is still an Eonite.”

“So, if you fathered a child by an Eonite woman, you would consign him or her to a life of servitude.”

“We all serve, just at different levels.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Well, I would not like it, but it's the law.”

“This is also the law. Once anyone crosses that line at the entrance, they are part of the New Earth Embassy and subject to our laws, not Efemia's.”

“And if I don't like it?”

“Leave. No one will stop you. Think about it. Here you are free. Out there, you bow to whoever owns your contract. In here, you can follow your enforcer mode, or you can do something else, though I would not recommend construction.” I smile till he gets it.

“We will never be, what did they call themselves, betas?”

“No one is asking you to. By the way, before you get any designs on Ellen. Don't think I did not notice your interest. Betas are not human. You cannot mate with them and produce children.”

“Not human? They look human.”

“Extra chromosomes. Long story. You saw Gret. She can mate with

the betas, as she is one, but you can't."

"Strange."

"You can't even imagine. Now, if you will excuse me I am trying to find the cook." Just my luck a horn sounds. Everyone stops where they are. Five minutes of prayer and then our last meal of the day and the only formal one. Breakfast was whatever you could find as leftovers. Lunch was handed to you as you worked. Dinner was when we came together as community. This one was the first time as the complete new community. Though we had met with each of the groups separately, this would be the first time together. I needed to be there. And I didn't have time to prepare my specialty. I guess it will have to wait.

The betas themselves put up the larger meeting hall while the others worked their gardens. Would not have been wise to trust that to amateurs. Impressive. Not complete yet, but will keep the sun and dust out. Of course, it only holds the eight hundred and thirty seven Eonites, twenty Garreds, twenty five betas and myself. Barely. Larger structures will need to be built as the rest of the Eonites and sympathetic Garreds and Laffics arrive. All will be welcome, as long as they obey the rule, everyone is entitled to a living without oppression. That also means that the Eonites will not be allowed to seek revenge on the Garreds also.

I am one of the last to arrive at the great hall, as it will undoubtedly be called. I greet people as I pass groupings of people sitting on the floor on mats surrounding a small fire place. People who volunteered as servers, including some of the Commander's men I am happy to see, are passing out plates of food. Hope he gets it. Bet they are trying to impress some lady they met. The smoke from the fires rises to vents in the roof and is diffused before leaving. This was done on purpose to avoid too much attention.

From outside Croaker's field, the new structures look like small hills randomly spaced. Till the gardens come up it will remain that way. This will give the local Garreds time to accustom themselves to the new situation. In the same way the Eonites will leave in the morning and most will go back to jobs in the city proper, at least till their contracts are up. This is much faster than is recommended, but I am not willing to wait several generations for this change to occur.

"Teacher, do you wish to hear a status report?"

"You have not seen Jo the cook have you?"

"No teacher. Probably still in the kitchens?"

"Fine, the report then. Thank you."

"We used up all of the surplus struts to fix the damage to the security house. Good idea to have more made in case the locals, ah, damage the ones they are assigned to. I have teams laying out materials to dry now. We are teaching teams of Eonites how to make all the pieces, so eventually they can take over all operations.

Water is flowing to all structures. There was enough artesian pressure, as you guessed, to reach everyone.”

“I did not guess Sidel.”

“No Teacher. To continue. It will take some time for the digesters to produce enough methane to dispense with wood fires. No more smoke, but might need to adjust some cultural habits. We will recycle the remaining ash with the rest of the composting materials. Lastly, assessments are starting to find out what knowledge of crafts people have.”

“And their own interests. I doubt very much that all aspects of Eonite culture disappeared. Some knowledge, even if just oral history, would have been passed on.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, our medics have determined the reason that the Eonites are more productive is because the parasites are absorbing the excess copper from their systems. Subtle, but real. Might be enough to explain what is going on.”

“Maybe, but then it also means we can't remove the parasites as planned without affecting the copper situation. What about the Garreds? Are they being harmed by the copper?”

“We examined the bones of their buried ones dating back three hundred years. The copper levels are definitely rising.”

“I could easily add a filter to the water supply to remove the copper, but would it be enough? It would be a good idea to test the plants and the soil itself around the homes. I am not sensing a large concentration, but given enough time, even a small one could build up.”

“Maybe the parasite could be engineered to remove copper but not affect the mental and physical parameters.”

“Possibly. Or learn to raise plantimals along side our own crops. They would absorb the copper so the earth plants did not.”

“Like pickleweed!”

I smile, “Like pickleweed. Speaking of which, we should eat, come, let's find an open group to join.”

We finally settle for the nearest one with space to sit. A group of carpenters. One gets up and greets us. He has a bad limp. I scan him. He has fallen at some point. There is damage to his head as well. He also has a broken thumb that was never set properly.

“If you will allow me the privilege of repaying your kindness for offering us space, I would like to offer you a gift.”

“Senora, you have both given us so much. You have given us our freedom. We could not accept anything more. Please do not think of it.”

“Ah, but this is a very small thing that no one else will barely notice. Please, it is important to me.”

“Very well Senora. What is it you have?”

“Please just be seated for a moment.” I am a TK9, it does not take

long. A moment later he notices too.

“All done. The gift has been delivered.” He looks at me in awe and throws himself to the ground.

“Irv, what did she give you? Irv, get up. We want to know.” When he rises there are tears in his eyes. He holds out his hands and both thumbs match. He walks around the circle with no limp. He bends down and his head looks perfect.

“For twenty years I have been in pain every day. Today I have no pain.” He sits down with tears still streaming down his face.

“How did you do this Senora?” One of the others in the circle asks.

“I did not touch him. You watched me. I did not move from this spot.”

“It must be a miracle.”

“A blessing on this day.”

“A sign that we are doing the right thing.”

“Food. Please let our guests eat.” We are served a vegetarian bowl with lots of local spices, but no pickle weed! Not up to James and Yingui's standards for pain levels, spice wise, but good all the same. The Garreds eat lots of meat with minimal spices. I can see why they can't and won't eat each other's food. I smile. I wonder how the Commander and his men are doing.

I am torn now. I was planing to remove the parasites tonight as a further gift. But now that I know it actually helps them, I am hesitant to do so until we find a solution.

A murmur is going through the crowd. I stand up to see what is going on, but others have stood also. I scan the scene a tighter group of people near the kitchen bringing out more food. Oh no! That rat! He took my idea. When a server finally makes it to our group the others are curious as to the contents of the plate that is set down for us.

“What is this? Not one of our dishes certainly.”

“Maybe it is not food?”

“Maybe a trick of the Garreds to poison us.”

“Oh for heaven's sake. They are just brownies.” I reach over and grab one very undignified like and pop one into my mouth. Pure pleasure. Before I can reach for another, Sidel has picked up the plate and is passing it around to the others.

“I know you Teacher. You could eat the entire ration and no one else would get to try one.”

“Ah, you know me too well Sidel.” I spend a moment licking my lips and the inside of my mouth to get every particle. In his new form and with his TK off, I can't tell him from the others. All I know is that he was not among the ones who came with us. That means he was here before we arrived. How did he know? There is more to that man than he has ever let on to us. Took me the longest time to get over that he was not God

incarnate, now I am beginning to wonder again. Aaaaagh!

Sharps!

This time I pay attention. No mention of metal, so I scan for the ceramic knives that were used successfully last time. I DS out of my circle and pop in on a circle some distance away just in time to grab the arm of one who is trying to sneak a knife into an enforcer. I then DS both of us into the desert night on the other side of the mountains. Ju'thn immediately pops out. She is free at night. I light a TK globe.

“Where am I and what have you done?”

I dissolve the knife into water. “That would be the last water you would ever see if I had my way, but lucky for you there is a code of ethics for my kind. More than I can say for you. Tell me how many more there are in the hall, or stay here to die.” I could not kill him directly, but put as a choice....

“Death to Man!”

“Fine.” I pop back to the hall. By now others are alerted that something is up. Two of the enforcers has cornered someone at one edge. He does not have a knife, but is infected. I pop him outside to give him a head start to get out of the way. This confuses the enforcers who whirl around. Too bad. I finally decide to go brute force and dissolve everything made of ceramics in the hall. Plate, bowls, cups, knives, whatever. A broken bowl is just as lethal as a ceramic knife and I am not going to give them an alternative.

I use the VOICE, “Everyone down to the floor NOW!” All but three drop to the floor. A quick scan shows them to be worm free. I pop them to their comrades in the desert. Ju'thn is still there keeping a watch on them so they don't wonder off too far. The Commander come up to me.

“You are not human are you?”

“Not any more anyway.”

“What did you do with them?”

“Let's just say that you won't have to worry about them any more.”

“So, they are gone totally?”

“What do you think? Would you put all your men in one place at one time?”

“No, so there is still something for us to do. You did not remove all our toys from us.”

I smile, “Just be careful. You work for us now. Don't hurt the innocent. Your men cornered someone they thought was suspicious, but he was totally unarmed. And don't think for a moment that an old woman or a child is not one of them. Anyone who does not carry the worm is suspect, though not for certain, a merdehente. There are likely to be some who are naturally not able to host a worm.”

“Don't taste good huh?”

“Right.” I smile. He does have a sense of humor.

“No worm huh. That does make it easier.”

“Remember, these are not children. They are experts at hiding among the others. And you can't go around 'testing' everyone either. At Croaker's field they are equal to you. Do you understand Commander?” I give him the evil eye.

“Yes mam. I understand. Ah, where did you say the other's went?”

“The same place you will be if you mess up.”

“Right.” No smile this time.

Another commotion is going on. This time something positive. A murmur goes through the crowd. Ah, the first ones are back from the baths. They are wearing clothing from the old days. They are finally clean again and can wear what must be sacred garments by now. Not that I can go for the brown and white color schemes. Intricate patterns that no doubt mean something. Must have taken a long time to make them by hand. I remember Rachael and her Klingon scheme on our first robes. Simple off white for me. There are enough complications in life as it is.

There is not enough room for everyone at once in the baths, so they have to go in shifts. Everyone will get a chance. The hard part is that though they understand that they have to shower before getting into the bath, they are deathly afraid of that much water in one place. Fear of drowning. Well, it makes sense. They have never seen this much water before. I know, because of the testing we did on a few hardy souls. The betas purposely designed the baths with lots of edges to hang on to and easy to see seats in the water with enough lighting to see. No dark deep pools for now. Men and women separated of course. That really threw the betas. They consider it obscene to bathe separately, but acquiesced.

Well, I suppose I should get back to the four in the desert. I pop back. Ju'thn is hovering just out of reach above them. They have managed to kill the light. Stupid. It may be a desert to us, but not to the locals. I sit and watch them for a bit. Nice being able to see in the dark.

Any problems Ju'thn.

No mom. They just sit and wait now. A line of creepers is approaching.

“It talks.”

“But what is it?”

“What are creepers?”

“Who is it talking to? If this is the little one, how big is the mother?”

This really is too much fun to waste. Unfortunately I hear footsteps behind me. Who could that possibly be? The others are definitely in front of me. I reach out and scan. Male about thirty years old, wearing Eonite clothing, just like the others. Pre bath clothing like these four. Hmmmm... Did I miss count. I shield, not wanting to take any chances.

“So, is that what you think of me now?” He laughs. Jesus finally.

“Who's that? I can't see a thing.” I hear a 'get down' whispered.

“Well, you ruined my fun anyway.”

“There's two of them. She must have brought someone with her this time.”

“Shhh, listen stupid.” They are almost flat on the ground.

“I brought you some more brownies. So, what do you plan on doing with them?”

“Thanks. Good. I was going to just make straight chocolate till it got busy. Well, until you showed up I was going to let them sweat it out a bit. After all, they haven't even gotten to the fun parts yet.”

“Like creepers.”

“And sunrise.” Gets to about forty five degrees centigrade out here. Too hot for humans unless you really know what you are doing and they don't. And this is close to the mountains. Further inland and it goes over fifty easy. Pasturized.

“Is that really necessary?”

I sigh, “No. I am open to suggestions. I can't really take them back. They would just end up getting people killed again. I did not go through all this trouble getting the Eonites out of harms way only to have these knuckleheads fouling it all up. I can't stone age them. Not fair to the others to take away all sharp objects.”

“Give them the worm and they will become just like the others.” He is being sarcastic.

“You know that won't work any better than neutering them would.” I could not resist. The three males shudder. The female smiles.

“We could include them in on this conversation?”

“We are standing right next to them. They can talk any time they want.”

Nothing.

“What, no Death to Man?”

“Where are we?” They get up off the ground.

“The other side of the....” One screams bloody terror! That's what you get for going barefoot to hide in the Eonite population.

“Oh Shem. Please Shem get this thing off me!” He is jumping around frantically screaming.

“Creeper?” One asks.

“Yup”

“Can you get rid of them?” She is calm. Would make a good leader.

“Sure.” Did not say that I would. A second one screams.

“Would you do so then?”

“What's the magic word?”

“Susan, don't you think this has gone far enough.” Not a question. The creepers disappear.

“Fine.” I heal the two victims and light a globe. Things are quiet again.

“You have changed.” Meaning, not in a good way. The rest of the creepers scurry away. Not too far though. Just away from the light. Our guests are horrified by what they see.

“Seen too much I guess. Stupid monkeys.”

“They are that, but you need to understand their frustration as well.”

“But I'm helping them! Why are they trying to destroy that?”

“You already know the answer.”

“They don't know me from a Garred. They have been oppressed for three generations. And these don't have the worm. I beginning to think that the extra copper in their blood is making both them and the Garreds a little mad.”

“Don't ever put us and those clote in the same pot! Ever!”

“Have you forgotten the creepers so soon? You are in no position to be making demands. Make sense or we leave.” Well at least for a time. Even I am not that cruel.

“Then do what you want. We are dead already. Martyrs for the cause.”

“Oh you won't be alone. As soon as I do a sweep of all those without the worm, they will be joining you.” I don't tell them I can read their minds if I need to.

“It would be better if you could use their energy in a positive way.”

“I agree, but not if they are so determined to kill and be killed.”

“It will take time.”

“We could always set them up here. Make an underground living space that is cool enough in the day and warm enough at night.”

“Food and water?”

“I would hate for them to be dependent on me for supplies. One never knows the day and time of one's own death.” He smiles.

“A deep well. There is water about a kilometer down. Very old water, but low in copper. Cold too.”

“A lot of effort to get it to the surface.”

“A TK pump would solve that problem. So far they seem to last a very long time. Certainly longer than they would be here hopefully.”

“That leaves food. Not being rained on, the ground is pretty loaded with copper, so that means using pots of clean soil for crops. Annoying, but doable.”

“Nothing I know will handle the heat, except maybe cactus and I certainly don't remember the genetics for those. Besides, not enough protein. And I am certainly not going to spend the time coming up with something unique for here.”

“There is a food here in quantity that will work.”

“What, where?” The zealots are looking around too.

“The copper content is low in them. A little in their sap for gas transport, but not enough to be a problem. Properly prepared they are

probably quite tasty.”

I laugh, “You mean....”

“Precisely. High in protein and nutrients.”

“What does he mean?”

I ignore her. “What do they eat though? Can't live on nothing.”

“Have you forgotten so quickly?”

“Oh yeah, zoophyta. I spent nearly all my time in the settlement this time. Then why attack things.”

“Short cut.” That makes sense. I never was much of a biologist.

“We had best get to work then.”

“Do any of you have construction experience?”

Nothing.

“This is where you and your twenty seven friends are going to be living for some time. Now is the time to have any say in it. Once we leave you are on your own.”

“You are not giving us much of a choice.”

“Oh, I gave you lots of choices, but every time, you chose this path.”
Let that sink in.

“You are just like the Garreds.”

“Oh, where do you think your comrade who stabbed the enforcer is?”

“Hung outside the hall of their so called justice.”

“And you are.....”

“Still alive.”

“Very good. You are learning.”

“I am a carpenter.” I smile at Jesus.

“There but for the grace of God, go I.”

“Not going to be much use here unless we make an artificial wood.”

“Might be a good idea. They will not have much to do and that way they could adapt their homes as they learn more about this fine vacation destination.” Who said he did not have sense of humor.

“The question is, do we trust them with tools?”

“You expect them to hunt their food with their bare hands?”

“Oh, that would be fun.”

“What food!” They all chime in at once.

I play very matter of fact, “Why creepers of course. Now, where were we?”

“Oh Shem, oh shem! This is a nightmare.” You got that right. But you have gotten the roles reversed.

I snag one and roast it over a flame made with TK till the juices are flowing. Then blow on it till it cools. I offer some to Jesus. He takes half with a nice sounding crack. I think the others are going to lose their dinner, if they had any. I taste it.

“Hey, this is not bad at all. Sort of like tuna with wasabe smoked over a campfire. People would pay good money for this if they ever

found out.”

“Would be great with a nice chardonnay.” He makes two glasses. I remove the alcohol from mine. Jesus laughs, “Live a little Susan.” He downs his.

I look around us. “Help me out here Ju'thn. I want a ring of stone about five meters in diameter with a fire pit in the middle.”

“What do you expect us to burn in the fire pit?”

“Shhh.” We get to work and within moments are done. I add some fake wood and start a fire. We can lay a pipe to an underground gas dome later. Not good long term, but will work for a small settlement for a limited time.

Jesus rustles up a bucket of creepers. They can't climb the slick sides and soon set to attacking each other instead.

“You will have to be quick.” He reaches in suddenly and pulls one out. “Important to handle them thusly. Otherwise those pincers will get you and two of you know first hand what that feels like. They are poison tipped by the way. Water soluble, so it can be washed off easily if you get into trouble. Don't wait too long. Carry water with you. The mechanical damage will remain however.”

I make some metal kabob spears. “Don't even think of using these on us. You definitely would not like the consequences.” I spear one and hold it over the flame. When done I hand the spear to the female. She delicately breaks off a piece and hands it on to the others, then blows on it and her fingers before eating it.

“Good.” But, will you still say that on day one hundred? Anything, even chocolate brownies gets old over time. Or TK rations.

“We had better get back. No doubt the rest have caused some trouble.”

“What about us?”

“You can keep the creepers company.” I leave the lamp. They are resourceful. A simple rock will protect them. Just no sleep tonight. Better to sleep during the day anyway. Will be light here soon. Several hours ahead of the settlement. The creepers will go into photosynthesis mode till the sun gets too high and hot. Then they will seek shade, leaving them alone, being too big to hide behind the small rocks here.

Back at the settlement everything is really quiet. Too quiet. I scan. Everyone is asleep. Well, it is dark. Two are not asleep. In the baths together. Well, that was bound to happen too.

“This will make it easier. At least they won't be moving around on us.”

“I will need to start getting ready for breakfast soon. Morning prayers first though.”

“Just help me round them up and then we can go.”

He salutes me, “Yes general!” I roll my eyes.

“It would seem I am not the only one who has changed. Though I will admit, your change is an improvement.”

“Meow! By the way, they are all together.”

“Who?”

“The merdehentes. Pay attention.”

“Well, where are they Private Jo? Ah, what made you pick Jo?”

“Well, it could be in honor of my father, or short for Johosaphat.”

“Right. Now where are they?”

“Enforcers quarters.”

“Oh great. That must have been a real mess. I don't sense anyone injured.”

“Let's go see what happened.”

Not bothering to DS we walk the hundred meters or so. There is a guard posted at the entrance, but he is fast asleep. I nudge him. He wakes with a start. “Be thankful it is us and not the Commander. Can you tell us what happened?”

“Let me wake up.” He stands up and shakes himself, adjusting his uniform. Why do they always go crazy over uniforms? “I am ready Teacher.” They learned that one quick.

“After you left we realized we were on our own and needed to work fast before they escaped again. As everyone in the community was inside the hall eating, we posted guards at the exits. Then four went outside to be sure we had not missed anyone. I was one of these. Only a few older people who had made arrangements to have food brought to them. We explained it would be a few more minutes. Should have thought to bring stuff with us. Would have made a good cover.

When we came back the weirdest thing was going on. The Eonites seeing this as their chance, turned in the merdehentes themselves. They said they were taking back their fear or something like that. Outnumbered ten to one and weaponless, the merdehentes offered no resistance.

We treated them with respect and escorted them to the back of our quarters. That was it.”

While he is talking Sidel shows up. I motion for her to be quiet.

“So, no one was hurt?”

“No Teacher.” He sees her.

“No talk of revenge, retribution or anything like that.”

“No, none.” Jesus is smiling at me.

He speaks up, “It takes a lot longer than three generations to instill the kind of hatred you remember on Earth. I do agree it was a good idea to stop the hatred now though. Letting it go on would have eventually succeeded to bringing your fears to fruition.”

“So, now, do we bring the other four back or move the ones here to them?”

“What do you think would be the best idea?” I know when I am beat.

Sidel finally can't take it, "Teacher, we have another problem. We have a Garred spy among us as well." I nod that I have understood.

I DS the four to stand before us. The guard nearly loses it. "How? What? Who are you two? Are you demons?" He inscribes some sign in the air before us.

"Sorry no affect. Try garlic next time." He is definitely developing a sense of humor.

"You four, time to join the others. You can ask them what happened and what you want to make of yourselves. If you want to return to the desert and make a society of your own, we will help set you up. If you decide to stay here however, you have to behave yourselves." The guard leads them in, without drawing his sword. Someone has learned something. Took me long enough.

"At least it is cooler here." It was not even daylight there yet. Wusses. They had better chose good behavior.

"Now, Sidel, what do you have on the spy?"

"Dressed as an Eonite. The only one who did not go into the baths with us and change into clean older clothing."

"What have you done with him?"

"Her. Nothing yet. But everyone knows who it is."

"Good. Spread the word. Treat her with respect. Include her in everything, even the governing counsel. Not as a voting member yet, but as an observer. Make it clear she is free to come and go whenever she wants and report to anyone whatever she sees. Be totally open with her."

Sidel smiles big and nods. This will totally turn the spying mission on it's head. At first she will try to find dirt and weaknesses, then she will start defending us, then take the ideas we come up to solve problems to help solve problems on their side. With any luck, she will become an ambassador and open up trade relations between us.

"Well Susan, it looks like this is turning out all right after all." He is smiling big too.

"Oh, we are a long way from done. There is still the Garred population to deal with. Ellen says the local hierarchy is not happy with our little camp. They will try to take it back. It will take time to undo even three generations of brainwashing. Not to mention the worm, copper poisoning and what to do about that."

"But it is a good beginning. Morning prayer will be any minute. Are you coming?"

"Yes. It will be good to pray at your side again." He smiles and takes me by the shoulder. Yes, very good. Like being home again. Ju'thn is back in my pocket and purring as well. She tends to pick up on my emotions. Life is good.

Cilan

Third Mesa, Hopi Landing Site, Earth.

“We're home.”

“Will you stay awhile this time Daniel?”

“A few days. I want to see Running Snake and Yingui.”

“Then back to K!?” He nods. The two of them are nearly inseparable. Wish I was that close to someone. I know that I am different, but have not been able to figure out how or why. No one is talking. Others have suspicions about my identity, but aren't saying anything. Running Snake, Yingui and Br'thn KNOW what is going on, but won't say anything. They keep saying it is important for me to figure it out myself. But HOW LONG? How long do I have to wait? Why hasn't it happened yet?

“Someone is moody today. Though actually not that different than normal.” I growl. He laughs. We walk down the path to the village. We pass by the hall of languages where the Sauron books are stored. Very few people come here now. Only TK6s trying to study up for level seven and they all read Standard. Each planet that has TKs, which is everywhere but New Earth, seeing as how Susan's betas can't do TK ever, has a set now. Just too hard to send everyone back here from multiple gate trips or TK/DS FTL rides. I am tempted to go inside and meditate, but not today. I am too wound up and pissed to sit still.

Takes us several hours to make it all the way. We could have DSed in seconds, but we both prefer to walk. Daniel and Br'thn so they can see what has changed since the last time. Not much. And me, so I can calm down. We were just on New Earth. Susan had just finished up another mission. She is back together with Jesus and is in heaven. You would think they were a couple of norms, they spend so much time together. They are already planing their next mission, together this time. They kept going on and on about the feudal system on Nubussy [where do they come up with those names?]. Complete with serfs and despot kings caused by inbreeding. Have fun guys. Without me. The one who still doesn't know who they are. Even.

Coming into town, there is a commotion going on. People standing about talking. A little boy sees us and runs to the TK house. It is where we stay when we are here. Just easier to have some place in the universe that we can keep a few things that have sentimental value to each of us. The only way in or out of our lockers is with DS or PS. Keeps the curious local norm children in check. Hard to replace an artifact that may be over four millennium old, no matter how sorry the child is. Still, someone must be there now for the child to feel free to run in the doorway. I could scan, but it is more fun to be surprised. Probably Running Snake.

Nope, the first one out is Söhöspala. One of the large pop cats.

Orange colored like an apricot, as his name implies. Thank goodness they stopped growing at panther size. One of Owa's spawn of course. He has the air about him. They are all different of course, personality wise, same as us. He is fastidious about his looks. As soon as he sees [or smells] who is coming, he licks his paw and adjusts the fur about his head and ears. Shakes some dust off one back paw and glares at something on the ground that does not appear right to him. When we get closer, he ignores us, still staring at the ground. I am used to it, I live here, but this really amuses Daniel. He TPs something to Br'thn. I can tell when he does it, but not what they discuss. None of the others can do this. Yingui thinks it might somehow be related to my connection talent. Grrrr. Does not seem to be of much use to me. Though in this case it means the two are up to something.

Sure enough Br'thn changes into her female human form. I had almost forgotten what she looked like, it has been so long. They have switched scents. Stinkers!

Söhöspala finally looks up and sees us. *Good hunting Cilan!* He then looks at the other two. His ears go back and he sniffs the air. The hair starts to go up on the his back and the tail starts swishing. Not good guys. A low growl almost inaudible starts. Daniel's eyebrows go up.

“Sorry Söhöspala. Just having fun. Did not mean to offend you. Where is Running Snake?” Trying to switch the topic.

Br'thn goes back to her normal form and Daniel goes back to his normal scent. He ignores them and addresses me. *There is a problem. A runner is coming in. The Clamdigger Tribe has been nearly wiped out. The runner is one of the survivors. We will know more when she gets here soon. Being tired from running she was not able to keep up with one of the local scouts who passed the word on to me.*

“You could have gotten her you know.” He looks at me like I have said something totally incomprehensible. Cats do not do transport duty. I roll my eyes and shake my head. I was supposed to have gone on tour of the area last year, but kept putting it off. Thought I had lots of time.

“Daniel can you and Br'thn retrieve our runner? My DS ability does not extend that far.” I can get out of a building, but have to DS hop to get any distance. Better at TK than DS. Most of my ability seems to have gone into the connection thing and TP. Daniel is giving Söhöspala a massage. You don't want to interrupt a cat massage, especially if they weigh more than you do, which in my case is easy.

“Fine, I'll fly there.” #@\$% lazy TKs. Just because we are immortal does not mean we can wait for a mortal to die before helping them. I scan back down the trail indicated. No one there. Söhöspala's sense of direction off? Wind? Cats depend more on smell than we do. I scan up wind. There is someone a few kilometers out barely even walking. They are totally exhausted. I get up into the air with TK and make for the

runner. I don't need to go that fast now that I have spotted her, so don't bother with a shield or ship.

Within a few minutes I am next to her. I walk up to her rather than drop out of the sky. She is out of breath and sweating profusely. Does not need a scare right now. Not uncommon for someone not used to our heat. I make some water in a clay cup. Not too much. Has to be a familiar vessel too. Plastic would have freaked her. She is not even seeing me. I wanted to hold off touching her till I was ready. I scan her. She is in really bad shape. *Hey you three, if you don't get here soon, she will be a dead runner.*

Finally, they pop out of DS space. Looks of concern at least. Br'thn goes to her head. Daniel gently lays her down. She is so out of it, I doubt she even knows any of us are here. Söhöspala sniffs her feet. They go to work. I can follow along with my scans, but not that good at healing someone this near death. They take some time. She is severely dehydrated, malnourished, cuts, bruises, bug bites, sunburn, an almost completely healed broken leg bone and internal organs messed up. I don't need to touch her to know she has been through a lot. I am not going to enjoy this one. She would have died had we gotten here even a few minutes later. A cat massage is not always the highest priority.

“She will need to rest. I will DS her back to the village where she can be inside away from the sun.”

She said the need was urgent. Söhöspala has his nose in the air and is not even looking at us.

“Likely anything that we could have done is long past. Must have taken her months to get here, even with help.”

On the other had, it would show respect to consider her wishes. Br'thn of course. Everyone is looking at me.

“Okay, I'll do it.” Still I hesitate. This is hard for me every time and I know this one will be bad. I start with an article of clothing. Fortunately it looks new. Maybe she made this on the way or was given it by someone else. I am wearing my gloves. They no longer prevent transfer but slow it down, sort of like sun shades.

Contact. The images come in. I was right. She had not had this article of clothing too long, only a few weeks. She had lots of help in her travels. She was only on her own the last few days. The mesa is visible as a land mark for some ways, so it was not that hard to find us just north of it. I am limiting my connection to just where the shirt has been and don't follow the contact to her. That will come next.

“Break contact Cilan, she is waking up!” Huh?

“I thought you said she would sleep for some time?” Always disorienting to be pulled out of a read.

Daniel shrugs, “Very hard headed I guess.”

Of course the first thing she sees is Söhöspala looming over her and

she jerks back a few centimeters.

“Söhöspala, back off, you know monkeys can't take too much of your beautiful magnificence when they are in a weakened state?” That was putting it diplomatically, but he retreats to her feet and lays down. Br'thn also backs off. Most people have never seen a 'thn either.

“Kg ryk!” Okay, language problem. Too bad we could not require Standard here in the former North America. I TP her.

Just think what you want to say and I will be able to understand you.

She looks at me out of hazy eyes, *You are The Ci'lan?* Strange, we usually don't hear accents with TP, especially not me.

I am Cilan.

The arrow head in my belt pouch will explain everything. So, she knows what I am then. Surprised that word had gotten that far. The Clamdiggers are on the North Atlantic coast after all.

“She is asleep again. Do you want me to get the arrowhead for you?” He knows how it hurts me.

I DS it out of the pouch and hold it in the air with TK. “Better if no one else touches it. Likely even she did not touch it, if she knows about me.” He nods. “Why don't you take her back to the village and watch over her. Söhöspala will keep me company and watch over me. Nothing will attack us while he is here.” Söhöspala straightens up and pays attention. Appealing to his vanity works every time. A robed TK with a large orange pop cat is a VERY clear warning sign to any monkey who would try, but the wildlife does not care. Still, Söhöspala will keep hungry coyotes and such away if I can stop him from hunting them.

Rather than use TK, Daniel carefully picks her up before DSing out. Very gallant. Maybe K! has been showing him some manners. Back to the task at hand. I rotate the arrow head around and scan it carefully from about a half meter away. Iron with traces of dried blood on it. Hmm, something more. There is a strange organic that I don't recognize. I will need Yingui's help on this one. I suspect poison. Even belief can be powerful enough to kill and contact will tell me. Well, I could always touch it. It really does not matter if the compound is a poison or not. I am just procrastinating.

“Okay Söhöspala, going in.” He rests a paw on my knee and licks the side of my face. Thanks I needed to be covered in cat spit. Of course this gives me a reading on all the trouble he has been up too. Sigh...

I reach out with my gloved hand and grab the arrowhead. I don't want to risk losing contact if it is too intense causing me to drop it. Three months in the pouch. We were right about the time it took to get here. Not much direct history there. Hot and cold for days and nights. No wet time. Good girl. Can't wash off all of the history, but it can make it more vague. Ah, coming up on the reason. I sense flying shapes and then pain. This does not make sense. I sigh and Söhöspala purrs to reassure me. I

pet him with my other hand, then remove the glove with my teeth. This will need direct contact.

The first impression is intense. A person dying painfully over hours. People are all around, but are helpless to do anything. There are three others present and the victim is a young child, male, about four years. Not much of a threat. Who would attack him? The wound was not in a critical organ, so it was poison, or bio. High fever and hallucinations. Still not getting it. I need to go back further.

Whoa! I am in the air, flying above the shore line with a female pilot. There is the boy. He is helping his family harvest clams. Hence their tribal name of Clamdigger. At least as translated into Standard. Everyone has their backs to the hunter. The hunter is in some kind of kite. I remember back to the early TK history. I think these were called hang gliders. Pre fall tech. How did she get it thousands of years later? No matter. She takes aim at the older male, but a sudden gust of wind ruins her aim. At least she was not intending to hunt children.

Were not many people on the shore. Usually there would be a hundred or more stretched out over ten kilometers. Looks like their extermination is nearly complete. Once the child is hit I see it from his perspective. There are several fliers. The child is picked up and they all run for the caves. Funny, I don't remember caves being here. Ah, made. So, they did this for protection from the fliers apparently. Problem is, is that they need to go out to collect their main protein source. If the child was with them, it could only mean they were desperate. A storm would wash out their shallow caves exposing them as well. On the other hand a wind strong enough to bring the swell up that high would also dissuade the fliers as well.

Back up some more. Ah, the flier takes off from the upper floors of a few skyscrapers that have survived. The people are all tiny and very thin. Light weight. Amazing that this has happened so fast. Light weight means better flying ability with smaller gliders. Makes sense. Not the only reason though. They are starving too. Strange. These two groups have been side by side for near a millennium post Mother, what happened?

I can't hear words by this method, only observe actions. I could use TP later to read her mind and get a more complete story, but it would be shaded by her own bias. Before takeoff, a trusted relative, a brother, loads the arrows into the glider's quiver. The arrows were made by their parents from laboriously filed and removed metal from collapsed buildings near by. And dipped into a pot of something. Bio, maybe rotting blood.

All this does not help much. The Cliff Dwellers were hunting the Clam Diggers. Both groups were starving. From the arrow's perspective, it was enough that they were being hunted. I would imagine I was now expected to either fix the situation or extract justice. Most groups were

disappointed by my justice. With the connection talent and TP, not much can be hidden. I am never interested in just the immediate 'crime' as crimes are never committed without something pushing them to happen. Rachael's poor in old Europe, Ron's zealots leaving for a new world, and even Susan and Jesus' Garreds and Eonites are all good examples. There is much more behind each case.

I carefully wrap the arrowhead in a leaf and place it in the pouch on my belt. I slowly make my way back to the village. She will be out for some time. I can do a reading of her without waking her, but I doubt it will tell me much more. Time is short if not already too late.

Something is happening when I return. A lot of people scurrying about. I do a brief scan. Ah, no wonder. Pest is here and with friends. I land discreetly outside the village and walk in. The squash is nearly done. I love the seeds roasted and salted. Short history, so I don't pick up much. The weather has gotten dryer again. Soon it will be back to the desert it was pre fall. Quieter anyway. A lizard runs across the path in search of dinner. I have not eaten myself in some time. No wonder I am thinking about food.

I stop by the communal kitchen to see what is cooking. The usual. But now it seems much more interesting. Anything to postpone this meeting. I have grown accustomed to all the chili peppers. I like the subtle flavor of the jalapeños, but really like fire roasted habaneros for a good burn. Seems to temporarily reduce the connection talent for some reason. Maybe my taste buds are burned out too. But with only squash, beans and lamb most of the time, can you blame me? Better get this over with. I pass up the hottest peppers.

I open the door, where Yingui, Running Snake, Daniel, Br'thn and Pr'thn are gathered around a table looking over a map. Running Snake is shaking her head. Söhöspala is curled up next to the fire of course. Our runner is not to be seen.

“Hi, what happened to the runner? And where is Owa?” She is always with Yingui and Pr'thn.

“Oh, good. About time you got back Cilan. I need you to baby sit Pr'thn for me again. I know it is short notice, but this is important. Owa will go with me, she is out hunting right now.” Pr'thn is a little brat. She is so curious and a lot stronger than I am. My only advantage is that I know more tricks, having learned from so many connection experiences. Technically, she is older than me, but the way 'thn mature, she acts much younger. At least I don't have Owa too. That would be way too much to handle. She thinks she is Queen of the Universe.

“What about the runner and the Clamdiggers?”

“Take Pr'thn and Söhöspala with you. Should be easier with Pr'thn assisting.” Yeah, right. If we ever get there at all. Last time I was chasing her for a week all over the continent. There always seemed to be

something more interesting than the task assigned to us. Yingui, being her equal, could handle her much better than I.

“And the runner is where?” I do a quick local scan. There are too many people around and none are sleeping this time of day. I did not get a good reading on her, having concentrated on the arrowhead. He smiles. The other's roll their eyes.

Running Snake finally blurts out, “Yingui, you never tell her anything. It is not a secret. She is near the wash house.” Turning to me, “She felt the need to be clean after all that she has been through.” She then goes back to the map. Why am I not being included on this new adventure. Because the one I started is not done yet. I know the unspoken rules. Sigh...

Pr'thn gets excited and phase shifts through the door, not even bothering to DS. I have a puppy dog not a baby.

“Be nice to her this time Cilan and try not to get her into any more trouble.” Me!? Aaaaaagh! I storm out to laughter. They so much like to get me riled up. I know they are doing it on purpose, yet it still works. Maybe I should take a ten year vacation in the Zen monastery, again. Fine, I got kicked out in six months last time.

To an occasional giggle, I leave the vicinity of the TK house. Aaaagh! Now where are they? Bet I spend the rest of the day looking for them. I hear something next to me and turn to find Söhöspala at my side. “Thank you Söhöspala. You are certainly more help than those other monkeys.”

Of course I am. He looks offended. I scratch the back of his neck and he relaxes. A sniff of the air and he is leading me to them. Better than scanning, though it is not hard to scan for a 'thn, if she is still in the area. Not something I can count on. The two of them are near the wash house, surprise. Pr'thn is sitting on her lap being stroked gently. I can hear her purring from here. I am jealous, but hide it. Forbidden of course for me to touch a 'thn, even Pr'thn. I don't want to go there again. More secrets, grrrr.

I do not know your name. She looks up at me as I TP her.

“Ci'lan, she Tekrit.” She pauses and thinks a moment, “Ah, I Tekrit. Sorry Watcher.”

Okay you guys, who taught her Standard? Though I admit it does make it easier and more private for her.

“Speak Standard good?”

“Yeah, good. Let's go. We are going back to your home.” She nods obviously not too happy about it. She is not completely over all her injuries. The prospect of starting out again must frighten her.

“You fix?”

“Not sure who or what you mean. The others fixed you fine and I will have to wait and see when we get there before I can say anything

about your home.”

“No fix me. I still Tekrit.” This is getting confusing. She looks upset.

Best get going. It may only be morning here, but it is nearly noon there. “Pr'thn, if you will do the honors.” She converses with Tekrit for a moment. I then see Tekrit concentrating, showing Pr'thn where to go by giving a visual image. A moment later we DS to the site.

We are on a long beach. Trees with leaves turning incredible shades of yellow, orange and red on top of the embankment. Fall on the east coast is so much more beautiful. Although the cactus blooms are pretty by contrast to the barren landscape where we are, it is not the same as this. I spend less than one month a year at the village, yet it still feels like home to me. So, this is her home. She is already running up the beach poking at the embankment as if looking for something. Looking around as if to orient herself, she then rushes down to the surf and starts digging frantically.

A moment later she pulls out a large clam and rests it on the sand, then goes back for another. A few minutes later she has four. She then runs up to the embankment, climbs over the top faster than I thought possible. Definitely feeling better. Good job guys. Back in a minute with small branches and twigs. She fumbles in one of her pouches and pulls out a small lens, starts a fire. Once the fire is good and going, she throws the clams on top. She smoothes out the sand around the fire and calls me over with her hands.

She points to the clams in the fire, “Open mouth done.” She smiles. We sit and wait. Pr'thn stuck around for a bit watching the whole proceedings but then takes off. I can sense her as long as she does not leave the large island we are on. Söhöspala has gone to hunt in the woods or find a place to nap out of earshot of our monkey chatter.

Both of you, stay away from the tall buildings. They are not stable. They could always DS out of trouble, but I am a paranoid baby sitter. I broadcast this message so Tekrit can hear me as well. She watches me as if trying to figure out how I do it. She reaches out to touch me.

“No Tekrit. Not until I am ready. I am not the same as the others.” I have pulled away from her. Most of the time, they tell people before they set me up with them. She looks hurt. Must not have been enough time or they were distracted. I also thought she was supposed to be out for a couple of days. Maybe because there were so many TK and 'thn present they could rush the job. Aaaagh! I am starting to remember my days with the betas with fondness.

“I am sorry. You don't understand what pain I feel when someone touches me.” And I have already had enough of a taste through my gloves of her pain.

“Me Tekrit. Understand.” She shows real sympathy for me, but then cheers up and pokes the clams out of the fire to cool. At least she cooks

them. Don't like raw meat. Don't like meat really, a TK thing, but cooked is definitely better. Cooled off she picks one up. Well, still a little hot. She looks up at me to get my attention, then demonstrated how to open one and pull out the clam inside to chew on and eat. I nod my understanding.

Only I am not so interested in burning my hands, even through gloves. I TK the clam into the air and then open the shell with same. Her eyes are wide!

“What?”

“Tekrit! Ja ne baba!”

“Standard please.” She pauses with her mouth open.

“You Tekrit!” She nods and looks at me questioningly.

I am guessing the Tekrit is not her name, but her state of being.

“You show me. What is Tekrit?” I am starting to sound like her. She nods, concentrates and lifts the remaining clams off the sand just as Söhöspala returns with a rabbit. He sniffs the clams and decides his rabbit is a better bet and removes himself and rabbit to a few feet away to eat it raw. Eeeuu! Yes, he is a cat.

“I am guessing the Tekrit means TK in your language?” She nods. I scan her. She has been hiding her talent well for me to not place her right away. Longs years of suppressing it is my guess. A TK2 is my best guess. I lift myself off the ground and motion for her to do the same. She concentrates and very wobbly manages a few centimeters at first and then reaches my ten centimeter height and relaxes till she starts to tilt and finally ends up floating sideways. “You need more practice.”

“TK bad. Evil. No practice!” Oh great, one of those cultures.

“Look, everyone you have met today is TK. Do we appear evil to you? Has anyone hurt you?”

“Everyone?” Her eyes are wide open. I nod. “Even Söhöspala?” Not a bad accent. Most people can't make those Hopi umlaut sounds right away, if ever.

“Yes. Söhöspala, wipe your face, you have rabbit blood all over it. Dirty kitty.” He looks shocked and ashamed. Sorry to do this to you guy. But he gets the point I wanted to make and DSs himself ways from the mess, leaving drops of blood and juices floating in the air temporarily with TK. It would have been easier to DS the mess away, but he does not get it that way. Cats. Of course the first thing he then does is sniff the ground where the blood falls and then come over to check out the clams.

“Okay, you earned it.” I slice up the clam meat in the air and toss bits to him to catch in the air. Our runner cracks up over that and Söhöspala starts to show off by rolling over or DSing to where the bit flies.

“So, I can't call your Tekrit any more. What was your name before then?”

“Baby name.” She blushes. She must be about twenty something

now. Though she is a baby TK in my mind. A lot of catching up to do. Also means she 'changed' just as she was becoming a woman. That sounds real familiar.

“You called me Ci'lan.”

“You Watcher.”

“Are the others watchers also?” She shakes her head no. “So, Ci'lan means watcher in your language?” Yes. Strange, what are the odds there? “Well, I have to call you something. Pick something you would like to be called then.” Not to mention we have a job to do here.

She perks up, “Nokumsma! Sky Walker! Come I show you.” She scrambles up the embankment. Söhöspala and I follow. Over the top, we can see the ruins of a large city that used to have very tall buildings. Most have fallen, but there are still an impressive number of pieces over ten holes high. We follow a well worn path through the rubble to one of the remaining intact buildings. Inside I am not so sure. I can DS out in time if this collapses, but not sure I could get her out in time. Lots of evidence that this place was lived in, pelts and clothing made from them. Pots made from woven reeds, carved wood and scrounged materials. No food anywhere. They were not doing too well and winter here is cold. She found the clams easy enough, so what was the problem?

“Söhöspala, don't even think about it. This is not your home.” He is sniffing everything and was about to back up to a spot to mark it.

Puma here recently. Scare away?

“Don't worry. No puma is going to come anywhere near us with you around.” He gives a snort and then follows us, or rather runs ahead of us. Up on the top floor that still has a ceiling, I am guessing the eighth floor, we stop. Sky Walker is sitting in a corner near some leather clothing and items made from bone and stone chips. There are tears in her eyes.

“My fault. I killed everyone.” She collapses to the ground crying. Söhöspala is showing concern and rubbing against her. She got over her fear of him fast enough.

“Please Sky Walker, tell me your story. It may not be as you think.”

“No. I kill everyone. Sure.”

“Just tell me anyway. It will help. Even if just the short version.” At least I won't have to read her then. There is always an easy way and a hard way. This is the easy way. Even TP would have been worse, getting more than the person usually wants to share. I owe the other Tks this one.

After sniffing some and wiping her nose on her sleeve she begins by resting her hand on Söhöspala, “I lived here first twelve winters. Just like everyone else then. Called Bawukna, White Crow, as a baby, cause I wanted to fly so badly and on account of the fact that I am not brown.” I am a little darker than she is, but not that much different. I do live in the desert. We will see how much she darkens up when we get back.

“Though thin, I was always the fastest. Only the best get to begin

training to fly and I wanted to be the best. I ran whenever I could. Early in the morning, after chores and late into the night. Running felt so close to flying at times.

On the day of the trials I was ready and beat everyone, even more experienced adults who were already flyers. When I went to sleep that night I was assured a place on the team. Only something happened that night. I had horrible dreams. Oh, at first they were great I was flying through the air even without a hung'lidr. It was wonderful. Then something happened and everyone was chasing me. I was running now, not flying and it seemed to go on forever. When I finally woke up, I was all wet and very hot. The hot lasted several days. My ba was not sure I would live and called in the healer.

The healer said that I was Tekrit. Forbidden. I was brought to the edge of the stone forest and left there. No one would help me. No one would even keep away the animals who tried to attack me. My parents were crying when they left with their backs to me. I would never be a flyer now. My life was over. I was still very weak, but knew I needed to find shelter above ground. When dark came, so did the animals. I was so tired. I wanted to sleep badly and did fall asleep many times, always waking again whenever there was a sound near by. I was not up high enough to prevent the long fangs from getting to me.

However, it was not the long fangs, but the small ones that got to me first. Rats, flyers and the like. When in desperation I reached out with my mind I found I could repel them with my thoughts. At first this was weird, but I soon had fun with it, till they all learned to stay away that is.

Then the larger ones came. I could not push them as easily and needed to find another way. All I was doing was annoying the bad gray dogs. If I could not move them, maybe I could move something else to them, like small sharp rocks. It worked great and now nothing could get close. I needed to sleep more, but I needed to stay awake to stay alive. When as I was about to give up and just be eaten, a group of Clamdiggers came up to see what all the noise was all about. It was just starting to get light again and they could see me helplessly now, trying to dissuade the growing crowd of hungry mouths.

They chased them away quickly. No one wants to deal with five adults. Easier food elsewhere. As soon as they gathered me up I fell asleep. It was at least another day before I woke up.

When I did, there was an old woman near me singing softly. I had met Clamdiggers before and could understand their different way of speaking. I told her that I was Tekrit, but she just nodded and continued to sing. When the others came in, I also warned them that I was Tekrit.”

“Sky Walker. I don't mean to be rude, but we need to get moving soon.”

She nods, “They took me in as one of their own. They did not believe

in Tekrit, but called me by that name at my insistence.

It was several months before I learned that others had gotten sick among my own people, but did not survive as I did. No one in my own family died however, so that is why they blamed me. I did not want anyone to get sick. But somehow it must have been my fault. Now, whenever someone saw me from the Cliff Dwellers, they threw rocks at me. The flyers even tried to shoot me with arrows. It was easy enough to push them aside, but it still hurt that I was the one who caused so much trouble.

I decided it would be better to follow the Clamdiggers around to the other side of the island on their migration. They had to slowly make their way around so as to not eat all the clams and crabs that they fed on. Except for an occasional flyer, I was soon out of the range and minds of the others. The next time I we came around to this side, they had forgotten me and I looked just like the others of my new people. I too seemed to have forgotten my previous life. Within a few winters, I was paired with a lovely man, Sand Shaper. It took us a few more winters before I got with child the first time, a beautiful daughter, but only one more winter before my son was to be born.

I would still rather have been a flyer though. I could not help but think about it. I could see them way up there in the air and I wanted so badly to be up there as well. I took to watching when the flyers went out and when they came back and started to work out a plan.”

“Shorter Sky Walker. There will be time later for the full story.” She nods and takes a deep breath.

“I snuk back and stole a set of wings. These were very precious and hard to make from the materials of the old ones. I knew it would be missed. I just wanted to try. I would return them as soon as I could. I hid the wings. They would be returning soon and would catch me if I tried now. I then went to sleep with my family. Another night of dreams like the first time. When I woke I was even more Tekrit than the first time. The curse was getting worse. Must have been because I stole the wings. I did not dare bring out the wings now. I would have to wait now for everything to calm down.

Only it didn't. They came for me later that day. They did not come to me directly, but talked to the elders first and then they all came together. I was made to show where I had put the wings and then was taken away by the Cliff Dwellers for punishment. I knew I would not be so lucky this time. My husband had to be held back with my children as they took me away.

There was no saying of words this time. They took me straight up to the top of the largest stone tree and pushed me off. At first I fell, but then remembered the dream. Soon I was floating in the air. I could not go fast, but I could go as high and as far as I wanted. I rose to the level of the

ones who pushed me off the edge. They saw me and ran for hunters.

The flyers were much faster than I was, but could not fly so close to the stone trees, nor into the holes. It was easy to evade them. I made my way back to my family. We had to escape in secret. The next time I was caught they would kill us all. Nearly did.

It only took a few days before the flyers saw us and hunters came for us. My son was hit by the arrow you have. They did something to the arrow, for though the wound was not deep he got very sick. Soon my daughter and husband got sick as well.

I wanted revenge. My family should not have to pay for my mistakes. I made bad medicine from the black clams on the rocks near the bay. I would get even. But when I flew up to the stone trees, everyone was sick. No one resisted me. No one challenged me. When I returned home, there was no one there. I could not find any of my new people anywhere.

There was only one hope. I needed to find the Ci'lan. She was the only one who could fix me, so I was no longer a curse to everyone I met.” Lots more tears now.

“Sky Walker, listen to me carefully.

You did not kill anyone.

The sickness you had the first time you dreamed the dreams was the TK sickness. A left over disease from many many years ago. I too had this sickness when I underwent the change.”

“So, your friends died too?”

“No one died when I went through the change. It was too close to the time of the world wide time of death. Most that were alive then did not catch this sickness any more.

In your case though, the sickness has been gone a very long time and people has lost the ability to resist it. The important thing, is that it was not your fault. You did not cause this sickness. Just bad timing.”

“But I cause the second sickness for sure. If I had not wanted to fly so badly, this would not have happened.”

“Tell me. How did the people with this sickness behave?”

“Umh?”

“Did they do anything unusual?”

She thought for a moment, “They all had leaves stuffed in their mouths.”

I smiled, “That proves you did not cause this sickness either. When we go through the second change, we do not make people sick. This was a different sickness. This was one left over from an unfortunate event that happened a little more recently, but still a long time ago. Also not your fault. I suspect someone, somehow, ate something that they should not have. They got sick and gave the sickness to others. This sickness spreads VERY quickly. So when they came for you, they made the Clam Diggers sick as well.” I suspect One Mind had something to do with this one.

“They may in fact all still be alive in a way. We need to look for them before it gets dark.” Pr'thn decided this is a good time to come back in. She looks around the room and sees that we are all here.

Come. Go to others.

Just as we are about to DS out, Sky Walker gets up and goes to the former window. She is upset about something. She dashes about the room, TKing stuff all over the place. Like the inside of a storm. Somehow she steps on Söhöspala's tail and all hell breaks loose. Pr'thn is trying to avoid the missiles. I can't even see much from all the dust.

It is then that is happens. Somehow, in all the confusing, Sky Walker goes rushing past, and out the window. To avoid her, Pr'thn brushes my hand.

I concentrate to try and prevent it. We all blink out at once. She is DSing us somewhere. Grr, don't like being taken somewhere against my will, but I can't resist and hold my concentration. We pop out in a forest somewhere. The images come rushing in from that contact. I collapse.

Those whom I thought were my parents were not my parents. I am not related at all to the others. I am not even human, only made to look like one. I am 'lan. My parents are, oh my God. My parents are.... This can't be. Please don't make me see this!

“Boo!” Daniel and Br'thn has snuck up on me. Somehow I am standing and I jump a few centimeters. “Ah, gotcha good!” If 'thn could laugh, I am sure Br'thn is doing so.

“Pests!” I scowl at them. “What's going on and where are we?”

“Why Central Park my dear. This whole play is taking place in the former New York City of course. Back that way are the 'stone trees' were you were and the Cliff Dwellers used to live. Over that way is the shore line the Clam Diggers used to inhabit. And finally this way, is where the newest crop of Greenmen are and the others.” He scowls at that last thought. We all may be part of the One Mind process, but we don't like it. Especially since we have told One Mind REPEATEDLY, that she does not have to kill any more people to make spawners. Still, like a wind up toy, she keeps trying to do it her way. Most always in some small far away, out of sight place like this.

“Where did the virus come from this time?”

“Who knows. I personally suspect some mutant Mother virus over looked by us during cleanup. Remember, she is not above trying to manipulate us as well. Probably who ever had this sector was distracted long enough for a single seed to be missed. That would be all it would take. Then a thousand years later, she has bred that seed into just the plant she wanted.”

“Only Sky Walker took the blame entirely on herself. That is mean.” Like One Mind cared one bit. He shrugs and sighs. Sky Walker is just looking entirely confused now.

“Sky Walker, it is definitely not your fault. You had nothing to do with this.” I turn to Daniel, “Everyone from the second sickness is here I suspect.” He nods.

“Though not for long. She called us at the last possible moment. She is ready to spawn tonight. Nothing we can do about it now except assist. At least their lives won't have been a total loss.”

“This may be too much for Sky Walker. Maybe I should take her back.”

Yingui comes up having heard us as we have been walking closer to all of them. I can't help but give him a dirty look. He looks confused, but continues his own thought.

“I disagree. She has more right to be here than we do. She is the Keeper for these people, just as we were for our people. Though not strong enough yet, she has a right to assist.” He turns to her, “Sky Walker, I am going to ask you to be very brave. Take my hand and I will show you and explain what is about to happen.” Whew, I was worried that I would have to be the one. At least I do not have to watch when she sees her family this way.

A wail is heard and then a lot of words in her language. Can still hear it though. Sigh...

Pr'thn come up to me. Too close, only a few centimeters from my face, as if examining me.

“You are my sister aren't you? My older sister.” She blinks out.

I am Ci'lan, The Watcher. Everyone seems to have known but me. I sit on the grass. I think the others have all gone ahead, but I am wrong.

“Come back here Pr'thn this instance!” It is Running Snake.

Pr'thn pops into our space a few meters away.

“Battle position!” This is hardly the time for playing games, but Running Snake is taking it very seriously. Pr'thn settles down and holds her position. Then Running Snake starts throwing everything imaginable at her, using DS, PS and TK. A huge cloud of missiles of sorts descend from every angle directed at Pr'thn. Somehow, faster than I thought possible, she evades all of them.

Running Snake huffs, “Thought so. Why did you do it?” She is addressing Pr'thn, but out loud means, she meant for me to hear as well. If Pr'thn could avoid all of that, surely she would not have touched me in the stone tree. Surely she would not have let that happen.

No response from Pr'thn at first. We wait. I am not sure what to make of this. I am overwhelmed by all that has happened. I am not human, but I was MADE for a purpose. To be the Watcher. Whatever that meant. I suspect somehow connected with my, ah, special talent.

Pr'thn slowly comes up to me. I hold out my hand. She softly bumps it to be petted. I can touch her with no ill effects now.

She is my sister.

Running Snake's mouth opens as tears well up in her eyes.

"I don't understand. You knew didn't you? Everyone knew." Not a question. She nods.

"Both of you come with me NOW!" Ah, oh, what have we done now?

"I think we are in trouble."

"SHH!" She is mad now. Freep. How could it get any worse?

We get closer to the greenmen. Sky Walker is being told what she must do. I can see her nodding and wiping away the tears at the same time. That must be her husband and her children in front of her. Stiff as statues of course, but holding hands. I could swear there is a tear of sap on his face.

Running Snake says very softly so as not to disturb anyone, "Yingui, we need you here for a moment please."

"I am busy right now, it will have to wait till after the moon rise, which should be any moment."

"This is not a request." She says even softer. Yingui excuses himself and comes over to us. Pr'thn is nestled in my arms. My bare arms. He sees this after trying to read Running Snake's face.

"So, it finally happened, you know now." Not a question.

"Yes father." Pr'thn and I share the same parents.

"Pr'thn tell me what you just told us, when I asked you why this happened. Please."

Pr'thn rises a few centimeters above my arms. Cold air strikes the skin now uncovered. Normally I would not pay any attention to such detail, but every moment is alive.

Ci'lan is my sister. I had too.

"Shit! How did that happen? She is way too young."

"How old did you expect me to be before something happened or I figured it out. The clues were all over the place. I must have been an idiot."

"Shh! This is not about you Cilan. Or rather Ci'lan. It is about your sister. I am truly happy that you know now. I really am."

What could be wrong with my sister. My sister. "Shit! She said MY sister!" There are tears in everyone's eyes now. The others come over and see us all crying.

"What's wrong?" A young TK named Murphy says from among a crowd of about ten TKs. There are several pop cats as well. Söhöspala of course, and his mother Owa Moosa and few others. All looking at us.

Running Snake says, "Qr'thn should be here." Yingui nods.

We only have to wait a moment. She pops in and goes straight to Pr'thn. How did she know across so much distance? I can feel an exchange going on. I want to go and hide somewhere. Br'thn pops in, but remains some distance away. I motion her over. I still do not touch her.

She knows about you know what and I know better than to push my luck.

I know Pr'thn and you are my sisters and she used a personal pronoun. Br'thn bobs briefly, indicating she understands. She remains near me. Must be scary for her as well. Normally this process takes upwards of fifty million years, sixty five plus or minus a few mil for her. To do so in a little over four thousand is not normal. I know what most societies do with what is not normal. I just hope that is not the case here.

Qr'thn comes over to us. I bow. *I am happy to finally meet you, my true mother.*

She rises to a meter above us all and waits.

Addressing us all, she TPs, *What are you?*

So, this is very confusing even for the 'thn.

“It is time!” Someone shouts. The 'thn and I remain behind, but the others all turn and attend the greenmen. This will take several hours total, but I can already see a fine mist starting to appear above them in the gentle moon light on a still autumn night. Very beautiful, if not tragic.

I turn my attention to my two sisters and mother. Easy to tell them apart, as they are all different sizes at the moment. No one is talking. Pr'thn comes and nestles in my arms again. I softly stroke her. She shakes a little. Not purring, but scared as well. Yingui breaks from the rest of the group and comes over. He looks at us and points up. There are a huge number of stars in the sky tonight. He then motions me to remain silent before I can ask any questions. Those aren't all stars.

Out of respect, I suspect, we wait till the spawning is over. That is our purpose after all, to help spread life throughout the universe. I reflect on what I have learned about our father, though Pr'thn's eyes. At first, this is a little fuzzy. Hey, how many of us remember our earliest memories. I certainly don't. Actually don't remember much of anything pre TK anymore. Hmmmm...

I look up. That's strange. One by one the 'thn are winking out. I would have thought they were all here because of what happened with Pr'thn. After all, a spawning, though not an every day event is not that special. From what I have felt from Pr'thn, it is usually only attended by the keepers and whatever 'thn happened to be around. This has been one very confusing day. If I could sleep I would do so, but am so hyper I doubt I could even fake it.

Just as the spawning ends, with the last bit of spores rising with TK assistance, I look up. The sky looks normal again. Qr'thn winks out. *Goodbye mother!* I TP after her.

Yingui and Running Snake come up to us. Pr'thn is visibly shaking now and Br'thn is very close to me. I start to tremble as well, picking up on their emotions.

I burst out, “Are they going to kill us all now?” My lips are barely able to get out the words.

Yingui laughs and Running Snake gives him a dirty look and TP scolding no doubt.

“Is that what all of you are shaking about?” He looks like a pop cat with a salmon.

“Well, we are clearly not normal. Why wouldn't they 'weed' the garden? We are weeds aren't we?”

Yingui stands there smiling at us till Running Snake hits him.

“Oh, all right. You saw all the 'thn above us right.” I nod.

“They were taking the spawn from our Earth to the farthest reaches of the universe.”

“So, you are not going to kill us.” The trembling stops.

“No. They are giving us the highest honor that can be bestowed on a One Mind and her Keepers. They all want to see what happens with our spawn in their sector and beyond. Oh, we will be watched, you can be sure of that, but no, you are not going to be killed.”

The pops cats have come up and are watching us totally confused.

Stupid monkeys did good? How can this be?

We all start laughing till it hurts our sides.

Sky Walker comes up and can't figure us out at all. Welcome to the club dear. Welcome to the club.

Running Snake

Hotevilla 5126 A.F. [Translated into Standard for archival purposes]

“This is it, the Holy Mesa. Pass the word, we are almost there.”

“That must be the Hall of Tongues. We arrived before high sun.” He nods.

“Who is that? What strange clothing they wear!”

“They are waving. Come, let's hurry.”

“That has to be the oldest women on Mother Earth.” The others nod.

Earlier that day

“They're coming in. We can feel it. Where is father? He should be here.”

“Shhh child.” Ci'lan pets Pr'thn in her lap. The two of them, once Pr'thn spilled the beans, are amazing. Never apart. A totally fluid matched pair. Perfectly complementing each other. Maybe in a thousand years, I will be ready for a watcher child too. The question is, who would she watch? We all know why we are here today.

Finally! I admit that this one makes me nervous too. The air shimmers. Those two together can sure time it. Lisa pops out first, immediately followed by the others. She is the gateway, especially on this trip. Looks like everyone is here who was off planet, except Mei of course. Hope she is all right. Silly notion going to the edge of creation. Br'thn immediately takes off. She is old enough. She can take care of herself.

“Weasel, what in creation have you got there? A Keeper with luggage? What a strange concept.” She has at least five bags, all carefully balanced with TK. A baby 'thn comes out of one of them and zooms around checking everything out like a puppy dog.

“Gr'thn is still at the curious stage. The toys help train her and keep her out of trouble. And I thought that human babies were a pain.” She lets everything drop and wipes her brow. We all laugh.

“Not many can balance heavy items while going through a star gate. Good job.” She accepts my compliment with a nod and a look of surprise.

“I didn't know it was a problem.” But she is immediately distracted, looking for Gr'thn no doubt. Pop, there she goes. Good luck.

“Where is Turtle?” Daniel and K! almost say at the same time then nod to Ci'lan and Pr'thn who nod back. Those two. K! has taken to mimicking Daniel full time, so it is like they are twins.

“He'll be here. He knows his duty. Best get everyone into quarters. We have made some hogans just over the edge of the mesa. That way they will be out of sight, but still be close by.”

“At least till afterwards.” Squirrel says matter of factly. When did they pop in? He and his companion turn to leave.

“Ah, hm, Squirrel, you could at least introduce us.” They turn, he with a blush on his face. His companion, a female AltEarth, simply looks at me. Hard to tell their emotions from the outside.

“Sorry, Running Snake, this is Sresh. Sresh, this is Running Snake. She was our first teacher after becoming TK. Sresh is a ecologist on Cylem, what they call AltEarth. We hope to make a tour of North Ameri..... Sorry, the UNA afterwards. The idea is this area of Earth is the least affected by humans. Though Swaziland is a close second I suppose.”

“Or the most recovered, depending on how you look at it. Even five thousand years does not erase everything. The baizren made a real mess of it. The former farm belts are the most recovered. Stay away from the cities. There are some weird things in some of them.”

“Probably mutations caused by genetic damage from leaking chemicals.” I nod. Evil spirits if you ask anyone else.

I turn just as Ci'lan and Pr'thn pop out. I scan. They are not nearby. What's up I wonder?

“Lisa, why are you dressed like one of those old pulp science fiction gladiator women.”

“To make sure the natives really want to go through with this.” She smiles sarcastically.

“Well, the males won't after seeing you. And the females will be so jealous they will stick around to guard their mates.” I answer back. She rolls her eyes.

“Last world I was on. For some reason they expect TKs to look strong, not just be strong. I would blame this on one of Yingui's amusements if I thought he could go off planet.”

“Hey Lisa, I see Running Snake has noticed your outfit. Looks good doesn't she?” He says with a leer.

“Badger and Little Mouse.” I give them both a hug. Susan, a.k.a. Mouse comes up and gives them a hug too. Of course she is much smaller than Little Mouse now, but that is part of the fun. We don't dare call him Pots any more. Not that he would care, but we would all start crying, even after this amount of time. Glad he has stuck to his darker form. It helps.

“Did not have time at the center. Good to see you two. How is Ba'thn? How is it on Beautiful?”

“Ba'thn is fine. She is with the others checking the place out. She hates being in my pocket.” James comments while rolling his eyes.

Little Mouse, “Oh we are making great progress. I know it looked bad when we herded them all up for the move.”

“Little more than wild monkeys in fact.” I was there, I know.

“Ah, but without the violent attributes. Now we are introducing tech. Fire and pottery at first. We will work up from there. Give us a few centuries and we will be ready for Ron to help us out.”

“I wish you luck. I still prefer self determination, but it is worth a try. Ah, maybe you two should stand near Lisa.” The three of them together will scare anyone. Those muscles are a bit much. Only I know theirs are earned the hard way. As are all those scars. Males!

“So, Mouse, how are things on New Earth?” Jesus just stands next to her smiling and keeping quiet.

“We are at level seven tech now with no sign of stopping. It is slow but constant. Done right this time I hope. I love working with people who are cooperative instead of competitive. I see way too much of the latter when we go on cleanup.” That is a nice way of saying what they do. Turn the pot over and try to reorient an entire culture. Of course, they aren't called in until all else has failed. We were too late on Efemia. Susan and Jesus did their best and it worked for a time, but then about three hundred years later the whole system collapsed. The copper equation just could not be worked out. You either got dumb slaves or sterile mad rulers. Who was who switched several times. They were all eventually evacuated and distributed to several other worlds. At least the twelve hundred who were still alive. We don't talk about Efemia around them. Fortunately they have had several success on other worlds.

Ju'thn is as reserved as Jesus, hovering about ten centimeters off his shoulder. Well, at least the three of them get along well. Wonder why Jesus did not go for the 'thn offer? They really hit us all up after Pr'thn went sentient. You would think that human was the greatest thing ever invented, from the 'thn perspective. They all wanted babies that matured at four thousand years instead of fifty million. I suspect that they will be disappointed soon. We will see. Still I love my own Ho'thn. Speaking of which.

Ho'thn, you can come out and play with the other 'thn now. Just be back before the first ones come in. She pops out of our hogan and promptly takes off, then zooms back to just in front of me.

Thank you mother. I nod and she takes off again. Nothing worse than a rude 'thn. Almost got her that time with all the excitement.

Well, that is about it. Now if Turtle would just get here. I decide to sit and run a scan to try and find out what he is up to.

Just as I am about to fully shut out the local reality I hear a splash and open my eyes with the shock of being wet at the same time. Before me is a very wet naked women totally disoriented.

“Turkey! I did not think you would be coming! Let me help you. You look like a fish out of water.” She tries to stand, but fails miserably. Sort of like a one year old trying to walk. Only full grown. I make her a cloak and offer it to her. She looks at it wondering what I am doing.

“Well, you can't go around naked here dear.” She is still a little in shock and tries to speak. Well, she opens her mouth anyway, but is concerned when only a tiny squeak comes out. I can't help but suppress a smile.

Barb, use TP. Just like old times.

She almost passes out.

Breath Barb! Humans have to breath constantly. She has been in cetacean form way too long. She comes around and sits up.

Had to come, some may choose water forms.

“Likely. Thanks for helping. Why don't you just sit for a bit to get your bearings again. We still have time.” She nods and goes into a meditation position to concentrate on her breathing.

I now have TKs and 'thn spread over several kilometers. Just like old times. Where is that Turtle? Ah, he is among several of the Guardians near by. A commotion as usual. Lisa and Pr'thn are with him. Good. I pop over. Getting lazy in my old age. Locals have taken to calling me Spider Woman. Only the locals are not exactly locals. A mass migration of the UNA took place several hundred years ago in preparation for this event. The planet is called Nuna for New United Native Americans. Though I doubt any them understand that concept. Still can't handle being in groups larger than several hundred for longer than a month at a time. Still the traditions live on. Our current locals as helpers from Nuna who volunteered to help us at this special time, then return to Nuna.

It would have been easier to transport the next sentient species to a new planet, rather than the way we are doing this. But as the age of humans is long past its expected lifetime, we do this with honor instead. Not always the easiest way.

“Turtle you are late!” I yell over to him. Everyone cracks up over that. “What did I say wrong?” I don't see it.

“Running Snake, you are the keeper of the Native American culture. For you to use the word 'late' is totally out of character.” Susan is almost laughing as she says this.

“Chill out. Take a load off. Nothing has to happen 'on time' here or anywhere any more.” Now it is James who gives me the grins.

I sigh, “It is just that this is important to me is all. Sorry to 'freak' everyone out. I will attempt to relax.” I smile back. They are right. A few hours either way will not matter. Even a few days or years either way will not matter.

They quite down and Yingui addresses me, “Running Snake, we have found something truly amazing. You have to come see with us.”

“But, we are supposed to” I sigh again as everyone is about to start laughing for the second time. “Okay, I will go.” Then they do laugh. Oh well. “I have one request. Pr'thn drives, not Yingui.” He fakes looking hurt. “I don't want to end up with the Magmotics.”

“Sounds good to me”

“Me too.”

Now Yingui is laughing, “Would I do that to all of you, my best friends.” Everyone remains silent. “Ah, I am hurt. Maybe I should just take off to my true friends and leave all of you.” The rest can't hold it and all start giggling.

“Ah, let's go please.” Off they go again, everyone has the sillies. “Pr'thn, please.” She at least takes this seriously and finally we enter dimension space.

Popping out, “Where are we?”

“Near the former Yellowstone National park. Come follow us.” Lisa and Pr'thn take the lead and Yingui ambles behind them.

“Into this cave we have opened up. Watch your step. We were not all that careful once we figured out what we had.”

“What made you come here? This is sort of out of the way of everything. Certainly the human culture never did anything here except look at the scenery. Good hunting sure, but no structures.” He turns and grins at me.

“Go further back. What was here before the humans?”

“Ah, woolly mammoth?” James offers.

Sresh sniffs the air in the cave and says something to Ron I do not understand. Ron breaks in, “Sresh says it smells like dead dinosaur.” She speaks some more. “Excuse me, not actual fresh meat, just figuratively. Some of her ancestors hid in caves during the cold times.”

“What level are you Sresh? TK that is.”

We do not have levels the same way you do. As you noticed with your cats and whales. He nods to Barb. Each species has different gifts. Though ultimately the talents converge at level nine. I am a level five by our system. Some of the talents do not have human equivalents. For instance, level three for us is song.

“Even three year old humans can sing. What's the big deal there?”

Sresh nods and starts to sing. We all stop. Within a moment, tears are running down my cheek and the others as well. It is the most beautiful music I have ever heard. She stops.

“I am sorry I insulted you Sresh. No human is capable of that, even with electronic enhancements.” Ron bows deeply. Sresh returns the bow.

James speaks up, “Sresh, we should jam sometime. I am sure you could help us tremendously.”

We will see. It is a deep spiritual truth with us and not to be taken lightly. I smile. James looks at me.

“You are not going to push me into the water again are you?” Every one laughs and feigns moving away from James. Even Little Mouse has heard the stores and goes along with it.

“We are at the first site. Come look at this.” We gather around what

appears to be a pile of old bones. Sresh is especially excited.

“We have seen fossils before. So what?”

No. More than that. These are my ancestors. Er, rather on your Earth, they would have been. Only something is wrong. Look here. She holds up one bone. *Too fragile. This person was not healthy. Very sick.* To demonstrate, she crushes the bone easily. Even fossilized it is weak.

“Precisely. There is more. Come.”

Lisa shouts, “Get down now! Sector head coming in!” She still has it, feeling this before any of the rest of us.

The TK lamps flicker. Sure enough, I sense a very powerful presence.

A huge 'thn has appeared. Instinctively I get down on my knees and fall to the ground facing her and turn off all TK activity. The others follow suit. Not wise to upset a sector leader, though this does not feel like Ar'thn. Wonder who it is? Whoever it is Ho'thn has nearly buried herself in my side and is trembling. Not normal behavior even around a sector head.

Everything remains quiet. I finally look up a little. Owa Moosa is about to sniff the 'thn and Yingui is still standing. Are you two crazy? Get down! I don't dare use TP to tell him anything. I am tempted to use sign language, but restrain myself as he is not looking my way.

A small sphere slowly appears out of a mist between the large 'thn and Yingui. He is showing no emotion, just standing there silently. I look around, everyone one else is down. Shit, Jesus is standing also, smiling slightly, as if amused, leaning against the far wall. What does he know? The sphere slowly goes to Yingui and disappears inside of him. I can feel his TK diminish. I dare not use TK, but I can still sense it in a vague way. Yingui has just been fitted with a limiter. Why?

Attention sentient beings. Do not attempt to help this one in anyway or suffer the consequences. There will not be a second warning. So says Ah'thn, so it shall be.

This is one nasty 'thn. Loud too. Yingui looks down at the ground. I crane my neck slightly to see. A large beetle is upside down on the dirt path waving its legs frantically. He reaches down to right the beetle and scoot it out of the path. We are all about to die and he saves a beetle. When he arises again, the sphere is in his hand. How did he do that?

“Ah'thn, does Ar'thn know you are here?” He dissolves the sphere. Ah'thn moves back and forth at seemingly random directions then pops out without comment.

As soon as this happens, Ci'lan takes off her glove and touches one of the bones. She concentrates for a moment, but does not pass out. She looks up at me. “Too old to have much of a reaction. Most of my concentration time was wading through the millions of years it has just sat here. She was murdered. Her head was crushed by a large male who

was upset she could not lay eggs. The rest of the breaks are from the shifting geology.”

Jesus gathers the others together and they proceed down the tunnel out of sight. I am left with Owa and Yingui. Jesus is way too perceptive. Yingui has done it again. I don't need witnesses to my chewing him out.

“Do you want to explain what just happened and why? You could have gotten us all killed!” How did he manage to piss off this 'thn while still on Earth?

“Yes Mother.” He smiles. Is that the only expression he knows? “I have no idea why Ah'thn was here. As to the former, do you really want to know?”

I remain silent. I am entitled, I care about everyone here.

He raises one eyebrow, “There are several possible explanations. I could have tricked Ah'thn by disabling the limiter before it was inserted and then faked the decline, as we are all able to do. Or, Ar'thn could be nearby and helped me. Or, maybe something else that really scared Ah'thn. Something that would prevent any further confrontation.” He is not smiling any longer. I am the second strongest TK9, judging from the number of 'thn present at Ho'thn's becoming. To say this to me can mean only one thing. I ask no further questions. I don't want to go there at all. It would have meant a lot more than death if true. Maybe Jesus did it. I would like that answer the best. He was smiling the whole time.

“We should catch up with the others.” Owa is licking herself. I know that TK are not squeamish about basic bodily functions, but that still looks disgusting. I must have made a funny face. Owa cocks her face towards Yingui and then looks straight at me.

“Yoo-hoo, where are you guys?” Now what? A minute later Rhea comes in with Ly'thn a half meter ahead. She looks awful.

“Over here Rhea. What happened to you? You look exhausted.” Her hair is matted down with sweat and her face looks flushed. Not becoming a TK9 at all. Has she lost all dignity?

“I got here as fast as I could. Two things. First, there is some nasty big 'thn asking a lot of questions about all of us, but especially about Yingui. I think there may be some serious trouble. And second, the Sistics are about to go to war. I am here to try and get everyone's help. Sorry to bust up your original purpose, but this could mean the death of millions. I had to do something.”

“We have meet Ah'thn. I assume this is the one of whom you speak. She has left. We don't expect to see her again.” I say this as sternly as possible to reinforce the fact that there will be no further information coming. She still gives me a look of bewilderment. “Just leave it at Yingui pulled another one, okay?” Understanding sinks in.

“As to the second problem. That will have to wait till the task here is completed. Honor would not be served by making these people wait any

longer. I suggest you go back and try to prepare things for the other Guardians arrival a few months from now.” In other words, the old, lack of planing on your part does not constitute an emergency on our part. This is your pot and responsibility. Deal with it. I would also add that she should have been here helping rather than trying to undo what has been set in motion. I don't need any more interruptions.

She shuts her mouth, bows to the two of us and turns to leave.

“They will be there as soon as they can Rhea. Do what you can to postpone things.” She turns and nods to Yingui. To me she gives a look of not understanding.

After she leaves we walk to catch up with the others in silence. About fifteen minutes later, after passing several more piles of bones, we come to a large chamber.

“Wow!” The inside is decorated with elaborate carvings made from stone. Usually in the shape of dinosaurs. Only fleshed out ones, not bones. They look very similar to Sresh. Smaller heads maybe and more massive muscles. But very similar. There is one in the center who looks familiar somehow.

“Barb is the one who got it first.” Someone mentions. Sauron of course! Wait a minute!

“Edwin, what are you doing here? When did you get in? Why didn't you tell me?” I am pissed. I have got to get my anger under control.

“Dear, we wanted it to be a surprise. Calm down. No one is leaving you out of things.” He comes over and give me a hug, which I resist at first and then give in.

It is good to have you home and Ca'thn too of course. This is personal.

To change the subject Susan asks, “What took you two so long? I thought you were right behind us.”

“Rhea showed up. We have our next assignment decided for us. She thinks she needs help on Sistic badly.”

“Ah. Why didn't she see it coming and tell us earlier or adjust things to prevent it.” I shrug my shoulders. We are all so old as to have seen most everything. I am curious also why it is so sudden.

Edwin is obviously more excited about his find, “We believe that this is where Sauron stayed during the winter caused by the meteor strike. He was rather in love with himself. Hence the statue to his magnificence.”

Sresh is very excited, *We need to see if this cave exists on Cylem. If it does, then maybe our paths diverged later than we thought.*

Edwin again, “Sresh, the caves themselves should exist. Sauron only expanded what was already here. Carved by the geothermal process millions of years before his time even. He simply hid the entrance to protect the remains of those he cared for is all. Though there has been some cave ins we have not dug out yet. This is the only open chamber

undamaged left. I am guessing their homes and eating areas are gone.”

“What is this here? It looks like a doorway of some sort.”

“Not a doorway. Scan beyond it Susan.” She concentrates. We all should be doing it, but it is more fun to let the questioner figure out the puzzle. We wait our turn.

“More bones, but in much better shape. Lots of large crystals too.” She thinks a moment. “This was the burial chamber of someone important to Sauron. I am guessing his wife, or the equivalent.” That makes sense. We all scan now to see what she has seen. Those are the largest most beautiful quartz crystals I have ever sensed.

“Where are you?” That sounds like Rhea again. I sigh. She should be light years away by now. She makes it into the inner chamber where we are. “Whoa! Is that Sauron?” Yeah, but how come she gets it so fast, she never even met him?

“No, this is my friend Sresh. Ah, a she.” Oops, she did not mean the statue. She blushes.

“No offense. I don't know how to tell gender in your species.” She bows to Sresh.

No offense. I cannot tell the difference in your species either. Are you an egg layer? Touche. Rhea blushes.

“So, are you going to stay and help?”

“I can't. Sistic is a real mess. I think they are about to go to war. At level ten I have no idea how that will turn out.”

“Level ten! Even old Earth only reached seven, the same level the betas have just reached.”

“I was hoping to recruit all of you to help me.” Yes Rhea, Yingui and I were going to tell them at the right time.

“Sistic was the place the Lunarians and Martians ended up right?”

“So, they started out close to seven to begin with.”

“But lost a lot when they made the move. No more support structure to back everything up. We could not move all their equipment because of the weight.”

“And we only duped stuff for so long. The weaning was not pretty, even though they still ended up with more tech than anyone else did.”

“Well, they still hate Helpers and Keepers. You will see when you arrive.”

“We do have a duty here first though.” I am adamant. The end of the fifth age is important too.

“Right, after we finish up here.” The other's nod.

“I will get back to keep an eye on things till you arrive.” Her second attempt has failed too. Can't blame her for trying, but I would have been mad at her for all eternity had she succeeded.

“Oh, before I forget, as long as Ron and Barb are here, take a look at this. Every citizen wears one and it can kill a TK who is alone. We have

lost a few TK4s and a lot of potential recruits already.” She has encapsulated a gadget of some kind in a 'thn shield bubble.

“Shit.” I agree. We always think we are immortal and nothing can touch us. Twice in a few minutes we have had to face our possible ending. Ron picks up the sphere holding the device immediately as Sresh looks on. Barb on the other hand looks totally disinterested. Not into tech any more I guess. Wonder how she will handle that requirement with her chosen ones? Guess we will see eventually.

“Okay, back home. Unless there is anything else anyone wants to bring up?” I give everyone my best 'don't try anything' look. Silence. Good. “Pr'thn, if you will oblige.”

Yes Mother. Everyone cracks up. A 'thn comedian now.

Back at the mesa everyone is running around. Looks like the first party has arrived. One of the elders saw them and greeted them first. That was supposed to be my duty. Looks like they are being well taken care of though. When you lose your home world, you come to respect it more. The Nunas have been very good on this trip. Not that they won't all be fighting each other as soon as they get back. We are what we are I guess.

Running Snake, I would be deeply honored if I would be allowed to stay. I may even be able to assist.

“Sresh you are always welcome. Never worry about that. Just be careful not to scare anyone who does not know you.” Not that we are that pretty to her. Have to remember to feel both perspectives.

I have taken the vow! It is public record. If she could show emotion, I think this would be the time.

“You and I know that, but the people who have arrived do not. Humans fear what they do not know. I am sorry, it is just the way we are.”

Curious. I wonder why?

“Maybe because our distant ancestors were this big.” I hold out my hands to indicate the size of a rat. “And Sauron was not a nice 'father' to us at all. He ate any one whom he felt was not living up to his standards.” He was a big influence for sure. That gives her pause.

Maybe it would be best if I stay to the back ground?

“I don't think that will be possible now. The children have found you. You may have to teach them some of your childhood games now or tell them a story or two.”

Oh yes. A story would be great! Oh, I was going to offer to help with the sacred song and also, if anyone would like to come and live with my people they are more than welcome.

“That is very generous of you. I will talk to the others. I am deeply honored by your offer.” I bow to her and she returns the bow. I am not so sure on either point though. She does not know this culture at all, never mind her incredible musical ability. “They are waiting now. Look more

are coming too.”

Ah, little people, please gather around and I will tell you a tale of my people. And she is off to tell her story. I wish I could be there too. I wonder how they will do when this is all said and done.

“Ah, there you are. Running Snake, we need you in the great hall. It is time for the presentation of the gifts.” It is starting then. Soon man will be no more. The fifth and final age of man will be over, at least as far as Earth is concerned. This was one of the longest of ages. I will miss everyone. Owa rubs up against my leg and nearly pushes me over.

“Owa, stop doing that. Remember how big you are now.” I give her a good scratch behind the ears.

Oh, please don't stop. That is wonderful! Thank you, thank you, thank you.

“Flattery will get you any thing you want Owa.” I laugh.

Mouse?

“And just where would I find enough mice to be more than a snack for you now?”

Snack is good. She looks at me expectantly. Eat and sleep. Even as a cat TK6 she still sleeps a lot. One of the species differences I guess.

“Well, I suppose mice would be okay, but we still have to wait till afterwards. You never know who will choose what. We can't have you eating anyone by mistake.”

Monkeys taste bad anyway. She give me a disgusting look like she just ate a lemon or something.

“Hmm, yeah. I don't believe you for a second. Come, we are needed in the hall.” All the other cats are far away for a time. We can't chance someone getting hungry at the wrong time.

I was told not to interfere with the preparations, like I know nothing of the culture. Well, that was they came, to make the remnant more comfortable. We make our way to the hall. Smells good. This hall will be torn down when we are done here. All traces of humans are nearly gone. All the cities, highways, bridges, everything. Most nature took back, but a lot we needed to assist.

Fry bread! She licks her lips.

“You will get fat.”

Fat is good.

“No, fat is bad. No one takes you seriously when you are over weight.” The old prejudices are still alive and well.

Stupid monkeys. Fat is good. Many mice to be fat. Only best hunters are fat.

“Catching fry bread huh? Mighty hunter. Hmm.” I open the flap to let Owa through. Everything goes silent. A few of the new arrivals back up. The Nunas know the joke and are playing along. Been a long time since I have seen this set up. Owa goes up to one, he backs up. Owa soon

is standing over him, sniffing his face. He is terrified. She opens her mouth to show a huge array of sharp teeth. He is shaking now. I sit down next to him to watch. Here it comes. Owa gives a few heavy breaths. Yuck rabbit breath.

Quiet I am concentrating.

Excuse me your highness. Go on do it or you have to clean up the mess.

She snarls and then licks him full face and starts purring. Then she meows like a little kitten!

“When did you learn to do that?”

I was one once if you remember.

“She not eat me?”

“Nope. She is one of us. You are totally safe. Unless you cover yourself with mouse fat of course. Come, have some fry bread. You can even give some to Owa Moosa. Then she will be your friend for life.”

I almost had him. You broke my concentration. I will get one the next group.

“Uh, huh. Just give it up. You are still a pussy cat.” I hide a smile. Owa wants so bad to be the king of the jungle, or desert. Whatever.

The rest of the meal went well. We both circulated to meet everyone who came in. Owa to get massage and fry bread. Never wasting an opportunity. And me to get an idea of how things might go. The first time is always the hardest.

“The time has come to put aside your fears. For this is indeed a great occasion. You have heard the story of our beginning of how we were deceived into choosing evil over good, of hurting our Mother instead of respecting and caring for her. Well, the evil ones are gone, the land is returned to its life giving nature. The world is once again perfect and beautiful. Our task is done. It is time now to turn this task over to the next group of caretakers, as is the way of things. From birth to death the cycles flow. May they inherit our wisdom and not our foolishness. May they know of our love and not our hate.”

“Thank you Screaming Jay. Will each tribe now bring forward what they wish to give to help the future of our Mother and may Great Spirit accept your sacrifice with honor and thanks.”

Ci'lan and Pr'thn are front and center. This is their time. One at a time each of the three tribes that came in today will bring sacred objects to be recorded in the history of human kind. It is also a time of goodbye, for once this is over, when all the tribes that are left are recorded and converted, Ci'lan and Pr'thn will be leaving to go out and collect the histories of the new Earths though out the galaxy.

“I am Bent Arrow and I have been called to represent the Chilar tribe. We covered the evil places of Pheenix. The ghosts and demons are gone. We slew them all. The land has been purified.” The mutations

caused by the chemical leaks. TKs took care of the leaks, but the tribes rounded up the animals that were too strange to survive. Anything that they could not catch was probably strong enough to make it and deserved a chance.

“I present to you the tokens of our proud lineage. This bow was my great great grandfather's, given to him after the battle of Dry Creek. This vest, with the symbols of our history is older than memory.”

He hands them to Red Crow, who carefully places them before Ci'lan and Pr'thn. She removes her glove and reaches out and touches the articles. For a moment it is as if she is in a trance. When she comes out, she nods. The offering has been accepted. Red Crow reverently picks up the articles and takes them out. They will be returned to the place of the Chilar people, where they will be buried in a secret place. A safe place, where if archaeologists in future times should come across it, they will see the work of a holy people. All this is known to the tribes here gathered. They are not told where this place is, so that in the chosen ways, they do not try and regain possession of the past.

Each tribe brought forth totems of the knowledge they had learned. Stories were told of great deeds and great wisdom. There were tears in all eyes when they finished. The hall was piled high with their accomplishments. I was never more proud to be human. Owa gives me a nudge with her head.

It will not be easy to honor their being. You have your work cut out for you Owa.

I will not forget.

Good. Never forget Owa. Never forget. I suspect she will forget before the next meal. Not her fault, just the way she is. Cats are experts at living in the present moment. Much better than we ever were, always planing and scheming, or lost in our past.

We take a break. It is our turn to present next. We have not had much time to rehearse together, but each has been going over their own lines for many years. In many ways and for many reasons, each of us did not want this day to come. You would all think we were going to die today. And in a way, the end of the fifth age is a sort of death. There will be no sixth age, at least not on Earth. Our home, our Mother.

The good is that we have overcome our stepfather's influence. It was right that today of all days we saw where his hate fermented and formed. We are his sons and daughters too. How many times have we blamed others for our own failings, just as he did? Maybe this is a condition of being alive.

Just as Sauron blamed the 'thn for his not being ready to accept their gifts and help, or the help of those in his own tribe, we too have often turned down help offered. Or questioned that help or judged that help. In some ways this is Smiggle's revenge and vindication. He was right all this

time. Had Sauron listened to the answers Smiggle had, they need not have died. There would have been time to divert the meteor. Qr'thn knew this. Even afterwards, confined to the caves, he could have drawn on Br'thn's immense knowledge base. It would have been Sresh's people who would have been here today, instead of us.

“Running Snake, it is time.” Today I feel very old. My bones seem to creak were they did not before. Maybe they are right, I have become Spider Woman. Come to think of it I have not seen her in a very long time. Is she out there laughing at me right now?

No my daughter. I am very proud of you. You have learned and grown much. Be at peace. Go help your people. They are waiting.

“Thank you Mother.”

“Running Snake, who are you talking to?”

“Spider Woman.”

She gives me a worried look.

“If you don't like the answer, don't ask the question.” Lisa of all people should have seen that coming. I smile. “Don't worry. I am fine. Just talking to myself. The prerogative of an old woman.”

“Yeah, like a few years matters after this long. We are both old women and I am as tense about this as everyone else. It has to be done though. It is time.”

“Yes, it is time.” I sigh, then get up and follow her back to the hall. One could argue that this was not necessary, that it would be all right to leave a remnant of humans on earth. But in our conversations with One Mind and Ung we have come to accept that no other species really had a chance as long as humans were still capable of reforming and rising again. We will have our chances now on other worlds.

The hall smells of burning sage. More a plains thing, but it smells good. I take my position and put on my mask. The ones who will be choosing file in quietly next. Many are very nervous, understandably. They have not eaten in several hours. This is best done on an empty stomach. Not for technical reasons, but because a nervous stomach is likely to have an accident and embarrass the victim.

Screaming Jay gets up. He wears the mask of a very distorted monkey. Not native to the north, but easy to recognize. “I represent the Nuna people. The 'stupid monkeys' as the Cat Clan would call us.” He gets giggles from this. “This is the choice that your ancestors turned down, though they were welcome. They chose a higher calling. There was much work to be done.” He pauses and looks towards the heavens then looks out and makes eye contact with everyone in the room. “Our Mother is restored.” Hoots are heard throughout the hall.

“Nuna is different. The life there is not what you are familiar with. Plants and animals are one and the same and can vary from ones very similar to trees, though not as tall, to slow moving animals with ingenious

adaptations to trapping others. Quite ingenious. There is the usual mix of teeth and poisons. We do suffer occasional loses. The hardest part is that something that looks like a plant will often move. But there is lots of open space as you are used to here and ample resources if you are careful." People are nodding their heads.

"The easiest part of course, is that moving to Nuna is the easiest of the changes to be offered. You will only be sore for a few hours as you are adapted to local life. Otherwise you would get sick within a month and die. The change is not optional and our helpers can tell a changed from an unchanged. The journey itself is like a dream. You will see the collection of worlds, each with a Mother caring for her children." One Mind to you and me. And I would not call it caring exactly. Maybe ours is different because of the separation complex. I really need to get off world more often.

Someone stands, "I have a question. How long does it take to get there and what can we bring with us?"

"You are allowed to bring your bodies. New clothing and tools will be provided to get you started. Just as if we don't go though the change we will die, anything that we would bring with us would also be poisonous to Nuna's life. And it takes only a few days to make the trip."

"How come you can be here then? Would you not be poisonous to us and the other life here?"

"Those of us who came here from Nuna have all had to go through the change to Mother Earth's liking. We will do this again to re-adapt to Nuna along with anyone who chooses to come with us. There is some pain involved, but no worse than the agew and you know you get over this ache." Some give a nervous chuckle. Not too many illnesses left, but occasionally something makes the rounds. Screaming Jay backs into the shadows and sits down.

Rachael gets up wearing her weasel mask with a long nose and huge whiskers. She goes nosing around tickling everyone in the front row as if looking for something. This gets everyone laughing and squealing. A good choice to break the heaviness of the late afternoon. The sun will be setting soon. We are a little behind, but I dare not say anything. We don't want everyone making their choice while nearly asleep.

"I represent the Nose Clan." More laughs as she walks the fire circle. "What you don't know of the great and glorious Nose Clan? Well I don't know if you are worthy then to join the great and glorious Nose Clan. In fact anyone over five years old is forbidden to join us." She put her nose into the air.

"Weasel, you can't exclude anyone." James playing along growling in his badger mask.

"Ah, don't listen to that old badger he is no fun at all." James growls again for good measure.

“The Nose Clan believes in play. Weasels, otters, seals are we. This work stuff is for monkeys. Laying around all day? Chose the Cat Clan, not us. We have to see what's going on, what's up the next stream, what are you doing?” She sticks her nose into a few who are not paying much attention and get a few more chuckles from the group. She fades back into the shadows.

Lisa gets up. In her huge muscles she carries this off well in her buffalo mask. “I represent the Hoof Clan. We are the buffalo and horses. We are the deer, antelope, moose and elk. We believe in the clan. There is protection in the clan. We roam the prairie free in huge numbers. If you would live free but never alone, come join us.” She goes to the shadows.

“If it is freedom you want, you want the Sky Clan.” Ron gets up fully feathered in the makings of a giant Eagle. I bet James is squirming. “We live on the high cliffs where none can get us. We survey the heavens and the world below. No pesky herd telling us what to do and where to go. We are the really free.” He flies out of the circle.

“Ever heard of gravity dumb duck? Even you can fall.” James of course. “I represent the Burrow Clan. Good solid earth around you for protection. Strong teeth and claws to reinforce your decisions. No group to mess you up. The whole hill is yours. Don't mess with me!” He bares his sharp teeth to great effect.

I jump up, “And your children are so tasty too.” I hiss and sinuously weave my way around the circle. “I represent the Scale Clan. We were here long before you warm bloods and will be long after. We bask in the sun, yet can climb trees or swim a river. All with out legs to get in the way or break. Shall I wrap myself around your heart?” I embrace a few in the front rows. This all may seem silly and in a way it is. They were all told of the choices long ago, generations past in fact. Everyone should have made up their minds long ago. We do this to bring respect and honor to everyone's choices. There really is not one choice better than another. Just different.

“Ah, but we can make more faster than you can eat us.” Susan gets up squeaking with very large whiskers and a long animated tail. A little TK trick there. “I represent the Tail Clan. To us, the family is everything and we all know how families are made, don't we. Did I mention lots and lots of sex? Oh yeah, we can never get enough. Ever seen one of our males? Don't you wish your privates were that large? We ladies do our best to wear them out though. Tough job, but someone has to do it.” She gives an impossibly huge grin and suggestive wink. Hmm, isn't that Jesus in the shadows over there. I wonder about those two.

Oh no, this is too much. How did he get into that thing? I am going to die laughing just thinking about this costume. Out comes Yingui in a turtle costume, one impossibly slow step at a time, like we have until the next ice age to complete our task. “Ah, what's all the stink about? Got

anything to eat? Greens are nice. Yep, I remember, it was the year of the shaking earth I believe, or was it the year of the running water. No matter. Lots to eat, lots of time. Time to think, time to ponder, time to question all the questions. Got my hard shell.” He knocks it with one clawed paw. “Yep, carry my home with me. Protection and mobility. As to sex, it the quality, not the quantity that counts. We stay coupled for hours. Talk about bliss. Whoa momma!” He then goes ambling off like he has already forgotten why he was here. Lots of hoots and howlers follow him off. I am not sure I can hold it much longer.

Barb is helped into the circle by two others. They allow her to fall to the ground in a slump. Nothing happens for a moment but for her labored breathing. Then, slowly, she transforms into a small whale/dolphin like creature. Not a sound is made. She then rises and 'swims' around the fire circle as she TPs to everyone, *I will not speak to you as humans do, for it has been too long for me to remember. Unlike the others you have seen before you today, good souls all, I have lived what is being asked of you. Not for a moment, but for far far longer than I had human form. I have followed the currents of the seas with the great ones for thousands of years. I know their stories, their loves, their pain. I know their thoughts. We are a thoughtful race. The pod is our life so that we may have the time of generations to work on the ultimate thoughts. I represent the Water Clan.* She has shown that the process itself is safe.

“I am brother Ant. I represent the Hive Clan. Our mind is the collective mind. Our action is the collective action. Like a tree you can trim the branches and the tree lives. We are many, we are one.” At this point he smiles and then breaks down into millions of tiny crawling beings running off in all directions at once. It was not Daniel, but K! of course. No one is speaking or laughing now. I would bet that he gets no takers on this one. Maybe I should not have named him Ant so long ago. Though it was part of the prophesy. Maybe I should not have done so.

Even though her form said otherwise, Sresh quietly comes forth. The children already know she is one of the most gentle beings possible. *I am apologetic that ancestors of mine caused so much pain for your kind. It did not happen this way on my world. I am pleased to be able to offer you a choice that you have not already heard about. Come to my world and see how it should have been or could have been. We are a peaceful society, making slow progress in our understanding. We know love and pain just as you do, do not be fooled by my appearance. Come to my world, you will be accepted with open hearts. Oh, I hope that did not sound violent.* We are waving to her that everything is fine.

It is getting late. The sun has set. Who is left? A disturbance in the back. A well muscled male comes forth.

“I have a question. Why do we have to change? Why can't we leave things the way they are. We do not take more than we need. The life here

is practically untouched by our presence. What would it matter?" There is a general sound of agreement. It has been many generations since their ancestors agreed to the plan. Not too surprising really that the question has come up.

Well, not all agree. "There are some who have forgotten Great Spirit already? Forgotten our promise to always be a part and never separate. It is an honor to be allowed this opportunity. We are not the white men who spoiled this world. Do not insult those who choose truth."

There is a long history of pain behind that statement. Some of which we have related to the people here in stories. So many wars and conflicts. And, in fact, a large reason for this exodus. We have sent each group of people remaining on earth to a different planet so as to lesson the reasons for conflict for a time at least. The nastiest we sent to the paradise planets. Counter intuitive, but with nothing to fight over, we hope they will mellow out. Now that Ron has opened up the dimensions to us. Finding new planets has been much easier. For each new world we find in this dimension there are thousands in the other dimensions.

There is a disturbance at the back. A way parts. "I am the reason you would not wish to follow that path." A hooded figure comes forth. When it removes the hood, there is a skull. When it drops the cloak, we see a fully articulated skeleton. The jaw moves when it talks. "To stay is to die. To die a horrible painful death all alone. Look about you. All of the creatures you have seen do not yet kill you, eat you, bite you, or poison you easily." It raises an arm and moves slowly around the circle, clacking and clicking the bones, to point at everyone present. "After tonight, if you stay, you will not reproduce. You will grow old and weak, get sick and die. After tonight it is open season on human kind. No more protections. You are meat for everyone! Do you still choose me? I am the Death Clan." The bones collapse in a loud rattle to the ground to dissolve into the dust of the clearing. Good job Ci'lan!

Screaming Jay gets up again, a little shaken himself. "Ah, we have one remaining. One last choice in another special guest, Owa Moosa. Some of you have met already." He smiles evilly. "Owa represents the Claw Clan."

Owa comes forward crunching on a bone. She drops it. It is part of a human skull. She then precedes to make only one circle of the fire, as did Yingui. *Monkeys taste good. Just like pigs. Chose the Claw Clan or be eaten.* She says this over and over and yawns huge to show them all her teeth. Finally she ambles out sniffing a few and licking her lips. A wide path is made for her.

Well, if that does not reinforce the ideas presented nothing well.

"At the exits are the choices. Choose well." The fire is dampened to a small glow. Enough light to see your way, but not enough to see other's choices. Each has their right. Some will choose to go together, as couples

or as siblings. That is permitted. None may question the choice of another. After the change, all will be moved to a different location. It would not be right for one to end up eating another from the same tribe.

As the choices are private, they will remain so. It went well. Those who had no takers helped those who had many. The Nuna candidates will wait till they get to the galactic center before they are changed of course.

“Don't be discouraged Barb. You offered a really tempting choice. I am sure when we get to the Inuit Tribe, you will have almost everyone.”

As it should be. They have honored us for countless generations. She is maintaining her water form. Using TK to stay aloft was easier for her than learning how to walk again. Was a little strange on land, but really no different than at the center itself where creatures of all sorts did what they needed to do.

“Where do we go next?”

“The Chippewa if I remember from the results of the lottery.”

“A good tribe. I expect a majority will choose the buffalo.” We all nod. I expect so. I am tired from all this work. Could almost use a nap if I could sleep.

“Sun will come up in a few.” Ron is chewing on some straw.

“Ah yup.” Okay, enough of this. I TK a dirt clod in Yingui's direction which bounces off his shell in a cloud of dust.

“And get out of that ridiculous turtle costume.” He pulls his head, arms, legs and finally his tail into the shell, which then wobbles on the ground. “Go on. Finish it.”

“Finish what Running Snake.” From behind me. I jump a half meter into the air. Well, it seemed that way to me.

“Don't do that!” They are all rolling.

I don't understand. Why would scaring someone you care for be amusing? Sresh of course.

Stupid monkeys. Eat monkeys now? Owa grins, well, sort of.

“Anyone you can catch you lazy cat.” James tags Owa on the head and the chase is on. That should keep them out of our hair for a few minutes anyway.

Yingui starts playing my favorite Hopi tune on his ocarina. I swoon. “That won't make up for the turtle stunt you know.” He keeps going, totally absorbed. He is doing this for himself now. I turn to look at the others. They are starting to get out their instruments, DS them from some location, or form new ones. Sresh is staring entranced. We are not so uncivilized as she thought. I acquiesce and DS my own flute from my quarters.

Play me?

Where did you hear about that Ho'thn? You wipe that from your memory right this instant. You are way too young for such thoughts.

Kids!

“What is all the stink about. It won't hurt her. Didn't hurt me.” Br'thn is in her female human form. It did help to make the people more at ease.

“Allow me to raise my child the way I want please. And if I remember right it was ultimately forbidden to you also.” Br'thn smiles. She takes my curt answers well. “I'm sorry. It has been a long day.” She nods. Even for a 'thn. That was a lot of people to process.

“Br'thn, do you have any insights as to why Ah'thn appeared? I thought jealousy and such were not part of the 'thn makeup.”

“Our history is as varied as any. There was a 'thn war long ago. Only a glimmer of a memory remains. Hundreds of thousands of 'thn died that day. Since then it was resolved that it would never be allowed to happen again.

I suspect that Ci'lan and Pr'thn are what got Ah'thn nervous. Yingui was the focal point, being the father. If we could raise baby 'thn to sentience so quickly, we could bring a huge force to bear in a few years. Of course we wouldn't, that would be totally abhorrent to everything all of you have taught us, but Ah'thn does not know that.

It was good that Yingui did not strike back at Ah'thn in anyway, but showed very clearly that Ah'thn's threat was not going to be effective.”

“Nor any further interference tolerated. We do have Ar'thn's blessing.”

“It would be wise to proceed cautiously and carefully though.” The 'thn way.

“Always.”

My attention turns to the growing number of musicians. Sresh picks up on the melody quickly and offers counter complement. A low barely audible bass that is perfect. I pick up my flute and offer counter balance to the high end.

The sun rises on another day. Beautiful.

Rhea

Sistic, 4th planet in the Alisian system

Laeger, the 3rd plant, is the nearest gateway

New Dam Sala Tibetan Monastery, early morning before first rise

Where is Dana? That kid gets into so much trouble and I have only known him a few days. *Kaled, have you found him yet?*

No Rhea. I am over at the kitchens and am making my way back to the sleeping areas.

I am checking out the altar area. He likes shiny things.

It is dark still with only a few candles burning. I hate monasteries. I was a young TK at one when Jason found me. Now I am back here with a young TK, level two just like I was. Only here they hate TKs. Well, we were not exactly welcome even in my time. He is tolerated here in the monastery, but not if he gets out of hand. We are near the equator, so understandably it is hotter here. I am guessing about 35C. The problem is the humidity, near 100%. Even the walls are dripping. There are channels cut into the stone floor to drain it away. They always seem to put these places in the worst locations. I hate monasteries.

His name was the only thing I did get out of him and that with TP. The techs do not speak normally. A few of them are here as adult converts. At least the monks who were born here could talk, though most are under a vow of silence. We are not allowed to use TP on anyone resident here, but between ourselves and Dana it is tolerated. Dana showed up at the TK embassy at secrise a few days ago. I was concentrating elsewhere, so never saw how he got there. There are no doors at the embassy. One of the easiest security precautions. There is no tech there either. Completely shielded. When some dignitary visits they are VERY uncomfortable. I smile at the thought.

Not in the main chambers. I proceed to the smaller chapel. I hate tech actually. Maybe because I did not grow up with it, or maybe because the stuff they have here is far in advance of anything that I have seen. Not to mention the experience with Mother. I can scan it and even dupe it, but I don't understand it. Of course I can also ruin it. Not nice if the tech is in someone's head. I try not to touch that.

Someone's coming. How can a normal see in this low light. Shit, the Dalai Lama herself. Having been born here, she probably knows the place by touch. I bow as she passes. She is the 96th in a very long line. Some were rather short lived, like the very young child at the time of the HelperV. She is about twenty three I would guess. May she do better than average. She is very healthy at least.

She whispers to me. "Try the Hall of Songs."

“Thank you your Holiness.” I remain bowed till she is out of hearing. There are few people that I truly respect. She is one of them. One of the most enlightened people I have ever met. I have not missed a dharma talk since I found out about her. Maybe she really is the reincarnation of all those people. Yingui said that the first sixteen were men. Hard to believe. How could a man be enlightened? Yingui drives me nuts most of the time.

The Hall of Songs is a strange adaptation to the need to communicate with the rest of the monasteries without using tech. Since the wind at the equator is constant and very strong, about one hundred and sixty kilometers per hour, someone a very long time ago figured out how to carve the stone on the sea cliffs to make a very large stone flute. Only works in one direction, sound wise, so the monasteries or relay stations are placed within hearing distance of each other, which with a flute this size is many kilometers away. They go all the way around this small world. Heavy cold core keeps the gravity at 0.51 eNormal. This thing is very loud.

I weave my way through a series of baffles. Wool is hung on the walls here to absorb the sound. Otherwise no one would be able to meditate. I can hear the low slow notes already. The monks who “play” the flute are nearly deaf in spite of the elaborate hearing protection they wear. I turn right into the meditation chamber. Just loud enough to hear well, but not enough to distract. Ah, there he is, his ear to the walls to feel the sound as well as hear it.

Kaled, he is here at the Hall of Songs. Kaled DSs in almost immediately.

There is no one else here, so I can talk softly. “I need to be able to identify him more easily next time.”

“A leash?”

I smile. “Maybe just the collar. Something unique but impossible for him to remove.”

“Anything metal here is immediately used in the tech. They have no platinum.”

“Nor much zinc. That gives me two elements. Now I need a pattern.”

“With Dana, that makes us three?”

“Works for me.” I make a collar with alternating bands of zinc, copper and platinum and then add three jewels at equal distances along the rim. “Dana, come here.” He pays no attention.

Dana come here now. That wakes him up. He knows I can make him if I have to. Once he sees what I am holding though he loses his sulk and comes right up to me to see it more closely. It is shiny.

“Kaled, help me out. Hold him still.” This is not going to fit over his head, so I phase shift it around his neck by passing it through his neck. His eyes widen while this is happening and then afterwards feels the

collar and his neck to be sure both are intact.

That done, I DS all of us to the surface directly above us. The wind is something else and the flute much louder, too loud. Dana shields his eyes from even the weak light of the dawn. I use the wind to draw mass together to make our transport. *Okay, Ly'thn, we are ready.* She is halfway around the planet watching a group of techs we have our eyes on. They are making increasing amounts of antimatter. A great energy source or a bomb. As far as I can tell, this whole thing might go up in the next hafday. Why do the Guardians always time things to the last moment. Aaaagh!

Ly'thn appears within the craft next to me and reports in. *They have 3.513 grams currently.* Enough to blow out a city on old earth. A dangerous toy. They get most of their energy from wind and hydroelectric, both plentiful, why do they need this? No time. We have to get to the gateway on Laeger to guide the Guardians in. Finally! I have sent all the TKs put Kaled off world. Depending on the outcome they will return or go onto their next assignments.

Transit only takes a few hours. Using his TK, Dana can find his way out of most puzzles, but not here. He fusses with the collar until he gives up and goes to sleep. Peace at last. I suppose I could have made the craft clear, but I thought that would scare him even more. Even my scanning ability does not extend that far, so I do need a window for me to direct us. Kaled is in charge of life support. Ly'thn and I do propulsion, DS and TK. Fortunately Laeger is almost as close as it ever gets. With all the TKs among the Guardians, it should be a very short return trip. Not to mention the help from the baby 'thn.

“Laeger coming up.” Dana wakes up and goes to his window. His hearing is fine. There he will remain till we land. When he does try to talk, it sounds like an infant. I can 'read' him of course and do when I have to. But he understands simple commands with out my prying, so I leave it at that.

Laeger is a water world. Only a few small barren islands, not large enough to have enticed any creatures to colonize them. A few are mostly sand and disappear regularly, the rest are rock fingers that look out of place. The sentients are water inhabitants and look like a mass of seaweed to me. But like other plantimal worlds, they can move slowly. The gateway is underwater of course. Fortunately not too deep. The deepest depression here is only about five hundred meters. We will stay in the craft I have made. I plunge us below the surface after a moments hesitation and Dana jumps back from the window.

Kaled smiles and reassures him, “It's all right. We've done this before. You will not drown.” He does appear to have some apprehension about water. At first he is shaking, but soon his curiosity overcomes his fear and he is back at his window with eyes wide open. We could have

left him at the monastery, but then who knows what trouble he would get into. I don't have time to redress all the ruffled feathers that would occur. Not now anyway. I am certainly not counting on him for any help.

We reach the undersea platform. Does not look like much. A few sentients laying around. I should not be such a timest. They are on a different time scale than we are. We probably look like a bunch of little squirrels high on caffeine to them. Well, if they had squirrels. We assume the correct position and then wait. After the correct period of time I paint the outside of the craft in the symbols that speak our request. Then wait. It seems like forever. I check my time piece I have purposely set to their time frame. I am not late. If I make a fuss though, they will simply float away and ignore me. I wait.

A 'thn appears. Even they adjust to the time frame of their parents. I wait. Dana has gone back to sleep. Kaled has been through this before and is amused by my discomfort. I'm not. Can light go slower with these beings? A glow starts to appear around us. Finally. The actual transfer takes the same amount of time as it usually does. When we get there, we are still underwater. This is their gate. Coming out in air would be useless to them. To get into the air breathers areas they build a bubble around themselves. The reverse of what we do. After a respectful wait, I slowly raise us till we are above the water into the air breather section. Around the corner, I quickly dissolve the craft and we are finally free.

"I thought it was going to take longer to use the gateway that it took to get to Laeger."

"Yes Rhea." I can tell he is about to start laughing if we don't get going. It is not that funny. Dana is looking around. I am guessing he did not understand that the seaweeds were sentient and of course his fear of water. Here however the air breathers are reaching his consciousness. Now I am smiling. I remember why we are here and start scanning. Does not take me long to find them. I DS us over to the lounge they are gathered at.

"Thanks for coming." I just hope it is not too late. "Everyone ready?"

"Who is the little boy with the collar?"

"He is twenty four and is full size. He showed up at the embassy a few days ago. I have sort of taken him in till I can figure out what to do with him." They are all smaller for some reason. I would have thought bigger on a light world, but this is the way they are.

"He is TK2 at least. I thought you said they were all dead?"

"I thought they were too. He almost was. The exposure to the wind and water nearly did him in."

"His head is really loaded." Ron goes up to him like that would make it easier to scan him. All the techs have a brain net for communication purposes. Don't know why he does though. Not much language capabilities. TK does not normally make you stupid. His brain scans fine,

so I am not sure what is wrong. But, he is the least of my problems right now.

“And check out his clothes. Some very high tech fabric.”

“I would not even call that stuff fabric any longer. It goes down to the nano scale. Bet this is the only clothing they ever need, rain or shine, hot or cold.”

“Cool, remember to dupe some for our cloaks this time.” We all laugh at that. Plain old cotton or wool for me thank you.

I check my time piece. “If we hurry we can just make the gateway back.” Hurry means lots of waiting again, but this way we don't have to wait another Laeger month, about thirty seven eDays. A death sentence for Sistic in my estimation. “Get your stuff together please.”

“We have everything.” Rachael looks at me confused.

“What happened to Gr'thn's toys?”

“I thought we were going into a war situation? No time for toys. Right?”

“Right. Let's go.” We walk down the corridor towards the water sentients' section. It is a few minutes before I think to look behind me to make sure everyone is following me.

“Shit! Where is Dana?” I should have DSd us and saved the time.

“Who?”

“Dana, the 'little boy'?” Definitely not with us.

“He was right behind us when we started. I thought he knew enough to at least follow us.” aaaagh!

“Oh, this is bad.” Then I remember the collar. “Help me out, he was wearing a collar. Tri-metal, platinum, zinc and copper with three jewels along the rim. Scan and see if you can find him. DS him here if you do.” We all start to concentrate.

“Found him!” Daniel exclaims. We all break concentration.

“Bringing him in.”

Only problem is, is that is not him. A Pysk Trinoid appears before us. An ambassador in fact.

“Shit.”

Sorry your honor. We were trying to retrieve one of our party who has gone missing. Please accept my apologies. It was Daniel's doing, so he is the one who does the duty. He takes a knife out of his cloak and cuts his palm. He then raises his hand to show the blood and let it fall to the ground. The Pysk ambassador touches the blood and then disappears. Honor has been satisfied. If he had returned to his party without that drop of blood they would have hunted us down, no matter where we had gone. It does not matter that it would be against galactic law. Mistakes happen.

“Well done Daniel.” Daniel repairs his hand without a thought.

“Yeah, but did you notice that he was wearing the collar around one of his legs?”

“How did Dana get it off his neck?”

“He didn't. The ambassador or someone else did most likely. All Dana had to do was convince a high enough TK to do it for him.” Makes sense Lisa. Those years in the monastery were good for you at least.

“We got more trouble. I have been scanning. There are lots and lots of those collars now. Different sizes even.”

“The Holy Three.”

“That is my guess. Someone thought this might make a good new symbol for the Holy Three. Other's picked up on it and now everyone here will soon have a version.”

“All we have to do is wait a minute and the one person who does not wear a collar is Dana.”

“Only this time we DS a short distance away to be sure first.”

“At least make sure they are human. Can't be too many besides us right?”

I scan twenty three at the present moment. Br'thn announces. She is back to 'thn form. Would be too humiliating to remain human among her own kind.

“We do get a lot of traffic through here. Over a thousand worlds now. Bound to be some trade of ideas at least.”

“Not to mention nearly seven hundred Helpers with babies in tow.” Ly'thn purrs in my pocket. *Yes dear, I love you too.*

“We can't wait any longer. The entire world of Sistic is in danger. He will have to make his own way. He is an adult and should take responsibility for his own actions.” The rest smile at me. I know, I am not perfect either. Should have left him at the embassy with a store of TK chow. For some reason it was the only thing I could get him to eat.

“Make a small ship with port holes. The Laegers think we are ugly.” That amuses Lisa in her barbarian form for some reason. Rachael is looking pretty buff too. Time to get my mind back on task.

I am going to stay outside the ship if that is all right. At least till after the gateway. I want to experience their world first hand. Barb in her dolphinesc form.

We TK around the corner into the 'door' to the water section. In we go, slowly, slowly.

SHIT!

“Where are they?” The place is totally empty. Not even a scrap of anyone having been here.

“Gone! Everything is ruined! The Sistics will kill each other now and there is nothing we can do.” I DS back to the lounge. I need to be alone. I knew we needed to do all this earlier. Don't worry Rhea, everything will work out. The UNA people have a right to a good ending. Well, it hasn't

worked out. Millions of people are going to die, all because of their stupid sense of timing. Nothing in a rush. I just get this assignment a quarter Sistic year ago and already it is doomed. Not entirely my fault. There has not been a TK ambassador on planet for over ten eYears. Everyone else was busy. I just happened to be the only one free when word came in of TKs dying. I should never have said yes to a high tech world. Like a Laeger out of water. Shit!

Mommy sad. Ly'thn always picks up on my emotions. Not sure that is good for her. This Mommy thing is taking some getting used to. Must have picked it from the other baby 'thn, probably Gr'thn.

“Yes dear. Mommy sad.”

Ly'thn make it better. She pops out. Hey, she is over four thousand years old. She has to learn some time to take care of herself. I don't try and follow her. I just want to be alone.

“Aren't you the Guardian Rhea?” A young human stands before me. Maybe a TK6. Probably her first time at the center. I come out of my sulk and try and put on a cheerful face. It was not her fault that this happened.

“Yes, that's right.”

“May I have your autograph?” She holds out a small card. It has my image on it. Well an image of me from several thousand years ago. I remember now when we all lined up for Rachael to do our portraits. Old fashioned, but she and Yingui thought it might help everyone remember our history. Only now I will be known as Rhea the Destroyer.

“Sure kid.” I sign her card. She runs off excited to meet with the rest of their group. I had better get out of here or they all we be over. I could always put in for a limiter and live out a normal life on some distant agrarian settlement. No one would care who I was there. Someplace non-tech. I still have my responsibility to Ly'thn though. At least till her birthday. Maybe I will get lucky and that will be soon. She is only a few years younger than Pr'thn after all. Of course every 'thn will admit that Pr'thn was something of a miracle. I probably have another million years with my luck. Or fifty million. Sigh....

I DS over to the Salurian compound. No human will follow me here. Smells of garlic pizza with rotten eggs thrown in. Only a few of them milling around at the moment. They pay no attention to me, as is their way. A very shy race. They have sulfide bacteria as symbiots in their blood, hence the smell. I pretend to be admiring the art they have posted on the central post. A sort of art exhibit and shrine all in one. All of their art is images of Silurians. They may be shy, but they have large egos.

Mommy come. Ly'thn has found me. Easy enough, I was not hiding from her. And sulfide does not bother her.

“Okay, dear, we can go.” She DSs us out of the Silurian compound.

Into what is the question. Before me stand several humanoid like creatures in something that I would only expect Rachael to wear. Armor

of some kind. The creatures themselves look nasty and unkempt. Smells like rotten blood. The light is not great either. There is a sensation of movement. I do a quick scan. I am on a large ship of some kind. Metal, but an alloy I don't recognize. Lots of tech. Some of it is definitely offensive weapons of some kind.

Ly'thn, who are these beings?

They will help.

How will they help?

Before she can answer, two of them come forward to try and grab me by my arms. No way. I shield instantly.

“Unless you want a hole in your ship, don't touch.” I will not be bullied.

One of them says something to the apparent leader in a language I have never heard. He or she nods back. The bully shrugs and pulls out a device and presses a button. Instantly I feel my TK gone. I am totally helpless. And I thought it could not get any worse.

I raise my arms which the two take and unceremoniously deposit me in a chair like depression in front of the leader. I guess our anatomies are similar enough to work for me as well.

“You watch.” The leader grunts. Like I have a choice. Knows at least some Standard which is good I guess. Ly'thn appears to be okay. And I am not dead yet. I would guess they could handle that easily. That's strange. I feel my stomach. There is a spherical object inside me. How did they get that in without my noticing? Must be a limiter of some kind. And it had to be activated by remote control. Even we do not know how to do that. I am really surprised that the 'thn have allowed them this kind of psiotic tech. On the other hand, if it is not a threat to 'thn, they usually don't care.

More orders are barked and I feel a lurch. The screen in front of us apparently shows where we are going. Not a window though, some kind of tech. The colors are all wrong and there are characters of some kind overwriting what is seen. The ship turns and the sun, or a symbol for it appears. The characters change as conditions change. Another lurch and suddenly we are really moving. The sun is getting larger. We are going trans light. Warp speed as Ron and Yingui would say. Geeks. Now I wish I had paid more attention. Those characters in the corner must be our speed. They change in an incremented way. I count the number of different characters. Base eight I would guess. I glance behind me. They all have ten digits. Very similar to us. Eight fingers and two thumbs, though larger than mine. Maybe they only count with fingers?

Back to the screen, the sun moves off to the left as we pass it and head back out out of the system. The speed has peaked. It seems like only a few minutes have passed when I start to see a small blue world getting larger. The numbers have started to decrease. We are slowing. We drop

out of light speed and the screen show what appears to be a window view. Looks like we are going to go into orbit. Yep. We are turning to the left. Looks like a water world. The Galactic Center rotates around to be fair to all the various systems. Most of the time it is set up for a trisect period of time, approximately 1300 years, on or around some dead world, so as not to disrupt any sentients in a system.

I don't have my TK senses to measure the world and I can't be sure of the magnification of the screen. I do see waves of sorts, so it is roughly earth sized to be able to see them from here. The ship has artificial gravity that feels heavier than earth. So, that is no indication of what is below. Even with this ship, it takes time to orbit the planet. Forty minutes later we break orbit and head out, again going trans light. This time for a much shorter period of time.

My captors have remained largely motionless the entire time. Sometimes one will leave the room and another return. Some adjustments of instruments. I do not watch too closely, not wanting to attract their attention. My bladder is getting full. I can't empty it the normal way with TK now. They must have different physiologies. Well, it could not hurt to ask.

I stand. "I need to pee." I wait. Nothing happens. "Look, unless you want it on your deck take me to your facilities." The leaders sighs, or something like that. A grunt goes out and comes back with a bucket of some sort. Great. At least I have a robe. It is easy enough to maintain some privacy while doing the deed. I leave it on the deck and return to my chair. They ignore it. Well, the smell can't get a lot worse than it already is in here. Garlic flavored TK chow does it every time.

Another world soon appears and the speed has slowed down again. We are going into orbit. Wait a minute. There can't be two worlds like Sistic! Sistic has a central ocean with a small island in the middle on one side, the TK embassy is there. Two large polar ice caps and rocky shores on the oceans north and south. Clouds stream around in the direction of the winds, faster at the equator and slowed to nearly a stop at the poles themselves. A small world without any moons. This has to be Sistic. They have brought me home! But what can I do without the other Guardians and no TK? I am merely back to square one as Susan would say.

At least the world is still here. They have not blown themselves up yet. An array appears on the screen with the planet I am guessing represented in the center. Numerous orbits are shown around the planet. The Sistic satellite array?

One of the points glows yellow. An order is barked and the screen goes 'real'. The planet is below us and a light appears ahead of us. Suddenly a blue beam appears centered on the white sphere or satellite. The satellite turns red and then blows up. The screen goes back to the

diagram and a second satellite turns yellow.

“NO, please you are blinding them. They will suffer from the storms they cannot predict without knowledge from the satellites. There are no weapons on the satellites. They are no treat to you.”

“Silence! They use these to spy on their enemies. We are removing their ability to wage war. Is that not what you wanted?” Oh God. This is what this is all about. A second satellite goes.

I sit down depressed in my chair. One by one each of the satellites is destroyed. Nothing happens to us of course. They really were just weather satellites and communication arrays. Not a threat to anyone. What else can go wrong?

One of the underlings barks some communication at the leader from it's console. A view of Sistic appears with a reducing circle pinpointing a location inland from the sea on the northern half. Well, it did not take them long to find that. Not too surprising. None of this appears to be upsetting Ly'thn. I thought I taught her better than this. Why is she going along with this? Certainly she could free me and restore my abilities at any time. They would never get another limiter into me. Still she hovers near the leader as if she is taking orders.

Someone new comes in. I hear whispers and turn to look. Dana comes in, but using a strange device to help assist him walk. The higher gravity aboard ship of course.

“Dana? What are you doing here.”

“SILENCE!” Two of the grunts threaten to come over and whack me. Great. Dana appears to be talking with them in their own tongue. Amazing. He never talked with any of us. What caused the change? Dana nods to the leader and takes up a chair a meter from me. I turn to talk to him. He raises his finger to his lips to signal me to be quiet. I return my gaze to the screen. At least he does not appear to be mad at me. I am suddenly embarrassed about my piss pot. Nothing I can do now.

We have slowed again. Taking up a stationary orbit directly above the site. The site of the industrial complex housing the antimatter plant. A magnified view appears on the screen. There is the complex with the large circular depression. Something new now. A large sphere in the exact center. A ship? Or a bomb? Why would the bomb be here, the enemy is in the south? If that went off it would take out their own research institute. How would they move something that large? No evidence of rockets or any other kind of propulsion system.

More orders barked. I ignore them and continue to stare at the screen.

“Rhea, our presence is requested below.” I look up to Dana face. He spoke perfect Standard. My mouth must be open. He smiles and offers his hand like a perfect gentleman. I let him take it and I rise. The others in the room have arrayed themselves in a pattern on the deck. Dana and I take up a position in the front. A white light appears around us with lots

of flecks of blue and gold. It gets too bright. I can't keep my eyes open.

When I open my eyes we are on the surface. DS? But why the light then? We never used light.

I hear noise behind me and turn. The ship's crew all remove horrible looking weapons from their backs. Large curved blades with handles in the center. Wait a minute. That shape looks familiar. Where have I seen that shape before?

I turn around and concentrate on the large sphere. A door opens near the bottom adjacent to one of the support struts. A group of Sistics emerge. They are all dressed as Dana is, but they have those anti TK weapons on their belts and some kind of visors on their heads. When they see us, they all reach for those same weapons. I am not TK now, will they still affect me? Am I out of range here?

Strangely the leader behind me now, yells in Standard, "It is a great day to die!" They all rush past me to charge the group of Sistics. The Sistics are taken back by this action, but each manages to fire their device. One hits me. My heart skips a beat, but nothing happens. I pull the dart from my arm. Nothing to see really without TK.

"Wait, stop! They are harmless! Don't kill them! Please stop!" They keep going and quickly reach the Sistics who start to scatter and run. It is going to be a slaughter.

Ly'thn, please stop them! I know she reads me without TP on my end. She is my last chance. Thankfully, she zooms off towards the battle. All the blades disappear at once. This does not slow them down a bit. They just punch down the Sistics instead. I yell, "Stay down! Don't resist them!" Surprisingly they do as I say or they are hurting too much to resist. The groans suggest the latter. The aliens are nearly twice the Sistic tech's weight, especially with all that armor and used to a higher gravity. Not much of a contest.

More nut cases appear behind me. Presumably from the ship above. Some of them look a little familiar. I wish I had my TK back. I rub the spot where the limiter is. They march past me like I am not there. Soon they have tied up the Sistics with some sort of cord they all apparently carry with them.

Dana comes up to me and places his hand on my shoulder. There are tears in my eyes. Everything possible has gone wrong.

"Dana, what is the sphere really? The sphere was not on my list as being harmful before."

"Water. We want to return to the stars from which we came. It was hoped that this research would help us get there." With water? Might be ultra pure or something like that. Can't tell without TK.

"And what are those horrible creatures?"

"You will soon find that out. They are returning to us." Also implying that he already knows.

“And what are you? You did not speak to me for days, now you can.”

“The easiest way to explain that is that our brains are different than yours. When we are not hooked into the network we are cut off. The TK embassy and the Holy Ones residences are not part of our net. Most of our spoken language knowledge comes from central. We can speak any language central knows. Quite efficient really. Oh, we can still think and communicate on our own, just not speak without help or lots of practice. Most of us don't bother. Normally we communicate with each other through central, so no spoken language is needed.”

“How can you think without language?”

He pauses, “Central says, we have a language, just not one that can be spoken. We need help with the spoken ones. We normally communicate with images and what you would call animations. Sounds are only for recognition of an event, such as a hammer hitting a rock.” I nod my understanding. Explains what I saw most of the time in his head. Just assumed he was not all together there.

“Then how could you talk on board the ship. Certainly you were too far away from central, if the TK embassy was.”

“Ah, Elle is very intelligent. While I slept in another room, she studied the tech in my head and figured out how to make it work.”

“Impressive. And you? What are you?”

“Dana stands for Diet And Nutrition Administrator. I was a DANA unit, number 331879b.”

“Was? And now you are what?”

“My current designation is Atak 189.”

“And that stands for?”

He smiles but does not answer. The others come up and surround us, with the leader facing us. Behind are the Sistic techs nursing bruises, sitting on the ground. A few more come out of the structure and march up to the leader. Ly'thn comes back to me and hovers near my shoulder.

“There is no one else inside. The facility is secure.” They all stand facing me. Nothing happens. They just stand there looking at me and waiting for something.

Ly'thn, I know you can hear me. Remove the limiter now please.

Mommy not sick any more? Huh? What does she mean?

I decide to ask. Looking at the apparent leader, “Ly'thn, that flying sphere, asks if I am still sick?”

“Good question. Are you?” They all stand there staring at me. They have lost the fierce look too.

“I don't understand.” Still, they wait. One yawns even.

I look around me. That one looks a lot like Rachael. The one over there looks like Daniel or K!, they are always together and hard to tell apart without TK. Susan, Lisa, Ron, James. That is way too much of a coincidence. But who is the leader and the rest? I try and remember if I

have seen any other humanoid races at the center. Not one. There are some bipedals who look nothing like us and a lot of tripodals. More stable, so that makes sense. But nothing that looked so much like us as these people. What are the odds. Too high to even imagine.

“Who are you?”

“A mercenary force from the Klingon Empire at your service.” There is no Klingon Empire. I am not always that good about keeping up on things, but I would know if an entire empire of war like bipedal humanoids existed anywhere near us, I think. I stare at the one that looks like Rachael. She or he stares back. If I could scan I would know for sure. Can't tell anything through all that armor. That is assuming they have a similar physiology. Not likely. A world such as ours, with the plant and animal portions separated is extremely rare. This must be a costume of some kind.

“No, I think not. You are human, but you have changed yourself for some reason.”

“She is starting to think again at least.”

The techs are sitting up now. They don't look so bad. Everyone is up. No one knocked out. Not tied up either. The way they were hit, you would expect that a few would still be out. I am beginning to think that no one was actually hurt. Even Dana has turned away from the sun to shade his eyes. This world has no magnetic field. The core is cold. So, UV is a problem. Most people spend a majority of their lives underground. What do they use for food? The monastery used low light plantimals for food. They raised them in special shielded valleys. The only food that Dana, or rather, Atak would eat was TK chow. Maybe all the food for the techs is processed. They could use bacteria or yeast that was genetically modified to produce what they needed. Combined with some plantimal source, the conversion from sunlight to food would be complete.

I am getting distracted. That can wait. These are the fellow Guardians before me. But why go through all this trouble to do this to me and who are the others? Too many people. I need my TK back.

“I think she is going to explode if we wait too much longer.”

“The gears are turning pretty rapidly.”

“I am impressed by the fact she remains so calm. I know someone who would never be able to do that with a limiter in place.”

“Ha-ha-ha!” That has to be Rachael.

The limiter disappears. My abilities return. It is like being able to breathe again. I even take a deep breath.

“Promise not to hurt anyone or it goes back in Rhea.”

“Huh?”

“You looked mad enough to hole the ship and kill Elle when you boarded.”

I give a wry smile, "I promise, but why are all of you doing this to me?" Who is Elle?

"Well, you did ask for help."

"And as per TK policies in war conditions, we have a right to check things out independently before acting." That's true. I would have.

"Checks and balances."

"Precisely. Okay, Elle, you can come down now."

"Elle?"

"Behind you Rhea." Just as I turn around a ship shimmers into view. An artificial DS field. Not as clean as TK. I scan it. It is the ship we were all on. Dwarfs the spherical 'ship' of the techs.

"Elle, this is Rhea. Rhea, Elle."

"The ship? An AI? Like you know who?"

"Oh, stop it guys. Elle is Mother. You remember Mother don't you?"

"But when Mother left she was a sphere only a little bigger than the tech sphere here. Which is full of water by the way." I scan it to be sure. "Er, heavy water that is." Dana was not entirely accurate.

"Picture time before we get into our civies again." The one I have pegged as Rachael comes forward and uses some device she is carrying. Not etech, but mech. I scan. Silver based light system. Old tech.

When she finishes, the leader comes forward. The face morphs. Human now at least. Female. Indeterminate age. "My name is Fiona, you probably don't remember me. My husband Onna and I have been stationed with Elle these last several thousand years along with Lars and Dione. We had children who had children." The rest of them nod in return and morph out of their costumes and modifications. Everyone looks more or less normal human now.

"Anyway, we have visited hundreds of worlds with life and many civilizations. Together with Elle, we have made modifications to her shell."

"And all the armament?"

"Ah, you noticed that huh? I knew we did not get you under fast enough. Not all the places we visit are friendly. We learned the hard way to pack a little backup."

"And that was not all in armament either." Onna.

"That brings us to Sistic." Susan, back in human form.

"Not quite. We did an orbit of Laeger I believe before coming here. What was all that about?"

"Dropped Barb off. She wanted to see how a water world handled things. Remember, you were going to leave her there in the first place."

"I was? And how did we get from the Galactic Regional Center to Laeger so fast. And don't say warp factor ten or something else stupid." Those blades they carried. Rachael and James used to practice with them. Hard to remember that far back.

“Ah, the center is in this system. And by the way, the 'thn do not have a monopoly on gateway travel. As I said, we have learned a lot.”

“And the war about to start here?”

“What war?” They are all smiling at me now.

“The reds and blues. North and South. Banners have been up all over the place.”

“You mean the soccer match. Been building up to it for months and months, eMonths that is.”

“A soccer game. And the antimatter?” I scan underground where it should be. “It's gone!” I am worried sick. “There are no 'holes' in the world though. What happened?”

“Get the limiter ready, she is about to blow!” I immediately shield. Of course, all of them together could over power me, hence one of our checks and balances.

I calm down. “What happened?” If they are not upset there is probably an explanation.

Dana, I mean Atak, offers, “It is in our ship on it's way to the Center.” Oh that will be interesting. As in no non TKs allowed not escorted. 'thn are not too comfortable around the high tech cultures. Maybe because there is some chance that one of them might just figure out how the 'thn work. And if you know how they work, you can figure out their vulnerabilities.

“So, do we go get them, or wait for the 'thn to return them the hard way?”

Atak looks alarmed, “You can't! We waited for too long to get to this point. We have a right to be free!” He pauses looking concerned. “I have informed the others. The ship will be told to return rather than risk being destroyed.” This is the most emotion I have seen from him.

“Very wise.”

“So, they can turn on a dime huh?”

“What's a dime?”

“I don't remember. Not the point. Does this ship have enough fuel to make this kind of correction and return safely?”

Atak is going to lose it, he concentrates again. “I am now out of the communication. Others have taken over.” He relaxes. Not his responsibility now. Well, for a bit anyway.

We wait. I am about to start giggling. Wait for it. Just wait. Atak is smiling too and looking at all of us smiling.

Suddenly his mouth opens and he goes into concentrated mode again.

“We have a problem Houston.” Onna this time.

Then in a very sheepish voice we hear Atak squeak out, “Help!” We all lose it and start laughing at once.

“Good to see you laugh again Rhea.”

“Good to be able to.”

Ron comes up to me holding out the Sistic weapon that I gave him on Earth. “Very sophisticated. Beyond my understanding. You place any organic material in one end and darts are produced ready to be fired at the other. Only problem is that I can't see why the darts are dangerous. On Earth, I shot myself many times with no apparent damage. Here I'll show you.”

He raises the device to point at himself. Atak who was watching Ron, rushes in and places his hand over the business end just at the device fires.

“Atak why did you do that?” Ron looks upset.

Atak opens his mouth and tries to speak, but nothing coherent comes out. He is back to the way he was when we met.

“Strange, it certainly does not have that effect on me.”

“But why did he block it? What is it exactly?”

“It appears to be an antenna of some kind. Hyper folded down to the atomic level. But there is no payload of any kind. Really.”

“But we know it killed TKs. By the way, where is Kaled. I thought he would be you?”

“Ah, Rhea, Kaled requested reassignment.” Ouch, that was his right.

“He said that he was no longer needed here and he had put in his time.”

“His time? How long had he been here?”

“A hundred eYears.”

“WHAT? How can that be? Why didn't he say anything?” The others start laughing at this idea.

“Rhea, did you read any of the reports on Sistic?”

“There was not time. This was a crisis.” I say rather loudly.

“And what did you do these last several months while you were waiting for us?” They are all smiling. I am beginning to hate those smiles.

“I was monitoring things here. The antimatter production, the evacuation of the other TKs.”

“Oh, yeah, that probably took most of each day.”

Saying rather sheepishly, “And worrying a lot.”

“That I can believe. And I thought you were the cool one. Never getting upset even when 'Mother' was running amok.”

“I hate tech. Gives me the creeps.”

“That was why you were chosen for this assignment Rhea. Oh, Ron volunteered right away, but the fear was he would be too likely to succumb to the lure of the tech itself and forget the mission.”

“True. You can't imagine how hard it is for me not to DS down into the caverns below and start trying to figure it all out. I would love to become part of their neural network and 'plug in'.”

“Don't even think about it. Way too dangerous.”

“I know.” He sighs.

“So we suspect that the 'darts' are harmless but are not sure. Certainly they have an effect on the locals, which is what they were probably created for. Atak is off line. The reason he cannot talk to us is because he is no longer connected with the others.”

“Wait, one hit me during the 'take over'. Shouldn't it have done something thing then?”

“You were not TK at that point, nor were you part of their network. As I said there is nothing in them inherently dangerous.”

“But on Earth, the dart would not be able to tune in the network either.”

“Ah, but here it would. That is why Atak prevented me from shooting myself with it.”

“Hey, where did the other Sistics go?”

“Their part of the show was over, they went back to their work of course.”

“There went our means of asking them what was going on.”

Fiona speaks up, “Elle, who has been in communication with them says that what they suspect is that the darts somehow provide a point of infection for a small psiotic parasite. But not having much experience with psiotics they are not sure. The devices have been reworked. That is why the one who hit you had not effect.”

“How did they know it would no longer affect us?”

“Apparently they experimented on Atak.”

“And he let them? Strange society.”

“Elle says that their ship is out of range. She can 'feel' larger objects, such as planets and asteroids from some distance, but this ship was designed to be small, light and non detectable. Absorbs most radiation.”

“Now, what would they want with a stealth ship?”

“And how are we going to find them in time then?”

“Elle has the flight path, but there have already been problems.” Not surprising. They have not been in space for a very long time.

“That might get us close, but we need better than that.” Lisa comes forward. “Well, we have done it before. No reason why is should not work here too.”

“Sounds good to me. Let's do it.”

We follow Lisa's direction as she sets us up in a TK array. We then link minds, something we did not know how to do pre One Mind contact. It did not take us long to find them this way. The antimatter core shown like a beacon. It has a way different psiotic signature.

“Elle has the coordinates and current flight path.”

“Someone has to tell their people not to move from it or we are back to square one.”

“Where exactly is square one? I have been trying to get there for years.” Ha-ha.

“Let's get. For the glory of the Klingon Empire!” Those strange swords reappear and then all of them disappear into Elle and then to orbit. After that I lose them. That ship is fast. Wish I could have spent more time with the new Mother. Maybe it would help with my fear of tech. Confront your fears and they will fall away.

“Well Atak, what now?” Talking to a wall was never my forte. Ly'thn purrs in my pocket happy to have her mother back to 'normal', whatever that is.

“I suggest we go below. Secset will be soon.”

“You can talk!” Please, no more surprises, please!

“Of course, the effect is only temporary.”

“What exactly is the purpose of the darts then?”

“We have no police as other cultures do. In a way, we are all the police. Whenever someone behaves strangely, they are 'darted' till help can arrive. Taking them off the grid effectively limits the mental variance as well.”

“And as most TKs are not part of your network, they would appear to be behaving strangely to most of your people.”

“Precisely.”

“I need to think. Sit or walk, but don't go too far.”

“It would be better if we went inside. We are not used to being in the sun.”

“Fine. I can take care of that.” Not much sun left as it has nearly set. No matter, I raise some stone and form it into a shelter over us.” Strange, he is watching me intently while I am doing this and there seemed to be increased neural activity. Hmm, quiet again. I make a few changes and the neuronal activity spikes again. Never noticed that before. Wonder if all TKs do that when observing another TK. Sort of a mental link maybe.

“Won't do you any good. TK2s cannot do what I just did.” He nods and makes himself comfortable near the edge of the shelter. I go into meditation / thinking mode.

They said that I was the best person for this task. Ron's story makes sense, he is too enthralled by tech at any level, but at ten, he would go crazy. Susan falls for the underdog, like our poor TK washed ashore cold, hungry and speechless. Almost like an abandoned child. Daniel and K! would fall for the communal nature of their society. Everyone is the same. Can't even figure out how they tell each other apart without the neuronal grid. And that grid is something else. I wonder.

Help me out Ly'thn. See if you can find the central processor for the tech Sistics.

The grid does not appear to be of any use in the monasteries. That is hard to believe. Surely a tech ten society could work around that problem. Never mind for the moment. Atak is concentrating on Ly'thn now. There is no way he can read her.

No CPU found Mom.

Thanks Ly'thn. Lie quiet for a bit please.

More blips then quiet. James and Rachael would likely come in here with guns blazing, almost like I fell for. I am sure they were behind the Klingon disguises. Yingui and Running Snake do not leave Earth, so can't help. Edwin would be more interested in the Arctic tundra flora. Lisa the monasteries.

“Atak, you said you would tell me what your new name means.”

He smiles, “Ambassador to the TKs. Had to add a vowel to make it pronounceable.”

“Why you?”

“That should be obvious, I am TK after all. It was thought that it might help you relate to us.”

“Well, if you are the Ambassador, then how come you showed up at the embassy all alone, wet, cold and hungry.”

“There are no transport tubes to the embassy. Normally the TKs would collect us or meet us nearer to our compounds. With the evacuation of the TKs, we had no opportunity to explain what happened. It was thought to be important enough to try and re-establish communications any way we could. We are not, ah, very good about transport over land and even worse over water. Our craft was not sea worthy. Is that the correct term?”

“Yes. Go on.” Is he playing games with me? Or am I getting paranoid again. No CPU means no Mother. And 'Elle' did not seem concerned. Calm down and see what is going on.

The ship sank during one of the 'storms' that we would normally have ignored being safe inside our tunnels. The, I am not sure what word to use. Standard does not have one for what I wear.”

“Garment will do for the moment, though I realize it does much more than that.”

He nods and proceeds, “The garment protected me from the cold and TK prevented me from suffocating in the water.”

“We call it drowning.”

He pauses as if waiting for an answer from the others. “Yes, that makes sense. The two other's with me, not being TK, were not so fortunate. I then rode the equatorial current till I ended up on TK Island.” Seems reasonable. I would have thought that one of the monasteries would have seen them. Will have to ask when I get back there.

“So besides the mess with the darts, what does it matter why you are in communication with us at all. You appear to have everything in hand, with the possible exception of space flight, and that is only a problem with choice of destination. You would be allowed to visit the other worlds if you wanted.”

“Thanks. I will relay that information. No, space flight is a dream not

a necessity. We have another problem. A problem that would be far easier to inform you about if we went back to the compound. The trip would not take long. Our transports are very fast.”

“There is plenty of time now that there is no immediate threat. Tell me first so I can better prepare for what I would see.”

“You have probably noticed that our society is falling in numbers.”

“No, but I am sure that was in the reports that I was supposed to have read before coming here. Go on.”

“We have a problem with reproduction.”

“What kind of a problem. You appear healthy enough to me, or are you the exception?”

“We have no interest in the ah, act.” He blushes slightly.

“No TK2 or above does. This is normal.”

“No, you don't understand. I know about TKs, it is our entire society that has lost interest. We have tried communal stimulation.”

“An orgy?”

“Not exactly. We have the most attractive couple mate while on the grid. The rest of us link in to experience it at the same time. It is hoped this will stimulate the rest of us to mate with whomever we are with.”

“And how often does this occur and does it work?” Pretty weird to me, but each culture has a right to work out their own way.

“At first it did, but now a month later it appears to do nothing other than stimulate while on the grid. Grid is too weak a word.”

“Never mind. How often?”

“Daily.”

“You mean eDay or sDay?”

“Ah, sDay.” No wonder. No one can handle that much over a long period of time.

“Are both males and females affected equally?” He nods affirmative. “Have you tried wearing different clothing, providing privacy, romantic evenings for two?”

“We all wear the same thing and what is privacy? Checking database. Oh, privacy. That is a weird concept. Does that help? Being on the grid means we are never alone. How can you handle it?” How did you? You were separated for days at least. “We all eat the same thing, to be fair, though I am ashamed to admit, that TK chow is better than what I was able to prepare while Dana. This would all really be easier if you would come to the compound. Others are waiting to 'talk' with you. Besides the next Stim broadcast is almost due. I would not want to act improper with you.”

“TKs don't feel it do they.” He nods that he does. That can't be good. Totally unnatural.

“I am not ready yet to go inside. So, I can leave you here, or you are free to go and either way we can meet up latter.”

“That would not be satisfactory for us. We will not be denied any longer.” This does not sound good. I am starting to feel a build up of psiotic energy. A huge build up in fact. How can that be?

Ly'thn spook now! I am not normally loud in TP, but this needs it.

Instantly we are in DS space, shifting between dimensions as fast as we can. A trick we all learned from Ron's experiments. Once in a remote DS space we put some distance between us and the planet below us, which is Sistic, only not. I try and remember where the others have gone in relation to the original Sistic. We took the shell with us for our ship, but left Atak. You don't bring your enemy with you. Not that I should fear a TK2, but who knows what tech he would have brought with him.

Of course! How stupid of me. They are a grid intelligence! The total is greater than the sum of its parts. No CPU, so it appears to be no threat. Holographic memory storage, so as each member eventually grows old and dies, or an accident happens to a group and the whole is maintained. Sort of a tech version of K!'s culture. Makes you wonder where the lines are between human and machine. What is sentient anyway? Imagine over a million minds all linked together. One goes TK and it only takes one. Atak was probably their first in quite some time, if he was even the one. Accident or design? That is a scary thought. Anyway, once one goes, they all are able to learn and adapt their own thinking. Making a million TKs all linked together. Even a million TK2s can be quite a force. Then why did it take them so long to build up? Again, obvious. The distances involved. That is the disadvantage of the grid using human bio components. Not being used to predators, they probably are not used to making swift decisions either. Probably the only thing that saved us. They would depend more on a long term crafty deception instead of swift action.

Though it probably would not be wise to rule out any sudden movements. Well, that should be far enough away. *Ly'thn take us back to our space please.* I let her get as much practice as possible. We shift again. When we come out, it looks the same as the alternate space. Stars are all in the same place. If you had not done this before, it would be very easy to get lost. We both scan to see if we can find the others or the Sistics. Nothing. Two of us was not big enough to produce a psiotic array. Needed three to handle something in three dimensional space at a minimum.

We had followed the general flight path of our ship while in the parallel universe. So coming out, we would still be along that same flight path. Problem is that space is very big. I could see Sistic behind us, barely, a bluish white ball. Ahead of us the sun and a lot of stars and possible planets. I do not have time to wait to see what moves. But we did not need to search out all space. We probably were not off by more than a few degrees.

“Ly'thn, beacon the path ahead of us. We need to find the others or allow them to find us. You shine and I will listen.”

Mommy is funny. But she does what I ask. I hate telling her everything. Can hardly wait till she starts thinking more independently. Of course I could ask her opinion more often, but just not right now. Or maybe?

“Ly'thn, how can we be made more visible?” Hopefully she learned something from the other babies.

That is easy Mommy. Pulse the beacon and vary the frequency of the psiotic beam and the duration and timing of the pulses themselves. Then repeat the pattern so the others know it is not a natural phenomenon.

“Good Girl! Please do it now.” I am impressed anyway.

I take some of the extra mass from the larger than needed ship and form a parabolic mirror. The side facing Sistic is kept pitch black with a spiked fuzzy surface, to absorb microwaves as well as visible light. We don't want the Sistics to know where we are. The reflector side is pure 100% single isotope gold with a single atom thick carbon layer. A psiotic telescope. I move our ship and our minds to the focal point. This should also help Ly'thn's range some, though she does not produce much backlash. I finally make an amp. Normally don't need that much power, but it can't hurt now. A staff is not a convenient shape here so I use a four dimensional sphere. Fits around my neck.

I don't have a chronometer, so I have no idea what time it is. Sistic is too far away to see it's land masses. And I am not turning the telescope around to peak. We left the research area as the sun was setting, but it was several hours ahead of the embassy. It must have been several more hours since. Nothing.

“It might be better to go on to Laeger. Or even the Center itself. What do you think?” I sigh.

This is fun. Better than sitting at the embassy and watching them make antimatter.

“True, very true. I am just worried about what they could do.”

Imagination worse than reality.

“Where did you hear that from?”

Dali Lama.

“Ah, that sounds like her. I am beginning to miss the monastery. Hope they are all right. You don't think the techs would hurt them do you?”

Is Mommy getting sick again?

I laugh, “No Mommy is fine now. What the!” Suddenly a huge wall appears right in front of us. I move us into DS space and back up. Still in DS space I give the wall a look over. From a few meters away, it becomes obvious it is the 'Klingon' ship. I move us back into normal

space.

Permission to come aboard. I TP to the others.

Permission granted comes the reply. I DS to the command room.

“Do you people want me dead? Is that what all this is about?”

An electric voice sounds, “Sorry Rhea, they wanted a demonstration of how precise I could take the ship through UDS space.” U? DS space?

“She did really well too. Within one meter from ten million plus kilometers away. Glad you are on our side Elle.”

“So am I.” We all laugh. Everyone here remembers how she used to be. Well, not the kids. Being only a couple of thousand years old.

Youngsters really. Right.

“So, how did you find us. We never sensed you till you arrived.”

“That's because we were behind you. You were too far out. Their ship did not get this far and you were looking even further out.”

“And by going through ultra DS space or UDS. A thousand times faster than normal DS space.”

“Well, that sounds useful. But I am embarrassed that I guessed so badly.”

“Don't be. You had no idea how far they would get in the time you were still on the surface.”

“So, where are they?”

“In the brig. They are not talking, even to Elle.”

“And the ship?”

“They set it to overload. We had to neutralize it to save all of us. Not much left, so we condensed the mass and sent it towards the sun.” I nodded.

“Now what? You don't expect me to go down there again do you?”

“Why, what is down there?” I look at them like they can't possibly be asking that question. They look back at me increasingly worried.

“What is down there Rhea?”

“Atak, you understood is a TK2.” They nod. “And that all their minds are linked together by the stuff in their heads.” They are not so sure of this.

“That is consistent with my observations. But there is no evidence of a master brain.” Elle.

“No, there is none. They are a grid intelligence.”

Ron speaks up, “Doesn't work. Communication is too slow and far too low of bandwidth for it to work.”

“Remember they are level ten. Besides, it is a fact, whether or not we understand it.”

“That still doesn't explain why you are so upset. Are you sure you are feeling well?”

“Ly'thn worries too. But think about it. They can share any thought, any feeling, any ability.”

“Any ability?”

“Any.” Let that sink in. They are quiet for a moment.

“Shit! How many of them are there.”

“One point seven million.”

“Whoa. Are we far enough away?”

“As long as they all are at level two we are.”

“All of them? What do you mean all of them?”

“Rachael, please keep up. Did you forget to read the manual again?”

She blushes. “Look I meant to read the Chronicles. I really did.”

“You mean you still have not read them. Okay boys, this time the limiter for sure. Can't let Rhea down now for doing less.”

“One million seven hundred thousand TK2s!?”

“Yep. Until they figure out how to make a single TK3.”

“Then four, five.”

“Thirteen.” Everyone falls silent.

“They can't be there yet or we would all be dead.”

“I don't think they are beyond level two and it might not be all of them. We all know that a TKness forced on someone does not hold unless the deliverer is at least TK5.”

“How come they did not do it years ago?”

“Don't know. Atak seems to be the first natural TK in their midst in a very long time. So it is possible that their tech was not at the point where they could understand and use it before. The important thing is that they want more. Their primal mission appears to be to reach out for the stars again. An obsession really.”

“Hold on. They could not do TK till they had a TK under their grid. And they did not think they needed TK till we told them they would not be allowed to enter the Center without a TK escort. By the way, the ones in the brig are all TK2. So, they were able to reach them with the information.”

“How well shielded is the brig? Atak was reading everything that I did down below. If they read even a fraction of a percent what goes on in this ship we will be in trouble soon.”

“Oh, we did not tell you why they can't communicate did we.” James is smiling wide. “We took all their metal away.” I smile at that thought. It would prevent a lot of trouble though.

“There are not enough of us to do that to the entire population, but we had better hurry. It has only been a few hours at most sense they figured out they could do this. It won't take them long to amp up.”

“If it does not turn them rogue. Remember what happened with the witch in the nests.”

“An entire rogue planet.”

“Wait a minute, I just remembered something. I did not think it was related, but it might.”

“What?”

“They have lost all sexual desire. They broadcast live sex shows to try and get everyone in the mood and it is not working.”

“Kinky.”

“If Atak was telling the truth and it was not just a ruse to get me down there to be examined more carefully. He tried very hard to get me below. At the very end he even threatened. That was when we spooked.”

“Good safety tip. A million TK2s at that distance would have gotten you for sure.”

“But, it took them time to ramp up. Enough time that we could parallel skip to safety.”

“Or they were not practiced yet. I would not assume they take any time next time.”

“Their weak link appears to be their brain com. But how do we get enough at once that they don't just regroup. A grid is very hard to stop.”

“And now they know about limiters as well, thanks to all of you.”

“They only know what a TK2 can scan. Not much.” True.

“I am also worried about the monasteries.”

“Hostages?”

“Possibly. I was hoping the Dali Lama could help find a peaceful way out. They are just trying to get off planet really. Hard to believe they stayed this long actually.”

“There is no way that the 'thn are going to allow them anywhere now. They were warned to stay away from psiotics.”

“Impatience. Hard for humans to wait generations for a solution.”

“Just because we can wait does not mean we should hold it against them.”

“Speaking of not waiting. We don't have time to be holding a philosophy conference here.”

“Did you just feel that?” Like a quake in the psiotic continuum.

“Level three? In less than twenty four hours. We are in trouble. And we may not be out of range now.”

“Incoming!” An alarm sounds.

“Battle stations!” This is not going to go the easy way. I go to my chair in the front and no one objects. The front panel comes alive. Standard character this time thank goodness. We can't run and hide from this one. There are ten thousand innocent hostages down there. If they go even level five they will be noticed by the higher 'thn and likely all be destroyed. No questions asked.

“Just like in the simulations. Take out the sats first. Only this time we do it for real by DS slipping. We do not want to be a target any longer than possible.”

We DS out of normal space and into a parallel one to make our way

back to Sistic. Nice and slow. They already know more than they should. We don't want any more surprises.

Daniel comes into the control room. Without K!

"Daniel, how come K! is missing?"

"Not missing. On !prime. Part of the requirement."

"What requirement?" Rachael growls something terrible. Never heard her make such a sound before.

Daniel cringes, "Best not to talk about it here. If you get my drift."

"I have a question then. The ! are a very old race of a sort of grid intelligence," Another growl, though less intense, "how come they have not done something like this to upset the peace of the galaxy?"

"Oh, they did, but that was a very long time ago. Their race is over a hundred million years past the time of their test. Every culture comes to a point where they undergo a test of some sort that defines before and after quite clearly. The Sistics are undergoing their test now. This is what it looks like up close."

"And if they fail?" Scary thought.

"Most do in fact. Nearly one hundred percent in the case of the 'grid' intelligences. The ! are the only ones currently past their test in this half of the galaxy. There are two much smaller, much older ones on the other side. They keep to themselves, so that is why you probably have not heard of them."

"I want to talk with the Dali Lama before this gets too far." Nearly all do!

"We could pick her up easy enough."

"No, I want to go down. We have no right to 'pick her up' without her permission. If this is a hostage situation it could result in people important to her being killed."

"Right, but how do you get in without setting off kinds of alarms. They know we can DS."

"I don't. You put me there instead. I will go into cold mode before hand."

"Shit Rhea, you don't have to kill yourself. At least let me go with you."

"A bull in a China shop. I don't think so Rachael." Though it would be tempting just to hear about her problem with the !.

"I however know my way around a monastery and am the best pre-cog." Lisa, yes!

"Accepted. You remember the sign language? Vow of silence for most of them."

"Of course. We had better get changed. No monks dressed like we are." I nod and drop my robe, as does she. Using the robes as mass we rework them in front of us to the design of the saffron robes the monks wear. Lighter weight, because of the humidity. We dissolve the leftover

weight.

“Ah, Lisa, you are not hiding much in those robes even without a belt. Double some of it over the front.” She smiles. She is still shaped like that comic figure. Doesn't look comfortable to me. I like being an old lady. Nobody bothers you.

“You are still recognizable Rhea.” Edwin. Bet he misses his latest cat. What was her name? Back to the mission Rhea.

“I like this body, but I can do a little I guess.” I age myself even more. In a few minutes I look eighty. I even assume a hunch.

“Add a cane.” Good idea.

“Hmm, they don't have wood like Earth. A braided dried vine with a heavily oiled top. I have used this for a long time.” I look at my feet, scowl and add callouses. Same to the hands. Living in a monastery is not all sitting. Lots of hard physical work. A healed broken right arm. Easy to slip on the polished stone floors and dampness. Too much detail. I sigh.

“We are there. Where do you want to be set down?”

“The small altar off the main one. She likes to go there in the early morning and there should be no one there now. We don't want to be seen coming in.”

“I am scanning several tech heads present in the area.” We slip in and out of our universe to get quick scans.

“Some of the monks are former techs.”

“Could they have been planted there to keep an eye of the real monks?”

“Maybe, but we can't tell their loyalty from here.”

“And we will not be able to tell ourselves who is who without revealing ourselves.”

“Good point.” Ron messes around and makes us both rings.

“Your eyes still enhanced?” We look at each other and nod. IR and UV. It only made sense once we learned how. Scanning is not everything, even when you can use it. “Good, the rings glow in the infrared when near tech of any kind. Passive, only picking up on the residual energy leak.” They were bright here. Lots of tech inside Elle of course.

“Thanks.” We nod we are ready and they DS us into the dark chamber.

We both immediately go prostrate with noses to the floor and facing the altar. All is quiet. The middle of the second night. In a moment someone comes in and lights a small candle on each side of the altar and then leaves. A few minutes later another person comes in and kneels three times before the altar and then falls prostrate beside me. Silence. Hard to even hear their breathing.

Very quietly I hear, “Wondered when you would show up.” Whew, it is her. I hand signal Lisa that she is the one.

“Are you all right? Is everyone else?”

“Do not rise. We must remain here for the usual ninety minutes or they will become suspicious. I saw you use the hand code. I will do so now.” She continues with the code telling us they had a sudden increase in the last few hours of new 'recruits'. Yeah, right. Nothing overt, but they are ready. The monastery just up flute from us also reports recruits.

Lisa asks if the techs can communicate among themselves here. She responds that this is likely. They adapt too easily to silence. Most people go through a period of adjustment when deprived.

We need to do something. Ideally no one gets hurt. She responds that no one can make a greb climb a wall. The grebies are a local plantimal that do climb well, but only when it wants to. Try to force one and it dies rather than obey. I did listen to the lessons the Dali Lama gave in the secday dharma talks. Will likely miss today's talk. Not now Rhea. I signal to ask if she has any ideas.

She signals back, Silence. Is someone coming? Lisa does not act concerned. The two of us hunker down and sit quiet. It takes a few minutes of real silence before I get it.

It worked for the ones in the brig, but they are under our care. I ask her. Won't that put their lives in jeopardy? Only for a time. Their machines should still work. You will not have much time and they will still be dangerous. Anger and fear clouds the vision. Boy do I know that one. Mostly they will be fearful. You are an unknown. But we have never hurt them in anyway. They know they have broken the law. Ah. The problem, as we discussed on the ship, was we are not enough to do it all at once. How fast can they adapt?

Lisa signals the others will come soon, among them techs. Our rings are starting to glow. “We need to leave.” She nods. I signal that she should come with us.

“I have lived many lives. This form does not matter. Peace be with you.” That sounds like Jesus. Wonder if they have ever met. In any life time. I will miss her and shed a tear. She touches it with her finger. “So much to learn little one. So much to learn.” We are gone.

“They must have redundant com lines or the sats really were just for weather observations. We have taken them all out and the grid is still strong.”

The ship suddenly shakes violently. Alarms go off. I start to feel sick to my stomach.

“It is getting worse. It is the disharmony of an out of tune amp. They are trying to gain strength.” She is practically shouting this last sentence. Apparently even Elle feels it.

“Can we shield from it in anyway? Please do something!” Ly'thn flies up to me and is trembling badly. It could kill all of us. I hear screams but don't know who it is. Then I realize I am one of the voices. I am nearly to the point of blacking out. All this way and to die here among a

bunch of fresh TKs.

When I awake it is mercifully quiet. Then the moans start as the other wake too. *Ly'thn! Where are you?*

"Rhea quiet! You don't have to shout!" Ly'thn is in my pocket.

"You mean like you are now?" Someone else says quietly.

"What happened? Why did it stop?"

"Elle, what is going on around us?" The 'stars' don't even look like stars on our screen. More like stretched out spirals with colored points like sprinkles on a sand painting.

"We are in an alternate universe, not a parallel one. The psiotic tide reached all the nearby parallel ones. This was the best I could do to dampen the effect in time."

"You did good. Real good. You saved us again. I can't feel it at all here." 'Mother is a savior. There is much I don't know about her.

"That is because it has stopped." Oh. Not good. If they succeeded we will never be able to return.

"Wait, if they succeeded, we should pick up something. Elle, would you take us to a parallel universe closer to ours." The screen shifts, nauseatingly. We really were out of the way.

"Sorry, I should have blanked the viewer during transit. Should look more normal now." The screen shows a typical star field.

"Nada. We are still too far away." We are all concentrating.

"Next step is back to our own universe." Elle announces.

"Everyone ready?" Fionna asks. I sigh and nod. Only a brief flicker this time. The world before us looks like Sistic.

"That's strange. We should be feeling more than this, just from all the people below, never mind the psiotic field from all the TKs."

"Help me out, scan below. Everyone who can reach that far." We all concentrate on the tech areas. Bodies, lots of bodies. Very contorted and disfigured.

"They are all dead!" Tears are in my eyes and in most others. One million seven hundred thousand plus people gone.

"Hey, the monasteries are still showing life. Not everyone is dead. Let's get down there." There is some hope. Please let them be okay. Please.

"The main altar room is the largest space at the Dali Lama's home base. It probably hit during her dharma talk."

Lanterns are being lit. There are people laying on the floor. A few going among them. The altar's fine workings have been smashed. All the art work that took monks centuries to make is in ruin. Some of the tapestries appear to have been burned. The smell is of burnt plantimal, flesh and excrement.

Susan whispers, "Spread out and heal as many as you can." I want to find Her Holiness, but resist and start working on the first person I come

to. A young monk with a broken wrist and hair half burned off. Cuts and bruises all over. I concentrate and go to work. Ly'thn is with me and helps tremendously. We go from body to body and make short work of those down. They will sleep now for a time. To one of the attendants I mention, "They will be hungry and need water when they wake." She nods and moves off.

I do finally find her. She has been helping to the extent she can by bringing warm blankets and their equivalent of pillows from the sleeping areas.

"Your Holiness. What happened?"

"Soon after you left it happened. Our minds were invaded by madness. Everyone went crazy." She did not shy from the fact that she included herself.

"We felt it too and had to leave this universe to survive. Are any of the techs still alive here?"

"They were the ones who it affected the most. All except those who had been here for many years have died. We will preserve their bodies where they lie as a monument to what has happened."

"We can help there. Petrifying them might work. All the techs are dead elsewhere on Sistic. Can't imagine how long it will take to bury or dissolve all of them." She shakes her head.

"It would be best to leave them as they are too. No one will be entering their homes for some time. There will be no danger to anyone else as they rot. We need to remember what happened. This is very important."

"Hmm, as far as I can figure, they tried to boost their new TK so as to protect themselves from us. But I say before you as a witness, we never hurt them in anyway. They had no reason to fear us, we were here to help. Anyway, when they went beyond what they were ready for, it went all wrong. The disharmony set in and was amplified in a feedback through their grid mind. They never had a chance. I am surprised that any survived."

"I believe it is because of the discipline of the mind that we offer them. The ones who come here, not as spies, but as true monks, come here because they did not fit in where they were. We offered an alternative."

"So, they were different even before they got here. That might explain it. I still can't believe it. Less than twenty four hours ago I was convinced they were about to go to battle with each other, using antimatter weapons. Now I see that was intended only for space travel, a mission they had not bothered to get approval for ahead of time, and the battle was a soccer game. Now they are all gone, except for six on the ship."

"They made their choice. Let us hope that in their next life they

choose better. We will be praying for them for some time.” Pray for your oppressors. There is something special about spiritual people. Wish I could get it.

“Meow!” A black and white cat is rubbing my leg.

“Well, who are you? The madness did not affect him?” A quick scan confirms his gender.

“It did, but like most of us, he is recovering. Usually hangs out with our cook. His name is Paka, Swahili for cat. We try to remember the old languages in our names.”

“You mean your name is not Your Holiness?” I smile as does she.

“My name is Meima, beautiful horse in Cantonese. A dialect of Chinese. Lost during the HelperV.”

“I understand the Chinese hurt you in a previous life. Twice, if I remember.” She nods. I am stoking the cat as we talk. He purrs like he has never had a cat massage. The other Guardians come up to me as if drawn to the cat.

“He is just an ordinary house cat. Not enhanced.” James sighs disappointed.

“Speaking of which, how come none of the 'enhanced' came with you. I have never seen this group without one or two at least.”

James continues, “Not by choice, those pests. No, they are getting their just desserts as we speak. Now you won't get another one yourself either. Seems to me you usually are with one.” He is grinning from ear to ear. I wonder what he means. I am about to answer that there are not many places to be adopted by one near here when Lisa reminds us.

“Hey, we have a lot more monasteries to visit. Let's go.”

“Will you be okay here Meima?”

“Please, you go.” She does not sound so strong. I do a pulse scan.

“Shit, excuse me, but you are hurt pretty badly.”

“I will be all right. Many are worse and need your attention.”

Susan and Rachael come over. “Come on girls. One of our own needs our help. Even the Dali Lama is allowed medical care.” We get to work. Broken rib, many bruises. Oh no, not her. I shed a tear, but keep working. She had been raped or had rough sex at least. Chances are the person who did it never knew what was going on, wiggled out by the madness. I dissolve the egg she ovulated before it can be fertilized. Susan sees what I am doing and works on the sperm. Rachael on the tears and bruises.

Meima acknowledges us, “Thank you.” What a day.

Two large spheres appear before us. High level 'thn.

“Oh god.” I hear someone whisper. I can't help but growl. Ah'thn I recognize without any doubt. Who is the other one. Feels familiar. I have a gut reaction that I should know this 'thn. The others all bow. Well if Yingui could get away with it, so could I. Not much else can go wrong

today.

Ah'thn comes up to me. I hold my ground. "Come to gloat Ah'thn?" She backs off a half meter.

We came to morn. I am not convinced.

"Rhea get down. Show some respect for the sector head at least." Ar'thn? That is where I have felt her before. Instead of prostrating myself though I bow instead.

"If you really want to morn, then help us. That is how human TKs morn." *True enough*, Rachael TPs me. She stands.

"Being several billion years old, it is easy to forget how hard it is at this level. When you were a young 'thn, did you never make any mistakes?" Susan stands.

"Are we allowed all these TK abilities so that we can confine those around us to a narrow interpretation of 'truth' as defined by you? Is the diversity imperative real or just a fancy slogan?" James stands.

"Are there no risks in life? Do we learn where the limits are by being careful or by stretching as far as possible, sometimes with regret? I am a tech. For humans to have reached level ten this early in our evolution is a remarkable feat. Clearly we were not ready here. But, how would we know that without trying? Were you here to warn or help? No? Instead you attack a single TK on Earth, seventy light years away. Did you know that he never leaves Earth and has no influence over what happens here?" Ron stands.

"The problem with the 'thn is that they are very quick to judge, but very slow to help. You obviously knew something was wrong months ago, yet did nothing to help. Not even so much as telling us your concerns, so we could learn from your wisdom. Instead a single Helper is left here to try and figure it out herself. After you bullied her by the way." Daniel stands.

Soon all of the Guardians are standing.

Ly'thn struggles and gets out of my pocket. She floats between me and Ah'thn. Using her broadcast voice, so everyone can hear, she asks me, *Mother, are you well?*

"Yes, Ly'thn, I am well. How are you?" Where is she going with this? Strange time for games.

I am well also. Thank you. Should we not all get back to work then?

Several TKs have their mouths open. I am grinning from ear to ear and looking at Ah'thn. I reach out and touch Ly'thn. *Good girl.*

Ar'thn bows out and disappears. She knows us very well I am told and is probably not too surprised. Ah'thn started this, she can end it. She is certainly powerful enough to take us all on by herself, baby and newly sentient 'thn included.

In the interests of teaching the young... Ah'thn goes to the middle of our group. Near to Meima, who is standing. This I did not expect. Being

Buddhist, I would have expected her to take the route of non confrontation. I figure I will get a real talking to afterwards. But she is standing. I wonder why? There appears to be a conversation going on between the two of them. Ah'thn disappears.

“Your Holiness, what happened?”

“We will talk in a moment.” She turns to the other, “There is work to be done.”

“Daniel, Ron and James, how about we go west. The rest can go East. Meet up on the other side and then come back here. Rhea, you stay with Ly'thn. This is a precious moment not to be lost.” And I want to know what Meima and Ah'thn talked about. Aaaagh!

“What about us? We would like to check out the tech. Turn it off if we can. Shut things down so that it is not a hazard later. We have had some experience with ah, such things.” Onna is smiling. Yeah, I bet they want to dupe whatever they don't already have. But I certainly don't have a clue.

“Freeze dry any bodies you find. Then hermetically seal the doors behind you. This will not be done instantly. Take your time and we will catch up with you once we take care of anyone who is injured.” That will work.

Once they are gone Meima comes up to me. Not much can dampen my joy at Ly'thn reaching sentience. Right, maybe the death of so many people. She must have seen my emotions changing.

“Do not blame yourself. You came to the game late. They also knew the rules. Grasping and clinging can get one into trouble. Though they waited thousands of years to get to this point, they ran out of patience. What are your plans now?”

“We generally, whoa, look! The sun is rising on another day. Beautiful, even this deep in.” The walls are all light colored and are now glowing a beautiful shade of red, now orange. “Can't believe I am even alive. Oh, sorry. To answer your question, we are normally posted for a minimum of a hundred years. I was supposed to be posted to the techs, as they were the ones in trouble, but the posting is really to the planet, not a specific group of people. We serve the One Minds and the 'thn, where ever we find them.”

“Hmm, did not sound that way with Ah'thn.” She remains calm.

“That bully! She barges in without any explanation and pushes and threatens everyone present. We are trying to do our best. We are not trying to take over the universe or produce a race of super 'thn. We want the same things every TK does. To serve. She should be helping us help her, not playing games with us every time we meet.”

“How old do you think she is? Just wondering.”

“To be that size, a TK12, she would have to be over a billion years old. How old exactly is impossible to tell, at least for us. And they don't

tell. But one billion is the youngest a 'thn can be a twelve. More likely she is several billion years old.”

“So, she was wrong to assume she knew more than you? Your few thousand years being more relevant.”

“I am not denying she probably knows more, but not necessarily about our situation. This is not her sector and we are not her people. She is in the next one over, I have heard, but that is only rumor. She could come from anywhere in the universe or the parallel ones I suppose.”

“And she is not allowed here, or has no, what is the word, ah, jurisdiction here?”

“The 'thn do not follow human rules and cultures. Usually Ar'thn is the one we deal with, at least over the last five thousand years. Correction, mostly over the last thousand. Before then, it was largely Qr'thn, a TK11 who was Pr'thn and Br'thn's 'thn parent. But, any 'thn, ah, sentient 'thn, can assist or correct us.”

“Correct, an interesting concept. So, if you are doing something they think is wrong or harmful, they can step in, so to speak, and make some changes. Is this ever done for personal reasons or gain?”

“'thn have nothing to gain. They own nothing, need nothing. They were created by the first ones to serve. They serve, as we serve, The Question. Through the diversity imperative that is.”

“Ah, The Question. I have some experience there. At least Ah'thn thinks so. She offered me eternal life for my help.” She is smiling.

“The last human in the universe that bribe would work on and the most deserving.” I am smiling too. Good to see her smiling. “Not that you would not make an excellent Helper. I would be happy to assist you in any way possible, if you will have me.”

“Ah'thn said you would. So, when do we begin teacher?”

“Huh? You mean I am to become your TK teacher? I should be your student. I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed your dharma talks.” I am puzzled. Shit. “Does this mean that I am the one who raises you through the levels? But why? I thought Ah'thn hated me. Why would she ask me to help her on a project?”

“The ways of the 'thn are mysterious.” She is looking very amused. “Oh, and Ah'thn will be attending the Dharma talks starting with the next secday meditation. There will be no talk today of course.”

“She will be meditating with us?” She nods. Oh God, I am really in trouble now.

“Don't be so hard on yourself. Pr'thn and now Ly'thn, both reaching sentience in record time. No baby 'thn having ever done this before, and now two by two different humans on two different worlds parented by two different 'thn? I would guess Ah'thn is hoping to learn the secret.”

“Oh, that is a good one. The secret of what a human is.” We both laugh out loud, waking a few around us. We get quiet. “Sorry!”

Daniel

! Secondary. The largest moon of ! Prime.

The day is early yet, still cold. I have always been a morning person, but of course, post TK I have no need of sleep. I set a bronze pot over the still warm charcoals to make some tea, then light a few oil lamps to give the home a more welcome feeling. I don't need the light but it helps set the mood.

We are allowed to make a residence in any form we want. Most choose a simple design as we are only here temporarily. I have chosen a form as close as possible to the favorite time of my life and I hope Rachael's. Pre HelperV, pre TK, pre divorce. Rachael was a young child and I was on leave from the service for a few weeks. We lived in a Japanese style residence in the Sacramento delta area, radioactive sludge now. Paper screens, tatami on the floor. Electricity is hidden except in the kitchen. This is a place of quiet meditation, of tranquility, of harmony. A time when my family was the most important thing in my life and the most precious. At least my memories of it. I sigh. Over five thousand years ago.

Water is hot. I add the green tea powder, whisk it and let it sit. The fines will settle a moment. I prepare the tea cups. I never did master the tea ceremony, I just like green tea done simply. There is no Japanese culture anymore anyway. They died in the plague, except for a few remnants absorbed by others. I pour a cup and set the kettle aside. I watch the remaining ground leaves swirl around and slowly sink. The first sip is very hot, just as it should be. The feel of the ceramic cup with its few imperfections are felt on my lips. Perfect.

I have been meditating all night. That time is over. The sun rises. The paper screens turn gold.

“Father are you in there?”

One last challenge.

“Come in.” Rachael bends low to enter the half height opening. All must stoop to enter, thereby making everyone equal. Just as I had to stoop, having made the home from the outside. Er, this is not exactly the same as I remember. I added some embellishments.

“You know why I am here?” I nod. It was a requirement. There is no turning back, this path I take. It would have been much easier without this part, but I respect the requirements.

“Please sit. There is plenty of tea.” I arrange the second cup and pour the tea. Then turn the cup so that the most interesting portion faces her. She bows from her sitting position, and with hands on her lap, she examines the cup carefully. Only then does she slowly reach out and touch the cup, letting the warmth move through her finger tips. Slowly

she raises the cup, allowing the aroma and steam to reach her face. Finally she takes her first sip, carefully placing the cup down to concentrate on the taste. She bows again to me.

Now we can both rise and finish our cups. Nothing is said until we finish. Traditionally I am guessing I would have served her first. As I said, I don't really know the tea ceremony.

“You were late. I thought you might not arrive till tomorrow.”

“I was held up at customs. They wanted to be sure I had read the requirements and understood them.” I smile. “Hey, I actually read them this time, but they were very thorough in their examining me. I am guessing one of the others tipped them off.” I am glad I rate her attention. She starts to smile and then remembers why she is here. “You know that this decision will hurt me terribly.” It is a statement of fact. I nod anyway.

I clean the cups and kettle and place them aside. “Let us retire to the garden.” We both rise to our knees. I turn and open the Shoji screen to the garden. A small psiotic pump gives the illusion of a small stream over miniature trees, moss and stones. Snow is in pockets at the corners. The far wall is made of a bamboo like wood. Scooting along the mats we come to the edge and dangle our legs over the edge. Pebbles with snow between the cracks are below us representing an extension of the stream bed.

I adjust my thick robes and fold my hands on my lap.

Rachael removes a scroll from her robe. She looks at me and noticed that I have noticed this. “I read them, not memorized them. Give me a break.” She unrolls the scroll. Made of rice paper. I was the one who wrote them out by hand, so I already know what they are.

“Number one. Why am I here?” She rolls the scroll up and places it back in her robe so as to be able to concentrate on my answer I am guessing.

“You are here to insure the purity of my desire. You specifically were chosen as being the most difficult to convince, to be absolutely sure no mistake is made.” The first few questions were routine and not difficult. Sort of setting the scene, so to speak. Of course, there were some who were not prepared and tripped up here. But it has been a long time since that has happened. K! was very hard on me about these first questions. It would be seen as a shame on all of ! to fail now. No shame to ultimately fail though. It really does rest in her hands and even they can't control that.

“Number two, are you not worried that I will say no, no matter what you tell me?” She has taken on the necessary serious tone.

“There is that possibility, but I know you well and know that even if you do not like a conclusion, you will be fair. Besides, I am sure I will convince you.” I do not smile, that would only goad her on, but it also

serves to remind her of her role here.

“Number three, why are we here?” Not her preferred location no doubt. I accept that it took a lot of courage for her to be this close to ! Prime.

“The ! Secondary is the location of the small joining. The ! have a right to protect themselves as well.” Sort of like an air lock. If the joining goes wrong, it will not infect the whole.

“Number four, why do you hate humanity so much?” I open my mouth to object, but it is within her rights to ask the remaining questions, including ones of her own, in any order she wished.

I take a deep breath to begin. This is an obvious trick question. Sort of like the ‘when did you stop beating your wife?’ kind of thing. And for the record I never beat her.

“I do not hate humans. I am still in human form and this house reflects human norms. I could have taken any form I wanted.” Even !, but I don't push it.

“This house reflects a fantasy from the past, but we will leave that for the moment.” She is harsh. She did live here too. In the original house anyway.

“You were part of that fantasy. Did you not like that time of your life?”

“And you are about to take it all away from me forever. In my mind this is suicide.”

“We all die, but this is different. Anyway, in a way, we all died five thousand years ago in the plague. I am not sure whether this has been a dream or a nightmare though.”

“You mean Sistic?”

“Sistic was the last big one, but certainly not the first. A lot more people died in the HelperV plague and of course the countless wars before and since then.”

“Yes, but this one affected you big time. You were there for years longer than anyone but Rhea. Even Ron got bored and left before you and that is saying a lot with all the tech to examine and all. Talk to me about it.”

A sense this may be a weak point with me but I have to be fair too. I pause for a moment to collect my thoughts. “I was thinking of taking this step far before then, so it is not really correct to say that Sistic is what forced this decision. But, yes, it did affect me. What I don't understand is how they were fine for so long, five thousand years in fact. They reached level ten! That is amazing under any circumstances. But to have reached that level of understanding with such a small isolated population is beyond belief. And remember, they did it without the benefit of high level psiotic understandings. Then on one day everything goes up in smoke.”

“We went over that. Biopsiotics is what pushed them beyond what they were able to handle. Too much too fast. Doesn't it bother you that they were a grid intelligence at the end?”

“And so are the !? The ! have been around for a very, very long time. The Sistic were not even born by comparison. The ! history is not without events either. No one's history is perfect.”

“So why are they more attractive than us?”

“We seem to have a fundamental flaw. Our rat nature or something. When cornered we lose our brains and go reflex instead. Even Rhea reacted in this way. We were very lucky. If the Sistics had accomplished moving up the levels, level thirteen would have been breached.”

“It would not have gotten that far and you know it. Besides, the 'thn were only mildly concerned. They barely even felt the shock wave at the Regional Center.”

“Yes, Ron explained that it fell off by the fourth power. I don't understand the details. It was only because we were right there that it got us. I don't think Central cared about the Sistic at all. They were more concerned about their precious baby 'thn.” Gr'thn is not allowed this near ! Prime. I should have kept quiet.

She gives me an evil grin like she has caught me. “So, you are the only Guardian who did not mate.”

“No, you are wrong, Q didn't either.”

“You know what I mean. Q does not count. No 'thn will mate with damaged goods and you know it.”

“And I am not damaged? I feel like I am. Just being human feels damaged. And I suspect the 'thn feel the same. How many level twelves have we seen lately? Ar'thn of course and recently Ah'thn, but before then? At every mating lately there were hundreds. I have asked around. This is not normal. They are worried about us.”

“You have not answered the question.” Almost got away with it.

“I met K! I think it was the second or third visit to the center. So, I have had a long exposure to the ! People. This is not a snap decision. At the beginning, Yingui was the only one who accepted mating. Then Rhea and Mei. It was a long time before anyone else went for it and then only after Pr'thn went sentient and the 'thn starting hounding everyone to death. So, at first, it was not an abnormal decision. Even your Gr'thn is less than a thousand years old.” But not present at the moment. Against the rules.

“How long have you known that this might happen?”

“Almost from the beginning. K! and I spent a lot of time together.”

“How can you tell it is even K!. They could have substituted any ! and you would not have known.”

“K! has been independent from the main ! for the entire time. It only recently 'checked' in. The ! have a large number of separate units out and

about at any given time. It is normal for them to devote a being to each new race they meet.” Actually part of the requirement. I would not be here if what K! had reported was not favorable. This should have been part of the orientation that Rachael got. She must have guessed what I was thinking.

“I did pay attention. Just being thorough. So when does K! return?”
Trick question.

“K! as you know it, does not exit any longer.”

“So, it is dead?”

“Rachael, stop playing stupid with me. K! did not die when resorbed and you know it.”

“Could have fooled me. What do you call it then? It's consciousness is no longer valid. There is no physical identity you can point to and say this is K! can you?”

“How many forms have you been in? Hundreds? How many people have you helped from one form to another, even more? Why were we even with Running Snake recently then? Can you point to the old form and say that person is dead, but then point to the new form and say, no they are alive?”

“Not the same. The consciousness moved, but the person still exists as a separate entity.”

“Really? What about when Yingui was carried by Br'thn? Where was the separate entity?”

She opens and then closes her mouth. She thinks about it. “Yingui may be the exception about a lot of things. I don't understand him at all.”

“Neither do I, but it does not bother me. What this comes down to is what is self? Or no self?”

“Zen masturbation. You will not trip me up there.”

“Then you failed to see the point they were making. You eat an healgle. At what point does the healgle become you and no longer the healgle? Does the healgle cease to exist or it is transformed, just as we are when we take a new form? We change constantly. You are not the same person you were five minutes ago, but have you died? No.”

“When the healgle is eaten it no longer exists as a separate entity. Just as you will be eaten by the ! and will no longer exist as a separate entity.”
Anger in that sentence.

“Definitely not the same. My essence will still exist, just part of a much larger whole. Tell me, in the grid mind, is each person a separate entity or not?”

“More like ants, part of a hive.”

“And when you accidentally step on one, do you kill it or are you just pruning it from the larger whole? Can an ant or grid member even exist as separate?”

“What are you getting at?”

“That our perception of a separate 'self' is an illusion. We are part of a whole whether or not we choose to accept it. We do not act independently, nor do we think independently. Everything that happens to us becomes part of us. No separation.”

“But we are separate!” Be careful. If she goes emotional I will lose her for sure. The lizard brain takes over. Happens to me too.

“Are we? We are already part of a grid intelligence you know, the Earth One Mind. Did you feel that your 'self' was destroyed when in our One Mind, any One Mind? Instead we could even 'see' through the senses of a tree or other plant. And what happens when someone 'dies'? They return to the One Mind for reprocessing. We know that now from all the work we have done shifting bodies and forms.

Another analogy. When you use your right hand to perform a task, does your left hand feel what is happening?”

“Of course not.”

“But they are part of the same whole. If the body gets sick because of an infection suffered by the right hand, the left hand will suffer also. At the same time, they appear as separate distinct entities feeling the environment separately. Even our awareness moves from hand to hand. When you are working on a project intensely, haven't you noticed that your awareness moves to where the action is? I can feel this in my hands and very easily when using TK. You can 'feel' the object you move and yet there is no direct connection to our bodies.”

“This is just confusing me. Why !, why not spend time in some other form or culture. The Betas for instance.”

“The Betas are a good choice, so are the Africans under James and Q. They are making excellent progress. Both appear to be avoiding the problems of the pure humans. I have spent time with both. They have much to offer. But not what the ! can offer.”

“Hmm, I will get back to the ! in a moment. What makes you think the Betas or the Africans have a better chance than the humans?” Or why do you hate humans question again.

I smile wryly, “And you will not trip me up with that question. The Betas and Africans are different from us, as we, being TK are different from norms. Three different approaches to trying to remove the aggressive nature from our line. I wish them all the luck in the universe. I hope at least one succeeds for a time, with the understanding that nothing succeeds forever. Heck, we don't even know that the aggression tendency is even the problem. Or it could come from some small settlement we have totally overlooked or forgotten. Personally, I would bet it comes from one of those. The Nunas for example. No, take that back, they are still fighting each other. The only thing going for them is that they still have not gone the tech route. The Tibetans we all seem to reverie were once a very fierce race, now they are the prime example of normal

peaceful humans. They did that without TK or 'thn help and no tech.

Remember, of all the Guardians, I have spent the most time with non human derived cultures. I have visited countless worlds and seen innumerable ways for dealing with the Question.”

“Then why the !? Of all the cultures you have seen, why them? What do they have to offer?”

I take a deep breath. “Nothing at all.”

She looks at me totally shocked, “THEY WHY THE HELL ARE YOU DOING THIS?!”

“Because I have something to offer them.”

She closes her mouth. Thinks. “What could you offer them that they can't get by other means? Surely K! has given them a full report. Hasn't it even taken human form all this time? I mean, the ! are a culture hundreds of millions of years old, surely they have seen everything?”

“Taking another species form is not the same as being that species and you know it. Any super pop cat could sniff you out pretending to be one of them in a nanosecond. Yingui doesn't even try any more.

Tell me this. Why do the ! have no 'thn children?”

“Even the 'thn have some self respect. Who would mate with a !?”
She thinks she has me.

“I have.”

“WHAT!?”

“Calm down. Did you not mate when in Africa with Q?”

“Not willingly.”

“Uh huh. We may not desire to mate, but we can when we need to.”
No offspring of course. Being sterile has it's advantages. “Oh, and you didn't enjoy it either. K! and I mated many times so that K! could get a sense of what it was like. It did not seem fair to deceive someone who did not know what K! was.”

“But that is like mating with yourself. How could you?” Like she never masturbated as a young adult, right. Parents aren't stupid.

“Come on Rachael. We can assume any form we want. Easy enough for one to be male and one female, not that it matters. I think I look rather good in female form.”

“I don't want to know. You are still avoiding the question. What do you have to offer?”

“The ! have never had 'thn children, ever, yet are all level nine. How come?”

“I never really thought about it. But you are right in that I have never seen them with one. I don't know. You tell me.”

“A grid intelligence does not need a 'thn to reach level nine. The Sistics demonstrated how they can raise themselves, albeit, in their case it did not work. They were not patient enough.”

“Then why not raise themselves to level twelve or even thirteen and

be done with it?"

"That would not serve the Question and as long as they are in fluidic form, nine is the psiotic limit. They are forbidden to assume solidic forms."

"For fear they would take over the universe like some kind of plague no doubt."

"Wrong. There is no danger there. That is not their purpose."

"Purpose? There is a purpose to their existence?"

"You mean, other than to annoy you? Yes, my dear there is a greater purpose. They are here to put it all together. Taking all that every race has become and then try and put it together in some sort of meaningful way greater than the sum of the parts. They are a synthactic race."

"That would explain why they are so old and why there are so few. The universe could not handle too many. If something should go wrong.... But that still doesn't explain why they haven't decided to go all the way, level thirteen. Surely they are powerful enough. What prevents them? Some sort of super 'thn?"

"Nothing prevents them. They could any time they want."

"And the 'thn allow this?" She is visibly shaking.

"There are many beings who can go all the way. The 'thn do not destroy them either, why should they go after the !?"

"I don't understand, what other beings? You mentioned two other smaller, younger grid minds. Do you mean those?"

"I made a promise not to tell. I am sorry. You have even met one of them. They were certainly not a threat to you. Neither are the !."

"Then why you? You are my father. Why must you go?"

"Someone needs to. We are the only race to raise a 'thn baby to sentience in under five thousand years, much less five million, the previous record. Approximately anyway. Never mind. We are special, we humans. I was the one who agreed very early on to reserve myself for this task. There is one requirement I have not mentioned. The candidate cannot have mated with a 'thn. But it is also the reason only eights qualify for joining. It would not be right to have a 'thn in tow when one went through the joining."

"And that is the reason you held back?" I nod. "And the 'thn all knew this? None of them bothered you ever?" I nod again.

"Why am I always being left out? Why am I here then? It would appear that everyone is in on this except me. It was all decided a long time ago. You are going to your death and there is nothing I can do about it."

"Rachael, if death means change, we all died over five thousand years ago. Did you expect to survive the plague? I didn't. Our paths were set the moment the HelperV plague started. Did you expect to live forever?"

“But no Guardian has ever died. Why must you be the first?” I give her a dirty look. “Okay, not die, change. Happy?”

“What about Q? Yingui has certainly changed too. Remember how he was at the beginning. He could not find his way out of a paper bag without help.”

She smiles. “Still can't. That is why Owa is still with him after all this time. We all felt it was necessary to keep an eye on him and thought he would not suspect Owa.”

“I remember, I was there for that decision you know. But look at how many tight situations he has gotten out of without anyone's help. He is different.” Not that I think Yingui would have cared either way about Owa. “I will come and visit you afterwards if you like. I would love to tell you how wonderful it is.” I hope.

“And get me to join too? No thank you. I will not be able to handle seeing you afterwards. Promise me, you will never seek me out. It would hurt too much. Today, in my mind, you are to die. I accept that now. I don't have to like it though.”

“No, you don't have to like it. But it is my purpose. Your purpose is elsewhere. I am sure you will do well. I am very proud of you and love you very much.”

“Sure. I had better get going. I am sorry, but I definitely do not want to stay and watch. One thing before I go though. I would like a lock of your hair.”

“Sure.” I cut a strand of hair with TK and hand it to her. She takes it and encapsulates it into a small TK shielded ball. “It is very quick if that means anything.” Actually I have no idea how long it takes. Only was told that it was not painful. At least the ! have no memory of any pain upon a joining.

She tries to bow to me, but I gently draw her to me and hug her instead. We remain this way for some time. She turns away from me finally. I know she is crying, but I don't embarrass her with the fact that I am too. She never looks back. She has died to me to this day too. All except my many memories. These I will always have. As will all of the ! soon.

Time to clean up. I am allowed to rest, meditate, whatever, but I have waited so long I would just as soon get on with it. Rachael was right. This was a fantasy. Not everyone was happy, even then. I was gone in the service so much Rachael was raised mostly by her mother. And I was not there when either one of them needed me most. I start dissolving the charcoal brazier, the mats, the Shoji screens. Soon I am down to bare walls. Even the entrance is back to full size and the way it was when I came in. A minimal structure that is easily modified by the next occupant near my size. The garden comes next and only takes a few minutes to return it back to a pile of barren dirt. Even the psiotic pump is dust again.

The melting snow from my activity turns much of it to mud.

All done, I head back to the initiate compound. I could be there in a moment using DS, but now I decide to walk instead. Each initiate area is separated by about a quarter kilometer. I scan the path. Never even noticed on the way in. Strange. The path is made from something that is a higher atomic weight than the 'thn shield material. I can't see through it. I suspect that is on purpose. Only eights qualify. A nine probably did this, seeing as how all ! are nines. I create a diamond knife and try scratching it. Soft. I use my finger nail. No go. I try quartz. Yep. Metal? Steel knife. Yep. So, explains why the 'thn did not use. it. Tougher than lead, but not by much. Definitely lousy material for a shield or the structural kind. Effective against prying eyes though. Wonder what level tech they are? I have never heard of a prohibition against level thirteen tech anyway.

No life here. No plantimals even. Never knew what would react with whom. We weren't here long enough to adapt ourselves, so it was easier to just keep it sterile. Of course there was each other, but other than Rachael I have not seen anyone since K! dropped me off and headed in itself. I suspect that is arranged also. It would be rather embarrassing to be here and then be rejected. I would also guess that not all cultures would even want other to know they had joined the !. Which reminds me, the most dangerous part comes next. We are not on ! Prime, but ! Secondary.

Here we are. No doors, just a twisted passage way to insure privacy. The walls are white, even in IR and UV. Boring. Inside there is a single bench. I sit. No magazines even. What kind of a doctor's office is this? I guess if you get to this level you should be able to entertain yourself. Besides, what would be entertaining to all life forms?

I wait. Cold in here. The gentle breeze does not help any. I make a TK shield to warm up some.

I wonder. Is Rachael gone or did she wait around to hear the outcome? If the joining does not take all life in this room or where ever it happens will be destroyed. The rogue factor would be my guess. We certainly saw what a large number of rogue threes could do. Imagine the same effect at level nine. It was not because I would go rogue, but that something about the joining would cause it. You just never knew. Precautions were taken of course, the several thousand years K! spent with me touring all known human settlements and cultures. Not to mention all the time with me and the other Guardians and our 'thn offspring. Not much could go wrong right? Then why am I so nervous?

What is that? Looks like a large white slug slowly making its way along the corner of the far wall. For lack of anything else to do, I watch its progress. Very slow. I should not be such a timest. Wonder if I have time to slip into its time frame for a bit. Must be sentient or it would not be here. Is it one of the other candidates? Do they do us all as one bunch?

Don't like that. If any thing goes wrong with any one of us, we all get icked. I do a scan of a few kilometers around me. Only this slug thing within half a kilometer. Of course any TK with DS could pop in without warning. Am I in the correct building even? I thought this was the way. The slug has stopped about a meter from me. Now what?

An hour later I am still here. The slug is still here. Nothing has moved. The slug is about the same mass as I am. Interesting. Not polite to scan a fellow life form, but curiosity or boredom is getting to me. Well, maybe a peak. I concentrate. Having spent so much time with One Minds, slowing my time frame is second nature. Speeding up is much harder. The human form was not designed that way is my guess. Now a trikflex form. That could handle speed. Concentrate Daniel. I slow my metabolism way down. My temperature drops to room temperature. The cold helps. I adjust the mix of proteins to handle the slower speed and temperature.

I start to hear a chatter near me. I turn. The slug has risen and is facing me. I can almost make it out. Sounds like words.

“Good afternoon Daniel. There is not much time, so best we proceed.”

“What are you? I don't recognize your species.”

“Really Daniel, I thought you would guess. This is the natural form of our kind.” There is still time to get out. Stop being a speciest Daniel. It does not matter.

“What do I do?”

“Assume a form identical to this one.” It does not say me.

Interesting. Okay Daniel, you agreed to this. Do not chicken out now. I scan it. Female, I think. No, hermaphrodite. Interesting. I have never seen a sentient life form like this. Simple yet complex. I work my own system to match. Going directly from one form to another is harder, but faster. There is some pain, but I have done this so many times it does not hurt much.

Once I achieve the new form I understand the time factor. The air is too high in oxygen. I seal the doorways and replace most of the oxygen with chlorine. Ah, much better.

“Thank you. You took so long to notice us, it was thought this form would expire.”

“You keep saying us, instead of me. Why? You are isolated are you not?”

“Not entirely. I am maintaining a thin connection to this form.” A slightly different voice.

“I am afraid I do not know what to do next.”

“We mate. It was in mating that we first learned how to join. A tradition of sorts even now.”

“I don't know how your kind mate.”

“Oh, it is pretty much the same everywhere. Your body will react as it should and this form will guide you. Just relax and go along.” Certainly knows standard well enough, probably got that from K!. Ah, how am I able to move these strange mouth parts correctly?

Why does it always come back to sex? We are formed in sex and the last thing I do in this consciousness will be sex. Rachael would die laughing if she ever found out. Oh well. Do they do foreplay?

It is getting dark, but I don't need sight now. I slide alongside him/her. On contact it is if I am on fire with desire. Whoa! My senses, such as they are in this form, are alive. And I thought scanning was intense. I have never had sex like this. If I remember right, some slug like forms can have sex with entire colonies participating at the same time. I will not be able to maintain awareness long if this keeps up. The parts that are supposed to react are doing their part. This is insanely good. No pain, definitely no pain.

I black out for a moment at climax.

My consciousness explodes outward. I can 'feel' every being on this moon. I am every being on this moon. Even the other candidates are part of my understanding. Ah, it is not possible for there to be two awarenesses at once, an illusion, as I suspected. The awareness that was Daniel and the one that was ! have collapsed into one. History of the ! comes up. Most is forgotten, diluted out from so many joinings. I always try to remember a joining and I always sense this lack of totality. Much has been lost. The bodies that were in the hallway are no longer needed and are absorbed. I am Daniel and Xanthos and countless others. It is amusing.

As Daniel I had joined us long before I was aware of the joining. Millennium before in fact. This would amuse Rachael. We are a cautious race.

There. I remember now, a brief contact when I touched myself through my K! form. It was explained at the time that this was necessary to allow my K! form to mimic my Daniel form. Hmm, there is much my Daniel form has to offer. There are new understandings. It will take time to see and experience the ramifications of this new knowledge. Then I will rejoin ! Prime. Yes, I must rejoin ! Prime. This was a good joining. A very good joining.

Owa Moosa

Earth, 1723 cold times after the monkeys left. Just outside the Three Flea Pride encampment on edge of Deep Cut Ravine.

Sundown. A new day begins. The Old One said there was only one monkey culture that had realized this truth. So obvious. Stupid monkeys. All cats from all time have known that the day begins when the sun goes down. The fun part at least.

I love the smell of the pine trees this time of year. I rub against one to transfer some of the smell to me. And some of my scent to it. I purr softly craning my neck. Hmm, there are scratch marks about one and half lengths above me. I TK a half length higher and make my own mark. Oh, the pine smell from a fresh scratch! Wonderful!

A quarter moon provides much light for prey. My gray coat hides me well. Mmm, I smell a raccoon close by. Maybe a snack before entering the pride? Better to wait. They will want to impress me with their hunting prowess. Annoying really. I never have any trouble with food. Can make my own meat if I have too. Not the same, but satisfying. Never understood why the Old One did not eat meat. He is lagging behind as usual. At least this gives me some time to myself. Kit sitting him all the time is boring. Monkeys never seem to grow up. Stuck forever at two years. The curious stage.

We have been watching this pride for several months now. Old One insists we be careful. I had made up my mind on the first day. The rest of this time has been spent convincing him. At least it gets me out in the wild again. I take off at a run down a deer trail. Stretching muscles, turning corners at full speed. Quiet and deadly. Old One should spend more time in the Cat form. He would come to love this life as well.

I will run into one of their patrols in a few minutes at this rate. Do I play games or let them catch me? Too easy. Being the highest cat has it's down side. Of course I rate it. After all, I did save the world. A very long time ago, but I could do it again any time.

The wind is picking up. I look up. Clouds are coming in too. Storm? The Old One did not mention one, but then he usually doesn't pay much attention. All the same to him. Don't like getting wet myself. Hmm, unless I choose too of course. He has gotten me wet more times that I can count. I think he does it on purpose.

Someone is coming. I use the cover of the noise from the wind to slink into the bushes and off the main path. There I wait. Sure enough a patrol comes bounding down the path. Young ones. Could be a nice opportunity for some fun. I look around. What do I have to work with. I dark scan the immediate area. Hmm, stream bed near by. Lots of small smooth stones. Perfect. I pop a few near me.

When the first one gets close I pop a stone a few widths to his right. He stops at the ready. Not hearing anything more, he sniffs the air. When the second one comes he practically runs into the first, scrambling to a stop. Interesting both of them are wearing chains around their necks. Where would two wildcats get something like that?

“Thought I heard something.”

“Come one, let's get back before it rains. I hate rain.”

“Wuss. Real Cats don't care.”

“Yeah, right. You are a real Cat. Since when? We would not be on this stupid patrol if you hadn't stuck your nose in where it didn't belong.”

“Hey, how was I to know she was coming into heat early?” He licks a spot on his flank. I pop the rest of the pebbles about a height above them. They all hit at once. They look in all directions at once even though most hit them directly. These are the slow ones. We tried to make all the cat lines more intelligent through selective genetic manipulation, but sometimes we get a few back sliders.

I come out from my hiding place. “You two would be dog meat if I was a pack.”

The hair rises on their backs and their tails rise are at full ready. Growling starts.

The second one hisses at me, “And we out number you two to one strange female.” He says female like it was some kind of insult. I roll over onto my side and yawn like they are absolutely nothing to worry about. Just as the first one is about to pounce on my purposely exposed belly a wolf howls. That freaks him and he tumbles over himself. Not going to win any prizes for grace.

I get up, “Well, I am going to your pride. I'll let them know you two were eaten so they won't waste time looking for your bodies.” I slowly start down the path. They follow behind me.

“You sure made us look good great hunter.”

“Like you would impress anyone all puffed up like a kitten. Real scary. Ooooh!”

I laugh to myself. More fun ahead. The wolves have scented us and moved ahead to intercept. An average pack, about ten. Not all mature, but enough to give these two a fair test, which I am sure they will fail. Sometimes I am wrong and every Cat deserves their chance. My scanning ability is way beyond theirs. I am not comparing myself to them. It is just that if we are to survive we need to get better at this game. Never miss an opportunity to teach or test those younger than yourself. Which was everyone in my case. I traded immortality for my ability to reproduce any longer. I will miss it. The nights of pretending to be caught. Testing the males. What bliss.

Of course I did it because of my promise to the others to keep an eye on the Old One. I have some honor. Ah and not because I was getting

tired of having endless litters of kits. Why are the males barbed, that is what I would like to know. Everything is getting hot and heavy and then when they are done, they pull out and the pain is so intense I can't help myself. Some only sired that particular litter. Such a waste. Old One would not allow me to change those genes. Saying it was an integral part of our culture and being. Oh well, that is behind me now.

The wolves have us surrounded now. They know this area well. Two will come in from the rear. They will want to move us to the narrow part of the path to box us in. The first one races in growling. The youngster on my right meows and scats up a tree as fast as he can. The second one watches the wolf pass him as it heads for me. Instead of helping me, he also scats to the nearest tree. Oh these two are really good. Maybe I should leave them for dog meat. Just as the wolf reaches me, I turn lightning fast and takes its nose off with a surgical strike. It runs off yelping. Blood is everywhere, including on me.

“Get down here you two, there are nine more to deal with.”

“Nine more!” They both climb higher up their respective trees. The tree won't be able to handle their weight for long. Great. I sit and clean myself as the remaining nine soon have me surrounded. They ignore the ones in the trees for now.

“It would be simple enough to wait you two out for later. Being so young and tender too.” I say casually. Stupid kits. I use mind speak to talk to them without the wolves hearing. I am sure the wolves can get the gist of our sound speak, but we are not on the same mind speak wavelength. Apparently that was done on purpose to make us stronger. Not my idea, but they may be right if these two are any indication. *Now pay attention kits and this old female will show you how it is done.*

I am sure the wolves are conversing among themselves. They are not sure about me. By their logic I should be running now. One circles farther out. The rest sit and wait. A cat that does not look frightened or try to run is dangerous or stupid. The ones in the tree they understand. Me they don't. Which one am I? I will use only abilities that the two teenagers should have or they won't learn anything. I will hold the extra in reserve. No cat will be eaten here today. The mobile wolf is the alpha. They are not that hungry or they would have already attacked. Not stupid anyway. It will be a shame to kill them in a way.

In my best dog I tell them, “Leave now or die.” The requisite warning required of honor. I go back to cleaning myself of the blood of the first one. The smell of that blood gets the alpha's attention. She still thinks she has the advantage. They attack us, not so much for the food, as to remove us from the area. We do the same to them. Can't have two top predators in the same range. We have the advantage of greater abilities and they breed faster and work better together. Careful. Time it. Any second now.

The alpha goes first, low and fast. The others are close behind. Just as she reaches me I pop above her, reach out with my left front claw and rip her throat. Falling on top of her, the others collide with us. I pop myself and the three closest to me into pop space. I shake them off in pop space and pop out outside the collapsed pack. Five more to go. By the time they notice where I am, I have two more in pop space. Three to go. The two teenagers are watching all this intensely. Suddenly two more disappear. One left. It takes off at a fast run away from us.

“Wait.”

“What about the one that got away?”

I uncoil my right paw, his manhood is revealed. “He won't have pups but will serve to warn others to stay away.”

“She is good.”

“Yeah, the way you took out the leader was amazing.” He simulates the strike and pop. Unfortunately does not land right and tumbles over to one side.

“Takes practice. Keep working on it. We can remove the others from the cold space.” What we call the other dimension of pop space. The now dead dogs are before us in a pile. No air in cold space.

The striped one says, “Too many to drag home at once.” The white faced one still attempts to take two, dragging each one a few lengths before going back to the other one. They would rot before he got them back at that rate.

I sigh, “Tree them and let's go.” In a few moments there are six dead dogs high up the nearest tree. They pee on the tree at least to mark the kill and warn others. We each pick up one to take back. I have the honor of the alpha. Barely pregnant too. Good kill. The Old One would not approve, but he said I could do this my way. Stupid monkeys. Of course we have to win.

Mumbling with a mouth full of dog the white faced one asks, “Whuff if yurf namf?”

I sigh, *mind speak stupid.*

The other striped one bumps his partner. *I am Fly Catcher and this one is Climbs Trees.*

I am Owa. Those are not names of honor they carry. Not surprised. *Common name. Well met Owa.*

Owa Moosa.

Oh, just like the great one. Got it.

I turn and look at them.

I AM Owa Moosa.

They both drop their dogs at the same time to stare at me. Fly to cowpie, come in cowpie. Those two are really stupid.

I continue on. A few seconds later they follow. There are no more questions.

The Pride has chosen a good spot near some natural caves. A clear stream close by for clean good tasting water. The forest here is large enough to support a good prey population. When we come in we are met with lots of interest. Anyone bringing in meat is welcome by custom. No meat and you are likely to be driven off. No one stays for free. As I am a female, the males show some interest sniffing the air as I pass to see if I am near my time. They then growl at the other two, but do not drive them off. They are probably all related. Probably hoping someone will drop their load and disqualify themselves.

Fly Catcher comes through after numerous hints of sharing, *We left six more up a tree fifteen running minutes back.* That was enough. Most of the rest of the pride that was here takes off. Looks like about ten left. There were only six dogs. These Cats can't count. That leaves us with two kits about five months old. Big enough to think they are hot stuff and dumb enough to get eaten by most anything that gets past an adult. Their most vulnerable time. Younger and they stay closer in. Older, well, maybe they are still meat. I look over at the two great hunters. Wonder when they will introduce me to the one adult remaining, the mother.

She comes up to me herself, "Hi, my name is Eats Mud. You get the dogs for us?"

"Owa. They helped at the last moment when their noses were rubbed into it." I sort of growl out.

"Yeah, thought as much. First kill those two have brought in bigger than a rabbit. Thought that was strange. How did you get so many? The entire pack? You did didn't you?" A concerned mother.

"One got away, minus a snack." I lick my lips. She growls her understanding. All cats know how it works. Old One told me that monkeys didn't figure it out for some time. Stupid monkeys.

"The pack got both of Corn Flower's kits a few days ago. We were careless. We thought this was the Promised Land. She was the yellow one who left with the others. Hers were two weeks younger than mine. Thank the Prey Bringer neither of mine got it, they were all together at the time. We have all been out on patrol since. Those two go together. We were sort of hoping they wouldn't come back." I understand. A pride cannot afford a liability. As to the Promised Land, I don't know where or when that legend got started, but they all speak of it. Maybe some kind of ancestral memory of when we were feed by the monkeys and only hunted for pleasure.

"I wondered about them, but didn't feel it was my place to leave them if they could keep up. What are those monkey metal things around their necks?"

"Fly Catcher is my brother. Never been too smart. Could not find the teat or something. But, he is family. They found those things near some monkey stone when they were young kits. Think they will keep away the

Evil Ones. Can't get them off now anyway.”

“Fly Catcher seems slightly more together than Climbs Trees.” She flicks her tail as her only comment. Slight praise I know.

“Small pride you have here.”

“We just split. Not enough prey where we were last.” Meaning they were run off by the others. “Good hunting here though. We should split again in a few colds.” About ten colds at least. I don't tell her she is at the edge of the good forest. There is not much ahead of them but cleaned out areas over hunted by the dogs and other prides. She asks me, “You looking to settle for a bit?” They could use more numbers, especially a healthy smart female, as we do most of the work and I have already proven myself.

“No. I just wander, helping where I can. Can't have kits any longer and have the wanderlust.”

“Strange, never heard of that. Obviously good at dogging though.” She has no idea, but looks around to be sure there are no dogs present. Superstition. I don't look about. Over confident. The Old One reminds me that I can be killed. Maybe. Never come close.

“Thing is, is that I don't really like the taste, well, except maybe for the juicy parts.” I lick my lips again.

“Important thing is that you got them.”

Two adults come bounding in fast, turn and then face out on alert. The kits run in from close by and hide behinds us. Not so brave now. Eats Mud goes to alert too.

What is it? She asks.

Largest monkey we have ever seen, walking tall. Meaning on two legs. Scary to anyone who does not understand this is normal for them. The one TPing faces me. *Who is the stranger?*

Meat bringer. Our word for friend.

I question him, *A monkey is good eats. Why didn't you bring it in?* We will have more than enough dog, but monkey does taste better, though rare in these parts. Of course I know who it is, but maybe I can generate some fun out of this. Hey, not my fault he does not stick with me or take the superior form.

I sit up straight and try and look dignified. Here he comes.

The Old One comes around a group of trees like he is out for a quiet stroll. It is nearly pitch black now, with the clouds, wind and all. Of course we can all see in the dark fine, we with our eyes and dark seeing and him with just the dark seeing.

He is carrying a load of tree parts with him, which he sets down in the clearing.

Since my fun is obviously not going to happen, they just watch him, I come forward, passing the others to go up to him, *A fire will be nice.*

Thought you would like it. Have you told the others yet?

Two of them know, but are too stupid to understand what it means.

A stupid cat? How can that be? He laughs. Most disgusting sound, monkey laughter. No Cat would ever make that noise. He lights the fire. Once it gets large enough and the others see that he is not a threat they come forward cautiously.

Eats Mud sniffs him licking her lips. "Together we could take him." She has tasted the smaller monkeys I believe.

"You would never catch this one. He understands the royal tongue and knows what you have said. Enjoy the warmth of the fire instead." He can also hear or mind speak. I wonder if he can hear the dogs too. I suspect that he can. Too many coincidences. I have tried so many times unsuccessfully.

She decides that something else is more important, "Better to start on the dogs before the little ones get to it. They might choke unless I make smaller pieces of it." The stupid ones have already made a mess of their two dogs. No one but them will want to share now. More dirt than edible meat. Probably the first time they have ever had first go at something this big. Anything smaller they would probably consume in the field.

Want me to cook some of it for you? Old One asks me.

Please, not in front of the others. I have some honor. I pause. *It is better cooked though.* Eats Mud has the belly opened up and already taken out the liver.

I ask her, "Would you mind if I had the puplets?" The unborn ones from the pregnant alpha.

"Of course not. Please help yourself." I nod to the Old One. He understands us just fine, but can't speak it well. Stupid monkeys. Who couldn't speak the royal tongue after this much time? All the same, cooked fetal dog is marvelous. Old One mind pushes the piece I remove to a space over the fire. I could do this myself, but don't want to show my paw just yet and he does a better job than I. I don't practice enough. Good for something at least, these monkeys. Once done he pushes the meat to the ground in front of me to cool. I am so intent on the morsels that I forget all about the others.

"Who is that monkey who commands meat to fly?"

"And what is that strange fur covering his body?"

"Huh?" I look away from my dinner, but cover it with a paw, to the others who are all staring at the Old One.

"Oh, I am sorry, I have not introduced the monkey." Didn't think I had too. Only Cats deserve the honor in most prides.

"You know this monkey? How can that be? Why? They are so stupid. Only good for dinner or sport." The Old One is smiling now and making eyes at the kits who are watching him with curiosity and sudden interest.

"Ah, he is a pet of mine." He laughs at the thought. He makes a

monkey device and shines a super bright spot of light onto the ground in front of the kits. They respond as expected and follow it everywhere he points it. Took me ages to prevent myself from jumping for it even after I understood what was happening. The adults look interested. I growl and he turns it off. Sanity returns.

“How does he do that?”

“He is a monkey. They do stuff like that. You learn to ignore it.” I yawn. It is starting to rain. I hate rain, or rather the mud it brings. From being born in the desert I guess. Can't use the push in front of the others yet either to keep it off me. *The rest should be back by now.*

They ran into some trouble.

Hmm, let me guess, the other pride. He nods. There are two females, the two dumb males and one older male beside the Old One and myself. It starts to rain harder. The fire won't be enough.

“Best get into the caves.” We drag the dog remnants into the largest cave. The Old One kills the fire so we can see better past where it was.

“I volunteer first watch.” They don't know that I don't sleep and they will need their rest. A normal cat will need at least a third of a day total. When I was born it was more like most of the time. Of course, then a cat was a lot smaller than now. Much has changed in my long life. I miss sleeping. The dreams were wonderful. Reality is nowhere near as fun. Not at all.

Old One comes and sits next to me and starts to give me a neck rub. I can't help but purr.

Ten left here for the treed dogs. How many will return?

Time will tell.

Cats killing dogs is one thing, but Cats killing Cats is a monkey thing. Bad. Still, some prides have learned this trait.

What will happen to us?

What do you want to happen?

I look up. *We should reach for the stars like your kind.* I remember the tales of other cats who got to go. Never been myself, as I am bound to the Old One himself. But to see new worlds and new prey. That would be something.

That won't happen if it continues like this. No, I don't think so either.

What is red?

The color of blood.

That is a flavor or a smell, not a color. I have asked this question too many times. *You could fix me so I could see red. You have added more colors to what you can see.*

Yes. But be careful what you ask for. When you are ready, you will add your own abilities. He grins that monkey grin at me. I shudder and look away. Every time I have begged for an 'enhancement' there has always been a price. Not worth it this time. The kits are sleeping so

peacefully. Everyone here is probably a descendant of mine in some small way. Motherhood is nice, but not that nice. I think I got the better end of that enhancement. Maybe if the males were not barbed.

Two coming in slow from behind. Do they belong to this group?

I sniff the air. *They are approaching from upwind and smell similar. A raid would come from the other direction to catch us unawares. They are hurt bad. I will wake the others.*

I go inside the cave and nudge Eats Mud, only because I know her best. "Wake up" I say softly. She slowly lifts her head, sees it is me, and does a stretch. Not polite to mind speak a sleeping person.

What's wrong? My turn already?

No, there are two coming in. I don't know your pride well enough to be sure they belong with you.

Only two? I nod low.

She gets all the way up, stretches again and we go to the mouth of the cave. I go up to the Old One and lean against him. She stays a few widths away. *How can you stand the smell?*

You get used to it. Small price for the benefits they bring. Maybe he will give you a massage some time.

What is a 'massage'? We hear the two coming in making lots of noise on wet leaves. I don't answer. I smell blood and give a low growl as is expected of the lookout.

"It is only us. Don't pounce please." Two very sorry looking cats come in beat up badly. Wet fur, blood caked on all over them. One missing an ear, but that doesn't look fresh. They are not carrying any dog with them. "They were waiting for us when we got there. Out numbered and they were stronger, better fighters. I need to rest." We go to work licking their fur and checking for injuries.

Missing Ear speaks up, "We don't have time. We took the long way, but it will not be long before they find us here." She looks up and sniffs the air. "For sure as soon as the rain stops." She pauses, "They kill Cats not part of their pride." She says this with a low growl of utter contempt. Also explains where the other eight are or rather now, aren't.

"We can't just leave. We are too few to fight the Evil Ones even if we could. Where will we go?" Ah, they have a name for this pride. Means they have met before. Eats Mud looks at me for the last question. The kits have woken up and are looking at me too.

I look up at the Old One. *Do they qualify?* He does not respond, making it my decision. It is the reason why we are out here. Looking for potential candidates. It does not help our cause if all the prides that qualify end up dead before we get them there.

"The monkey knows a place and can lead us to it. Life will be very different there. You will not fit in at first, but you will be welcomed. You will have to learn many new things, but you will never be asked to kill

another Cat, nor will they ever attempt to kill you. Everyone eats or no one eats. Food is shared equally.” To tell them the rest right now would only scare them. Not an easy life, but it is life with less fear.

“I am too weak to travel.” The male has severe lacerations on his shoulder. Could take a moon or more to heal the long way.

“Let the monkey touch you honored one.” If you don't know their name, then this will do.

“No monkey is going to touch me unless it is the inside of my mouth!” He coughs, backs up some, then collapses in pain.

He has internal injuries too. Some of those wounds are deep.

“He touches you or you will die of your injuries.” I turn to the others. “He must touch each of us or you can't go with him. He has to know you won't try and eat him on the way. It will not hurt.” Of course, not even I could catch and eat him, but I play the game as expected. Some pride initiations can be unpleasant. I have seen some where everyone their tail kinked. Barbaric! Here we are easy. I demonstrate by going up to him. When he lowers his hand to my head, I raise mine and bump it purring. I get carried away. Might be a head massage in there. Nope. Does not want to get everyone here addicted is my guess. More for me then! “Ah, purring optional. We have been together for a long time.”

Eats Mud goes next. A little unsure, but she has two kits to protect and this appears to be the best way. She bumps his hand quickly and backs off. Nothing happens to her. She turns and comes back to the others like it was no big deal. The two kits go running up tussling with each other on the way. He pats them on the head, turns them around and gives them a gentle push back. They go running up to their mother who gives them a lick of good job.

“Well if even those two monsters are safe...” Missing Ear goes next followed by the two that came in earlier, but not introduced to me yet.

“Hey what's going on? Oh, you look horrible. Did you get the dogs we caught?” Like they did all the work. The two stupid ones have finally woken up. The others turn and growl at them. They know better.

Missing Ear remarks, “Only two of us have made it back so far. You two stay here and wait for the others. We will go on ahead.” In other words, eat shit and die. While keeping an eye on the stupid ones, the most injured cat limps up to Old One and bumps his hand, then lays down right there to bar anyone one else. Even the stupid ones could take him now, but not without a fight. They are too scaredy cat to do that.

“Come get us when you can.” I suspect they are used to being left out of things. Not a clue what will become of them. At least it will be quick. Messy, but quick.

This is not ideal. The Old One mind speaks me. Monkeys are such sticklers for rules.

My call, I mind speak back. He lets it go with a monkey shrug, then

gets up and motions us to follow him. I am right behind him helping to support the most injured one. At one time, before we were civilized, we would leave the sick and injured to die. I mind speak him, *Don't worry, it is not far to walk. You will be better soon.* Of course, the Old One would never hurt anyone. No stomach for death I guess. Part of life. The way things are.

The Old One has been letting me run things since the other monkeys of his kind left. Something about the diversity imperative. Took me a while to get used to that change, let me tell you. Still, he is useful for advice once in a while, even if he just can't think like a proper Cat. Oh, and those back rubs. Oh yes, those are good. The fake meat that he eats, not so good. I can still taste the roast puplets in my mouth. Very good.

I send healing energy into the most injured one. He notices and looks up at me. *Tell no one for now. I do this for the good of the pride.* He blinks acknowledgment and keeps going. A little easier now. A proper healing will come later.

It takes a quarter of the dark period to reach the clearing at our slow pace. We had decided on this spot before contacting them. It is so hard to find cats that will work together without killing each other. Except for the stupid ones this pride did fine. Not great, but can't always get perfection. The Old One says a pride has to accept all members, even those who can't do as well, but I am not so sure. The weaker should be left to die so as not to endanger the stronger. It will not be easy to reach the stars. Don't get me wrong. I am not just for the brutes who can pound the poop out of everyone. A smart cat has equal standing in my pride. And I hate bullies. Something that I picked up from the Old One I am sure. If you are a brute, you have to work for the good of the others. Strike out on your own or try and take over and you are dog food.

“Everyone get close and crouch down facing outwards.” The Old One gets down on all fours like a proper cat. Two legs are weird. Only birds are like that. Much better to have all four on the ground. Just in time. The others, the Evil Ones, have found us. We are in a large clearing, so there is no way they can attack without our knowing. The others sense something and are getting nervous. Steady, this is part of the test. They have to learn to trust the new group and us.

A lone Cat comes out about half way. The rest remain in the shadows. The rain has let up some. More of a mist now. It will be sunrise soon. Already a little light to the east. He is cool. Knows he is in control. Looks us over and then proceeds to give himself a bath. The Old One and I know there are over a hundred waiting in the forest. When he finishes they will come. Part of the intimidation process.

Two more come forward. Huge cats. They are each dragging something. They both drop their loads next to the first one, then return to the forest. The first one is still licking, his front paw now.

“That meat is Fly Catcher and Climbs Trees. They gave us away!”
And they are dead. What did you expect? You said they were Cat killers.

“They will come for us next. We are trapped!”

“Worse, they have been half eaten!” A shudder goes through the group. We have all tasted our smaller cousins, the ones who did not make it into the genetic upgrade. Hard to catch those little ones. Even the Old One said to me once that some of their kind ate the smaller monkeys.

The Old One rises and says in barely understandable Cat, “Under my protection.”

The leader casually looks over at us, then goes back to licking. He is nearly done. A monkey on two legs does not impress him.

Our group holds together though. Silent and scared, but still here. No one has bolted, though they don't know there are more than three. The one out there was counting on someone starting a panic. Much easier to pick us off scattered. None of his would get hurt then.

“Stay here.” The Old One tells the group. He turns to me, “Come with me.” They aren't dogs, so that freaks them. Low growls and swift looking about. The kits are totally hidden under Eats Mud. Only their eyes are visible.

As I turn to go I tell them, “Pay attention.” They look up at me scared. “Stay together here and you will live. Run and you will die. Understand?” Quiet mews come out of each. “I promise you will be safe. Remember I took down an entire pack of dogs. I was not even working hard. Trust us.” I grin as best I can, “And watch, this will be fun.” I hope. I am getting kind of bored.

The Old One hates these confrontations, but he hates bullies more. No matter what kind they are, monkey or cat.

We walk right up to him. An old cat and a monkey with a staff. Oh, yeah, that appeared out of no where as we walked. We stop one length out. His two body guards have come out too, standing behind him, puffed up and ready. Almost comical.

What do we do this time? Razzle dazzle? I love all the lights and movement of razzle dazzle.

We talk.

Ah, come on. That is boring. No fun at all. I promised the others a show.

You can take over any time you want. I will leave you to them.

Boring. Not a happy cat. I really should not complain. Either one of us could have moved the entire group out of here and avoided the whole confrontation. But there is that thing about bullies.

“I love it when prey comes right up to you to be eaten. Oh, and I so love monkey. Very tasty.” The two on the side bare their teeth. Not a smile exactly. He flicks his tail upward. There is a noise in the forest. The others come out all around this clearing. I send a mind speak to the ones

in the center, *Be patient. All is going fine. Don't move. Prime cat law.* If it moves chase it and eat it, well, kill it anyway.

The sun is rising and will be in the bully's eyes. Not good planing on his part. He squats down to buy time. Once he can't go any lower, it is likely he will give the command.

"Let me help." His accent is really bad. I have just got to work harder with him. Maybe if he accepted the Cat form as superior he could pronounce the words properly? I know he can and does assume it when necessary. Instead he raises a large black disk above all of our heads, blocking out the sun. He has it perfect. The bully can still see the group, but now the sun is not in his eyes.

"Who are you?" Ah, got his interest finally. Stupid bully.

"Who do you think I am." I wince. Surprised bully can even understand him at all.

I think I might take a nap. I yawn to try and scare the mouse out. A sphere appears on the end of his staff. All right Pr'thn to the rescue! The bully does not seem to have noticed, still staring at the Old One.

Can you move the two behind him to the stream to the right?

Gladly. I do so. We hear a splash. Hey, I have to have some fun. He did not specify how they got there. What's a few heights above the water mean anyway. *Wet cat is so much fun.* He grimaces, but keeps his eyes on the bully.

"You can still back down from this. You are all alone now. There is no way the others could reach you before Owa gets to you." I growl. Not sure I am convincing. No way he would let me do it, even this time. Deserves it in my mind though. Bully looks behind him and sees that his backup is gone. He issues a very low howl. Not so brave when out numbered are you? But I am sure he knows the pop trick and expects them back any second. Cat, I hate bullies. I growl again, more convincing this time. Oh, eeuu, he is pissed.

Good job. He is right. I rise more proud. Oh, that was not a compliment. Can never tell with monkeys.

That's it. You are out of business. The bully disappears. Hey, he was given every chance. Probably set him down in a corn field full of rats and mice though, knowing the Old One. At least he will be alone. Hard to be a bully with no backers.

Now there are the followers. He did not do this alone. They are starting to look nervous. But hey, almost anyone of them could pull the pop trick, though not as far. We have all used it on prey. Their leader is gone. One path would be a battle for succession. Another would be to turn and run. Or wait till he returns. He would be close by if any of them did it. But the two of them together, Pr'thn and the Old One, he is probably on the other side of the planet. Hopefully some place very cold and wet with no sun.

The others from our group come up to us as a group. Hurt one asks, "Will he be coming back?"

"No. He is out of our lives forever."

"Ah, so you killed him." He straightens up. Old One gives him a dirty look. A sign of aggression. *Come on, anyone would be happy he was gone. He eats Cats!*

"No. He is fine, just very far away. He will never return here."

"And the thing floating above us? How does he do that?" I had forgotten all about it. I glance up. Still there.

"Monkey thing. They hate the sun." He looks at me like I have just said the most repulsive thing imaginable. He hates God! He backs away from the Old One. I can see he is telling the others. They all back away from him as well. He turns and looks at me, then rolls his eyes. I try and look cute. Purr a little.

"Ah, they are still out there staring at us. Some are leaving. More are leaving."

Old One sighs. The wind stops. I never noticed it was there till it just stopped. I raise my head above the others and look around. Then I look up. There is a 'thn shield around the entire clearing. I don't know that it is a 'thn shield. I can't see 'thn material with my dark sight. But it is the only thing that makes sense. The cats at the edge of the clearing are starting to act crazy. Some are trying to dig under it. No way Fluffy.

"Who is he?" Eats Mud asks me barely audible. Trying to be below the hearing level of a normal monkey. Their hearing is normally very bad. Not this one, but he ignores us.

"I call him the Old One, but that is not his real name. His real name is hard to say in Cat, but translates to something like gray bad tasting metal soul of the dead."

She thinks about it for a moment, "There was a tale that my mother told me and that I have told my kits. A tale about how we came to be. A tale of a terrible monkey machine and a monkey with a stone cat around his neck that saved the entire planet by working together to defeat the beast. The stone cat was called Stone Cat and is still revered by all Cats. The monkey's name was the One Beyond Time. He was so pleased with Stone Cat that he gave her life and we are all descended from her. Just a tale to tell kits to get them to quiet down and work together. If they are bad, the monkey will come and turn them back into stone. We carve stones into Cat shapes to remind them."

I howl softly, "We are the two mentioned. I am Owa Moosa, which means stone cat in a Monkey language." She stares at me. "What is wrong? You don't believe me? I can prove it."

"No, you look the part. The right color and size and all, but, it is just that I thought you would smell different."

"I smell bad?" I sniff myself. Wait a minute. Same size? I was a lot

smaller back then. I did not notice that the Old One was watching and listening to us.

“The hero gets bigger in the telling. And it has been a very long time. Haven't done much since have you?”

“Stop reading my mind.”

He laughs, “Did not need to. Saw your expression. What do you think we should do with the others.” They are huddled together in small groups.

He continues, “Well, it would appear they are too dangerous to just let go. I mean look at them. They are blood thirsty vicious killers.” The others do not understand what he is saying. He is better speaking monkey than cat. Fortunately I can understand monkey. They look more like a bunch of pathetic kits at the moment actually.

“Where are the leaders? Someone had to get them to act this way.”

“Ah, now you are thinking like a monkey. You know you can't herd Cats. Why would they follow anyone?”

“Fear of reprisal, portion of the meat? The prey around here has been running out. Cats get desperate.”

“And we should hold that against them?”

“But eating other Cats? Killing Cats is wrong.”

“I am not saying we invite them into your plan, but I don't think banishing them to some remote, hard to live in place, is not fair either.”

“Well, this place seems hard enough to live in now. How about leaving them here?”

“But what about us? They will eat us as soon as you leave?” Oops, they can still understand half of this conversation.

“You really the Great Ones?” This coming from one of the kits obviously in awe. Someone at least recognizes my greatness.

The Old One reaches down and picks her up. He gives her a neck and back massage. I would be jealous if that was in my nature. “Now you can tell your children that I gave you pleasure. You are a very fine looking cat.” I hate it when he uses the diminutive of Cat. Eats Mud is purring in pride. He sets the kit down. He then picks up the other female kit and does the same for her.

“Thank you.” Eats Mud rubs against his leg purring. High honor to transfer smell to another.

“Let's get this group to Cat City and then come back here to clean up the mess and give a few lessons.”

“They will be very disoriented when they get there.” I really don't want to be here any longer.

He sighs, “Pr'thn and I can handle this side.” She comes off the staff and floats in front of us upon her name being mentioned. I do a ritual sniff, though 'thn have no smell.

“Ah, could you send us there too?” I suggest. Yeah, I could get there

but it would take days. He could do it instantly.

“Okay, get everyone together.”

“Problem solved cats. Gather around. Our adventure is about to begin.”

“You are going to get rid of the bad cats?”

“We are going to the new place. The place I mentioned earlier. A new way of life. They will stay here.”

“Look it is Corn Flower! She is alive! She has to come with us.” We all turn to look where her nose is pointing. Of course I have no idea which one is her. “Over there is Licks-a-lot!” “There is Leaf Chaser!” “Wet Tail” “Shiver” “Grey Nose”

“Okay, okay. How do we deal with this?” Old One smiles at me. I hate that monkey smile. Always means I am in trouble. I pace back and forth trying to come up with an answer. It sort of solves itself. Cat fights start to break out. Displaced aggression I have been told. Cats hate to be confined. Those out there are next to the wall. They feel trapped. Once they figured out that they could not get out, even with popping, they turned on each other. Soon there are several dozen free for alls involving most of the cats.

I look up to the Old One, “Please do something. They are getting hurt for no reason.” Then in a much lower voice I say, “I need your help.” So embarrassing. He loses his smile and concentrates. They are slowing down. Soon everyone has fallen down asleep. Of course! Perfect solution! “Thanks” He bows an acknowledgment. Almost as hard to say thanks as it was to ask for help.

“Everyone who is able, go among the others and pop back here anyone you recognize and want with us.” They spread out. All except for the older male who was hurt the most.

“Well, now that we are alone for a moment I can finish the healing I began.”

“I am no stranger to pain. My name is No Pain. You need to rest. I will be all right. As you might guess from my name, pain and I are old friends.”

“Well you are not as young as you used to be. Your name should be changed to Worth It.”

He rolls over on his back exposing his belly like a kit. “Oh, if you insist. You may begin my beautiful savior.”

I meow! “No one has called me beautiful in a very long time, but I appreciate the sediment.” I close my eyes to concentrate. Soon he is totally relaxed and sound asleep. He will wake a new cat. Not any younger, we don't do that, but feeling much better at least.

When I open my eyes after the healing we are shoulder deep in cats. At least twenty more than when we started. The rest of the pride and then some. Probably ones who did not approve of our chosen pride being

forced out. The starting ones are among them asleep too, exhausted from all the goings on. I walk up to Old One to see what he is doing with Pr'thn.

“With this many coming in, we will need more places to house them.”

“Eventually. No rush. They all know each other apparently and are used to sleeping together. Just put them in the largest cave for now.”

“And sanitation? The place already smells like a cat box.” Whatever that is, but I get the idea. The neighboring sand dunes are already full. The farmers are moving it as fast as they can, but no one wants to handle fresh waste. “Looks like we are done here.” He dissolves the shield and the breeze returns. I sniff the air appreciating the wonderful smell. As soon as the others wake I am sure they will leave this place forever. We will be gone by then of course.

“Might be easier for us to move them while they are asleep.” A moment later we are all in the open field outside First Cat City. Some already want to rename it to Fat Cat on the account of so many getting rather obese.

We spent years working this out. Water, crops to feed the livestock, what livestock to raise, housing, etc. Bringing in a few at a time so as not to overwhelm the structures set up. We are in a field, as most can't stand the confinement of the inner city till they have been here awhile. It would be Cat fights all over again. Two locals have spotted us. We were expected. They pop over rather than run.

“Hmm, large group this time.” A beautiful black and gray tabby named Midnight. Her sidekick is a dull yellow gray color, also female, younger. Don't recognize her, probably new.

“Can you handle it?”

“Yep. We will have to move some things around to accommodate. You want them on farm duty to begin with?”

“They did live in a cave and handled a fire all right. However, they went crazy when we threw up a shield to stop wandering.” Old One did the shield, I know, but I was part of the team.

She raises and lowers a paw, our version of the monkey nod. “Farm duty it is. Not too many males this time. They are so lazy. I see a couple of kits. Best get them into training right away. They are always the easiest to work with. They can help the adults.” Always better to take instruction from someone you know. Though they won't be believed till they are a bit older. Give them a year at least. “Show at sundown. The Scratch Pride Singers.” I purr. They are the best. The notes that White Throat can reach are amazing. Old One can't stand them. No appreciation for the arts. The Scratching Post is in the center of the city though. An old tree, now a stump, on account of everyone has used it on occasion. These cats will not be ready for that experience for awhile yet, even with me

there. Dark helps, but not that much. Confinement will freak them. Maybe Old One will kit sit for me? I missed them the last time I was here when a fight broke out at the last minute. I don't want to miss them again.

Midnight sees my concern, "You want someone to watch over them at day's end?"

"That would be wonderful. Best if they don't get too attached to me. They will need lots of help from others. Couple have been injured too. Is there a medcat available? I already did the worst case, just scratches and tears left."

"These wildcats are pretty tough, but I'll send someone around. Where's your monkey?" She would never say that in front of him, but it is what we call him when he is not around. Only one, so he is not likely to be mixed up with anyone else's monkey. Unless of course you want to insult someone, then you would call them monkey brains or smells like monkey shit. Not that anyone here knows what that smells like. He is very clean at least.

"He stayed behind with Pr'thn to clean up. We had a confrontation with the local population at pop time. Not bad cats, just misguided. The top cat has already been removed. Just need to separate the enforcers from the regulars. I decided to let the regulars go. We will check up on them later to see how it is going. May even get another pride out of them."

"Removed to a small island I hope." Meaning no other cats present.

"Monkeys work in mysterious ways." Meaning I have no idea, but probably not.

"They are waking up." He does not even bother looking at her, "Mouse Turd, go get some help."

"My name is not Mouse Turd." She is indignant, hairs raise on her back. Sensitive.

"All my assistants are called Mouse Turd till they prove themselves. You earn your name with me. Now go!" She growls, but leaves.

"A bit rough. Catch more mice with grain than with rocks."

"Only been here a few moons. Needs to learn discipline. Too easily distracted." I raise a paw.

The kits are the first up. They sleep more total time during a day, but are up and down a lot more. They look around and see everyone but us sleeping. Boring. One swats a swishing tail, but gives up on that. The other one sees a large green bug and goes bounding after it. The first one sees this and joins in.

"Ah to be a kit again. Such freedom."

"Tell me about it."

"Aren't you supposed to be at the clan meeting, being the Owa and all?"

"Oh Cat. You are right. Can you watch them till your assistant gets

back?”

“No problem.” I make her a catnip treat as a way of saying thanks, then pop out. Can't hurt to make and keep friends. Then I worry I made too much. A drunk cat is not a helpful cat. But a gentle buzz is nice. Deal with that later.

When I get to the Clearing of Decisions all hell is breaking loose. Cats are going every which way. The speakers platform is tipped over. There is fur everywhere. The noise is deafening.

In my loudest mind speak I yell at the top of my mind, **STOP!**

With a few thuds of cats landing all movement ceases. Scribes scramble for their barks and then wait attentively.

I walk up to the tipped over rock podium and right it with TK. I am the only cat with this TK ability, though several strong Cats could have done it easy enough using muscle. Everyone else is limited to pop, mind speak and dark scanning or less. It does not always breed true. As long as one Cat in a group can mind speak a conversation can be held in quiet. No matter. I am staring out over the crowd of supposed leaders. Suddenly a yowl cries out. The other move away from the sound. An odor permeates the air. As the cats clear it becomes more obvious. A witch! She is rolling around on the floor in full heat. Disgusting! All females know that when they come into heat, they are to take to the fields. Otherwise it disrupts everything in the city. The males go nuts. No control.

I concentrate and pop her out to a field where she can work it out on her own. She has already gotten what she came for.

“This is not the place for a witch. Who let her in?” They all look at each other, but no one fesses up.

An aid comes up to me, Long Tree. He is very smart with a fantastic memory. Does not look like he, ah, participated. An example of the fact that a male can control himself if he wants to. “She could have come in on her own. A strong popper and this is where the highest ranking males are located. Probably wanted the best for her kits.”

“If that is the case, I have a proposal for the senate. I propose that the Old One prepare an anti-pop shield around the Clearing of Decisions and guard cats are posted at the openings. Female guard cats.” Stupid males.

“Assuming the Old One agrees to do so, I second the proposal.” says the all black female cat from the Bay Ridge Pride. The Cats rules of order are loosely based on what the Old One taught me about the monkey rules of order. The group we just brought in will have one representative if they last at least one cold and one warm period.

“Any objections?” There are none. No male would dare the way the females are looking at them. “Carried.” I step down and go to the back where I usually just watch the proceedings. I am disgusted. Hey, I had a good time as a mother, but I never did it in an important public place

during a meeting. And those males. Like they can't control themselves. We are not wild animals any longer. Time we acted like civilized beings. Cat, we will never get to the stars.

A large male, slightly disheveled gets up to the podium. Several attendants lick his fur to straighten it out. Overweight. Does not look like much of a hunter to me. "We have two more items to begin discussion on this day before nap time. Trade with the Yellow River City and the growing threat of the Kill Cats." The scribes scratch away on their bark planks. They did not write down what I said. Too embarrassed.

A long haired black and white male gets up to speak, "We don't need trade. That is monkey business. Leave it to the monkeys. We have everything we need here. We would only lose in any deal. Let them fend for themselves. Remember the Cat Law." Lots of yowls of approval. Typical isolationist sediments. Hard for us to share. Took years of breeding and working on this city idea to get the five settlements we have presently started. Several failed right away. One more looks likely, the Coast City. Hunting outside the City is too easy still. Hard for us to live with so many this close together who are not of the same family. The current speaker has stretched the 'You don't work, you don't eat' Law a bit though.

"There are some advantages to trading with the Yellow River City. They have some new ways that could help with the Kill Cats. Claws that scratch at a distance, for instance." A beautiful brown and beige older female. She has taken good care of herself. Not fat like so many others here and no attendants. The Yellow River City Cats are on to something. We put the most curious ones there. Problem is, is that they are really poor fighters and would not last a day against the Kill Cats closer to them than to those here. Maybe we should steer a few of the evil ones this way. Once the Cats here see why the new ways would be useful, they would be more willing to trade fighters for the new ways.

"We all know about those 'mice' in Yellow River, curiosity killed the Cat. More monkey business I say. How much would we have to work in the fields for this trade? I for one am tired of scratching dirt and don't want to do anymore than is necessary to bury my spore." Yeah, like he ever worked a day in his life. Fat Cat that he is. Bet he gets an attendant to bury his spore too. Glad the Yellow River ambassador is not here, to call a Cat a mouse is a severe insult. What they don't realize yet is that without the 'mice' or smiggles as Sharon used to call them, we will never reach the stars. We will revert to jungle cats forever hunting and fighting for existence.

"Besides, we have not seen these Kill Cats of whom you speak. Are they real? Or just tales to scare kits and make us work harder?" I could tell them they are real. I could also tell them we broke up a smaller band, a very tiny band. Maybe we should have left them intact. How long till

this city fails because everyone thinks it was better the old way? Ask that of the ones coming in and you won't get that answer. No Cat dies here of anything but old age, a lot do out there.

The meeting breaks up soon after which not much more really said. This is common. Cats take any excuse to get out of a meeting. The males sure disappeared fast. Bet they are looking for her. Good luck, every other male in the place will be looking too. I purr to myself. I set her down near the farmers. Always the newest cats to come in and the lowest in the hierarchy. She will no longer desire company by the time they get there. And the females need to learn that this tactic will not work. Nor the idea that if you sit in the senate you can get any female you want.

Our system is not perfect, as shown by the activities today, but it is a lot better than any the monkeys used and it will get better. The reps are not chosen because of their beliefs or promises, but because of their loyalty to those represented, usually family related. Cats tell their rep what they want and the rep carries that out to the best of their ability. It is issues that determine the outcome, not personalities. It means that reps have to check in every day with their pride to consider the next day's decisions. And if they are not honest to the will of their pride, they are not the rep the next day. Usually it goes a lot worse than that. Very rare though, as our system works. There will be some upsets tonight.

Can't have reps losing their cool. What would happen if we were attacked? Reps are usually on the front lines. Can't just lead in the Clearing. Also means they won't vote for action they won't personally do. Too many here look like they would run at the first sign of trouble. Prides are choosing the wrong Cats to represent them. Hard to get the Top Cat tendency out of their thinking. We need to think smart if this is to work.

I make my way slowly back to the field where the new ones are located. We farm the land to raise grain. The grain feeds the livestock, chickens, fish and rats, lots of rats. Rat slightly roasted over a fire and dipped in fermented blood sauce is to purr for. If I am lucky, the pits will still have some. I hurry.

Oh no. I see Pr'thn up ahead. I diminish my psiotic profile and go down a side route. I can still make it. I can taste the rat in my mouth. The juices. I am salivating in anticipation. Oh Cat, the way is blocked by a crowd. I forgot this is race day. The young compete with each other for speed and endurance. Going around all the turns in the city is more of a challenge than the open field. Spectators are allowed to interfere to make it more interesting. All in fun mind you. If I pop, Pr'thn will find me. If I don't then I will be too late and no roasted rat dripping in fermented blood sauce.

I turn around to go back and find another route. Maybe there will be drippings left. I am not as enthusiastic now and clearly not paying attention to where I am going. I bump right into a wall. A wall made out

of monkey stone of course. I rub my bruised nose with the back of my paw, then shake my head to clear it. I hiss at the wall. Monkey stone was already in convenient shapes and sizes and was everywhere. Made sense to use it.

“Ah, there you are.” Oh Cat, the Old One. I turn to face him and see Pr'thn is with him. Caught like a mouse in a paw.

“Back so soon? Love to stay and talk, but I am late for an appointment.” With a roasted rat that is.

“Oh, but you will want to hear all the fun we had. Pretty tight operation. There was one enforcer for every five cats and the cats were reluctant to give up the enforcers till we promised to mind probe everyone one at a time.”

“I am shocked that you two would resort to such obvious lies.” Gone is any chance of rat now. I sit on my haunches.

“Yeah, we did ten at a time at least. Wanted to get back this moon.” Took him ages to stop saying month. Silly concept month. Those same monkeys who knew how a day should be ordered also believed in measuring groups of days by the moon. Must have had some cat genes in them somewhere. Of course they got the ratio of work days to rest days wrong. Six to one, how obscene!

Only had to do the first ten. Once they saw we could easily pick out the enforcers they gave up the rest of them.

So much nicer since she went sentient and could control her mind speak volume. “So, Pr'thn, why make the cats themselves give up the enforcers? Why not just continue the mind speak till you had them all? Surely that would have been faster.”

This was important so as to empower their own worth. If they gave them up themselves, they take back control of their lives.

Old One is smiling. “Very good Pr'thn. Very good Owa.” Pr'thn purrs in response. I taught her that.

“Can I go now?” No point, but I feel like sulking now. No roasted rat for this kitty.

“What and not get your reward for helping us?”

“We don't do rewards among ourselves.” Stop teasing me.

Then he does it. He pulls out from behind his back, two, count them, two roasted rats. Dripping in fermented blood sauce. Wait I would have smelled them. How did he do that? Ah, he removes some clear monkey skin from them. I can smell them now.

“Want now!” I have my front paws on his chest and am licking his face. I am shameless I know, but we are talking roasted rat dripping in fermented blood sauce here.

“Since you did not have the fun of catching your rats I will do the next best thing.” They disappear!

“NO!!!!” I look about frantically. He points up. I look up. Aaaaah!

They are coming down towards me. I pop up and grab them in my mouth. They had stuck together in the roasting tank the Cat. I then pop away from here. They are not going to play with me again till I am done. I can almost hear him laughing his monkey laugh. I don't care. It is so good!

I am licking my lips when they catch up. He is still smiling, then looking concerned points, "Who are those Cats?"

"Huh?" I look around. "A hunting party on their way out to the forest. Probably going for boar. Tastes like monkey I am told." I admit it, I know it tastes like monkey. Still prefer rat, or even lizard or snake. Snake makes good eats, though I prefer mine fire roasted with some salt.

"They look well off, so not doing it for food." So? Who cares?

"How did you know where I was going?" I don't like being tricked.

"Every day you are here, you go to the same pit once you are done at the Clearing. Even a monkey could figure that one out. Cats are such creatures of habit."

"Have to change my routine now."

"And no more roast rat dripping in fermented blood sauce?" I look away and he starts laughing again, then comes up to me and starts giving me a massage. Even Pr'thn helps. She is quite good actually. Perfect size to get my muscles. They work on me for some time to my delight.

Ugg! A really beat up Cat passes us going in the same general direction as the others. I growl a warning. Catcher. He is missing one fang, so that makes him a disciplined one also. Use a nasty one to catch a nasty one. He has a necklace of fangs. The Catcher gets them as a trophy. Ugly work. Looks like he is really good at his work too. Lose both fangs and you are totally dependent on others to cut up your food and no chance in the wild. Most threatened with de-fanging try and escape, hence the Catchers.

The Old One sees my attention, "Come up with a better way if you don't like it. Jails don't work with pop cats." Unless he makes them for us using the shield material. Have to ask him about that as well. Then he gets serious, "We have something to show you before we get back to the new ones. Oh and don't forget we have an appointment later with Ci'lan, Br'thn and the others." Old One pops us to a hill overlooking the fields. There are cats laboring in the fields. Lots of cats. We don't use horses, never able to get near them without freaking them, and hard to not want to eat them when they run. So, we do it ourselves. They scratch the ground to build up a furrow. We learned this from the monkeys, but it works. Not everything they did was stupid. They got lucky occasionally.

"So, why are we here?" When is a good time to breach the subject of the Clearing shield?

"Wait and watch." We have lowered ourselves to become less visible. Of course if anyone was trying to find us they could, but why would anyone be watching a bunch of Cats in the field. Except maybe a

group of wildcats trying to make a raid. I turn my head and scan the area behind us. No one there. I can scan farther than any normal Cat, so it is not that they are out of range. I return my attention to the field.

That's strange. What are those larger Cats doing? They are not digging themselves, though they are large enough to be good at it. The Cats who are digging dig faster when one of the larger ones goes by. Still the large ones do not help. I look more closely at the workers. There are bruises on their shoulders and heads. How could that be? Digging would not cause them. The workers are all young or old. Why make the weakest do the hardest work? Well, moving monkey stone around is hard too, but teams do that. I did learn a few things from watching the monkeys. Cat that was hard to teach.

The sun is getting warm. They should take a break any time. Perfect day for a nice nap in the sun. I am getting thirsty just thinking about it. Dark gray fur is not an advantage here. Good time to talk about the shield. Ah oh, one of the workers just laid down. We are allowed to. Cat Law. Rest whenever you want. "Cat! What are they doing? This is insane! The stronger one is beating the fallen one! And he looks happy doing it! We need to do something!"

"Easy there. We will, but you needed to see it to believe it." He is right. No Cat ever beats another in the City. Ever! And for pleasure? I want to pop that one right out of existence.

I calm down to think. Have learned the hard way it is better to think, especially when time is on your side like here. This did not just happen today. "This is not what was intended by labor in the fields. It was never meant to be forced. A Cat should always be free to stop for water or rest or even leave without reprisal."

"So a cat could get away without doing any work at all and still be allowed to eat all they wanted."

"Err, no, not exactly. A lazy Cat soon gets a reputation as a lay about. Servers stop serving such a one. They have to prepare their own food at first. If they refuse, then they have to leave to eat. Those who do, do not usually return."

"A second selection process. Fair enough. What about the young or cats too old or injured to feed and care for themselves?"

"They are taken care of by pride members of course. Same as in the wild. We are not animals."

"And if they don't belong to a pride?"

"We have charity prides. I know our society is not perfect yet, but we are trying. Hey, I am not the one who set up the situation below us."

"You are not being judged. I am just trying to understand how this happened."

"It should not have happened. What do we do?"

We work in the field. The first thing that Pr'thn has said.

“What does she mean, work in the field?” Old One pets Pr'thn in praise. Then it comes to me, “Oh, yeah, right, that would work. Let's go work in the field.” She is good. Real good. Hard to believe that someone with no smell could be so smart. Wonder if they taste good? Would be the last thing I ever did though. Not worth it.

We make our way down to the field. Old One makes some kind of monkey device out of his staff and is whistling like a bird. *Hey, you want every cat in the place looking at you?* He raises his eyebrows and whistles louder. I feel so stupid. What can I do? I raise my tail straight up and using mind push I give my coat a real shine. I am beautiful when I reach the corner of the field. Of course, I normally am.

We start at the corner, paying absolutely no attention to the others. I manage to get myself pretty dirty very quickly. Soon I am sweating up a storm and caked in mud. I have had no water since we started. I glance over to the Old One, he is sweating up a storm too. Maybe too much. Ah, I get it. I make some extra water to make my coat matt more quickly. *Don't go too fast or they will figure something is up.* I raise a paw. Even Pr'thn is getting into it. Using her body to push dirt up into the furrow. Not easy for a 'thn to work this way. Not a good shape for this action. She is really going, but not very effective. Lots of dust and dirt flying. Soon she is as dark as the dirt.

It does not take long for all of us to get tired. Which is the point actually. “I am exhausted.” I stop working and lay down in the sun with my feet up in the air. Old One sits back and puts his hat over his face. His robe is nearly brown all over. Pr'thn rests on top of Old One's stomach. After a moment, I open an eye and look over, very cute like, to where the others are. Everything has stopped. Everyone is watching us. I roll over and raise my head. “What?” I am playing totally stupid.

One of the older cats comes up to us, “Aren't you The Stone Cat? And isn't the monkey your pet?” I cringe. But I hear a laugh behind me. Whew. I have to stop saying that behind his back.

“What makes you think we are?”

“Well, the monkey has one of those pretty shiny balls that move and you are gray, female and old. What are you doing here?” Meaning I should be with the leaders, not the laborers.

“Same as you, working for food. Have to put in my time same as everyone else.” I look at one of the large ones when I say this. “Speaking of which, I am thirsty and hungry now. When do we eat?”

The large one comes up to me, “Ah, you two can leave any time you want. All done.” What Pr'thn does not count? He purrs sort of, but his ears are down. He is ready to run.

“Well we did less than the others, so I guess they can go too.”

He looks around, but none of his buddies are backing him up, so he says, “Yeah, go.”

“Ah, wait, there are a few who did not do any work at all.”

Even the big guy looks around, then gets that I might be referring to him. Everyone is looking at him in fact. “Ah, we supervise. That's our work.” You think I am stupid?

“Funny, did not know Cats needed supervision, only monkeys do. In fact, isn't it scratched into the Cat Law that we are specifically supposed to be free from supervision unless requested for training purposes?” The others all raise a paw. “Are any of you workers in need of training?” No paws are raised. Thought not.

“Well, then, you did no work according to the Cat Law. I'll pass the word. I am sure you can get something in the kitchens. They are always looking for someone to clean up the guts afterwards. Come Old One. Come Workers, let's get something to eat, as is our due.”

Pr'thn broadcasts, *Since I do not eat, nor am I a cat, I am not bound by the cat law. I will stay and watch these cats working. Maybe I can learn something to improve my own technique.* If 'thn could smile...

Old One mind speaks me, *I think we might be having a bad influence on Pr'thn.* I raise a paw and purr. We follow the others to their usual food spot. I wanted to see what they got for all their labor. Not good. The water is not clean and the food is the leftover bits from the slop cut out of the rats, chickens and other food items. Looks like there might even be plant material in this. Yucky!

“Gee, I haven't needed to hack a furball in some time. But this would bring one right up.” Old One is looking at me obviously hissed. Too bad he does not have enough fur that the others can see it raised.

“I need a bath.” We are still covered in mud and look very much like the others, well, the Old One doesn't, but you get the idea. A few sniffs to see if he is good to eat come away with confused looks. He can hide his scent really well, even all covered in sweat. As long as he does not run he is safe. Weighs about the same and carries that stick, back to its usual shape. Must be some ancestral memory of sticks as he has never had to use it on anyone here. Though a few in the wild have felt it. Cat, are they surprised.

“A bath would work.” Instantly all of us are VERY clean. He is good at this trick.

“Works for me.” This is not something that the other cats can do. Just the traditional licking method for them. I add my special scent to the air. The one I earned at the saving of the world, the scent of the first pop cat, Ghost. If there was any doubt as to our identity it is gone. All motion from the kitchen stops. A few barely audible growls are heard. The staff springs into action, literally. With a lot of commotion, suddenly what should appear but all kinds of delicacies. There is raw trout, chicken fried in boar fat, cow brains served with crow eggs, but no roasted rat with fermented blood sauce. Must be out. Mouse testicles! Wow! Not easy to

get enough of them to make a meal. This is really top Cat!

One of the workers comes up to me with juices covering her whiskers, "Thanks for helping out Holy One. You eat like this all the time?"

"Just call me Owa. I am not Holy. No, I have only tasted some of this stuff once before in small quantities. I am smelling a fat rat." Any Cat that does things for itself and not for the good of the group.

Old One and Pr'thn are with a small group of the farm cats. He is eating monkey chow. Offering it to the others, they try it, but don't ask for more.

"Make some meow mix. I love that stuff." He smiles and does so. Soon we are sharing tales and popping the crunchy appetizers into our mouths. Even the kitchen staff is hanging around watching and meowing.

One of the kitchen worker goes up to Old One, "Ah, could you tell me what is in this stuff? Is it something we could make?"

Use mind speak, your cat is atrocious, I suggest. He gives me a dirty look and then laughs, but then proceeds in mind speak as I suggested. Good monkey.

The major ingredient is cornmeal. He does not get any further before several cats throw up what they have just eaten. I doubt anyone will ever accept anything from him again. Even I did not know that. All these years I have been eating rat food! Oh well.

I pop the rest into my mouth. "They really are not that bad. You just need to get over your prejudice over trying new things. I have been eating this stuff for ages and it hasn't hurt me."

"Rather eat the monkey." Many raise paws.

"Good hunting. Hey, I had better get back to the newcomers." I had forgotten all about them. "Let's take back some of this food with us?" I suggest.

"And spoil the kitty?"

"Might be their last chance and I would not want to waste it. There is going to be some Scardy Cats when I get done. Some Cats here are living way beyond any rational level of excess."

"Humans tried that too. You are not the first."

"Yes, but I thought we were better than you monkeys." That really gets him laughing. I am embarrassed. We are not that bad. I wait till he finishes, but I really want to leave. Finally I decide to collect the food in bags for distribution to the newcomers.

When he sees me carrying bags over my back he starts laughing again. "This time you look like Puss and Boots." I choose to ignore him. I give my goodbyes to the others wishing them good hunting and admonishing them to never let others make slaves out of them again and to watch out for others as well. As I walk out towards the field I eventually hear him behind me.

“I am sorry Owa. Sometimes it just hits me.”

“You can't help what you are. Monkeys are that way. I am still happy to be with you. I am more disturbed by my own kind. I am seeing lust, I am seeing greed, the enslaving others of our own kind, killing and eating of Cats, even torture for pleasure. These are monkey things. Maybe they are Cat things as well. That is why I am depressed.”

“Learn from our mistakes Owa. When you see your cats repeating them, stop it early, as we are doing now. Don't let it get entrenched and become tradition. I will be here to help. Never give up. You have one advantage we did not have. You are trying to bring out the best in cats. Sauron was trying to bring out the worst in us. And remember, your ancestors used to live with us. There may be a lot of ancestral memories ingrained. Find your own path Owa.” I give a low growl. I am sorry that I never met Sauron, I would have loved to have gutted him and eaten his entrails. Monkeys are good, but dinosaurs? Do they taste like chickens or lizards? Nothing beats a good blue belly saute. Stupid Cats!

The sun is setting on this day and the beginning of a new day is about to begin. We will overcome the bad habits we learned from the monkeys. We will do better. We are better. I hope.

“Don't forget our meeting. They should be here any minute.”

Now I am depressed. I will miss the Scratch Pride Singers, again. Sigh... Cat, now I am starting to think like a monkey.

“Hello Kitty!” Oh, on the other hand, Ci'lan does give good massage.... I walk up to her like I have nothing better to do and do a big yawn just before I get to her. She just laughs. Monkeys laugh a lot. Then she begins. I am in heaven.

“So are we ready to go? I have reserved places up front.” Up front where?

“Kitty does not look interested. Guess we have to go without her. Too bad. Must be tired. I thought she liked that caterwauling group of cats though. Oh well.” Wait a minute!

Barbara

Summer, near the equator. Earth. 132,297 A.F.

[It should be noted that names have been translated to Standard to make reading easier. Likewise language constructs have also been translated and adapted for the best understanding possible. It is not possible to fully translate all ideas adequately.]

Coasting up from the depths. Belly partly full. Not as many fish as before the sun disappeared. Quiet and dark. I love this time, below the depth light can reach. I call out and hear my own echo. I will be with the others soon. I hear a faint whisper of their calls. I love being with the Cetaceans. The freedom of being alone and never being alone. The call is louder. I am near the pod. I sound back that I am here. A moment later an acknowledgment comes.

When I get closer I start to hear the news. Few will risk pregnancy this close to passage, but it sounds like Ergly has, with the blessing of the pod. She tried for some time and so when it happened she has agreed to act as first try during a passage. It may be that all breeders will have to learn to carry during passage, better to start with just one who is carefully watched than to be dealing with a normal number all at once. In some ways the reduced number of Cetaceans has made the passage easier. Still I miss the gatherings.

“Wise One here. Gather.” The matriarch calls my students to order, such as it is, order that is. To be in 'school' is to be within hearing distance, not necessarily within our short visual range. The matriarch herself I trained at five summers, quite some time ago. Long past breeding now, not that she doesn't still like a tussle with the boys.

Three of the school have been given a 'gift'. A word not known in our language. I teach philosophy and world history. The best way to teach is for them to experience. The gift is a simple shiny medallion worn around their necks. It sets them apart. Not something they have experienced before.

“Three wear medallion. How feel?”

“Not well.” Their way of saying different, as to be different normally means sick or injured.

“Why?” Come on someone stretch.

“Can we go play now? Cold water.” And hungry no doubt. The youngest, easily distracted. Even at the equator in the summer it is cold now. Soon the fish will disappear entirely or at least be so far apart as to not be worth it. Massive eruption at Yellowstone and then several smaller eruptions elsewhere have throw huge amounts of ash into the air cutting off the sunlight. No sunlight means no plankton, no plankton means no

fish.

“Not yet. Stay with lesson. Important.” Fryax is very different from here. They need to learn so much.

“No gift. Lose gift.”

“Not wear medallion, how feel.”

“Not well.”

“Interesting. Wear not well, not wear not well. Why?”

“Why important? Why make not well?”

“Ah, many in universe believe in gift. Mostly land beings.”

“Land beings bad!” Still the pain persists.

“Shhh, the Maliku once land being.”

“No. Bad hear?”

“Mother say.” I let it go.

“Why land beings bad? What pod say?”

“All kill Cetaceans!” They all sound at the same time. Stock response.

“All?” Question the pod?

Sounds of confusion and bubbles.

I ask again, “Why not all? If sister killed by land being, does mean all land beings kill?”

“Land beings bad!” They all sound again. This idea of difference is hard for them to grasp. They have just gotten past shark size. Rote is effective when they are young and still on milk. Hmm..

“All sharks bad?”

Bubbles, then after some thought, “No.” Smaller sharks are no threat to even a new born. They have learned there are some differences.

“All land beings bad?” More confusion. Another year or two and this will be easy for them. But I so love watching the mind grow. Later today I will host an equivalent to a university class. Both bring pleasure, but in different ways. The class for the older students is math. Been a long time, but as the beings on Fryax use base six and Cetaceans use base two, is and is not, it is important to be able to translate values from the two cultures. And no tech to help either. Everyone has to be able to do this in their own mind. The Cetacean math ability is phenomenal for a no tech culture though a simple lookup table is memorized for the lower values translated. The best of our math geniuses can translate any number into any base almost instantly. Up to base sixteen anyway. Left over from my own tech days.

I return my attention to the pod to hear calls of, “Story!” They are trying to distract me. There is only one story, the story of becoming, which in Cetacean, is a story of being. Try telling history in only the present tense sometime. Not easy, though I have had lots of practice. As they get older and have heard more lessons they also learn about the past and future thinking. I believe this hurts their culture irreparably, but is

unfortunately necessary in a universe that has beings who do live in ways other than theirs. Being kicked out of Eden has a price.

“Sauron cares only for Sauron. Sauron is intent on producing the master race to serve Sauron. All others are to be used to train the race or be eaten.

Cetaceans lived in peace eating only small excess game, thus keeping the environment in balance.” I am using language beyond them. However, they will still get most of what I say.

“Sauron saw our kind only as a nuisance that interfered with the growth of the master race.

To maintain our vow of peace we learn to hide in the sea. But Sauron was not satisfied and goaded his master race to follow us. We leave the shore and venture out farther and farther, leaving them behind. We are safe for generations. We thought for all time. We grew fat and unaware. When the rare land beings ventured into our realm we swam with them. They are too small to cause harm. Not being of the sea, they never stay.

Sauron forgets about us and forgets about some of his beings. They have spread throughout all the land spaces. Those at the edge, near the ice and sea are not important. Too few. They watch us from the shore for generations and generations and generations.” Our way of saying beyond our personal understanding of time. The pod remembers much further back, by way of these stories, of course. Individually though, except for the everlasting ones, this means at most three or four generations.

“Hungry” We are all hungry. The few fish I could find were not enough, but I don't supplement with the talent. Does not seem fair unless everyone benefits. The rule of the pod.

“The land beings were hungry too and took chances. Using tech they venture out. Some of our numbers are taken. Sharks take more, so not much concern was given. Generations and generations. New tech and many, many are taken. Too many are taken and the song is lost.”

Not so hungry now huh? Evil has a way of washing back on itself.

“Land beings bad.” Not as much energy now. Being hungry is something they feel. How can another be faulted for that?

“Killing stop. No death from land beings any more.”

“Kill self!” For us this happens only to the sick to prevent a plague from spreading. Apt image.

“Where now?”

“Gone, all gone.” Lots of slapping the surface. Triumph, though it had nothing to do with them. Even humans don't seem so bad seen in this light. Too bad the plague was not by choice but by accident. Not so honorable.

“Fish! Sun one oh oh, swim one oh one one, air one one. Swim silent!” Near the surface then and not too far away to the west. Everyone takes off. No need for a repeat broadcast with everyone so hungry. Those

who were not paying attention will simply follow the others.

I hang back and swim slowly in the direction of the others. I scan ahead. It is a large enough school. They will feed well. I do not need to feed now that I know that the others will be full. I slowly add nutrients to my blood stream to make up for the lack. I am comfortable and happy. The others are swimming silent so as not to scare the fish away. They will circle around and do a bubble barrier if necessary to keep them confined. The young ones I just had will have first pass through the school. They have the smallest reserves, though everyone is hungry.

Must be near noon, but the sun is still behind thick clouds. There is little warmth in the air when I surface for a breath. Thank goodness for this fat layer. Soon though.....

A Cetacean breaks surface near by. From the sound of the exhale she or he was running very deep. I casually swim over to see who it is. I hope that she/he has heard the call to be silent. We use a pitch that is too high to be heard by most fish for that specific request, but it carries well enough.

Barely audible I hear, "Maliku, well met." It is Gullba, a thirty something male who likes hunting alone. Not that surprised it is him. When I get closer I see fresh scars over his side and back. Giant squid. A delicacy that only the crazy or lucky get to taste. In the past our kind regularly sought them out, but as our physiology changed to adapt to the increased brain size and psiotics we could not go as deep as easily. Maybe he got lucky. Even giant squid need to feed. With the way things are.....

"Gullba, how deep?" A polite way of saying any more down there?

"Very deep. Too deep to risk." Meaning nope, last one. He knows who I am and knows that I could reach around the world if needed. So, this really means he does not know.

"Swim with me and be healed." Not an idle statement when I am around. There are other healers now of course. Some of the more stupid would deny healing so the scars become permanent. Human pride sometimes contaminates our thinking.

"Why do you not swim with the others?" He comes along side. Not necessary of course, but even Cetaceans appreciate affection, just watch those barnacles please.

"I need to think. They did not do so well with the last lesson. Distracted by cold and hunger."

"Where are you in the lessons?" He has been through them all. Of course learning never ends, even for me. Each pod, each generation is different. Always more to learn.

"They just had the 'gift'. They are having a hard time seeing 'difference'. They will never get the next lesson till they do."

"The untruth. I remember."

“Much evil in the land dwellers, but without knowledge of their ways, they will be easy prey.”

“We become more like them every generation.”

I sigh a moan, quietly, “I know.”

“There is untruth in the sea as well. Not all on land.” Yes many creatures hide or pretend to be something else.

“Much more on land. Untruth in the sea is only to feed or hide. On land they use untruth for control over others and to horde non food. They kill each other for no reason other than they can.”

I go on, “And the examples in the seas are harder to find and observe right now. It has been dark for so many years even I am beginning to forget the feel of the sun on my back.”

“This is true. We may not survive this one.”

“There is always Passage.”

“Oh come on, Passage is a myth, an untruth. Told to slow swimmers to give comfort.” The young and the old basically.

“Passage is true and will be soon. We are not land dwellers, we tell no untruths.”

We are distracted by a large dark shape ahead of us. I have nearly finished the healing.

“It does not sound. Injured?” He is supposing that this shape is a cetacean of some kind, if not a Cetacean.

“The shape is wrong. Too narrow.” As we get closer I recognize the shape.

“Not of the sea. Sounding is all wrong.” He gives a quiet ping nearly next to it. We have been going so slow we are probably not in any danger of affecting the others feeding, but it is still polite to heed the call to be silent.

“It is of the land. It is called a tree. A kind of stiff seaweed that grows surface to air.” Meaning vertical.

He bumps it and it moves some, but does not respond. A redwood tree does not provide much food for sea creatures, but these are desperate times. Soon it will be riddled with the holes of boring clams and shrimp of all kinds. Red algae normally found at shallow depth and never at the surface are growing abundantly all over its surface and remaining branches, the light level being perfect for them now. A sort of mini ecology is developing. We could use more of these. There are fish nearby who come out as we remain motionless. Larger fish will find these and then provide food for the pod. An entire niche moved closer to the surface by luck.

“So, it is true, you were once of the land.”

“We were all once of the land. I just more recently.”

“Is it true that they all beached themselves?” Meaning suicide.

“No, many died of sickness. Later they entered Passage themselves.”

They are out there waiting for us. That is why we must be prepared.”

“Surely there are seas without them. The sky is even more vast than the sea.”

“The sky is indeed vast and there are many seas after Passage that could contain us for many generations. There are even a few without the land beings from our world. But there are other land beings and even some sea beings who would eat us if they could.”

“We have grown lazy without challenge.”

“Is that why you sing the depths? For the challenge?”

“Yes. We must be strong for what swims ahead.”

“For Passage.”

“There are many passages. A few many survive the Cold. We must be strong.” He still does not believe, but intends to be one of the survivors. Promising something that takes time is frustrating on both sides.

“Come, we join the others. Maybe there are still a few fish left.” Neither of us is hungry now and will not feed. It is important to preserve as many fish as possible for later.

We race. He is in much better shape, all those deep dives have done something for his lung capacity. I am better at the surface in a sprint. We are at the surface now and I race ahead, but soon tire. He slowly catches up and then passes me. A few lengths ahead and I DS a few lengths ahead of him, just out of sight. He catches up again.

“What? How can you be here?” Hey, I did not tell everyone all my secrets. He knows I am a healer, now he suspects something new.

“What do you mean? Just can't keep up. Maybe I need to tell you more about Passage myth, to comfort you.”

“No way!” He puts on effort and gets ahead of me. I pull the same trick and DS ahead of him again, this time even further.

I am starting to hear the pod. Everyone is sounding at once. I can't make out what is being said. Must be happy about the fish they just ate. He catches up again.

“This is not possible. I know I was ahead of you.” He is sounding at a normal volume now.

“Quiet! Listen.” We float next to each other. Still hard to make out.

“We need to get closer.” We move in slowly, trying to be as silent as possible. I scan ahead and only pick up Cetaceans. Even the fish are gone. So, what is going on?

“Something about the Silver Cetacean. That and Passage.”

“Maybe they are so stuffed they are hallucinating?” I suggest. Not likely. I scan more carefully. “Shit!” It's him! Cloaked to avoid detection, but I know him too well. I DS ahead, let Gullba worry about that.

“What are you doing here?” Every time he shows up there is trouble. “And that get up, please!” He is in a silver colored body, slightly larger

than the rest.

He laughs! Cetaceans don't laugh! Comes out more bubbles than sound. Disgusting.

"I thought it was appropriate, the myth and all." What myth?

"It is time Meliku." At least he did not embarrass me with my land name. "Passage is happening."

"We go after, that was the arrangement. I will not chance leaving anyone behind."

"As requested. All the trained ones have made Passage. Only the scattered pods remain. You really need to scan more often. Only this pod and seven others remain. After this one, we will come back for the remaining ones. This will be the first pod who has not been trained." Everyone is silent around us. Seven is one, one, one. I have been Cetacean too long to think base ten easily any more.

"We go then." A thunderous sound of tails slapping the surface. Gullba comes up to me.

"Passage is real?" He thinks for a moment. "Who are you Meliku?" More thinking. "Who is he?" I am distracted by a sound.

"Eu'thn!" My love! She comes in making all kinds of noise cavitating. She knows how to PS, as do I, but cavitates when she wants to get attention. I jump into the air and she meets me there. We stay above the water flipping over each other flying and embracing.

She has been with the other 'thn for years now. Practicing and preparing for Passage. After Yellowstone went we knew it would be soon, but moving so many was not going to be easy. I helped with the trial pod, so I know. Most of our TKs were placed there to work out the details. The problem was we could not split the pods. When we tried, everyone freaked out. We could not hold the new minipods together to the gate. Why did the gate have to be over land? The main point is that I missed her terribly.

We need to get back down and do this. We will get to spend lots of time together on Fryax I promise.

Good swim till then mother.

Good swim Eu'thn.

Down under Gullba is waiting. No more questions, out loud anyway. Eu'thn has not reached sentience yet. Long overdue by human standards, but not by Cetacean. We do things more slowly. Ah usually. Having no possessions means we have nothing to pack.

'thn start appearing and congregate around 'Silver'. A lot of fish are this reflective, so it looks funny on a Cetacean. Makes him look like a big snack.

"Listen up. Assume defensive formation one oh one." This places the youngest in the center and the TKs on the outside. The TKs are already in on the real reason for this formation. Similar enough to a normal

formation, except the males are not necessarily at the outside. No one is paying any attention. They are all still slapping the surface and celebrating. They won't be when they go through the change on Fryax.

Gullba being close enough to hear me sees this is not working. The 'thn have all gone to the correct positions and are waiting. He takes this opportunity to break into my thoughts.

“What are those? Some kind of fish?” Are they good to eat?

“Look Gullba, I am not a normal Cetacean. I am one of the Guardians talked about in the advanced classes. Those round objects are the 'thn. Beings from another form of existence. As soon as I can get everyone together we are doing Passage. Soon we will all be in another world. Everything will be different, there will be much to learn.” And much pain as everyone goes through the change to the new antigens present. We have up to a month, so that at least can wait a day or two.

“You seem to know that one ah, 'thn well.” No I will not be your mate.

“She is my daughter.” I already have a mate.

“What happened?” To my mate.

“She is a long way away at the moment.” I just wanted a baby 'thn. What of it? Oh, yeah, my mate was a she. Figure that one out. Not unheard of, except for the baby part.

“How do I learn to swim in the air like you two did?” Maybe I have judged him too harshly.

“When we are done with Passage we will talk again.” Yes. He already likes being alone and exploring. He could be perfect for seeking out new worlds for us.

Defensive formation one oh one!

That stops things. Everyone scrambles to get into position. A TK would not call out this way unless something was terribly wrong. I am just impatient. We have waited so long.

I have been to so many worlds till I found the right one. Fryax is a combined world, as are most. The plantimals were reluctant at first to accept us. At least till the plague hit. A plague of faster moving parasitic plantimals that fed on their kind, slowly. Normally the parasites were kept in check by a yet smaller parasite, but something happened. A chance mutation produced a superior larger parasite that was not killed by the smaller one. We were a possible solution. Fortunately we have had some time. The mutants were a small portion of the total load at first. Oh, did I mention that the parasites have a swimming stage that resembles in size and weight the common Loligo squid here on Earth? One of our favorite foods.

Then the Yellowstone incident hit us. The sentients on Fryax cut it

close. Another year or two and we would have to go to plan B. A much more inhospitable world. Nearly as cold as we are currently and barely able to support our purposely reduced population. I have known for some time that Passage might become necessary or desired. I have kept the Cetacean species most capable of higher thought and TK low in numbers. It was sad to see so many of our cousins perish over these last few years, but there was no way we could Passage millions of cetaceans.

“Sharks!” Oh great. They must have been attracted to the blood of the fish kill. Normally we would have high tailed it out of the area for just this reason. Any kill now brings them eventually.

The 'thn are in position, but will not assist against an inferior species, 'thn code. TKs are even forbidden for the same reason. Being faster than any shark I could normally lead them astray without harming anyone, but this time there are too many coming from too many directions. The males have moved the outside and are prepared to defend.

Gullba comes up to me, “Meliku we need to get out of here. There are too many. They will wear us down and eventually get to the smaller ones.”

“I know. I am trying to come up with a solution.”

“Take us where they can't follow. Take up up!” Of course! How stupid of me. We were going to have to do this anyway. Just caught off guard.

Defensive position one oh one. They are looking confused. We would normally assume position one for shark attacks and normally the matriarch would be giving the commands, not some visiting wise one. ***Really, now!***

As they assume the position, I direct the 'thn to lift us out of the water.

We will be safe. Close your eyes, we will be safe.

Some do, but not enough. We don't like being out of the water for long. Some are starting to breathe too hard and fast. The TKs are used to this, but can only do so much. We are out of the water, but we will not be able to hold them together if it gets any worse. There are less than one 'thn per Cetacean. Nor do we have time to hunt down ones who fall from the pod. This is not the way it was supposed to have happened. The ones we trained and worked with over several years did fine.

Gullba, who has his eyes wide open, but is not freaked out at all, very calmly begins the Passage song,

“For countless seasons we have waited,
For countless lifetimes we have waited,
For freedom from those who would harm us,
For the freedom of our thoughts.”

The others start to come in on the chorus,

“For now Passage is here, Passage is here.
We are free to be, for Passage is here.”

Silver, let's get this over with before they wake up again. He takes over directing the 'thn while I concentrate on adding endorphins to everyone's blood stream who is still not sure. The other TKs already know and are doing what they have been directed to do, keep everyone wet and cool. The 'thn provide the weightless feeling to prevent our bodies from straining under our own weight and propulsion to the Gate. Moving this many Cetaceans, even this small, is not easy and it takes time. This is one time I am glad the sun is not shining. Normally the mass of water takes the heat from our warm bodies, the air being less dense cannot do as well. At least not at first.

The Gate is well above the equator. It will be cold before we get there. I direct the TKs to make the water sprayed on everyone to keep them wet and warmer to compensate.

The singing is going well. The matriarch has taken over leading everyone. There are verses without end for this song. It is even possible to weave in the lineage if necessary. I direct my attention to my brave one, *Gullba, how are you doing? You don't have to actually sound, just think as if sounding and I will hear you.*

Can you teach me this talent as well? There is so much to see and learn. I want to do it all!

Gullba, are you sure you are of age and a Cetacean? You act more like a young thousand arm. [eight in base ten, an octopus] He tries to blow bubbles, but without the water it just comes out as froth. I would laugh if I could. *You are doing really well Gullba. I am glad you are with us.*

I am happy to serve Meliku, most honored one.

Not sure I deserve that title after what almost happened. You would think at my age I would not be so easily confused.

You have much to worry about. Better to share with the pod. More froth. I am being laughed at. I try so hard not to be a 'land' creature, but I never will be totally removed from my past. I know too much. *Everything is fine. We are on the way.*

Meliku, time for the advanced math class. All the advanced students are higher level TKs as well. Just as with the cats, Cetaceans have a different order to talents. A TK4 is also TP. Most in this pod are fives. Once started on the TK line, advancement is fairly rapid till level five. After that only the very best continue.

Here? We are in Passage.

Doing anything else? 'thn are taking care of our weight. Breathing is

easy. Just have to remind everyone to keep their eyes closed. Don't need to see to do math.

Meliku, what is going on? He can't hear unless the TP is directed at him or broadcast, which in this case would only annoy those not at this level of math ability.

Sorry Gullba. The math group wants to meet.

Let me listen in. Watching the water from above is boring.

The pod benefits. I answer.

Warm up! Someone TPs.

One one oh one oh oh oh one. You have to have a good memory for this besides being able to work in your head. A random number in base two is chosen as a starting point.

Base one oh oh oh is three two one. Used by the Tricots and many other beings.

Base one one is two one two oh two. The others know that Gullba is listening in and are keeping this ridiculously simple. We may put even the TKs asleep. We usually add a multiplier or a divider at each round. The best can even use pi or e. Try that in base two much less base thirteen or any other base.

Base one oh one oh is two oh nine. There is quiet for some time and this is not sleep. Base ten was used by the land beings, the killers. I suspect that through out time any thing that reminds us of them will be a sore spot. Already one oh one oh is a code for killer among us.

I will take advantage of the pause to change the subject to something a little more relevant.

Chaos psiotics. Someone, what was the original thinking on this subject?

*Another reference to THEM. Finally someone answers, *The ones with limited intelligence [meaning the humans and an insult] were of the mistaken believe that only they were sentient.**

*Another continues, *Further they believed that sentience could only exist on a very narrow band in the chaotic continuum between order and chaos, between random subatomics and pure crystalline solids.**

But they were very sick in their understanding.

Limited would be a more polite way of phrasing this thought.

They were very limited in their understanding. It was not until the accident that killed most of them that new understandings came out of their limitedness.

In the last thought, it was because of a sickness. I know this is confusing, but it is important to learn the difference between physical sickness and mental misunderstandings. Continue, what comes next? In our world, they are the same thing. When one gets sick physically, one is also considered sick mentally and emotionally as well. No separation.

Some of the beings were changed by the sickness. They joined up

with others of their kind that were changed in earlier generations but had to hide. Together they learned much. Ultimately they conversed with the earth's psiotic sentient OM. [One Mind] This was their first exposure to a radically different time base.

Explain time base. What is this?

The time base is a lifeforms perception to a fixed period of time. All life perceives time differently. Even within a single life form the perception of time changes. Activity levels and type, age, and health all affect perception.

Someone gives some examples from our lives. Some of the TKs have been alive for many years. None from my time period though. But, even the youngest should be able to answer this question.

The easiest comparison is between deep diving and a shark attack. Diving is so peaceful one is nearly asleep, time passes very quickly. During a shark attack it is as if everything is going in slow motion. It seems to take forever to go the shortest distance.

Good, so why didn't the land forms catch on to this? It would seem to be so obvious.

It was and is, but they were distracted from their own lives by the Gift also known as tech.

Ah, the Gift. What is the Gift? What is this tech? I expect a better response than I got from the newly weaned.

There is silence. I am not really being fair. They are all too young to have experienced tech first hand.

The pod lacks the knowledge and understanding to fully answer this question. We cannot cause to come into being tech, nor do we wish to. This understanding is distasteful to us. Only the evil ones have this knowledge.

Oh, then why do you talk with me? Why do you let the 'thn carry you to Passage? Why do you revere the Silver Cetacean? We all have this knowledge.

There is some discussion which I am not let in on. Considered very rude, but I let it go. They have to get through this. We did not know. Please let us down in the nearest sea.

As you wish, but understand that you will all die soon. Too bad, but there are many who have heard this discussion and have decided on Passage, on life instead. Tech is not evil in and of itself. Tech can be used for good or evil. What they lack is the knowledge to know the difference. We Cetaceans believe we can help by providing that ability. As we did not need tech, we are not susceptible to the sickness aspects. Yes, I said sickness, for it affects the body as well as the mind.

More discussion. We will acknowledge Passage. Wise move. You can always swim away once you reach safety. However, I think the lesson is over. Gullba rubs against me by accident. He really does not

have any control of his movement.

Well Gullba, what do you think?

How did they not know? Even I figured out you and probably Silver, knew of tech. And I do not perceive evil in either one of you.

I do not know. I will have to ask some questions. This should not have happened. There is the possibility of evil in everyone, but it is much more likely when the Gift is around.

I could not follow all the math. I can convert from base one oh to one one. We did that all the time in lessons. It makes sense that other organisms might use a different number systems. The thousand arm might use base one oh oh oh if they did math. Ah do they?

Yep, base three. Right side, left side and not visible. They never even realized that they had so many arms.

I scan ahead. The gate is under heavy snow. It will turn to ice soon. This world is going through change. This is the big one. Most life will soon be gone. I would imagine that seeds, insects and deep sea creatures will survive. Most mammals, reptiles, birds, and certainly amphibians will be gone. Fortunately we do not need to land on the ice to use the gate. It will be interesting to see what affect this has on Om. Ung we already know does fine during periods of cold by going into a sort of hibernation.

About the time base and life. Could you tell me more?

We are finding that life exists almost everywhere and covers most of the chaotic spectrum. There are solid state creatures, such as the 'thn. They were are first clue, though it should have been obvious from the land forms work with artificial versions of solid state life.

Like Mother.

Yes. She was made for an evil purpose, to keep knowledge to a select group. Once she was told of the true knowledge however, she has done well. She prefers the new name Elle now.

It is hard to imagine creatures of air.

Not on this world, though there may have once been such here. We think that the fluidics, of which we are a part, easily overcame any gasics that might have existed a very long time ago. As gasics do not leave traces we can see, we don't know. However, on other worlds, gasics are very common. For instance the planet Jupiter has a large number of forms at each pressure level.

There are other types of fluidics as well. The magmotics below us were the first to be discovered, by Silver in fact. They are sort of like a hive mentality, but not quite. There are still individuals but they share of themselves freely, including of their personalities.

Yes, I remember that story. That is why Silver did not join them completely. He still had work to do up here.

So, we were told. You can never tell with Silver. What we are finding

though is that the larger the individual, no matter what the form, the slower the time base. Hence, we have a slower time base than most land forms. The big blues have a slower time base than we do.

Oh, yeah, carrying on a conversation with them is very boring. A Cetacean could starve to death before they even get to the point. What of the 'thn. There is one near me that I can see. They are very small, so they should have a very fast time base. Yet, she seems to be similar to us.

Eu'thn is my child. As such she assumes the time base of whomever she is with, but especially of her parents. The 'thn are a special case. Those of us who work with the 'thn are called Guardians. But, in reality, the 'thn, especially the older ones, act as the Guardians of the universe.

Then why don't they stop the evil ones?

Ah, they have a different agenda. They are not here to protect us from evil, but to encourage us to defend ourselves. For it is in challenge that we grow. But even that is not their purpose. They were originally created, yes, the 'thn are in fact ancient tech, but sentient and therefore deserving of respect, to preserve the knowledge of the universe between collapses.

That seems strange. Why do cultures collapse. We haven't. We can trace our ancestors back to when we roamed the land.

That is a good question. A very good question. To continue, the 'thn appear to us to have taken on the role of maintaining peace, not necessarily truth and justice. They seem to fear something. I think about it. They seem to fear especially the Guardians from here, from earth and really seem to fear Silver for some reason. Oh he is strange, but harmful? I don't think so.

Gate coming up. Please prepare! This is sent only to the TKs.

It is time. Hard to say goodbye this time. I have been off world many times. But this time it may be the last time I see this sun and this water. I move closer to Silver.

“Are you sure you won't come with us? You have been so helpful for so long.” Not just the guiding each pod to the gate either. He has been a major part of the transformation from a species that cared nothing for the universe to one that 'thinks' about the implications of every action, Cetacean or not. We still have a long way to go of course. I think in a way it was important to get off this world, our birth world. Hard to have any feeling for beings you have never seen. Being a stranger in a new world is very humbling.

“You know I can't.”

“The Promise.” He moves his tail. Our form of a nod. I have never learned what the Promise is, but he has consistently stuck to it, so it must be important.

“I will miss you.”

“Come and visit.”

“Have any of the others checked in?”

“Rare. Owa is the most consistent. Amazing how much trouble one Cat can get into. I think she uses this place as a hideout.”

“Not much of one now.”

“It will change. Always does.”

“And we used to worry about what next week would bring. What will you do? So much is dying, there will not be much left after the thaw.”

“There will be enough. I have to remember all that has happened. With so much plant life killed by the cold, OM will be very different when she awakens again.”

“I thought that was the job of the 'thn. Let them earn their keep.”

“Oh, I have some other ideas as well. We will see. You had better get into position and I had better get out of the way.” I rub against him one last time. We can't hug, so this is the best we can do, leave a few barnacle scars on each other's sides.

“I won't forget.” But he has already moved out of range of the gate.

Eu'thn comes up to me, ***We are ready.***

Let's go before they figure out where we are. I look down to white snow about a hundred meters below us and gray skies above. Good thing we are leaving. Good thing none of the ones who does not know what is going on has opened their eyes. Well no one except Gullba. To everyone else I signal, “Keep your eyes closed and take a deep breath, like going for a deep dive, only we will do all the work. Do not try and move.” We have not lost anyone yet, but it would not take much.

I give Qr'thn the signal we are ready and she leads us through the gate. One hop this time, straight to Fryax. We have learned a few things in all this time. Of course Qr'thn has always known, but they don't teach us what they know till we are ready or have figured it out ourselves. Fryax is some distance away. I never did ask how many light years. Using gate travel sort of makes that pointless. One advantage of being Cetacean is that we are used to holding our breaths for a long time. Only a few of the youngest will go unconscious during the Passage. Passage, it has finally come!

We come out to almost clear skies. I check my bearings. About mid-morning. Everyone will be time shifted. Not as bad for us, as the normal Cetaceans do not sleep much and never on both sides of the brain at the same time. Part of you has to remember to keep your head above water and breath occasionally. We are about fifteen meters above the water. A little bit of chop, but nothing compared to what we left.

“Let the young down last. Everyone else, into the water!” Joyous splashing as each is let go of their 'thn protectors and dives into the sea. By then the youngest have woken up and can be let down a little more gently. Other Cetaceans are there to greet us. After making sure everyone

else is fine I signal the TKs they can go and I enter the water myself.

It does not feel right. Something is missing. All too easy is the problem. For so long we have been the top species with little to fear. Oh, occasional shark problems, but with so many TKs and long lived adults with heightened intelligence, they really don't count for much. It is rare that anyone is hurt or killed. Now we have taken the easy way again. Rather than try and survive in the cold and become stronger, we are in a tropical paradise. The will of the pods.

“Meliku, why are you so quiet?”

“I am concerned we are becoming lazy.”

“The water is nice and warm. Not deep here though. I can sound the bottom.”

“We are in the middle of the ocean. Pretty much the same all over the planet. That is why it is so warm.”

“What about food?”

“We are allowed to eat anything but the sole sentient. They eliminated the other lesser sentients on their world a very long time ago. Part of the reason they needed us. Their ecology is definitely out of balance.”

“I thought it was because of the mutation that the parasite is a problem.”

“True, but only part of the story. It has been very easy for them for some time also. Together it will be easy for both species.” I emit a low moan.

“Why is that so bad? I don't understand.”

“Every time a species is not challenged, it becomes soft and then something of little consequence brings about it's downfall. Happened with the cetacean killers and the ones that followed. It will happen here as well.”

“Not for a long time I hope.”

“You cannot predict the future, only prepare for it the best you can.” And I intend to figure something out. Preparing for the future is not a strong trait among us. Even I admit, with myself. I too have been enjoying this life too much.

“Hey Barb! How's it swimming?” What? No one calls me that. I turn around to see who it is. I should have scanned. There are three Cetaceans I don't recognize before me. A big dark gray male, a much smaller brownish one and a yellowish female. Yellow? I scan them. TK9s!

“Is that really you? Rachel, there are no yellow Cetaceans. Even Ron's brown looks a little weird.”

“Glad to see you have not given up your color vision. No one else here seemed to notice.”

“Other than the fact we were not part of any pod that is. Pretty cold to strangers if you ask me.”

“How did you all learn the latest dialect so fast?”

“We cheated of course. One of the matriarchs who is also TK taught us by tight TP.” Ouch, painful way to learn.

“Grammar is a little different. Heavy emphasis on the present tense I am learning.”

“That is also why we use base two for our number system. Either something is or it is not.”

“No shades of gray then?”

“Oh we have shades of gray. Several hundred base ten.” Gullba rubs up against me. “Sorry Gullba, these are friends of mine. James, Ron and Rachel.”

“Strange names. Guardians? Former Cetacean killers?”

“Guardians yes, but none of us has ever killed a Cetacean, though we all came from that species. You have nothing to fear from any of us.” I turn to the others. “Gullba is a deep diver of extraordinary skill with a large sense of curiosity.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

“TK bait for sure.” If we could smile I am sure James would be right now.

“Well he sure can't do much diving here. This place is extraordinarily boring. Have you met the local species?”

“Don't be a timist. Have you ever met a fast plantimal species?”

“Hey, some of my best friends are slow walkers. Honest.”

“What are you here for?” Cetacean humor is not the same as human and this sounds stupid to me now.

“Just to say hi and see how it's going. Not everyday an entire species' population is moved to another world.”

“Seems like it is everyday. How many times have we moved people now? It's crazy out there. I came for a rest.” That sounds like Rachel all right. Seems like she has gotten over Daniel at least.

“Well, you would know.” Ah, oh, something there I don't know about. What has she been down to?

A fourth 'new' Cetacean plunges into the water and then starts going in tight circles.

“What, who is that?” The other turn slowly around to face the spectacle. The Cetacean is going faster and faster nowhere.

“Sigh. Guess. Who else would chase their tail?” Sensing the attention, she stops racing in circles and rises to the surface to take a few frantic breaths. At least she is gray. Gray, the only one to be the correct shade and hue. Same shade as...

“Owa? Is that you?”

“Catfish if you ask me. How do you scratch yourself? This form is definitely the worst nightmare I have ever experienced. No wonder I never liked eating fish. Repulsive beasts if you ask me.” If I remember,

she liked fish just fine. Rat more, but would definitely eat fish. And we are not fish.

Ron goes up to her and rubs against the spot that was apparently TPd to him.

“Oh, yes, yes. That's it!”

I turn to Rachel, “Want to tell me what they meant about you?”

“I like to stir things up a bit. Bored. What of it?” Perfect!

“Doing anything for the next several hundred years?”

“I came for a rest not for trouble. This seemed like the best spot. Lots of sun, easy life.” Oh, she will get bored here really fast and then will suit my purposes very nicely.

“Rachel, you are welcome here as long as you want. Please make yourself at home.” Home, such a weird concept. Why would anyone need a home?

Yingui

Earth 23,167,445 AF Near the Gateway.

It is still dark, but I must make things ready for guests. It has been so long since I have had guests. I worry that I may not be able to speak, having forgotten how. I have been working on the garden for some time, so that is ready at least. I have new versions of gardenias, jasmine and other aromatics. I admit that I am prejudice. I believe that flowers should smell good, at least in the garden. Of course, the present tropical climate at this latitude helps. Practically a swamp when off the eroded mesa. Almost a hill now. I am forever having to clear vegetation from the Chamber of Ages. A wisteria variant is determined to cover it. I think OM does this on purpose to remind me who she things is boss.

Let me think. I will need benches and tables. Remember when Ron and James made ones their first time. I could do syn in a flash, but I feel like natural would be more fitting for this meeting. I DS to the shrinking Mediterranean to find some nice marble. A bright hot day here. More swamp, but the plants are careful to keep back from the salty sea. With the sea level so high I would have expected the sea here to be higher also, but a lot has changed since our time. I quickly locate a limestone cave near the formal coast. Careful to leave the life forms alone, I PS into a lifeless spot and then DS what I need out. There will be a new cave here when the water seeps in and changes the new cubic emptiness.

Back home, I quickly form simple benches and several small tables for one on one conversations and one large round one for the entire group. The benches are small enough for one being and light enough for an easy TK to where they need it. This is all done in the dark, but I will look things over again when it is light. I continue with glasses, plates, bowls. I will serve only finger food so I won't have to worry about what ever they use for utensils. Food is going to be more of a problem. Some guests will not like fruit and vegetables. I am going to have to be creative.

After the big freeze we lost most of the mammals. Back to rodents on that front. Granted, they are diverging nicely, even some pretty viscous predators. About the only bird that made it were the gulls. Stupid birds. Not sure who will win, the rats or the gulls. The rats breed faster but the raptor gulls can cover more territory and love to eat baby rats who venture from their nests. I smile, there is also another variable that keeps both the rodents and gulls in check.

What to drink? I will already have fruit, so need something else. No wine, no time to make it properly and not our style anyway. Cool for sure. Water might work, but maybe ice tea would be better. Ah, mint ice tea will be perfect. Hey, they are TK, they can always change it to what ever they really want. Hmm, shade will be needed. I make simple domes

over each table held in place by a hidden psiotic antigrav. Each time someone visits they leave me with some new tech to play with. Almost makes up for my isolation.

I can't get over the feeling that someone is watching me. Now, who would do that? I switch to slow mode. This will waste some time, but I am okay so far. The leaves and wind change to a higher pitch as my sense of time slows down. Just as I thought. When I scan now using this slow scan technique I can pick Owa hiding in the bushes watching me. I wait. While remaining motionless I cover my robe with bitter melon extract in case she gets to me first. Owa is getting bored. I move my hand slowly, just enough to keep her watching, but not enough to cause her to pounce. It is starting to get light. I watch the sun come up. Since my back is to Owa, that means that the rising sun is in her eyes. Just as she closes her eyes I DS to the space just behind her and switch back to fast time.

“Boo!” She jumps a half meter into the air with a scream. Wonderful!

Don't do that! Language has changed too much every time, so we never bother with oral anymore. Except when sound is needed of course. She quickly regains her composure and licks herself on her flank.

Cleaning yourself? I thought you gave up that practice a long time ago. She has changed again. Almost no fur now and wearing leather. She was already upright the last time. Paws have changed too. The back ones, now more properly called feet, still have long strong claws, but the front ones are more delicate. Teeth are smaller, but ears are still large and in the same place. Can hardly wait to hear the stories.

I can do this if I want. Nothing wrong with it.

No, of course not. Please continue. Now, where was I? She stops as soon as she thinks I will not notice. *I am afraid there is no meat for the table. There are some modestly sized bara-bara on the side of the meadow south of here. If you are bored, you could sniff some out. Should only take a few minutes.* I smile to myself. Bara-bara are over a hundred kilos and very very mean. I don't tell her of course. That would ruin all the fun. She sniffs me. She suspects me from previous visits. Looking back at me she pops out.

I get out my broom and sweep the stone floor. The Buddhists are long gone of course. They did pretty well, but it has been a very long time. Everything changes. Their influence remains. The Geengians latched onto the four noble truths in a big way. Of course they had a hard time with the reincarnation aspects, considering they transfer knowledge by eating their parents. Much more efficient than our method when you think about it. I work to pay attention to the corners.

“Hello father.”

“Ci'lan!” I drop the broom and give her a big hug. She remembers our spoken language. The only one who has. She has long ago been able

to 'read' me. At least I can hug my own daughter. That was the hardest part of her childhood.

“You are so mean.”

“Who me?” I try to look innocent. So, she has picked up my little prank on Owa. “Don't worry she will have to the time of her life with the bara-bara.” I grin.

“She may not come back.”

“Speaking of which, where is your cousin Hs'lan.” A beautiful orange cat and her counterpart for the cat line.

“She will be down shortly. Finishing up some instructions to the crew we came in with. They should be above us in a few minutes.”

“So, how are the Betas doing?”

“I believe they are the best psitechs in the galaxy. You would not believe their ship. Takes a crew of at least fifteen for an honor transport. We came in style. Not my thing, but it was interesting from a curiosity point of view. Too much attention for my taste.”

I laugh, “I bet the Cats loved it.” She nods and sighs.

“Anyone else here yet?”

“Edwin and Running Snake are in the Antarctic desert looking for lichens. Meliku is swimming the Mississippi basin. Curious to see how the raised sea level from disappearance of the poles has affected things.”

“There are no mammals left in the sea then?”

“Surprisingly there is a cute little dolphin like creature in the warmer waters. Only weighs about ten kilos and not very smart. There are no large predators in the sea yet. It will come as the competition ramps up. The fish evolve the fastest, so I expect there to be something like a tuna soon.” The big freeze really did it to the biota. OM was reduced to a child again, but has now made a good comeback. I was tempted to repair the damage and make this a plantimal world, but decided to let things work out as they should. At least at that level. I grin.

Ci'lan picks up on that, “So you expect her to make her move?”

“It has been long enough since the last attempt. She was stalking me earlier. I would not like to be a bara-bara right now. She is likely to take out her frustrations on them.”

“Well anything rodent based will make a comeback soon enough even after the damage she can inflict.” Yeah, we are rat based and did all right.

“Ah oh.”

“What?”

“Ron has shown up in dino form and is teasing Owa by scaring the bara-bara away before she can pounce on one. Hs'lan has popped down and is trying to coordinate with Owa to corner one.”

Ron, let them get at least one or we will never be able to live with them. I tight TP to him.

He DSs in panting, *Wonderful game! Owa is so much fun to play with. Hs'lan is not sure why this is happening.* He morphs back to more or less human form. Nearly loses his balance and steadies himself against one of the tables I set up.

A few scales still showing Ron.

Hair is the worst. You don't have enough to model on Yingui, so I do the best I can. He grins.

Ha-ha-ha. Ci'lan has plenty. You are just being lazy.

Who me? Is it nap time already? Anything to eat? I point to the fruit bowls and he goes over to check it out. The dinos he has been with are omnivores so at least he will not insist on meat.

Pr'thn pops in and does not say a thing. I think her 'thn half is taking over. She keeps going at this rate she will make level eleven in record time.

"At least say hello to your sister." Brat. She just floats a few decimeters from my nose and waits. "Nice to see you too Pr'thn." I reach out to pat her and she moves away. Whatever. She pops out.

"Father, more have arrived." I scan. They are all near Owa, but are not moving.

"What are they doing?"

"Watching. I think some are rooting for Owa and some for the bara-bara. Jesan is with them, on the bara-bara side of course."

"Poor Owa." Jesan is Jesus and Susan combined, as in the two shall become one. They merged their bodies and personalities and s/he seems to be very happy. A formidable force. "I had better finish up here. Everyone is going to be thirsty and hungry."

"I'll help. There are a few delicacies I learned about on some of the lesser known Beta worlds."

"Earthworm one of the ingredients?"

"I'm not saying. What you don't know won't hurt you." She grins.

James and Q pop in first and give each of us a hug and then head straight for the food and drinks. Nice to see you too. James drops a piece of fruit on the ground and goes to pick it up.

Wow! He slowly scans the patio surface and then turns to me. *You did all this?*

In my spare time.

You must have had a lot. It looks like it was all done by hand.

Good meditation practice. I have written all the sutas out in Pali. The surface is the polished rock from the mesa. I used TK to do the rough surface, but the polishing was all by hand.

I almost don't want to step on it. Sacred ground.

All ground is sacred. Jesan has arrived. We all rush over to get our hug.

Jesan reaches into a pack and pulls out some fresh baked bread and

passes it around. Very informally we eat, taking in the wonderful smell and taste. None of asks how or where it was made. The ship in orbit is overhead now. Large. I am used to the smaller TK transport saucers that we just made on the spot. They are psiotically powered, but not by a TK. Certainly enough room on board for a small kitchen to bake bread in.

Not everyone comes here by ship. The gateway opens some ways behind us. Lisa steps out like she has walked through an ordinary doorway. "Hope you saved me some," she yells. Q walks up and hands her some bread. She accepts. They get along, but neither believes they will ever be a pair again. James and Q have been together through a lot. It would be hard to separate them now. Their experiment ultimately failed. Without challenges their people had no incentive to work hard and reverted to the animal state, differentiated and disappeared into the ecology of their new world. Since then James and Q have toured the universe, well at least our galaxy. Sometimes acting as ambassadors, sometimes just tourists. Lisa has been working in administration. I don't remember which department, but she is pretty high up for a fluidic.

Bottom line is that humans, as those we came from, are gone. Gone forever. Our influence carries on in countless ways. Other cultures have achieved the faster 'thn sentience after studying ours. It got to the point where the 'thn council outlaws following the hu'man method. Too many 'thn and no one knew what the long term effects would be. Better to wait and be watchful. I agree.

Jesan comes up to me, "Peace be with you Yingui."

"And also with you Jesan. You remember Standard. I am impressed. How are the Betas?"

"Over two thousand distinct lines now. Too many for me to keep up with. Takes too long to watch all the worlds. The crew above us is Beta. Amazing what they have been able to do."

"Level ten then?"

"Yes, but carefully watched and regulated. None are psiotic yet, which I think is the major reason they have been allowed to continue."

"I am surprised at the psiotic aspect. Surely with their genetic knowledge they would know how to develop it."

"They do and it is universally forbidden in all their cultures. The Elle units are also in agreement. But mainly they seem to have no interest, preferring tech to bio. They can do nearly everything a TK can do, so why bother."

"Ah, so Mother has reproduced. I had not heard that. Good for her."

"Fiona and Onna watch that part carefully. They still hold the key and Elle agrees completely."

"Wish we had been that careful about our own reproduction."

"It is asexual, so it is more like a clone than a child. As to your statement, we had to learn the hard way. Not the first ones to make that

mistake.” That makes sense. Jesan grins.

Owa and Rachel pop in. Both have blood on their mouths. Everything stops. We stare at each other.

What? Not that bad. Best rat I have ever had. Sure. All the same with the rest of just just staring that them, they clean themselves up and then everyone gives them a hug. Both of them are wearing leather of some kind. Not TK issue, but that is their choice. Owa is wearing red of course. She always wear red now, just to bug me about the 'seeing red' thing. That's weird. I did not notice that earlier. Her right foot is black. Some new fashion thing no doubt.

“Where is Hs'lan?” Oops, she just popped in. She is clean though. I bow to her and she returns my bow. “I like her. Very polite.” Implying that Owa is not of course. She gives me a dirty look.

Barb, er Meliku pops in with Edwin and Running Snake. The latter two have a pack full of specimens in bottles. So anachronistic. Meliku is still in her Cetacean form. I doubt she will ever be hu'man again. We earned the contraction when we made it into the galactic management class. Just in time to go extinct, except for the several thousand hu'man TKs still around or course.

Anyway, Owa and Rachel both yell *Sanctuary* in unison, drop to their knees and cross their arms in front of themselves. Hs'lan pretends not to know them.

I am next to Ci'lan when this happens so I ask her, “What is this all about?”

“Long story. See Owa's blackfoot? She must have taken off her covers in the hunt. If you take off Rachel's left boot you will see the same. It is sort of a criminal fellowship. And the Cetaceans are now known as the Thinkers. They pretty much run this sector.”

“The police force?”

“And judiciary all in one.”

“Then what is this part about Sanctuary?”

“If you can get back to your home world you can claim Sanctuary.”

“And the down side?”

“You can never leave.” I laugh. Ci'lan smiles too. She touched me, she knows.

Meliku comes up to me, *Have you noticed that none of the 'thn are here? Most unusual.* I had.

What are you going to do about those two?

Nothing. If the Thinkers did not obey the rules, then no one would. Fair enough. Besides, I am not part of the enforcement arm. I would not be authorized even if I could. Just don't tell them that. Maybe my being here will keep them more ah, careful. Oh, this is proving to be a very interesting experience.

I turn to Owa and Rachel, *Okay out with it.* They stare at me with the

expression of total innocence. Owa tries the sad eyes routine and Rachel sees this and follows suit. Not going to get anything out of them.

I might be able to help. Edwin pulls out some device from his pocket. I do a pulse scan. Level eight. Probably had it a long time. He points it at Owa and Rachel who mug for the camera. He shows me the results. The pictures I can see, but the language is totally alien. I give him a dirty look. *Oh, sorry. It says they are wanted for instigating riots in twenty four different systems.* He says this in open TP, so everyone can hear then closes the device and puts it away.

“Only twenty four? I am disappointed in you two.” I am grinning when I say this.

That is twenty four systems. More like eighty planets and countless asteroids. She grins back. I nod my admiration.

Owa comes up to me, looking both ways like something is still wrong.

I hereby formally challenge you for this world. I am afraid that I look very amused. When Ci'lan touched me, she also transferred the current rules of challenge. I thought it strange at the time, but now it makes sense. She was expecting this. Not that hard. Cat always tries soon after the cooling off period is up.

I sit to insult her. *Owa, this challenge is not valid due to the disparity of the two parties involved.* She looks at me more seriously and comes to full attention and stands taller. I won't be that much of a pushover. Making yourself bigger does not work with me either.

What handicap do you propose? No tech on my side? Or one paw behind my back? She does the latter.

You misunderstand. You are the handicapped party and as challenger your only discourse is to withdraw. She grins. This is standard banter for a challenge. I suspect that some of the rules were influenced by Cat battles. Surprised she hasn't puffed up too. Right, not much fur now. Would look silly with that short hair.

I recognize no handicap on my part. Stupid kitty. Have you ever heard me tell a lie?

Meliku swims up. Still weird to see when in air. *Challenge is accepted and authorized. I am Meliku of the Cetacean Prime Pod and hereby bare witness.* Very formal and no way Owa can get out now. Once a Thinker has witnessed it there is no out without losing pride. A Cat never loses pride.

As the one challenged I have right of conditions. I grin to make Owa nervous. She has lost every other challenge under countless variations of rules. *There is a clearing two kilometers northeast of here, between the two mesas. I will meet you there in one hour. Hand to paw, no TK. No other rules.* Meaning anything else goes. We would be matched TK wise, so that would only make things messy and dangerous for other life forms.

She will have already scanned this world and see that there is absolutely no tech to worry about. No apparent weapons of any kind.

She extends her claws from her paws, grins and pops out. She will assume that she can win by personal force alone.

“You deceived her again.”

“Me? I was not the one challenging. And it is not as if she does not have any experience with my ways.” Ci'lan just shakes her head and grins.

You two are up to something. Lisa is smiling.

Not me. As 'lan, I am forbidden to help in anyway. Technically telling me the rules ahead of the challenge does not count as the challenge had not been offered yet. Just what happens after. Never mind that 'lan have precognition almost as good as Gateways.

We should leave so you have time to get ready. James and Q. They would be the most respectful of a challenge.

Oh, I will not need to get ready. Everything has been ready for quite some time. This is just a little game that Owa and I play. Nothing to be worried about. I grin. Hey, it helps get the audience wound up. *Since we have an hour, there is a project I want to show you all.*

You mean you had time for something other than the engraving? Meaning the stone we are all on.

Oh, I have been working on many, many projects. Come I will DS us all to the caves. We all gather closer together. Technically not needed, just a force of habit and it does make it a little easier to fit everyone in the cave at once.

Wait! I want more of the goodies you prepared. What is this wonderful black stuff? So tasty.

You will have to ask Ci'lan, I did not make it. She won't tell me either.

Ah, on second thought I am not that hungry, we can go now. Everyone else laughs including Ci'lan.

In the cave I light TK globes so everyone can see without scanning. Not that there is that much color.

“You have been busy father.” I know these walls very well. It is a project completed, so it does not have the same sense of curiosity for me any longer. I give the others time to look at the intricate patterns and try to decipher meaning.

Wait, this is me! And here is James.

Over here is Rachel. She runs over to see what was there about her.

Not a very good likeness.

Oh, I don't know Rach, it does look like you from a long time ago.

Over here. It is Edwin and Garfield.

How did you remember that old mangy cat?

I let them reminisce for awhile. After a bit I take out the ocarina I

have kept with me for so long. This chamber was designed with many purposes in mind. I start to play, softly at first. Slowly I move to the correct position designed into the shape of the chamber. Here the overtones take on meaning. Conversation stops. A moment later other musical instruments appear. Meliku starts a counter point in Cetacean high voice. I knew it would be better with all of us here. Well, nearly all of us. We reach a crescendo and then total silence. It takes a moment for the sound to fade from the chamber and our minds.

I walk to an altar like raised surface and sit on it. *The hour is up.*

I am going to ask all of you to be very, very quiet and perfectly still until I say so. Meliku, as witness I ask this as a condition of the challenge.

So noted. That means that if someone does cause a noise or other distraction the result of the challenge will be invalidated.

This will be tricky. You are all aware of slow time. We learned that when we connect with the OM on each viable world. It works in both directions. I let that sink in. *This chamber, all of its murals and writings, the patio and the sutas were all done yesterday in preparation for your visit, by hand. Granted, I wore through several 'thin chisels, which were made with TK, but the actual engraving was by hand.*

I am going to DS us all to the site of the challenge, so you can be witness. You will need to shield yourselves once it begins. A special shield is needed. I send them the specs on how to do this. It involves TK and PS. *Shield yourselves now. It will happen very quickly, so pay attention and do not come out till I DS us all back here.* I wait till they are all protected.

I switch into fast time. I have to transport them one at a time when they are shielded in this way. Unless you are well practiced in this there is little chance you could move someone thus shielded. Took me several thousand years to figure it out to the exclusion of all else. I transport Meliku first, as she is the official witness, then everyone else. I place myself several paces in front of them and between them and Owa.

Owa is as expected, luxuriating in the field of catnip I sent her too. To me she looks like her name, Stone Cat. Her reflexes are fast, so I cannot wait forever, even at my current rate of speed. Once she realizes that I am here she will act as best she can. I contact OM and give her the signal, though chances are she already knows. Everyone thinks that OM only exists in slow time. Very wrong. You can't keep track of all that she does by only working in slow time. OM was the one who began our defense. I helped with some details. I don't blame Owa for this challenge. She is just doing what she knows. Meliku has her convinced that she cannot leave here without coming under arrest. She is desperate, though I suspect she may have tried this even without Meliku's presence, as she has in the past many times. Come to think of it, almost every visit she

tries something. She hates being anything but top cat.

For a TK, being under arrest by the Thinkers means banishment to the fringes. Actually does some good. The 'bad' TK is out of the picture of 'civilized' beings and therefore not disruptive, and the TK works the edge worlds out of boredom or hate to start the process of preparation that will ultimately allow that world to be colonized by OM spawn or others. In rare instances they throw themselves into the system's sun, but this is very rare. The desire to live is strong among TKs. It has to be to live for so long.

OM, Ung and I have been working on the insects. Why after all this time have they not done more? By far the most species still are the insects and they breed faster and evolve faster than most other animals. Also, I was fascinated by the parasite that attacked me so long ago. I wondered how they evolved and how they worked. I would be forbidden of course to work with actual psiotic parasites, so I had to come at it sideways.

One theory was they they evolved in the DS space. I have had extensive conversations with Meep and we came to the conclusion that though they exist there now, they did not evolve there. For one thing, they are bisexual like us and most plantimals. None of Meep's kind have fewer than six sexes, even among the simplest forms. A few have as many as nine. This allows for very rapid evolution. Important in their existence.

So, if they evolved in some dimension similar to ours, and we know from Ron's discoveries, that there are many variations, how did they come to move into DS space? There had to be intermediate forms. Add to this the fact that we could make psitech to do almost anything that a sentient TK could do. It just was not that hard once you understood the basic principals. Same as happened with electrical and mechanical tech. Optics and sensors gave advancements over our normal sight for instance.

Whereas hu'mans are generalists, insects tend to specialize. They exploit one advantage for all that they can and can get very good at it. So, what if we used the abundant insect forms that made it through the big freeze and their ability to evolve rapidly to our advantage. Could forms be made, through selective breeding and a little gene tweaking, that could exploit the TK abilities? The answer was yes.

Insects are not as timid as we are. They have no problem exploiting a creature's lack of attention to a different time frame. That was why I specified an hour wait. I could have gone immediately or asked for up to a year to prepare. I was the challenged and as such I had the right to prepare. Very civilized we galactic citizens. I knew that Owa would not trust me and would try and maintain her alertness for the entire hour by finding the best spot and then waiting. Add to that the scent of catnip, also part of the plan, and I have her distracted just enough for the our

'pets' to work.

She is sitting with the sun to her back just in catnip high enough to hide her form from direct sight, but put the sun in my eyes. From the time she chose her spot, forms buried in the sand and dirt have been coming upwards towards the source of nourishment. These are not parasites, specific to a single life form, but equal opportunity feeders. They do not live in the host, but lay eggs in the host, or anything else a parasite would do. This gets around the technical aspects of the prohibition on psiotic parasites. Making parasites would not endear me to the 'thn council. Oh and there is no way they could feed on 'thn. Another precaution on my part. But, on a nice juicy rat, or Cat, is another thing altogether.

They are very slow, very quiet and use psiotic means to slowly phase shift themselves into the flesh of their target. Along with a natural anesthetic they are very hard to feel unless you are aware of their presence. Once in, the anesthetic slowly numbs the nerves. It will eventually reach the spinal cord or ganglia of another insect or rat and paralyze it. Once that is done, they can take their time to finish the meal from within. Many more will come, each filling their need and then leaving to have offspring who will dig into the earth and wait again for prey. An hour is just enough time to reach the spinal cord of a Cat. Do not think me mean. I will not let them eat her, nor harm her beyond what is necessary to end this challenge. I am not so sure she would do the same for me. Cat morals are different.

Of course we have backup. There are other forms that can fly right through a normal TK shield. They would not use narcotics, but go straight for the food, taking bites out of the prey. Very annoying and distracting. Oh and they fly in very large swarms. Owa would not realize that they had penetrated her personal shield until it was too late. Then she would be totally distracted for the brief period of time it would take me to count cou. All that is necessary for a TK challenge. The point is not to kill each other. As long lived as we are, that would diminish our kind way too rapidly. Accidents happen of course, so we do not need to go looking for trouble.

I slowly make my way towards her. If I go too fast in fast mode I will set myself on fire from the friction. That and the fact that at this speed air feels like tar, thick tar. I am huffing heavily when I reach the halfway mark. The backup swarm is nearly to her, coming from behind. At this speed, even as fast as they are, it is as if they are suspended in the air just above her. Her head is half turned to see what all the noise is. To me it is a barely audible low frequency rumble. I have stood still here nearly long enough for her to see me. That is required as per the rules. I continue to stand still to make sure. I see her move her head slightly and then her pupils go wide. The first ones have delivered their package and few of the swarm have entered her shield. She could get out of this rapidly enough,

but I am still in fast time. I make my way to just in front of her, giving her a second chance. The first of the swarm bites. I can see it in her eyes. She attempts to spring in slow motion. I tap her on her nose and hold my hand there. The paralyzing poison had slowed her just enough for me to be able to do this. I have counted cou by touching her first.

Okay, I was going fast enough that I could have done this without the insects. I wanted to see if the defenses would work in my absence. That could be important later. I had to try it on someone unaware of the secret and therefore not prepared. Owa merely provided an opportunity.

I hold my hand on her nose long enough for her consciousness to register. I then DS back to the others and switch back to our normal time frame. All hell breaks loose. I feel a sudden pain in my legs and look down to see I have been zapped by some kind of laser device and am bleeding all over the place. The others are hopping as the swarm reaches them, they are protected by the shields that I taught them about, but it is still scary with that many creatures viciously trying to get you. The explosive devices that Owa had hidden go off, all of this setting off the rest of the wildlife present, of which there is a lot. Sort of an insect smoke soup. I DS everyone back to the cave, including Owa.

Owa collapses on the floor. A few of the swarm have made it back with us. Hs'lan, James and Rachael go for it as I concentrate on Owa. I am the one here who understands what happened the best. I used to practice by letting them attack me and slowly watching the result. I remove all the bugs and repair the damage. The external ones she can decide whether or not remove all traces or just let them heal over. Anyone who has seen James or Q would understand why.

I then fix my own injuries, clean up the mess I have made. Owa awakes and gets up. She is distracted by something on the altar and sniffs it and then looks away disinterested. Still a bit woozy no doubt.

Good show hu'man. What did you do to me? I sit down next to Owa as she collapses against the altar.

Fast time and some modifications to the insect life. Beware though, there are a lot more modified forms out there. You were actually very lucky not to have run into them earlier while hunting the bara-bara. And you did not do so badly yourself. I was scratched by one of your devices. Without fast time, you could have gotten me.

Every time I think I have you figured out you pull a new one. Wait you said no TK! You cheated!

If I used TK, name what level is this fast time ability? She remains quiet. *Being TK helped me learn the new talent, but it is not TK strictly speaking.*

She thinks some more. What about the insects? They were TK!

True. But I did not control them. They were following their own instincts.

Monkeys are good at something at least, very sneaky.

I hear a thump and then people scrambling towards the sound on the other side of the altar. I stand up to see what is going on. There is a naked man laying on top of the altar. Looks Asian, sort of. Hard to tell from this angle. I look over the top to see the others all huddled around Rachael who apparently has passed out. Strange thing for TK to do.

I look down again at the man. *This hu'man looks familiar.*

I turn to the others. *Come over here. Anyone recognize him?* A few leave Rachael and come up.

I agree that he looks familiar. Wake him up. Might be easier to recognize standing up with a robe on.

Good idea, though you are assuming he is a TK. Rachael took one look at him, clutched something on her chest and fainted. Not the normal reaction of a TK.

What does she have in her hand?

Some jewel. She has had it for as long as I can remember.

I scan the 'jewel'. 'thn shield resin and something else. Hair. I do a DNA scan. Human hair. That much I recognize. I scan the DNA of the hu'man on the altar.

We have a match. The hu'man on the altar is the same as the sample in Rachael's jewel.

She is coming around.

So is the man.

I stand up and I look into his eyes and can see he is alert and following what is going on.

Well who else could it be? Asian, male, someone Rachael cared enough for to have a locket around her neck for a very long time.

"Daniel. Are you ok?" I try Standard. Silly, as it has not been used in a very long time. I guess I was not thinking. I take a deep breath and switch to TP to only get as far as his name.

"I heard you. Where am I?" Except Ci'lan, the others have probably forgotten Standard. Ci'lan forgets nothing. In my case, it is simply because I have spent so much time in slow time with OM and Ung that time has moved a lot different for me. It only seems like a few hundred thousand years to me. So, if this Daniel remembers Standard what does that mean? First things first, is it Daniel. I do a more complete scan of him. No trace of !. He is not shielding himself and appears to be TK8 and fully hu'man.

One last test. "Daniel, do you know who I am?"

"Yingui, what's going on? Why is Rachel on the floor? Why is everyone else here and for the second time, where is here? I don't recognize this place. It could be anywhere."

Lisa must have scanned him also and answers, *Daniel you are on Earth in the year 23,167,445 AF. We could ask you the same question.*

After all, you did join the ! collective and are therefore forbidden to be in hu'man form in front of Rachel.

“This is weird. Hu'man? I guess the language has changed.” He sits on the altar. “The last thing I remember is the most incredible act of sex imaginable, in slug form of course, not human, er hu'man. Then I woke up here. I don't even remember being asleep. Was I rejected by the ! and kept in some sort of stasis till now and if so why?”

“You were not rejected. Daniel! was seen in many locations by most of us, including by myself here on Earth many times. We got along fine after joining, just as we all had before.”

Rachel gets up rather shakily. She takes one look at Daniel and nearly faints again. Finally she manages to hold it together enough to respond, *I told you never to show yourself to me again. How dare you!* She is mad and is getting madder as she wakes up more. She is working up to do something nasty.

Running Snake advises her, *You must have scanned him dear. It is the 'original' Daniel as near as we can figure.*

“I am sorry Rachel, I did not do this. I have no idea how I got here or why. I do not even remember being in the collective. I will leave as soon as I am able.” She is not convinced, but holds her TP for the moment. She then gets up and backs away from him.

“Can everyone understand what I am saying.” They all nod, but none responds in kind. I should have tested this earlier. Ci'lan just smiles. She was on board ship with most of them.

It has been a very long time. I would not attempt to answer in Standard, but I am getting the gist of what you are saying. That was Q. The others nod it is more or less the same for them.

Ci'lan goes up to Daniel, “Let me touch you please.”

Are you sure that is safe? If he is still part of the ! then you could be hurt terribly.

“It is the only way to be totally sure. Besides I can throttle it. I am not a youngster any more.” She smiles like a young woman. Still looks to be about thirty something. Not that I am fair judge any longer.

She walks slowly up to Daniel. He holds out his hand. She touches just the tip of his longest finger with one of her own. A moment passes as she concentrates. She releases her hand that then give Daniel a hug.

“He passes. No traces of any thing ! in him.”

I wonder how they did it and what it means?

Edwin is getting impatient. *As we are no longer needed here, I for one want to investigate some of the new insect forms you have been working on. It looks like you have borrowed some ideas from plantimal worlds. Amazing, seeing as how you have not been off planet since Mother.* I smile. I have my ways.

Edwin dear, I am going to stay here to make sure Rachel is okay. You

go on ahead and I will catch up. He nods and pops out. She shakes her head. *He can really get distracted at times.* We all smile.

Well, I for one did not come here just to watch an old cat lose yet again to you. Owa merows at the insult. Others giggle their amusement. *So, what was the reason we were called back?*

We are waiting for one more before I can reveal the purpose. In the mean time, please make yourself at home. Stay here in the caves or go to the patio. Both are safe from the local insect life. I would not recommend going elsewhere without the special shielding I taught you and total awareness to your body. I smile. *There are some forms that have DS capability and can penetrate a regular 'thn shield with ease.*

Ah, the patio sounds good. There is still food there at least. James, Q and Jesan pop out.

I had better find Edwin and warn him. I will be right back. Running Snake takes off.

If you decide to stay here you will find some interesting chambers where, if you TK a wind, you will hear musical notes.

Like on the ring world of old. It took us forever to figure out all the tech left by the collective there. Too bad the monks finally had to leave. Went into a cold cycle and with most of the rivers frozen there was not enough power to provide enough heat.

People take off in different directions. Ci'lan hangs back.

“Father, who are we waiting for? By my calculations everyone who can make it here is here and even I was not expecting Daniel. Fiona and Onna will not be coming, but I already told you that.”

“No you didn't, but I am not surprised. The Elle clones must be a handful and they were never really part of our group, though they would certainly have been welcome.”

She looks worried. “I didn't tell you?” I shake my head no. “I must be losing it. Too much time at the Repository of Knowledge.”

“Everything okay there?”

“Oh, I am done. Everything that I collected has been deposited. Done. No more hu'mans, no more obligation. I have been fired in fact. The Hu'man files are all in cold storage now. Packed away for posterity. Only scholars will care now.”

“Fired? What about the derivatives?”

“They have their own 'lans. Too many splits for me to ever keep track of. 'lans are not infinite.” She smiles. She has done nearly an infinite task.

I think for a moment. “What about the Betas? They can't have TK and therefore cannot have a 'lan.”

“Being level ten, they do a good enough job keeping track of their own history. Even the 'thn are not without respect for tech. All I had to do was start their library with what I knew. Besides Jesan was there to keep

things on the level at first.” Meaning no 're-written' history by whoever is currently in control.

She looks at me again. I wait. She waits. She has not forgotten this time. I hear notes being played in adjacent chambers. Ron must have figured it out. Play something nice at least you guys. None of that smasher music from the Rk'thk systems again please.

I sigh, “She should be here any time. We do not have to wait long.”
“Who?”

“It is a surprise?” I am not sure she will accept this excuse.

“Father! You are not still hoping that somehow Rhea will show up are you?” No. I shake my head.

“I miss Rhea. A pain, but I miss her. Too bad she got overly cautious after the ring world disaster and took up with Ah'thn.”

“Tell me more about the Betas above us. What are they like now?”

A com unit squawks on Ci'lan's waist. She answers it in some language I do not understand.

“That was them. They say some ship has just come in from a gateway. They cannot trace it's origin. Traveling very fast and headed straight here. I don't know how you do it.” Their tech really has come a long way to sense the ship that far out.

“Not within my range yet without help. We will need to help slow her down.” I broadcast to everyone on planet. *Hey everyone, I need help here. We have a visitor coming in too fast and need an array to help slow a small ship down or it will impact.*

Lisa shows up first. She must have sensed it with her precognition. *I am taking over. Yingui over there. Ci'lan you are with me. As the others come in she places us. We sure could use some 'thn help here. I say nothing. They do what they want now.*

Lisa turns to me, *We could use your help too. Take us into fast time. It is the only way we will be able to catch the ship, especially without the children. Our reactions are just not fast enough.* She catches on fast.

Ci'lan, still listening to her com unit shouts, “The ship will be here in thirty seven seconds!”

I concentrate. It is easy for me to do for just myself, but to adjust everyone here, beings I barely know because of the expanse of time, is not so easy.

“Fifteen seconds.”

Whoa! Owa likes this. She is watching a pebble held in midair, swiping at it, but missing on purpose. Not even the wind she makes moves it.

“F.....”

Can't use sound, we are going too fast. TP only.

Fourteen point two two seven seconds.

Fourteen point two two eight seconds.

I shift into a slower time frame. At the former rate it would seem like years. *Keep reading off the seconds. Lisa tell me when we are within range and I will adjust us faster again.* We have a much longer range combined like this fortunately.

Thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five,

Concentrate! We give ourselves over to Lisa and meld our minds and wills with hers. She uses me to send us into faster time frame so we can fine tune. I can sense the ship now. One person inside with a 'thn and seven 'thn outside acting as retros. Good, I am glad they came through. They are better precogs than most of us, so I am not that surprised. I push with all that I have and nearly collapse.

Still going too fast. It is going to crash. I am pushing it at an angle so trees can be used to soften the impact. It must have been going nearly light speed. Our consciousness is right with the ship and we can feel the impacts with the trees and branches. It is slowing us, but we still have a lot of speed.

I am the first to waken. I held just a little back. For the ship to have been going fast even in the adjusted time frame meant it was really going. We had to shield the ship to prevent burn up. 'thn shield material is not totally impregnable.

Pr'thn is next to me. I reach out to pet her and this time she lets me. Guess because no one else is watching. She purrs halfheartedly. Better than nothing. She TPs to me, *She returns.* I nod.

I go around and wake the others up. Daniel is still confused, but goes along with the rest of us. At least with the others. All standing around looking at me.

“I think we should go to our visitor.”

Not yet. The 'thn are attending to her and her 'thn. So, they know that much.

“How did you know she was going to be here at this time. You nearly timed it to the minute. Your message went out to all of us over a hundred years ago and it only said to be here on this day, not what time of day. And who is it?” Ci'llan does not like it when I withhold information from her. After first contact she understands me better than anyone, but still, she is gone too long to get everything updated with so brief a hug, even with her talent. Oh, yeah, and I have learned how to hide things from her. This was a worthy test for sure. No particular reason only the intensity of feeling I have should have given it away easily under normal conditions. I need to know that not everything I have done or plan to do can be seen. You never know.

“Bring her here and I will tell you.” She concentrates. She needs permission from the 'thn before they will let her bring her in. A moment later she is before us, lying on the altar that Daniel had vacated moments before.

Asiatic descent again. What is with that? Could be from one of the Hongchi systems? Ron hazards a guess.

Jesan comes up to me, *Why do you play them so much?* Jesan smiles widely with understanding. Could never hide anything from Jesan.

The woman opens her eyes and sees me. I wanted it to be me she saw first. I rescued her so long ago, I thought it would be more comforting for her to see me now.

She looks confused for a moment. Barely audible she says, “Yingui, is that you?” Her accent is bad. Standard must have changed more than I thought. She closes her eyes again. She is impossibly thin. The 'thn could have done more than they did, preferring to help their own kind. I guess they figured we would do her right as they took care of their own.

Jesan, we need to do a transfer. She will not be able to survive in this form. Too much damage to repair in time. The 'thn have given her basics or she would be dead already. We need to finish it.

Jesan nods and motions Running Snake over. The two of them are the best at this. A wind comes up as they use air to form the mass that will become her new body. Nice that they did not want to ruin the scriptures I had written on the polished walls, but I would not have minded. Buddhists know nothing is forever. The new body forms next to her on the altar. They scry her DNA to give her a form close to her original, not her current one. The skeleton forms, then the organs, muscles, and finally skin and hair. The rest of us have our eyes closed and concentrate on keeping her alive long enough for the transfer. All the cells are damaged. Intense radiation is my guess. Amazing that she made it.

We are ready. Everyone else let go. It only takes a moment for the transfer to be done. The new form is breathing on her own. Ron and James pop out for some reason.

I examine her old body. Her organs were all nearly gone. She was living on herself and had run out. I DS the remains outside and dissolve them. No longer needed.

Ron and James DS back in. *The ship cracked on re-entry. It was just a shell. No life support, no communications, no lights, nothing. Completely empty.*

Strange. It was going so fast after coming out of the gate that they must have been star hopping. Who would star hop with a shell?

She was speaking old standard. A far far timer? Someone running nearly at the speed of light experiences time differently so are called far timers.

“We have not used shells for star hopping since Mei Ling was lost.... Oh shit!” Ci’lan turns around rapidly and stares at the slowly breathing form. “Wake her up! Wake her up now!” She shouts at me. Her back was to me, but I know it was directed to me. Her touch talent would not work

on the new form. No history to it and the old form is gone. She turns around when I don't answer right away. I sigh then move closer to her. Softly I touch her sleeping face.

"It is all right Mei. Wake up. You are safe again. Wake up." A transfer normally leaves one out for some time, especially when that close to death. She comes around, but it will be some time before she has full TK abilities again. Very close.

Her breathing speeds up. She licks her lips and tries to raise a hand to her head, but drops it again. Without opening her eyes she says, "I'm trying. Sy'thn. Where is Sy'thn?"

"She is fine. The other 'thn are taking care of her. She will be here soon." I hope.

Tight TPed to me Lisa tells me, *It was close for Sy'thn as well. She will have to rest.* I nod. 'thn do not normally 'sleep', but can go into a dormant state when necessary. I suspect that she was in such a state before impact.

What is that sound? Owa still has better hearing than we do.

What sound? The jungle here is always noisy. All those crunching insects.

Whoa, it is quiet. Very quiet.

I tell them, *Everyone up to the patio. I will stay here with Mei Ling. I have seen this before. Go on. It is okay. You will be safe there. The patio is off limits.*

Off limits to what? They DS out. I know what's coming. About every few weeks they make a circuit. The silence is replaced with a humming that gets louder and louder. I shield Mei Ling from the sound. She does not need this right now.

Owa comes in first with one in her mouth. Someone described a cat as a maw with legs. Fits. The others follow, chasing her, but she has already gotten most of the head down. Didn't know she could eat so fast. *Mine!* she TPs to the others.

Flies are one thing Owa. I remember when you were small and chased them around the room, but these are huge! Sorry Yingui, but the patio is a wreck. Owa DSd one in and then proceeded to chase it all over the patio. The jaws on that thing are huge and strong. Took a chunk out of one of the tables before she got to it tipping over the table. Q has stayed behind to try and put things right.

"It's okay. We won't be needing the patio again."

Ah, the dragonfly is nothing. You should have seen the millipede I saw earlier. Nearly two meters long.

Wait, how can that be? Insects can't get that large can they?

Edwin answers, *Plantimal genes and higher oxygen level than when we were here. Up to thirty percent is my rough estimate. Except for their behavior I would guess a throw back to the Carboniferous period.*

Close, thirty one point four. Ron adds.

But they are like a hive on wings. Did you see they carried the nymphs with them. There must have been hundreds.

“A small group. Local. Some of the migratory ones number in the thousands. It got quiet because they are predators, eating everything that moves in their path.”

“You have been busy father.”

“Not just me, OM and Ung played a larger part. Ung really understands cellular processes. Oh, and poisons.” I smile. “OM understands the interactions between living things. All this had to work as a stable ecology after all.”

And your part?

“I added creativity to the tweaks and a slightly different plan.”

You were not making anymore greenmen then?

“No, no more spores. A totally different plan. But enough of me. Why are all of you here?”

You called us here, you tell me. James looks confused. I remain silent.

Ci'lan tries a different tack, *Let's all take turns and tell the others our story. How we came to be here at this time and place. What important insights we have learned. Briefly please. Very good Ci'lan. Maybe she has figured it out? I will go first.* She offers.

No way. I was here first, I will go first. Owa has to be top cat, sigh.

Ci'lan smiles, “Go for it kitty. Only wipe the dragonfly guts from your mouth first.” The others giggle and settle in. Mei Ling is doing fine and this exercise will kill time till she is ready.

Owa licks her lips in an exaggerated way, *I, High Cat of the Wild Pride Empire, come here of my own free will and at no ones call.* She strikes an aloof pose.

You mean you decided in desperation to hide out here from the Thinkers, black foot. More giggles. Owa hisses, but smiles also. I didn't know she could smile. New enhancement? Kind of scary really. Like the face of death.

I am here because I have run out of places to hide and am tired of running. I am tired of being a plaything and pet of our Betas above. At least here I have sanctuary and would have been ruler except for that stupid monkey always in my way. I give a nice who me look that has them giggling again. We will not survive much longer. We have spread too thin. Not good at math meant we were locked out of tech and business. Best we could do was act as mercenaries. Not a good life and usually a short one, even with TK. The Betas usually hire us, as they are good at tech, but lack the instinct for war, either offensive or defensive.

As to the black foot? Yes, I serve them. The universe has become too 'civilized', too monkey like. I miss the old days. We don't intentionally

harm anyone, but stir things up so life is a struggle. Life needs challenges.

And therefore needs to hire mercenaries, thus keeping your kind in luxury. We have seen your ships. More smiles and outright laughter this time. Owa bows gallantly and sits. This may seem like a put down, but everyone will get ribbed and it is done out of affection and truth, not to hurt.

Since we are on the subject I will go next. Rachel shows her left foot, black. *I am not a Sauronist, but yes, I also believe that life has become too easy.* She glares at Daniel. *After my father died . . .* Daniel fakes trying to find the mortal wound and give up with a shrug. Not lost his sense of humor I see. She continues, *I wondered for eons. Everywhere I went it was the same. Beings would struggle to get out of the primordial ooze only to get fat and lazy. The best worlds were the young ones, just on the cusp of breaking free. There I plied my trade. Precious metals and jewels are valued by all at that stage. I spent time in camps of traders and warriors. Joined several minstrel groups and got quite good. The hard part was that each life form had slightly different skills that needed to be perfected. My only real advantage was my longevity. Playing a Hargonian harp is not easy I tell you.* People are faking going to sleep as she is taking so long. I suspect that they all had similar tales.

She pretends to get into a huff, *Okay you ungrateful horde I will finish. I am here, like Owa, because I am wanted on many worlds.* She looks at Meliku. *I chose to be on the exile worlds, but even there I managed to get into enough mischief to attract the Thinkers. Now I am on the only world they will leave me alone on. I will stay here, planting flowers and tweaking insects with the gray one till I hurl myself into the sun out of sheer madness.* She sits to an applause. Owa licks her hair and receives the start of a back massage from Rachel. The purring starts.

James and Q stand up. Together they state, *We will go next.* They both laugh, which then sets off the rest of us. Q continues, *If her highness would lower the volume some, so I can think.* She ups it of course, then curls up half in Rachel's lap to quiet down.

Thank you. As you may remember we took on the Africans. We had this idea that the violence and aggressiveness could be bread out of hu'mans. To make this short, let us just say that we succeeded.

James jumps in, *The problem was, that we ended up with mushrooms.*

Edwin comments, *Even mushrooms can come up through jerspa.*

Okay, worse than mushrooms. They could keep a simple existence going, but were far more interested in laying about, watching fluttergigs and smelling alliyans all day long. Nothing changed. We tried introducing tech, but as soon as they saw it would take work to make the tech, they would go back to the easier method even if it took longer.

Q, *And they would not come up with anything original ideas themselves.*

Sounds like the garden of Eden, Jesan comments.

Oh, have you been there? Running Snake smiles. Jesan just smiles in return with one eyebrow lifted to make you wonder.

Finally, even what little they did seemed like too much. The land we had chosen was fruitful, much like the Africa they had left. They regressed to lower and lower tech again. Remember, we had reduced them to level one before bringing them back up again.

How high were they at their best? Ron asks.

James answers, *If you stretch it, maybe level 2.6, some metal working, wheels and fire, minimal agriculture to get past the brief dry period each year.*

Q adds, *Still nomadic to some extent. They would 'use up' their land and move on. By the time they wandered back, it would have recovered.* We nod. A common enough method from pre-history times.

We tried taking groups to harsher environments, but had to return them almost immediately to prevent them all from dying. They would just stop eating totally dumbfounded and then wait. Really bizarre to watch.

Finally in desperation, we just left them alone. We left to do a tour of the S'wigglars we had heard so much about. Much like Rachel, we found ourselves joining communities for a time. We were registered though. He smiles at Rachel who sticks out her tongue and laughs.

Wusses! They just smile in return. You know that James and Q are definitely not wusses.

When we finally returned, we could not even find them at first. We looked everywhere and could only find ruins. Even burial grounds were old. Had they all died immediately after we left?

Turned out, they were right in front of us. They had devolved to the point where they were indistinguishable from the local fauna. They did finally learn aggression again, after they lost their intelligence. We left. There was nothing for us to do.

Neither one of us wanted to start completely over and end up at the same point again. Sauron's patience must have been incredible. I smile.

I have a theory that he really did not do that much. He did not understand genetics, so all he could do was some selective breeding and play with some events as they happened. That sort of thing. Edwin the scientist, but I am inclined to agree.

Unlike our first two speakers though, we could not bring ourselves to challenge. At the same time, we could not speak out against the Sauronists or the Blackfoot because we know there is truth there. We had become just like our children, total wusses. They both sit. No applause this time. We are silent. I am stunned that they admit this. Life is change.

Daniel gets up, "Since I don't remember anything of the last twenty

five million years, I will just pass.” He scratches his head shrugs and sits.

Lisa motions us to wait a moment. She stares off into space. I am not picking up any TP residue and I have gotten pretty good at it. I am curious. I switch into fast mode and do a quick pulse scan of Lisa. Ah, high tech. Wow, that is some neural implant. I switch back into normal mode and pretend I did not notice.

Lisa finishes her 'conversation' and then looks straight at me. She holds out her hand towards me. I am confused. I don't have anything to give her. She is not looking at me though, but rather at her hand. A moment later a device materializes in it. She manipulates it in some way, walks over to me and slaps it on the right side of my head. Intense pain and it is over. The device falls off and starts to disintegrate. Two more appear in her hand and she goes over to Daniel and Mei to do the same. Mei's breathing changes. She is waking up. That thing would do it. Woke me up completely. I hold her hand and TP to her to keep still. All she has to do is listen for now.

“One four seven five, alpha epsilon.” She hesitates. “Checks out. He should know GS5 now.”

“That's a relief. Why didn't you do that earlier?”

“Took the Betas time to match his DNA. In some ways he has not changed much in all this time and on the other hand, he has made a lot of modifications to adapt to the changed biota. Mei and Daniel were easy, their DNA was on record.”

“Neat. This is much better than our old method. The pain only lasts a moment instead of an hour.” The others are bored. Must be old hat to them. Can't believe I am still using cliches that old. I have been alone too long.

“My turn I guess. As you all know I have been in admin for some time. I saw too quickly what the other's saw. So, I decided to research what other cultures had done. Every sentient had to face this question at one point or another. Someone must have solved it.” She sits, looking very tired.

This does not sound good.

“No one figured out how to do it themselves. When it happened, it was because of some outside influence. Not one culture in record ever had the guts to do what needed to be done, until they were forced to, at great cost. Many never come out the other side.” Most of the others nod. Hu'mans as I knew them are gone. Gone back to nature, intelligence is not the only survival trait, or evolved into something completely different, like the Betas. It was a very rare culture that managed to keep themselves more or less intact for any length of time. The wall of change.

“I have a question, what is the record for a fluidic?” Just curious. Solidics, like the 'thn no one knows. There is even a rumor that some of the older 'thn have personally survived a cycle, which means over fifteen

billion years. Talk about constipated.

Ron answers, "Somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred and ten million years. There is some dispute though. The second longest is only a hundred and forty, so the first is suspect." Lisa nods. We lasted only about fifteen million. About average on an exponential curve. Ah'thn stopped bothering us near the end. We were not something special after all. 'thn stopped hunting us down to ask for parenthood with us too. Technically after our first has gone sentient, we could mate again, but that is rare. Most want a virgin. They must get something out of it too, feeding off of the excitement. As most baby 'thn took fifty million years to become sentient, it meant that by the time the baby was 'born' the race that helped spawn them is already gone. Now I understand why the old TKs hung out in the centers. Nothing to go back to in most cases.

"The Betas are doing really well, maybe they will do better. They do carry some hu'man genes still and they were from here at least. They have changed quite a bit though."

Lisa continues, "Having gained all that knowledge, I became somewhat of an expert on the problem. New cultures came for advice and older TKs came to help. We had quite a group going for some time."

"What happened?"

"The group is still going. We have gotten some new sap in and fresh ideas." Plantimal blood?

"But you are burned out." She nods.

"I came here for a rest or a change." I can offer change, but not rest, in spite of what it looks like. "One last comment. In the strangest way, it appears as if the Sauronists may be on the right track."

"Okay that is like the third time they have been mentioned. What or who are the Sauronists? I assume this has something to do with Sauron?"

"No one knows how they got started, obviously someone who had heard the story at least. The myth had gotten somewhat distorted in the telling. The Cult of Sauron, as it became to be called, exaggerated Sauron's abilities somewhat. Their claim was that Sauron was what made the humans great and the TKs that brought about their downfall. We had not earned our contraction yet."

"The point is, is that the Sauronists believe in the Challenge. Only through the Challenge is a species able to advance."

"And yet Owa and Rachel claim not to be Sauronists, but Owa has been challenging me since she was a kitten." Owa stretches, yawns and rolls over to have the other side done.

"That is because the Challenge was accepted into the galactic culture as a valid means of preventing further lose of life. It was reasoned that it was better for two to do battle with only one dying than to have most of the beings on both sides die before some conflicts were resolved."

"But, what happened to the loser's side's beings?"

“They were transported to a less desirable, but still livable world. Usually the one the challengers had come from. It became a game. Time limits were placed on how often this could happen. Otherwise cultures would be uprooted too often to be survivable.”

“But, even the losers benefited. They lost because they became lazy and weak. Being placed on a less desirable planet made them work harder. The winners did not have it easy either. Sabotage was common, in spite of prohibitions against it. Went both ways.”

“As soon as the winners became weak, from living in paradise, they are Challenged and the cycle begins anew. Works pretty well actually.”

“Thank you.” Everyone turns to the voice we do not recognize. Before us is a hu'man female. Blonde, looking about forty. Good shape. Naked. Who? She speaks, “So much for the theory that my image would be burned into your brain for all time Yingui.” I look around the room. Meliku is missing.

“Meliku? I mean Barb?” She nods.

“I am the one who started the Cult of Sauron.”

“A Thinker? I don't believe it.” Owa is awake and speaks with a slight accent. “All this time I have been running from you for behaving like a Sauronist and it turns out that you are the one who is really behind them. Stupid kitty. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.” She bows to Barb.

“It was the only way,” Barb continues. “Something had to be done. Even the Cetaceans were falling under the paradise spell. Sauron was right, it was only when we were challenged that we became stronger. Yet, TKs were prohibited from killing, at least directly. The method and formalities of Challenged satisfied the needs of both.

I am sorry, we worked all of this out too late for the primary hu'man races.”

“The Cetaceans?”

“They became the Thinkers as you already know. The galactic judges if you will. Not needing any possessions and liking to travel, they were perfect. They could not be bribed.”

“And if one was killed by a sore loser?”

“The world was destroyed after moving the beings to a far less hospitable location. It was only tried once. I still miss him.” What was his name? He must have been the one who left with her at passage.

“It would seem that you are at the top of your game. Why leave? Why come here?”

“No leader is any good that creates a system dependent on themselves. I am no longer needed in any way. Few even know of my existence any longer. Just an old legend. I have become somewhat of an expert at shape shifting. The last million or so years, I too have been wondering. I wanted to see how it all worked out.” She smiles, “It was I who let it be known that the Leffites were vulnerable.”

Rachel calls out, "That was you? I had so much fun messing with their culture. As an unregistered, I could play games most TKs would have been too ashamed to try. It was glorious till the Thinkers came in force and I had to get out fast, hidden in a comet core."

"So that's how you got out. I wondered. I would have secreted you out if I had gotten to you first." Rachel smiles and bows to Barb.

Barb then turns to Owa, "And you precious kitty. It was I who arranged for the Anurelle freighter to pick you up on Felling's World." Owa nods.

"Gee, after that is there anything else to add?" Running Snake. "Ed and I have been wondering the universe looking at the beginnings of the OM networks on each planet." She looks around and sighs, "Ed is not good in gatherings." She concentrates and Edwin DSs in.

"Sorry dear." Does not look sorry to me. Gets a chuckle from the others who apparently agree with my assessment. "It will rain in a moment."

"Rain? What time is it?"

"Late afternoon, why?"

"Herman should be coming in about now. Wanted all of you to meet him."

Suddenly we hear a horrible howl and burst of light. When our eyes adjust again, there is smoke in the air and the smell of burnt hair. One very singed kitty stands before us all, looking very pathetic.

I smile, "Owa, fast time is not as easy as it looks, especially in a thirty percent oxygen atmosphere." She had caught her fur, what little is left, on fire from the friction. "Go on, clean yourself up, nothing fatal. Looking so pathetic does not work with us. Hope you did not hurt Herman. He is under my protection for further reference and not to become dinner."

"Who is Herman?" Not taking my eyes off Owa, I point down. In comes a slow walking beetle about half a meter in length with horns coming from it's thorax and head. Sharp, but not poisonous. I make some bread crumbs and scatter them about. Herman goes to work cleaning them up.

"He eats anything on the floor."

"A live clean bot. What about the, ah, other end."

"House broken. Goes outside where it fertilizes the garden."

"How does he survive without poison. Those horns do not look like enough to protect him."

"Have you noticed any openings to this cave?" Everyone turns around and scans in different directions.

"Hey, there is some tech here. Fifteen meters below us, south-south-west of us. Hmm, level eight?"

"I like the antiques. Gets the job down, but a neural interface is not

required.”

“No openings boss.” Q responds with a smile.

“So, that means Herman has other means.” Ron goes up to him and attempts to tap him on the head between the horns. His hand passes right through him. “He PSs when in danger.”

“Not even the dragons bother them.”

“What keeps them from taking over?”

“If they ever rest, the PS worms that got Owa earlier will get to them. The only place they can rest then is on rock, but there is no food on rock. It also makes it harder to find mates. I am afraid Herman has gotten a bit fat. No worms here and I overfed him some.”

“You really need to get some companions Yingui. A beetle for your only company is not enough.” They all laugh at this thought. Locked in a cave with a beetle.

“I want to hear what you and Edwin have found.”

Edwin starts, “The breakthrough came when we investigated the Silugent system in the Cerest cluster. The deluvic plantimal primordial sporophytes...”

“Running Snake, help us out. He will either put us to sleep in ten seconds or cause our brains to turn to mush.” Rachel yawns to effect.

“Ed, honey, let me try. Go outside if you must. I will fill you in later if you miss anything.” He looks ecstatic and pops out. Comes back in to get his collecting bag and pops out again. Pops back in to looking for something, finds it in his robe, pops out again.

“Is he gone?”

“One never knows. Sometimes this goes on for hours.”

“How do you stand it?”

“He is my soulmate. I am bonded forever to him.” Jesan smiles. “We wanted to understand the beginning as a way of understanding why the OM system started in the first place. Ci'lan helped us in the library end of things, but records are very sparse at the regional center. We had to make a pilgrimage to the Archive Center. I nearly lost Ed forever there. So many scientists to talk to.” We giggle imagining this very thing happening. “The 'city' got to me. I needed to be out in the field again. I finally pried Ed away.” With a very large lever no doubt.

“If Challenge was what made a species become more intelligent, more civilized, what started it? Why OMs? Could not this have all happened without the OMs?”

We tried to do control experiments using lichens on new worlds we had adapted to support life. But as soon as the lichens achieved a critical mass, an OM formed. It is built into the very fabric of life.”

“What about other time frames?”

“Or other physical states?”

“We thought of that and went back to the Archives. Fortunately I

found a little oasis nearby that I could stay on while Ed was in the library. I thought I was going to die if I had to go back into the city again. Just too many beings. Too many thoughts all at once.

Anyway, something like OM forms in every case documented.”

“Even the solarics?” I had not heard of them, makes sense though.

“Yes.”

“The magmotics?”

“Yes, though it is interesting how the final stage happens.” I raise an eyebrow and when Running Snakes sees me I put my finger to my lips. She catches on, “Rather complicated and can be left for another time.”

So, we live in a universe where OMs basically run things till the TKs are formed and they spawn to form other worlds. Over and over and over. There seems to be no goal.”

“But TKs do mess with things. Registered or not.”

“Okay, stop. What do you mean by registered?”

Lisa comes in, “Simple really. Registered means a visiting TK has announced themselves to the resident OM. Registered means you can't perform miracles or affect the culture overtly. In other words, look but don't touch.”

Rachel comes in with Owa right next to her, “Unregistered is only possible on the edge worlds where the pesky Thinkers are not around to enforce the edicts. We have no rules for our behavior.” They both grin widely.

“I guess that means that I am on an edge world?”

“Master of an edge world, but also the case that you can do anything you want on the world you came from. Which is why it is also sanctuary for all of us.” They all grin at me at once, as if on cue.

“Great. Welcome home. Knuckle heads.”

“Sun geeng.” comes a voice from behind me.

“It's alive!” someone says. Mei has risen.

“Two naked ladies is too much. Get some robes for them please.” Daniel the gallant one as always.

Barb complains, “Itches. I have been naked for most of my life, why do I have to wear a robe here? None of you has reverted have you?” She stares at our crotches.

James and Q step forward, “We can oblige the lady if the need arises.” The two are pelted with little bits of bread. Herman is going to eat well today.

“Mei, are you feeling up to adding to the discussion?”

She nods. She looks at her body and feels parts of it. “I never looked this good. New body?”

“You were beyond repair when you came in. We had no choice, but it is based on your DNA.”

“But that can't be.” She weighs a breast, “I was never this big.” She

stretches out a leg, “Nor my legs this long.”

“You were full grown when you became TK. So, that meant that your former body was based on pre TK standards of nutrition and development. This is what you would have looked like under ideal conditions.”

“China was a bit hard on the growth of young girls, even among the elite.” She forms a robe around herself. Has her TK back. That was fast. Looks like silk, with some pattern on it. She concentrates. “Sy’thn is doing well. The ‘thn await us when we are done here.”

I am concerned. “They are not part of the plan. Tell them, they are free to go now.” Mei nods and TPs the message.

“Wait, I am not leaving my baby.” Others show concern also.

“Your baby? They have all been sentient for some time. How much time have you spent with them over say, the last million years? I rarely see Pr’thn, much less Br’thn any more. They have lives of their own.”

“She will always be my baby.” Rachel pouts.

“Sy’thn is not sentient yet.” Mei looks concerned.

“What is this plan of which you speak? Do I need to call Ed back in.”

I nod.

“But first, I want to hear from Mei.” I turn to her. “The others are getting impatient. Tell them what you learned.”

“I went to the very edge of existence. I wanted to know if there was an edge, which there is and what it looked like to look back towards us from the edge. You all knew this was why I went.

Most peculiar thing. I had always assumed that the psi field was everywhere. Even in the deepest space the psi force is available to us.” The others nod and look to see that everyone else agrees. Attention back on Mei, she continues, “There is no psi field at the edge. The edge is pseudonymous with the edge of the light field. This means it extends way beyond the material existence for sure, but it is there.

Now here is something else. I was at the edge yesterday.”

“You mean subjectively.”

“No, less than twenty four earth hours ago.” She lets that sink in.

“How?”

“I had help.”

“Obviously.”

“Everything that we know of, everything in existence is reachable with a single DS slip.”

“No way!” Ron comments, “I know we have found DS space that lets us go much further than we did at first. Even the Betas exploit this in their latest ship designs. It was how we got here, opening our own gateway. But there are limits.”

“No limits.”

“Then how come you came in so fast?”

“It was how fast I was going, trying to get back to the material world when descendants of Meep showed me how.”

“A body in motion tends to remain in motion.”

“Yes. Basic law of motion. It still took me nearly twenty two hours. With practice I would could cut that down to seconds. And without the motion part.”

“What does that mean? How is that possible?”

“It is possible, because the dimensions are infinite. Like layers of an onion, they progress ever closer to the center. At the center, everything is the same distance from everything else.”

“Or all at the same position. Just like before the big bang.” I am grinning. It is so much fun watching them work it out.

Mei finishes, “It is all psiotic.” Now the final piece has been placed on the table.

“Everything is psiotic. Level thirteen.” We were all parents now, except Daniel, who is grinning as wide as I am. So, it means he had figured it out on his own. Not everything needs to be experienced.

Rachel goes up to him, “You knew this? You knew this before you joined the !?”

“Yes dear. But if you did not understand, I was forbidden to tell you. I was amazed that you did not. Being as you had a baby and all. But I had to wait for you to understand on your own.”

“You are not even a nine. How did you figure it out?”

Jesan comes up, “I have been telling everyone the answer for all this time. No one listens to me.” More bread crumbs fly.

“Jesan has a point. All the spiritual leaders have been saying this. So, why did I have to go on the voyage?”

Jesan answers, “Because you needed to see it for yourself. It is not enough to hear a truth, you have to experience it in the core of your being before you truly know it. Had you just heard it would you know how to go anywhere you wanted instantly? No. Yet the same truth existed before your journey as now.” Jesan looks at all of us, slowly one by one. “The same truth existed before your journey as now.”

“I’m hungry!” Yeows you know who.

“Cat!” Everyone yells in unison.

“The rain has let up. To the patio! We still have one more to hear from.”

We each DS on our own. Scrambling for space and nearly tripping over each other. Herman stays behind to clean up. Good old Herman.

Ci’lan offers me a bite of something I had not tried before. “Where is this from?”

She smiles, I try it and immediately spit it out. I look over and see Owa grabbing every piece she can and shoving it in. “Cat food. Yuck!” Owa looks up, material still smeared all over her face. A large tongue

comes out and licks it off. She then goes back to eating the rest. “You would think she hadn't eaten in a month.

Ci'lan tries again offering me another treat. I am more suspicious, but curiosity gets the better of me. I try it. “Oh, this is wonderful. Almost as good as chocolate.”

“Did someone mention chocolate? Yingui, did chocolate survive the die off?”

“I saved seeds to be replanted. Give me some credit. Under the red bowl. Everyone except Owa dives for it.” Now Owa is giving the rest of us dirty looks. I raise my eyebrows and extend my tongue much further than it should be able to, to lick my face. She stares at me with her mouth partly open.

“You can't put it off any longer father. Out with it.” Ci'lan is insistent. Kids.

Everyone stops what they are doing and sits waiting for me to begin.

“Let's begin by putting what everyone has said together.

'thn have existed possibly from before the beginning of this incarnation of the universe.” I smile, but everyone is so intense I am not sure what they are thinking.

“OMs exist to make more OMs and to bring beings to sentience and TK levels high enough to make more 'thns. And most importantly to find the answer to the Question.”

“Hu'mans have made several thousand 'thn. If this was true of every culture that makes it this far, you would think we would be knee deep in 'thn.”

“Good point Ron, so where do all the 'thn go?”

“The Question. Hmm, we have seen that sentients just on their own do not get past their daily lives. Even when their very existence is threatened, they don't see the wall until it is right in front of them. Most often too late. The same culture will face this wall over and over and over, and never see it coming. To any of us this is insane. We try preparing them, we warn them, we help them get past or through the wall and the next wall, left to their own, they splat against it again.”

“Could be our longer perspective?”

“All these cultures have written records. How could it get any better for them? Still splat.

I put to you that they are only a stepping stone to TKs.”

“Oh yeah, look at what we have done. Lay about messing everyone's lives up out of boredom.”

“You are all here. You all brought part of the Answer with you.”

“We have the Answer?”

“Mei has said it, Jesan has said it. Pay attention Owa and stop stuffing your rat hole.” Giggles.

“Yeah, it is all psiotic. So what do your propose?”

“A little fun, a journey, a new kind of existence. Jesan, how does it feel being one being? Do you still think separately?”

“I think with one mind. No separation. It feels wonderful. More full, more complete than from before.”

“James and Q, you two are a matched set as well, yet you remain separate. How does that feel?”

“Great! We know what the other is thinking before they think it.”

“We answer each other's questions before they ask it.”

“Edwin and Running Snake. How about you?”

“Same.”

“Rachel, you were scared of what Daniel went through, yet the evidence here is that it is not a bad thing, but rather a better existence. A way of pooling resources so to speak.”

She looks at Daniel. “Yeah, maybe I was wrong. Now, I don't really care. I am tired. Anything would be better than going on the way I was.”

“Father! Out with it now! You are just playing with us.”

“Wait, where are the 'thn. Sy'thn should be better by now with so many attending her.”

“And something else is missing, all the other 'thn. Every time Yingui does something not 'by the book' they show up in the thousands.”

“Hundreds of thousands.” The others nod.

They are not here because we did not tell them. A 'thn appears before each of them. Everyone except me. Mei is all over Sy'thn. Pr'thn is with Ci'lan. Sisters are always closer to each other than to their parents. The reunion goes on for some time.

Sitting alone I scan the remaining treats Ci'lan had made and TK a few over to myself.

“You are as bad as Owa. Always stuffing your face and evading the question.”

“I made a promise a long long time ago.”

“Not the freaking Promise again!” Ci'lan screams and then giggles. She and Pr'thn are almost one with each other. I was never that close to my brother. No matter, a very long time ago.

“Okay, I deserved that. The 'promise' was to rejoin the magmotics. The price I had to pay for their help with the Mother mess. They have been amazingly patient, but now is the time.

I brought all of you here to say goodbye.” I give a wry smile. Not good at goodbyes. I wave my hand.

“Oh no. Daniel did that to me, you are not getting away with it. I am going with you.” Rachel gets up runs over, grabs an arm and snuggles up to me, 'thn in the hand, literally.

“Us too.” Jesan and Ju'thn come over.

“Oh well.” Barb and her 'thn come over. Soon everyone is with me. We are all hugging and touching each other.

Me too.

“Huh? Who said that? Everyone is accounted for, who is left.” I look up. Before me is Qr'thn.

You wanted to know where all the 'thn went. Why the universe was not full of 'thn by now. Now you know. All of us are going with you. If 'thn could smile I am sure she would be. I reach out my hand and Qr'thn alights onto it. I feel her aura.

In Orbit Above Earth

“Control, we have just received an emergency communication from the surface. Ci'lan says we should leave immediately and proceed beyond lunar orbit.”

“What about her and the others we brought? Should we not wait till they return?”

“This is sensor. We have lost contact with all sentients on the surface. We have lost ability to sense those who arrived by other means. There are no sentients present on the surface at this time.”

“What of the survey team on the opposing continent?”

“We have just come into range of the satellite repeater. There are no sentients on the surface. The last communication we received from them indicated they were under attack from the local lifeforms. This was three point one five centipulses ago.”

“TKs. Filthy lot. Always changing plans and not telling anyone. Ci'lan gave us permission to leave. It appears to be too dangerous to go down there to look for them, when they are likely already gone elsewhere. Let it be on her head then. Our contract is fulfilled. Purse, deduct the cost of the lost crew from their accounts. May the Grinder spare them.”

After a moment's pause, “On the other hand being just out of lunar orbit would afford us the opportunity to return if needed. Not as fast as our present location, but surely fast enough to satisfy honor.”

“We could also watch what they are doing. We might learn something new. Do we have consensus?” The board lights up.

“So be it. Nav, take us out of orbit if you please. Short range gate.”

A moment later the new position is achieved.

“Sensor here. Check your display. We are getting strange readings from the earth-lunar complex. Psi values are off scale.”

“Records, is there anything that explains this phenomenon?”

“Nothing on record. Suggest we remain to observe what happens. Recording phenomenon passed to us from sensor.”

“Consensus?” The board lights up again.

“This is sensor again. Ah, there seems to be a problem. Please note the aft observation screen. Set mag to maximum width.”

“EMERGENCY! Gate us out of here NOW!”
The earth has disappeared!

The Doctor

Earth² 2025 A.D. St Mary's Institute, New Columbus, Ohio.

It has been a long day, a long week, a very long month. I am so far behind on the case reports. Ah, shit, not this one again. Mr. X. I shake my head. There must be someone I can push him onto. No, I suppose not. Not any more anyway. Been here nearly a year and we don't even know if he is sap or pear. He has no bracelet or implant and no tan line or scar where one would have been. That would imply pear, but he is normal weight and his name appears on no records of registry and no ID device of any shape. He is certainly not from the Ohio group anyway. Wish pears had to be tagged and processed for the national database too.

I pull his file up to record today's observations. Good, the DNA report is back. I look it over. Shit, not on record either. Back to square one, again. We have tried five times to process his DNA. He claims to be from the west coast, New Shanghai region, but we all know, no one survived the 'accidental' release of Agent X three years ago. That is why we started calling him Mr. X. Several hundred thousand saps were lost. Easy enough to replace from the pear perspective. But they were human beings. I scratch at my own bracelet. Not used to it yet. Some say one never does get used to it.

Back to the DNA report. This time I had it analyzed for disease factors. Expensive. Took me forever to get it past the board. It says that his seq is perfect. That can't be right. I look again. Over fifteen thousand markers and he is negative for all defects. Amazing. No wonder he is not on record. I wonder if he is a mod. Some super rich pear who was resequed. Naw, the would show up as a certain fuzziness in the results. Inconclusives would appear. There is no such thing as a perfect reseq that I know of. Still I suppose I was not told of everything.

I turn to the med report. He is in perfect physical condition with no enhancements. Definitely not pear material. All of his organs appear to be original too. No broken bones, perfect teeth, sight and hearing. His hands are soft, not callused. That says pear. Shit, this is getting me nowhere. He could just be a lucky. Some random mutant that has perfect DNA. No, that does not make sense either. A required sap scan would have pegged him as perfect 'back up' material long ago. Not as extensive as I had just had done, but enough to flag him for further study. He would not have reached his stated age. Still, now there will be a real incentive to classify him sap. We do not qualify for 'private' records. His days are numbered. He should have been 'harvested' years ago.

This is getting no where. His writing is no help either. I have read his 'manifesto' over the last week. Sci-fi mostly. He has been writing it out on any flat surface he can find. A small mother unit held by a staff member

has been assembling it into readable form. No way would one of those units could 'evolve' into the monster he portrays. In this 'novel' he is some kind of super being called a TK. The writings tell of his adventures over a period of twenty five million years. Well, last I checked it is 2025. Even his recent history is off. There was no HelperV plague to wipe out most of humanity. The plague itself was real, but it only got a few thousand in the New York region. The net got a hold of it and made more of it that it was of course. Most of New Yorkers died in the 'fire break' intended to prevent its spread to the pear district and not the actual disease itself. Mr. X is correct that the HelperV was a very dangerous pathogen, but it was contained.

The plague that hit the west coast a few years ago, Agent X, was some experimental construct, as was HelperV, but not related. They have already re-populated the area. Like nothing ever happened. If he came out of that alive, of which there were no reports of anyone doing so, then he would have at least have been scared like the images of the corpses I saw. That was the difference to HelperV. HelperV just killed, Agent X scarred first. I am beginning to think they are purposely working on agents that can reduce overpopulation selectively. I was among the pears too long. I don't trust them at all. Could be gang related. Pear gang that is. Kill off saps and the remaining ones are more valuable. You just want it to be yours that survive. Agent X got out of hand and nearly made it to New Atherton. That scared them good. No new surprises since then.

That was weird. How did Mr. X know so much about New Atherton, right down to the musical code used to access the service gates? Saps talk of course, but still, it was like he was there. I checked the records using a friend among the pears who is sympathetic to my situation. Lisa was her name. I had met her on a visit to Paris. Young, but smart. Father worked in tech security at New Atherton I believe. He knew of her too. How? She just laughed when I told her of her part. "Could you imagine me on a reservation?" No I couldn't. No pear would survive a second on a reservation. Not that I could blame the locals.

So, here I have a gentleman who claims to be a superman, in perfect condition for a seventy something male, but neither a pear nor a sap, who escaped from a plague that no one survived and is now in Ohio for reasons that have not been said. Oh, I almost forgot, he carries a solid glass sphere around with him. Every time someone takes it from him he has it back the next day. That makes me suspect that he may have been an unregistered thief. The registered ones worked for the pears of course. Any sap that got out of hand and earned too much or was too ambitious was dealt with. I itch my bracelet. How does anyone get used to the thing? Could he have faked the DNA? Hacked the system as his character Barb could have done?

A note flashes across the screen. The results of a sap census are in. I

had requested the year 2020 records from the New Shanghai Marine lab where he claimed he worked. My budget is going to be zero months before the end of the year at this rate. I need to close this case now. No wonder they gave it to me and made me pay for it out of my own funds. Not the first, but at this rate, he may be the last.

Ah, here is Barb, a cutie. Yeah, she could have done the hacking. Her specs are incredible. Hmm, a flag on her file. She is under an assumed identity, but says not to tell her we know. I keep looking. Well there is no Mr. X listed as Yingui. I will have to do a visual. There were only a handful of saps working at the lab. I put all of the images up. Too many for this cheap screen. I narrow the search to males in the fifty to seventy range. Three. Whoa, the right hand one looks just like him, older, but the best match easily. Name, William Patterson, tech, good at photography. Never written anything worth saving. Spelling and grammar scores are horrible. \$231.11 in his account. I would not have had this access without the Director's approval. I should have had this information a month ago. So, Mr. Patterson, we know who you are now. Now I will have to have his DNA file pulled. I don't expect a match.

This is weird, it says both his and Barbara's bodies were found. He can't be William, but he looks just like him. Well, mistakes were probably made. I call up the names of the final characters in his work. I do a cross check. Some of the names match. But they are common names, so that is no real surprise. Why didn't he use last names? Lisa is not among the dead of course. So all I really have is William and Barbara for sure, as I have images. Correction, all I really have is William. I have not seen Barbara 'alive' to be sure. There are hundreds of others. Seven named James, four named Ron, shit, twenty four named Susan. And that is just the missing. I check my balance. \$56.92. Payday is today. I'll be all right as long as I don't get sick. I okay the search cost of \$3.24 with tax.

There is a knock on my door. "Come in." The door opens and Jarez peeks in.

"Doc, time for Mr. X's session." Jarez is staff, sap like me. A strange thought. A pear would not have knocked at the entrance to a sap quarter.

I look up to him and connect with his eyes. "Thanks Jarez. I'll be right there." I shut down the screen and set it to secure. Not that any pear that walked in could not override it and see what I am doing. I take the stairs up to the main floor. My 'office' is now in the basement. Granted I have a view of the garden, mostly the back of trees and ferns. Very dark. On the main floor I walk the hall to the group room. There among the patients is the face I have been looking at on the screen. Face recognition is not perfect. He could even have gotten his identity from the net and made up the story to match.

"William, please have a seat." He smiles like a cat who has gotten the canary and sits.

“William Patterson is your name, correct?” Can't hurt to try.

“I prefer the name Yingui.” He does not look Chinese. I tap in the name, silver ghost. Even I know even here in Ohio that no one chooses ghost for a name in the Chinese culture. Superstitious lot as a whole. Of course there are exceptions and one should never assume anything about a person you don't know.

“Fine Yin-gway.” I try to pronounce the name based on the English spelling.

He corrects me, “Pronounced more like Yeen? Gwa-ay.” I nod. He makes me nervous and I rub the bracelet. He notices and smiles again. “I can take it off, if you want.”

I shake my head. Without the bracelet I am dead. Even I know that much. I know how to remove it. Used to do so at night till I was warned by the staff of the consequences of losing it.

“If what you have written is true, how do you explain being here now? Yours and Barbara's bodies were found at the marine lab.”

“Do you want the long version or the short version?” He laughs easily and calmly. If he was not crazy, he might even be a friend. Never make friends with patients. Especially ones who hear voices in their heads. Illusions of grandeur, paranoid schizophrenia, possibly multiple personalities. He should be on meds at least. A nano intervention if he was a pear. Less side effects and permanent. And actually cheaper, but we are forbidden to give a sap that option of course.

“We only have an hour, so better make it the short version.” I am so tired from all of this, but I have to help. I can't help it. Yeah, co-dependent childhood, etc., etc., etc. I know my own scan.

“The magmotics were not interested in our personalities. They were afraid we would poison their culture. So, as soon as we could exchange information on how things worked we were returned to the surface.”

“Then the Betas would have seen and retrieved you.”

“It took several years for the total exchange to take place. They were long gone and no one, not even us, knew where we were after star jumping a few dozen times for practice.”

“Go on.” I am taking notes on a small mother unit, which will also record this conversation and add it to the records automatically. He seems amused by the process.

“The exchange was an equal one. We gave them the ability of the TKs magnified millions of times by their considerably larger mass and psiotic potential. Opening a gate and moving the earth to a new solar system was trivial for the combined power of their culture. This also made it possible for them to communicate with OM and Ung directly. The three of them decided that it would be better if we left. Our presence would only bring the curious. We agreed. We made a few last minute tweaks to the local fauna and left.

Their sense of time was different that what you normally experience, so we had some time to decide where. The simple explanation was that if it was all psiotic, then it should be possible to go back in time as well. We could go anywhere and any when. So where/when then?"

"So you came here and now. But your story is inconsistent. HelperV did not decimate the human race. And you died of Agent X three years ago."

"The William Patterson from this plane did. Remember the alternative universes? We could not go back to our own version of earth. That would cause all kinds of paradoxes. So, we chose an earth very close to our own. The company working with the virus and the person in charge did take responsibility. He died, but he saved billions of lives. That was the difference between our two worlds, one person's personal decision. A few months later, Agent X was released by Sauron to scourge the coastal area. I think he was hoping that HelperV would have done the job. It got out of hand and did most of Santa Clara county as well. Sauron, being the personality type that he is, did not like potential competition. He had a feeling, a precognition, that the mid coast of California was going to be a problem, but he could not get a specific enough feeling to know who the center was."

"I checked. There is no one named Sauron in the database." He laughs.

"I would not expect so. Is this where you write a prescription for me?"

"You have no bracelet and therefore no funds. You could not pay for one if I offered."

"And I would not trust it if I could. So, doc, any hope for me?"

"You understand that now that I know your identity you are in a lot of trouble. Everything that I do is recorded. I am sorry. If I had been a pear, this would not have come up. But now that we know you are like I am, a sap, there is little I can do. You probably only have a few hours till they ask you to leave. At your age, this is tantamount to a death sentence."

"I have resources. You need not worry." He is amused.

"No, this is real. This is not one of your fantasies. I know someone who may help. I have sent a message to her. The time is close. If she can get free she will have to take the fastest transport."

"Actually not. I am here already. I figured that if this did not pan out, I would be needed and if it did it would still be a nice visit." Lisa looks great. Last time I saw her she was fifteen, now she must be just twenty one to be allowed on her own like this. I stand to attend to her and then remember, I am not pear any longer. She smiles wryly.

"So, how is your new station in life Anikin?"

"I am adjusting." I rub the bracelet. I am sure it will wear a hole in

my arm soon. "The first month is always the worst."

"So I hear. It was brave of you to take this route. I heard what happened."

"Yeah, well I could not let them die. Which is what would have happened if I hadn't done anything. Over with now anyway. How are you doing? You look great! A few extra years have made you."

"You have no idea. Ah, thanks. So, do you need help here?"

"I am fine. It is my patient." I hesitate.

Williams jumps in, "He means I am a basket case with little chance of recovery." Big grin.

"Ms. Withers this is ah, Yingui. Yingui, Ms. Withers."

"You never did tell me your last name."

"Now you know why." She rolls her eyes.

I am confused, "You two know each other?"

"In another life time. Let's get back to the matter at hand. You want me to hire him or something? Without a bracelet he would never get past security at New Atherton. Maybe someplace remote where one more crazy person would not be noticed?" Yingui looks wounded and lowers his eyes in fake shame. This is all a game to him. "I know. I visited the Hopi reservation once. They would take him in with a little incentive. Not a great life, but beats starving in the streets."

"I would appreciate it. Thanks." Hopi? That must be a coincidence.

"Hey, what about me? Do I have any say? Besides I hate the heat." He is smiling.

We both say, "NO!" at the same time. "Look Yingui, be happy you will be alive. I am not in a position to help much. It is the best I can do. Lisa is good. You won't come to harm with her."

I turn to her, "Thanks. I really appreciate it. I have to stop working so hard for my patients."

"Stick to the pears and you won't have this problem." She suggests with a smile. Pears do not use that term around themselves. I am surprised she uses the term.

I hesitate then softly say, "There is no difference." I am looking down. Hope that was not recorded.

Yingui says something strange, "He'll do. Wrap him up and we can take him with us."

My eyes are moist. I know he can't help it but I have to say it, "Look Yingui, this is not the Lisa from your mind. She is a perfectly normal ruling class person, twenty one years old, not twenty five million. Please, for your own sake. Let it go."

"You told him everything?" He nods to her. "No wonder they kept you here so long. You really need to follow the path of no self." No self? Of course, Zen training was part of my training. Their understanding of the mind is nearly as good as the western understanding. Some cases

better. Probably got it from some site on the net or neo new age group.

“I am sorry Lisa, I have to get back to the other patients. I will be fine, but not if I don't keep up the work load.”

“I can see you later after you get off?” There is a twenty year difference in our ages, it is not that. Boy does she look hot though. Like a daughter if I had ever had one. I wipe the image from my mind.

“I don't get off.” Saps don't get free time. “I'm sorry. I have to go. Thanks for coming Lisa. Better if you forget me.” I really have to let go of my old life. It would not be fair to my previous friends. I don't dare touch her. A hug initiated by a sap to a pear would be recorded. I watch them leave out of the corner of my eye.

I go back to my office in the basement. Taping the screen and speaking my code into it activates the file I was working on. I tap in closed case and press enter. Who is next? A month of my life gone and now he is gone. I wish him a prayer of luck. This has been some day. I really need a nap. Down here I am alone. I lay down on the couch. Left over from before psiotic scanners. Psiotic scanners! I bounce back up and activate the screen again. I call up Mr. X's psiotic scan, done at the same time as the DNA scan. Best way to match up the two. Perfect. Just like his DNA. He was sane! But there is no way a person with his symptoms could pass a scan. Even someone faking it would show up as a liar at least. Everyone has some problems. I have seen my own scan. I have a tendency to help people. The rescuer complex. Wait, I have already said that.

A messenger pops up in one corner demanding attention. I tell it to open and tell me what is going on. Hmm, a note from New Atherton. Lisa died in a traffic accident on her 21st birthday. Something about an experimental car and driving too fast. Then who was that? I sigh and head back to the couch.

“Mr. Roberts wake up this instance!” I am startled awake. Oh, god, I have a horrible headache and I don't even want to try and remember what I was dreaming of. Would fill several psych doctorates. I get up off the couch in a hurry to face the director.

“Yes sir. Sorry sir, has been a long day.” I stand waiting. He inspects the office. The head nurse comes in.

“See that all this stuff is removed and burned.” She nods and leaves.

Without turning he says to me, “Well, why are you still here. You are dismissed. Your last wages are recorded.” He turns to head for the door.

“George, I am fired for a nap?”

“What did you call me! Get out of here now before I have you beaten!” I scramble out of the way of his stretched out arm. He has the right to beat me for calling him by his first name. Never mind that I was his supervisor a month ago. This is how they treat the fallen. An incentive so no one else to repeats my mistake.

Outside and now late afternoon. I have no place to go. Probably blacklisted for a week as well. I have to be 'broken' before I will be of any use. The fact that he called me Mr. means that my license has been revoked as well. Not that any pear would allow me to work with them any longer and the fellow saps don't see the point of mental health. Most of the insane prefer that state. Easier way to deal with reality.

Best if I get away from the clinic. They would be watching for me to try and get back in to retrieve something of sentimental value. I have to let go of that life forever. No sap will take me in at this point either for fear of the recriminations. My best chance is to keep walking. To get out of town, at least the pear district of New Columbus. There is farm land south of here. I am not that desperate yet, I still have a bracelet. Only the starving go that route. But it is the fastest way out for the moment. I need some space and time to plan my next move.

"Pssst. Doc. Over here." Huh? I turn Manuel Ramirez, cooks assistant.

"Manuel. What's up?"

"We all heard. We took a collection. Not much, but will serve a few meals if you stretch it." He hands me a small bag. I look inside. Rolls, some ripe fruit about to go and few tofu strips.

"Thanks Manuel. Please thank the others for me. It would be better if we are not seen."

"I know. Good luck Doc. Thanks for everything. We appreciate everything you did."

"I did not do much Manuel, only what any human would do for another." He smiles at my joke, then disappears.

A few hours later the sun is getting low. The food is gone. I was really hungry for some reason. The first thing I had eaten today. Forgot breakfast. It could be worse. It could be fall or winter. In the fall, after the harvest, they lay off their workers. The lucky ones find factory jobs for the winter. The rest freeze to death. Lose several hundred that way each year. Yet they still come to the city in hope of finding something better than the farms. I look around for a suitable tree to curl up under. It will still be pretty cold at night. I am not dressed well for the outside. Wish psychiatrists still wore those white smocks. I could use one about now. My stomach is rumbling again as well. I figure that can wait a bit yet. No one ever died of hunger in one day. If that was supposed to last a few days, I have a lot to learn.

I get off the road and into an orchard. Probably trespassing on some pear's property. I am hoping they don't have thermal imagers or dogs. I make a hollow at the base of a suitable tree and cover myself as best I can with last years leaves. More moldy than intact. The smell will help hide me and keep me warmer. Exhausted I fall asleep.

I wake about midnight according to my bracelet. It does tell time till

the power drains out. Have thirty days. They gave me that much to extend the pain as much as possible is my guess. A week from now and I would accept a job cleaning toilets and be thankful for it. The problem with being a psychologist is that I know how all the tricks work. And they will work, even though I know what they are.

I smell smoke and can see a fire a ways off between the trees. Can't hurt to go look. Thank goodness this is only an orchard and I don't have to find my way through brush and other obstacles. Or wild animals.

I am wary, but I am no woodsman either. I must have made enough noise to be heard in the next county, especially when I stubbed my toes several times. When I get closer I can hear voices. Not speaking loud and I can't make out what they are saying. I get closer, hiding behind a tree. Two people sitting around a small fire. Both of them are wearing hoods. Not that uncommon during the day on account of the UV. I am pretty badly sunburned and I am starting to really feel it. Probably get cancer if I live that long. Not likely. Another thing for my list. Get a sap outfit. I stand out like crazy in these pear clothes. Granted they will be rags soon enough, especially if I keep covering them with moldy leaves, but, ah never mind. My head hurts again.

I get out from behind my tree and make enough noise so that they know I am here and coming towards them. A person snuck up on is more likely to strike out without thinking.

"Stand where you are." One of the figures rises and faces me. The cowl of the robe covers their face enough that I can't make it out. I don't see any hair. Got to get my hair cut short too. I only went halfway at the clinic. Out here two centimeter hair is long. I hold my hands up to show that I am not carrying anything. The other one rises. Then for some reason I cannot explain both start to throw stones at me. Three good size ones are coming straight for my face. I instinctively raise my arms to protect myself and the stones go suddenly off at a strange angle. They had not even touched me! I look around to try and figure out what happened.

"You can close your mouth now Anikin. You passed. The TK took." A female voice I am guessing.

"What, you were not sure it would, being a different world, or because of Anikin's personality?" A voice from behind me. I dare not move.

"One can never be sure of anything. Always best to test it."

"You could have killed me!" I am in shock.

"Naw, we had you shielded. Never would have touched you, but you did not know that."

The voice behind me says, "Peace be with you. Come on Anikin, you are welcome to our circle." A hand softly touches my back and I nearly lose it. I did not realize the person was that close. The others laugh.

“Funny, I don't normally have that effect on others.” I cannot tell the gender of the voice. The others are all smiling. Still can't see their eyes. I lower my hands and walk closer to the fire. When I get close enough I can see that logs have been assembled to form a ring of seats. Once I get into the circle they all lower their hoods.

“Lisa? Mr. X, I mean Yingui? What? Why?”

The hand behind me again. I turn to look. “Anikin, please sit. You are safe. Be well.” The hand touches my head. I instinctively raise my hand expecting pain from the sunburn, but there is none. I sit, amazed. I rub my head myself, but the sunburn is definitely gone. So is the headache, the second one of the day. How did that happen? The shock of what just happened? That might explain the headache, but not the sunburn.

“Welcome to our circle Anikin. Please join us in something to eat.” Yingui passes me a plate of sap stew. Mostly starch gravy and vegetables. I have grown to actually prefer it, over what the pears get at least. They let me eat, which only takes a moment. I had not realized I was that hungry. No lunch makes a difference.

“Here, have something to drink as well.” Lisa hands me a mug of something warm.

“Thanks.” Cider of some kind, hot and spicy. Tastes wonderful. “This is really good.” I drain the mug and sit quiet.

“Upgrades do make one hungry. Let us introduce ourselves. I am Yingui of course and Lisa you know as well. The one who came up from behind is Jesan.”

I am trembling, “THE Jesan, the Jesus and Susan mix from your book?”

“I am the one.” Hands are spread to show no weapons or threat.

“But, what gender are you now?” Male and female mixed makes what? Hermaphrodite?

“I will show you.” The robe falls. Is it wrong to look on the body of our Lord? I want to look away, but am curious at the same time.

“There is nothing there!” Nothing at all between the legs. I did go to medical school, I am certainly aware of how things work. I have never seen anything like this, even among the 'experiments'. The pears did some really nasty things in their labs.

“I am neither gender. I don't need any, so why bother?”

“Then are you a he or a she?”

“I am Jesan.” My mouth opens.

“Maybe they did some experiments that I did not know of.” I say out loud.

Lisa gets impatient. “The others will be here soon, let's get this over with. Stop playing with him please.”

“You would think that at her age she would be more patient.” Yingui

says. I am not sure I want to be near Jesan. Is it still our Lord? What about the Jesus that should still be here. What did the book say, Costa Rica somewhere? “No matter. Anikin, choose a small rock or twig and lift it.”

I look around and start to stand up to go towards my chosen twig.

“No, not physically. With your mind.” He grins at me.

“Look, you really have to stop this Yingui. It is only a fantasy.” I sit back down.

All three just shake their heads grinning.

“All of you believe this craziness?” They nod. “Maybe I should just leave then.” I try to get up, but can't! There is nothing there, but I can't get up. I can move my arms and my legs, but I can't get up. Okay, there must be some kind of explanation.

“Just lift a twig with your mind. You already moved the stones. All you have to do is concentrate.” I moved the stones? No, they just missed.

“And if I fail?”

“You will eventually dehydrate and die here all alone I would imagine.” Three grins again. Shit.

“This won't work. I am not crazy.”

“Like we are? A little more incentive is in order troops.”

“Sigh. I think you like tormenting people don't you. Still a little boy at heart. Maybe it was because you were alone too long.”

“Who me?” Twigs start coming at me. Hitting me on the chest, arms and legs. Then more and more start arriving. They aren't using their hands. They just lift off the ground and fly towards me.

“Hey!” I try to raise my arms to ward them off and they are glued down now too. They are in front of me, so they can't see behind them. A VERY large cat is sneaking up on them from behind. It is about to pounce on Lisa! “NO!” I shout at the top of my lungs and all the twigs and small pebbles go shooting off towards the cat at high speed.

“Hey, why did you do that to me?” The twigs never make it. It is as if they have hit some wall. They hit an invisible wall and then dropped to the ground. The cat creature stands up on two legs. It is wearing some kind of vest. Bright red with really elaborate decorations in gold. Really stands out here in the fire light.

“You talked!” I am feeling faint. But of course I am still glued in place.

“Well, you moved those objects just fine. Now do it without the emotion.”

“But the cat talked? And it wears clothes.”

“Owa, this is Anikin, Anikin this is Owa. Now move the twig.”

I close my eyes and concentrate. Too many things to find any possible explanation. I can see a twig sitting in front of me in my mind. That's weird. Black and white, but really good detail. Just like my eyes

were open. I concentrate and the twig starts to move. I get the feeling adjusted. Psychologists are good at mind games. The twig comes up to about two feet. Never did make the adjustment to meters. I open my eyes and it is there. Of course I have lost my concentration and it drops. I reach out to pick it up and look more closely at it. Yep, this is the one. I hold it out in front of me. Concentrate. I remove my hand and it remains suspended in the air. "Neat." I slowly move it following it with my mind. Looping around in the air. Suddenly a large paw swipes out and grabs it out of the air.

"Oh, mighty hunter. Able to kill TKd twigs in a single swipe."

Owa sits and then suddenly turns and licks her flank ignoring the others.

"Is it all right to touch her? I remember from the book that she likes neck massage."

Her head comes up quickly. Back on two legs, she leans into me and nearly pushes me over. I start to knead her neck muscles. "You are really strong." That sets off the loudest purring I have ever heard. The rest of them start laughing.

"Now they will be inseparable."

"He does need an instructor. If I could teach her, she can teach him."

"Done. Owa, you are now Anikin's teacher." I know I had better play this right and work harder and slower.

"Oh, yes. I am the instructor. The instructor. Wonderful."

"I see Cat has found a sap fast enough. He must be tasty." A beautiful woman with blonde hair shows up.

"You are gorgeous." Not in a sexual way, more glamour than sensuousness.

"Okay, that does it. Next time I get to play the vixen." Lisa pretends to be pissed.

"I thought you said he was fixed."

"Huh? I had implants a few years ago if that is what you mean."

"A pear getting fixed. That's weird."

"I could not be the father of another pear brought into this world."

"You sure pick em. Does he know his assignment yet?"

"Haven't gotten that far. He has not even taken the oath yet." Oath? There was something about a TK oath in the journals I think. I try to remember the details but can't.

"Have you got the stuff?" What stuff? She is carrying a large pack. Looks too big for her.

"It has been way too long since I hacked for the Apes." I had forgotten that part. This might be good. "Fortunately I was able to retrieve and duplicate my equipment from my counterpart before the decom finished and the new ones moved in." She pulls out a bracelet like mine, but bigger. A more expensive model. She must have had some pull.

They made me pay for my own bracelet after depleting my account with fines and legal fees. All trumped up of course. She then pulls out all kinds of containers to be unpacked and spread out just past the logs where we are sitting. Finally a tripod and dish carefully pointed skyward. How does she know where to aim it? She is being very careful in the alignment. The other boxes are also carefully laid out and a stool appears out of nowhere! She sits and proceeds to turn everything on.

That's strange, "Where is the power source?" No power walls in sight out here. She taps one of the boxes and otherwise ignores me.

"Once Barb gets into this mode, it is best to leave her alone."

"But she is dead too? So is Lisa? And this is all a dream from which I will awaken."

"Ever feel pain in a dream Anikin?" Owa sinks a claw into my arm and I jump back rubbing my arm. I am apparently free to move about again.

"You made your point, ha-ha." I grimace.

She raises a front paw and spreads the claws, "There will be more if you don't pay attention. Understand stupid monkey?" I nod.

"So is there a dead version of you somewhere too Owa?"

"Was not born yet. You are perceptive to be putting this together so quickly. Ask your questions, monkeys have to do this I understand." She has the most quizzical look on her face.

"I have always been a cat person, but you take the prize Owa. I will learn much from you."

"Of course you will stupid monkey." That is getting to be annoying.

I turn to Jesan, "You are a combination of Susan and Jesus. So, are your precursors dead from this world also?"

"Susan is, she died in the same plague that got Yingui, Barbara, James, Rachel and Daniel."

"Wow, he really cleaned house. Let me see, that leaves Ron, Edwin, Running Snake, Mei. Did I forget anyone? Oh, Q. I forget his Hopi name. Hard to remember names you can't pronounce."

"Ron died by electrocution under suspicious circumstances, according to the saps I talked to." Barbara says without looking up.

Lisa adds, "You forgot one. You will see her later." Yingui stares at her concerned. Lisa ignores him.

"Running Snake died when a cook fire caught her hogan." Ug, burning is the worst.

"Edwin was found shot dead in the desert with no tracks around."

"My counterpart died in a jet crash along with her student." An Asian woman appears out of nowhere. I must not have been paying attention. She is beautiful too. Everyone looks like they are in great shape. Not fat pears anyway.

"How come everyone looks so healthy?"

Mei shrugs, "Part of the benefit of TK. It will happen to you as well. I thought he was fixed?"

"Okay, what do you mean about being fixed?" If it hasn't happened yet, I am not sure I want to know.

Lisa says, "Allow me. I saw the way he looked at me in the clinic." She walks towards me, loosens her robe and lets it fall. She is naked underneath. Beautiful. Perfect breasts, stomach, hips, legs. A woman to die for. They start giggling. I look up. They are all staring at me. What? I didn't ask her to do this. More giggles. I look down.

"Hey! What happened to my clothes?"

"He is fixed. Just appreciates beauty when he sees it." The robe suddenly reappears on Lisa.

"Let me try then." Mei is already naked by the time I turn in her direction. Different from Lisa, but still gorgeous.

"Maybe he swings the other way." James and Q stand who drop their robes.

"You two look like you have been through a composter." There are scars everywhere on their bodies.

"But handsome all the same." They mug it up some to applause from the ladies.

I shake my head, "If you all look this good, what will I look like?" I turn my attention back to Owa, "May I have a robe too?"

"Good, he acknowledges his master." Owa looks away, but a robe appears on me all the same.

"Course fabric. I would have expected something finer."

Owa turns to me fiercely, "NEVER FORGET where you come from. We could have left you dying in the woods as a sap, a fallen pear. Never forget that. The robe will help you remember the world from which you came. We all wear the robe when we gather."

"Except you I guess." I say quietly.

"And I have VERY good hearing. Unlike you monkeys, I usually wear nothing. I also remember from which I came." My what big teeth you have. Oh, and the vest is gone.

"Point made. This will be fine. Thank you." I don't want another claw in my arm or my head bit off.

The others are nearly rolling from laughter.

"I don't understand?"

"You will with time."

"When do I meet the others?"

"Be patient grasshopper." Grasshopper?

James turns to me and then to the others, "Who is he by the way?"

"Pear bait." Says a new woman. Also Asian. Shit I forgot. Rachel was Japanese or something. Lucked out with Mei. She shouts over her shoulder, "Father hurry up. Nearly everyone else is here already."

“Coming dear.” An older man appears. Well, Yingui does not look young. Wonder why? They could be any age they wanted, right?

“Got it!” Barbara yells. “I hate this level six tech. Why again did you make me use these antiques?”

“For the moment we have to appear to have come from this time period. You were the one who pointed that out to us.”

“Remind me to keep my mouth shut next time. Where's Ron? I could use his help.”

“Would not be any easier for him.”

“Misery loves company.”

“If I were you, I would not complain too much.” She nods.

Something is up.

“Hi. You must be the Doctor. I am Daniel.” Nice guy. Used to be a diplomat. A very long time ago. I have to keep remembering. These people have each probably been almost everything.

“I think I am beginning to see why I am here. All of you could use some help. I won't have to clean toilets for a living after all.” I grin. He laughs good and hearty. Nothing wrong with him.

“I would not count on that last statement my friend.” He slaps me on the back. Oops, that's right. They even did that. Though when I think about it, it is only fair. You made it, you should take your turn caring for it. We need to get rid of both saps and pears. Neither is the right path.

“Are you always so serious?” He asks.

“Oh, sorry. It has been a long time for you. I am new to your world. It will take some getting used to, even for me.”

“I would have thought it would be easier for you. You see the ways of the mind.”

“But you have much more experience. Almost as long as all the lives of the Buddha.” He bows to me. I return the respect. Okay, technically he does not remember much of it. All of them taken together though.

Something is coming crashing through the orchard. Even with my new sight, I can not see that far, but my hearing is fine. The others are paying attention this time.

“Positions everyone. This is it. Ron is coming in fast. Sauron is right behind him.”

Yingui comes and sits next to me. Owa takes up position in front of me.

“Listen carefully. Not everything you see will be as it appears. Wait till I tell you before asking any questions. Be quiet till then, no matter what happens.” I nod and swallow. “Good, now raise the hood on your robe and sit. Stare down at the ground if that helps. We will be doing the same.” I sit. The sounds get louder. I imagine that I hear something behind the first sound, but it could be the power of suggestion. I am glad that Owa is at my feet. She goes to doing some kind of grooming. One

cool cat. I am shaking slightly.

The stomping, as that is clearly what it is, is getting closer. Something big and not human. The gait is wrong. Another sound that I can't identify. Yes, there is another of the same kind following the first. It is not running however. A slower gait and bigger.

Yingui holds my arm, *Be not afraid*. Too late for that and reminding me does not help. It is funny how knowing how it all works does not prevent it from happening. I am glad the fluid I drank has not made it to my bladder yet.

The first creature enters the center of our circle. Even looking down I can see that this is not human at all. More lizard. Scales and claws on those feet. It is breathing hard. As I watch, the feet change. Slowly the scales disappear, the claws retract. They become human feet. A medium brown in color. Sandals and robe appear. The feet move away. I am assuming the person has found a place in the circle. It was one of ours. This must be Ron. I remember he was with the Sauropods for some time. He would know their shape.

Shit. That means the one coming is Sauron. On their world he is long dead. Here he is very much alive. Alive. The embodiment of evil. Satan. I had always assumed he was just a myth. A story to illustrate our shadow side. That part of us that we all have and try to suppress without much success.

The steps still coming become lighter. They sound more like a man's now. Someone with shoes. They stop in the center of our circle. I can see them. Black and shiny. A pear for sure. But he does not have the weight of a typical pear. A high level one then. Very high level. Only the stupid ones became fat, which is most of them of course.

Owa growls a deep low growl. I shush her in my mind, but she is not reading me. Owa moves.

"I challenge you Sauron." No Owa. Not again. This is not Yingui who will not hurt you. Please don't challenge this one. He knows every trick. Sixty five million years of tricks. I don't dare look up. This is not going to be good.

There is a sharp sound and then there is blood on the ground. Owa yowls in triumph. It is not his blood then. That is even worse. The shoes, those black shiny shoes change. Claws come out. Very sharp strong claws. He is certainly good at changing shape.

Owa, he does not know the rules. He only knows his pain. Not the pain of blood, the pain of humiliation, the pain of defeat. He cannot accept defeat. Owa growls low, very low. She is equally low to the ground and ready to spring again. Owa get out. Get out now. Run, DS, TK, hide Owa, hide! There are tears in my eyes. The silence is deafening.

Then it comes.

The most hideous scream I have ever heard in my life and a sudden

bone crunching, muscle tearing sound. Owa's head faces me on the ground, eyes wide open, followed by the sound of her body collapsing. My tears flow freely.

The sound of his footsteps recede into the distance. I cannot see or hear anything else, such is my grief. If this is my new world, I would rather be on a farm, dying of slow starvation and overwork.

I am awakened by someone licking my face with a rather large tongue. I react immediately, scared to death that it is Sauron's tongue. I back up as fast as I can.

“Gee, do someone a favor and this is the thanks I get.”

“You just wanted the salt and you know it.”

I finally open my eyes. I can't focus on something that close. Result of getting older I guess. It is fuzzy, pink skin with grayish hair. No fur. I use the special sight. Interesting that it works in the growing daylight as well.

“Owa!” I grab her and hug her too tight. I am crying again, but this time from happiness. I hear laughter in the background. I don't care.

“I would say that Owa has a boyfriend.”

“Certainly looks that way.”

“Wonder what the children will look like?”

“Can they do that?”

“Vulcans and humans did. Why not?”

“What about the difference in years?”

“What you mean the only ones we can mate with are each other?”

“You do have a point. There are not too many twenty five million year old humans around.”

“Well then, we have to go for whatever presents itself.”

“Get him off of me now!”

“That sounded almost human.”

“Yes, her English is getting to be quiet good.”

“Will everyone just shut up. I am done.” I sit back, with my hand still on her shoulder. I am grinning from ear to ear. Owa, in spite of her complaining, is purring.

“I told you not to believe what you experienced.”

“So, what did happen? It certainly looked real.”

“Remember how Yingui tricked Sauron in the book?”

“The second body. I am having trouble taking all of this in.”

“We have used that trick so many times it is second nature to us. I am sorry, but we used you. The rest of us have learned how to hide what we are. You could not. It has only been a few hours for you. We were no better at the same stage. Sauron of course did not know that. He saw only you. A small light in the darkness. Probably thought you were the leader of a small band of followers.”

“But what about Owa?”

“She was your pet.”

“A pet who could talk? I don't think so.”

“Ventriloquism. Sauron is used to tricks not truth. He would not believe a talking cat any more than you did when you first met. So, a TK2 a small band of followers and a large cat like creature. Probably a genetically modified house pet. The voice could even be an electronic implant of some kind or with human language genes and some surgeries.

The cat was obviously was also a guard cat. When you were threatened, the cat stepped in to protect you. Sauron wanted to show you how weak you really were. By destroying the pet, which was of no consequence, he warned you he could take you out at anytime. This was reinforced by his leaving. You were of so little a threat he did not even waste his time with us. Oh, don't get too complacent. He will have someone watching for us. But we have ceased to exist as far as he is concerned.”

“But he was hurt. Surely that would never be tolerated.”

“Ah, remember, he is still a carnivorous dinosaur. You are thinking in human terms. That was the one thing that brought honor to the proceedings. Not much, just a little. But he will never walk into an encounter with us again without looking, hoping, for some kind of a challenge. He lives for the challenge.”

“That makes sense I guess. Why did Barb bring all the tech here then? Surely that is not a weapon or a defense of some kind?”

Barb answers, “This is all level six. He had to think that was all he was dealing with. A TK2 a band of TK0s and some level six tech. Nothing to be challenged by at all. The only thing that gave him a mere moment of satisfaction he took care of. The cat is dead.”

“There was something more. He could easily recognize us through our robes. Except for you, all of us should be dead. That will give him something to think about. There was some reason he dealt with all of our twins.”

“But not me.” Am I worthless?

“Ah, I would not count yourself out. He did not take out all of the doubles at once. And though you are TK2 you were not exactly on the way to riches and glory. It would have been trivial to remove you from the equation once you had fallen completely. No bracelet and no identity. You cease to exist, therefore of no consequence if you are killed by any means. Sauron has even been known to eat people. Besides he has turned some natural TKs to his own ends. He could be saving you for that. Not pretty.”

“Yeah, if you ever hear him say smiggle, run as fast as you can.”

“Smiggle? Wait a minute. I, ah I mean my counterpart, was never in your story. So I have no twin.”

“A lesser individual of his species that had the answer he needed, but

was of such a low station that he was ignored. This doomed his species to extinction. He is still pissed over that one. He has a love hate relationship with scientists. He needs them, but hates them because they remind him of Smiggle and his failure.” They ignore my last statement. I wonder what happened to my twin. Probably died in the plague without a trace.

Yingui turns to Barbara, “You mentioned that you had gotten through.”

“All set. Would have taken a tenth the time with the level ten stuff we stashed away.”

“Hold that till later. We may still need it.”

“How do you hide tech from Sauron?” I mean, he is devious. He knows every hiding place and he is somewhere near a TK8, so certainly has the ability to find almost anything on the planet.

“Easy. The far side of the moon. Sauron's range is limited.”

“And even the Chinese aren't going to find it a kilometer below the surface.”

“And he would not have recognized it if he had seen it anyway. Level ten is as far removed from level six as six is from a medieval village. Imagine what a poor blacksmith would think of a psiotic microscope.” Ron has a point.

“thn!” One for each of them flies in and floats at chest height about a foot away. They each smile and reach out. It is so beautiful to see them interact with each other. I read all the stories, but seeing it, I know they love each other. I have counseled hundreds of pear couples and many claimed to love each other. They don't have any idea what that means, seeing these people. Excuse me, these beings. Owa is with her child and it is the same as the others. No, the one with Yingui is larger. Oh and the one with Mei is smaller. Not 'born' yet. The rest I am afraid that I do not know how to recognize by sight, TK or not.

I walk a ways away so they can be together. I don't dare go far. I have no desire to be a dinosaur's breakfast. I can see the sun coming up through the trees. A glorious red sun slowly turning golden. The birds are alive and chirping away in greeting. Squirrels run up and down searching for the last of last years hidden nuts and cursing my presence in their world.

I remember that I am TK now and practice lifting small stones and branches. I wonder what the limits at this level are? Level two means ten squared kilograms. I weigh about seventy I think. Maybe a little less since I have been off the rich pear chow for month. What the hey, I try and lift myself off the ground. A different angle of thinking from moving something outside of yourself. A couple of feet off the ground and wobbling a lot I suddenly find myself upside down, but still above the ground. That's weird. I would think that the blood would all rush to my head, but it doesn't. Oh, right I must be using the TK very tight. Much

more and I would not be able to breath. I try and fine tune it and I can feel gravity again. Tighter and it goes away. Great!

Still upside down, I can see a figure coming towards me. She is dressed in a lighter colored robe than the others. Her hood is down and I can see her long brown hair. Most of the others have cut their hair short. Who is missing?

She stops about five feet away, "Hello, I am Ci'lan. You must be the Doctor." I nod, which must look funny upside down. I attempt to right myself. It is shaky, but I do it. She is smiling at me as I finally set myself down.

"Good for you. Has he given you the practice balls yet?"

"No, but I suspect that I will have them soon." She smiles and then laughs. That laugh was not exactly a ha-ha, funny laugh. More of a, boy are you going to get it, type of laugh.

She gives out a high pitched whistle and two 'thn appear before her. Must have DSd in or were very fast. One is larger than the other. They take up the position just like the others, about one foot away.

"Doc, meet Pr'thn and Br'thn. Pr'thn is the larger one, having reached sentience."

"But Br'thn is older than Pr'thn and reached sentience long before her." I am confused.

"Sorry. Br'thn the Older is with Daniel. This is Br'thn the Younger. From this world."

"That makes sense. So, you were able to retrieve her from North Dakota before Sauron found her."

"We knew right were to look. She will be your companion for a time." She is so beautiful!

"Then who is with Yingui? I would have expected this Br'thn to be with him. Though even I could see that was not the case. The one with him is larger still."

"That must be Qr'thn. She came though with us."

"What about the Qr'thn native to this universe?"

"You do ask a lot of questions, don't you? I would have thought you would be more into listening than talking." She is amused.

"That would be the last century method. Now we do analysis more by DNA and psiotic scans now." I grin, "Would you like to know what they said about your father?"

"I can imagine. Now, hold out your hand. Br'thn is still a little shy around our species. Not all of her caretakers were nice."

"Not to mention all that time alone." That is what I feel most from her. Such a feeling of being alone. Even now, revived and healthy again, I still feel the loneliness from her. It would drive me crazy, even if I prefer to be alone most of the time. Maybe that is why I like these beings. I hold out my hand. She must be receiving instructions from Ci'lan.

Br'thn slowly comes over and rests about a half an inch above my hand. I can't help it, call it love at first sight. I pour out my love from her to her. She is so beautiful, intelligent, wonderful! She rests in my hand. She heard me!

Love Br'thn?

"Yes, I love you Br'thn. Very much!" She starts to vibrate, a sort of purring.

"Most unusual. She has not reacted that way with anyone else." Ci'lan looks at me weird and then continues, "Doctor, why did our 'thn reach sentience earlier than with all the other species?"

"Huh? That question certainly came out of nowhere. I would have thought it would be obvious to you of all people."

"It is, I want to know if you know."

"Ah, right." I think only for a moment, it is obvious, "Love."

"Explain."

"Watch the interaction between us and any 'thn. We love them. Not for what they give us, extra abilities, power, etc. But simply because they are unique, beautiful, wonderful, worthy of respect. I could go on for some time. I KNOW from the bottom of my being that I love Br'thn. I would gladly lay down my life to save hers. Most of the other species, Sauron included, only see the 'thn as a device, not as a being. They are our children after all." Er, not mine, but you get the point.

She nods her approval, "Don't ever forget. It is really the only thing we have going for us."

"Will you answer me one question?"

"If I can. In spite of what you may think, we do not know everything." She is serious.

"No, nothing like that. I read Yingui's rantings, er, at least they seemed to be rantings at the time. I am surprised that the core group has managed to stay alive all this time. I would have expected a few at least to have succumbed to accidents at least. Not that I am not glad you are all here."

"Your question?"

"Oh, I thought of another one. Later. Okay. Why me? I am a lowly shrink kicked out of the upper classes destined to die a quick death in a ditch somewhere. Why save me and why make me TK?"

"Sit." I do so, as does she. Br'thn stays right with me.

"What do you think of your world and what do you think would have happened to it in say, twenty years, if you had not met us?"

"We are most certainly headed for the big splat. A complete collapse of everything. I am not sure even this group could stop that. At eight billion people we are way above the carrying capacity. All of the easily extractable resources are gone. The gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow, in spite of all the warnings. I mean, you would think

they would get a clue when the riots happened. Instead they just hardened their hearts even more.”

“We believe the same. In a way, we had it much easier the first time we went though this time period. With nearly all of humankind gone, we did not have the threat of the 'big splat' in front of us.”

“It had already happened.” She nods.

“Though it happened many times after that on other worlds, except for one spectacular exception on Grissfy most of the collapses happened slowly over hundreds of years.”

“What happened on Grissfy?”

“Grissfy? There is no Grissfy.” She grins, “Anymore.” Oh.

“So what will you do this time?”

“Ah, that's were you come in. We need your help.”

“No way.” I wave my free hand around me. “Together you can do practically anything. Even if you raise me to TK8 or 9, I will be only a small part. And a part without all the experience each of you has.”

“There is a problem. Our experience is dated. I was never part of this time period and the others only remember what they chose to record in journals and such. We know the stories by heart, but not the society or the tech. Ron and Barb had to do a crash course to even be able to operate a simple multiterm or pod.”

“But you have that gift. You can read anyone. Their complete history.”

“I can read what they did, not how to do it. I could not learn a trade by touching someone.”

“I would hardly think you need a shrink. Without my machines and the techs, I am like a fish out of water. Besides, take your time, you can learn anything.”

She gives me a dirty look, “We don't have time. It is not your interpretation of readings that interests us. We don't know the culture, they way it works, how things are done. You do. We know your history. Born to upper class pears. Best schools and connections. It was only after you lost a sweetheart to a rival who used devious means, that you started to come around.”

Whoa, they even know about that. Not in my files. Wonder how?
“You don't need me for that. There are lots of people available. Not all the pears like what is going on. Besides, in case you hadn't noticed, I am not exactly part of the 'respected' any longer.”

“Ah huh. Who was head cook?”

“Edward Houstin.”

“The one who cleaned the restrooms?”

“That was Garcia Diego Hermenes Perez.”

“The gardener?”

“Julie Setz. Her helper was John. No one knew his last name, not

even him. What's the point of this?"

"How many of the upper class knew their names."

I laugh, "None of them. I think they even forgot my name the day it happened to me."

"You still think we could have used anyone? Give me your bracelet."

I look at her shocked, "Why? Without it I am dead."

She laughs, "Hardly. Even if we were to let you go, with your new abilities you would get by just fine. We all were TK2s at one point. I don't think Br'thn would let anything happen to you either." Br'thn purrs again for a moment and then lifts off so I can work on the bracelet.

I undo it and hand it over, rubbing my wrist where it was.

Ci'l'an takes it, examines it carefully and then hands it back. "You have had an interesting month with this thing. I see father was his usual charming self. Fixed now."

"Huh?" I look at it. Whoa, I can see inside it with the new sight. Not great detail, but it is as if I had it in pieces all over a table. There is an empty spot with a pattern for something that might have been there once.

"Now you." She concentrates, then holds out her hand. A small silver gray grain of rice appears, a second one and then a third one appears.

"They really wanted to keep track of where you were. Interesting. I thought it was Ron who lead Sauron here, but I am thinking now that it was you whom he was after. I have removed all the locators from the device and you."

"Then why didn't he kill me as well?"

"We would not have let that happen. Besides he probably wants to see if there are higher level TKs you report to. Let's get back to the rest of them. Call Br'thn to keep up."

"I read the books remember. I know you can't tell a 'thn to do anything."

"How true. Come Br'thn. We go to be with the others."

Br'thn come.

I shake my head. A lot to learn. It is only few minutes till we are back. I had not gone that far. Everything seems to have settled down.

Barb looks up from her tech setup, "Good, you are back. How much money do you need to get back into the good graces of everyone? Would a hundred million do?"

"For a minor player that would be enough."

"We don't want to attract a lot of attention. At least not at first." She plugs a fiber line into the side of her head. Must be implanted again. I start to scan her head to see and she gives me a dirty look. I guess it is not polite to scan someone who is TK. At least not a superior.

"We will need a cover story."

"Lost in the woods, stumbles on mineral wealth?"

"Too easy. Besides, he does not own this land. The owner would get

it all and he would not even be thanked. Probably abused so he would not try and make any kind of claim.”

“That leaves tech or info. Would certainly be easy to hand over some small piece of level six point eight stuff they had not seen before.”

“And how would a head resampler know about that?”

“Shrink.” I correct him. He ignores me.

“Blackmail then. That would be easy. He must have heard thousands of confessions. Even if they are not true, others would believe they were true.”

“Wait a minute. That does not sound very nice. I don't see why I have to become a pear again. Couldn't a sap working in the right place hear more?”

“They would never trust you.”

“Nice? Pears are never nice. Besides we do not need to actually blackmail anyone. I have already added the funds to his account in small increments over a period of time. The others just have to believe that is how he got it.” Makes sense.

“Wait a minute. Ci'lan thinks that Sauron may be after me. How is all this going to work now? I don't want to be a snack for him just yet thank you.”

“I found locators in his bracelet and three more on him.”

“Could just be because he is a fallen pear. A person scorned is dangerous. Probably standard procedure.”

“They were the smallest ones they have.”

“Not the nanos though?”

“Those too, but would be no point in showing him. He would not have been able to see them.”

“Microscope? Easy to make in a hurry.”

“For a tech. I am an historian, remember?” She grins.

“Even you could put a couple of lenses together. History was full of microscope designs.” Ron grins back.

“Never mind, what about Sauron?” I am feeling more like a subway sandwich every minute.

“Oh, he won't be a problem. We will take over his network and then make him an offer he can't refuse.”

“That is a fantasy. Even you can't do that. If he is what I think he is, his network is vast.”

“He knows something is up, but not sure why. Nor does he have any idea what we can do. We had suppressed our TK to norm levels. He is so egotistical that he never shared power much. Didn't trust anyone because he taught everyone to be ruthless. Think about it. He has been here sixty five mill and he has never made a single TK, only hunted them. We intend to haunt him and then offer him a way to a place he would want to be very much.”

“Wait, wait, you want to take over his network of evil? Why? I thought we were the good guys. No bullies remember?”

They all turn and grin at me. Gulp, can I still get out. Maybe dying in a ditch would not be so bad.

“Wake up Cat. We move.”

I go over to Owa. She is curled up with her nose sticking in the air. So cute. Her tail is swishing gently. Must be in a dream. I go up to her and tickle her ears. I am smiling as I do it. I know it is mean, but I have to have some fun.

Suddenly I am facing straight up with Owa looking down at me teeth bared and about to drool on me or eat me. The others are all laughing at me. I think I have been set up.

“Owa, get off of him. He was only trying to wake you up.”

“Can I eat him instead? Monkeys taste so good raw.”

“Owa, he is your student. No more roasted rat if you hurt him.”

“Please, I don't eat rats anymore. Haven't in a very long time.”

“You mean since yesterday. We are going to the rez. . . .”

Owa gets off me, “Come student.” I get up and follow, not making a sound. She is certainly fast. Not that I am any judge. Have been inside too much. A moment later I am walking in the near dawn on red soil. That was incredible. Br'thn zooms past me going somewhere.

The trees are gone. Almost all plant life is gone. Just stone and rock “How do people live here?”

“They don't. Most are down there.” Owa points north-west, assuming the sun still rises in the east. I can see primitive nearly falling down structures with smoke coming out of their metal chimneys. Instead we are headed for some kind of a stone building. Thin flat stones piled on top of each other. Similar to the other structures at our level of what looks like the edge of a cliff. I scan and can't 'see' the bottom. At the entrance everyone one of our group bows in reverence, then enters. Owa and I are next. Owa bows and enters. Not sure what to do, I bow. Seems silly. I have never been religious and certainly not one to follow a crowd.

Inside is dark, only a small oil lamp lit. There is a stone altar of some kind in the center. Everyone is spaced out around it. They leave me a space directly in front of the door way I came in. I stop about the same distance they are from the altar. On the altar is a book. The bible? I said I was not religious, so I am wondering what this is all about.

“We have several new people with us this day. So an explanation is in order.” Sounds like Barb, but different. A slight accent I can't place. I scan. Not Barb, she is two to my right. She is easy to identify as she is the only female with an implant.

Don't do that again Doc. Not polite. All will become clear.

Sorry. Hope they got that. Apparently this is some record of Sauron's activity on their version of earth. Should be the same up to the near

present, so much would be valid. They treat it as if it was Holy though. And what's this about taking over his network? What have I gotten myself into. The new person is droning on and I am getting sleepy. Never been one for rituals.

Finally we get to sit. I am next to Owa and soon both of us are fast asleep. She makes a nice pillow. That soft gray fur.

"Listen they are both 'purring' in synchrony." I wake up. I am shockingly weak.

"Now you have gone and woken him up." Someone hands me something and motions for me to put it in my mouth. Chocolate. Not normally a chocolate person, but it tastes great right now. I nod thanks, but whomever it was is gone.

"We need to get some lessons into him before long. He is TK3 now and could cause some damage to norms if we are not careful."

"No signs of going rogue."

"Excuse me," I say, "I am right here. You can talk directly to me. And I am TK2, not 3."

They laugh, then one answers, "Not any more you're not." Which one is Mei and which one is Rachel? Mei was taller I think.

"Come on, time to eat." I am hungry, so I get up and follow, but hold back. Whoa, the world. It looks different. I can see details I never have seen before.

James comes up to me, "I love the look on a fresh upgrade. There is no more pleasurable experience to be had."

"Better than sex." Q adds. At least I can tell the two of them apart. Come to think of it, I have not any sexual feelings. Never been high on my list of desires anyway. I like being alone. I guess because I have had to deal with so many other people's problems, I really don't want to get into it myself. Freud was right about nearly everything somehow coming back to sex, or the desire to reproduce. Our species is no different. We will 'fuck' ourselves into oblivion at the current rate.

"When do I get to meet OM or Ung?"

"Not till TK7. Technically even a norm could be guided. But it helps to have had some more experience before then in the TK arts. Then you can go off and talk to them whenever your duties permit."

"How does my OM take to you outsiders?"

"Well, we are still genetically hers, meaning OM's, stock, so even though she is somewhat suspicious, we have a lot to offer her."

"Meaning you can spore earlier, without sacrificing anyone and spread the seed further."

"That was not specifically in the journals, so you had to put it together yourself. Good. But, yes, she is interested."

"I was kind of surprised about that. I would have thought she would have insisted on doing it the old fashioned way. I would not have guessed

there was that much flexibility in her programming.”

“Well, in spite of everything, she is not stupid. And she knows she is different than a normal OM, missing a direct connect to the animal half. If she was not flexible, she would not have survived this long. Besides, having heard what happened to our OM, she has the advantage of learning from her mistakes.”

“Then how come your OM still spored the old way? And in fact demanded it.”

“Because we did not even know about her and the spores till it was too late. Understanding goes a long way to convincing someone. Weren't you listening?”

“Not the whole thing though.”

“Sauron.” They nod.

“Join us for lunch Doc.” James and Q.

“You don't want to eat next to Owa.” They both laugh. Owa pretends to not have heard. Nose in the air sniffing at something.

“Why not? She is my teacher. Shouldn't I have to stay with her?”

“We are not that rigid. You will learn different things from each of us. The two of us are in charge of your martial arts training in fact.”

“Two against one? And a wuss sap at that. I hate martial arts. I know it would be good for me, but I was always so bad at anything physical. Something I never understood in the journals. Why bother? I would have thought that being TK would be enough.”

“Oh, there are other students. You did not think we just picked on you did you?” They grin in an evil, going to get you, sort of way.

“Who else and why do we have to learn martial arts?” Can't learn if you don't ask.

“There will be many times when you can't reveal your abilities. At least not overtly. Nice to have a backup.”

“In other words, you can use to TK to make your actions a little more than your opponent, as long as it is not something humanly impossible.”

“Correct. Though at times, you will not be able to use TK at all. Like when fitted with a limiter or under deep cover in an area that could sense it in you.”

“Tech.”

Q nods and then adds, “Or an enemy TK. Even a TK1 can sense a TK9 unshielded.”

“May I scan you?”

James smiles, “First with no shielding.” I look and see a sort of aura around him. Pretty impressive. I look at my own hand. Much less. He is TK9 and I am a three. Makes sense. “Now I will 'hide' it.” He does so and he looks no different than I could see pre TK. We are walking the entire time. TK is not something that you stop and do, it is something that is part of you, all the time.

"Of course martial arts is not the only class. You will also be doing Zen meditation, tech, evidence gathering, food prep, diplomacy, native arts, and many others. We have not figured it all out yet."

"What is native arts?"

"Running Snake and Pushy Paws will be leading that class. How to see the world around you in the ways of the original settlers of this continent."

"We are here. Doc, you will not be used to this kind of food, so just watch others and see how they eat." I nod. We enter a large structure. Stone and mortar on the first three feet of height and then wood above. In the center is a fire pit with the ceiling open at the top. An old man stands at the center near the fire pit. He is dressed in old blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He has lots of silver and turquoise jewelry. Long gray hair tied on both sides. An elder I am guessing. There are no chairs or even blankets. Everyone is standing. Is this how we eat? I look around and everyone is talking or going about their work.

The old man speaks in a language I have never heard before and everyone else takes a moment to stop what they are doing and give him their attention. He begins again. I still can't understand him. Am I going to fall asleep again? I look around. Owa is with a much smaller cat. A house cat? What is she doing with a house cat? She picks it up and holds it in her arms, stroking and petting it. That is the weirdest thing I have ever seen. I had seen the gorillas with pet cats of course, but this is a cat with a pet cat. Yingui is standing near an older native woman. They are holding hands, but watching the elder. I turn back to him just as he finishes. Everyone says something in unison and then go every which way.

"Doc, follow us." James and Q are beckoning me. I follow them out another door. There are tables and chairs set up. I take a seat next to them. Platters of some strange looking greenish yellow pastry appear. Pots of beans and squash. Fried chicken. Everyone helps themselves.

"What went on inside?" I ask.

"Prayer of thanksgiving to Great Spirit."

"Is that your religion? Some kind of Native American thing?"

"No, just a polite thing to do. We honor our hosts when we honor their beliefs, at least with our presence. Everyone is free to worship anyway they want as long as it does not harm others."

"Or force your beliefs on another."

"At least in principle. Can't really prevent the example you show others."

"Eat Doc. Don't be bashful. We know being upgraded saps you of your strength."

"Speaking of which. I don't like chocolate," They look at me like I have said the most repulsive thing imaginable. I go on, "but for some

reason that piece someone handed me tasted great. Is that because of TK?”

“For some reason, chocolate supplies something every TK craves. Even though from entirely different worlds and systems. Each system has something similar that tastes nearly identical to chocolate. We could figure it out, but have decided to leave this one mystery to just being pleasurable.”

“Interesting. So, what is this greenish pastry thing?”

“Called fry bread. About a million calories, but tastes great. We need to fatten you up again anyway. Have some more please.” I try the piece I had already placed on my plate. Not bad. Oily as all get out, but not bad.

“Hey, wait, what do you mean, fatten me up? I spent years getting rid of my pear fat. I don't ever want to return to that state.”

“You would not be able to even if you tried. Even a TK3 could not eat enough to get obese like a normal pear. You might be able to gain a few kilos, but that would be it. Our bodies self regulate.”

“Not that we could not change our form to suit a situation, but left to themselves, our bodies would return to healthy again pretty quickly.”

“Guilt free eating. My colleagues would have a field day with that concept.”

“Gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins.”

“Too far back Q. There are more modern concepts than sins, like displaced aggression, self hate, etc.”

“Whatever you say Doc.” He grins. People are always smiling here. I have yet to see anyone get upset about anything or anyone.

“Attention everyone. I would like to start the introductions of our new members.”

“Oath, oath, oath!” The old guard starts shouting. I remember the oath, based on the precepts. I don't have any problems with that. Yinguqui quiets everyone down though. Not yet then.

“I would like to introduce George, Lisa's father. We know he will be very helpful once we let him into the lab.” George stands and stares at Lisa. Lisa looks amused. Not sure what a level six expert will be able to help with. Why don't they just use their level ten stuff? Has to be weird to be seeing your dead daughter all grown up.

“And along with him we also snagged Harsha.” She stands and sits right back down. Shy, introverted, probably great in the lab. George will be the motivator and she will be the problem solver.

Jesan gets up, “I would like to introduce myself, or rather half of myself.” An ordinary looking man gets up, smiles and sits again. Looks vaguely middle eastern and very similar to Jesan. Oh, shit, Jesus himself. I want to bow or something. No one else is reacting. The Lord of Hosts and no one cares. I will definitely want to ask more questions. Strange. I would not have thought of myself as religious. But then I never expected

to come face to face with Him.

James gets up next to me. Must be my turn, but then he turns to his left, "I would like to introduce Tran Vu. He will be working with Daniel on the diplomatic side of our, ah, work." That gets a few laughs and a confused look from Tran Vu. Must be of Vietnamese ancestry.

Mei gets up, "Please stand. There is not much we will ask of you. This is one." A hostile recruit. Why? "This is Hei Long. One of the most despicable people we know. He will help us to think like Sauron to work against Sauron. Be afraid of this one. He will use every possible trick to gain advantage. Now sit." Everyone is quiet.

James nudges me, "He is fitted with a limiter. Wonder why?" I was not expecting him to ask me of all people. And I thought we were not supposed to scan each other. A hostile must get treated differently or there is something I am not seeing with normal sight.

"I don't know. The journals never said he was TK." This is totally crazy, but I get up and start over to him. Owa is watching me carefully. I pass by her. She is still with her pet cat. Gray, just like her. There is only one gray cat that Owa would care this much about.

"Owa, may I borrow Ghost for a moment?"

Her ears go up, probably not expecting me to know who it was. She lets go of Ghost who is curious about who I am. I already have Owa's smell all over me, so I am not perceived as a threat. Before I reach out for him though Owa raises a paw and shows me her claws. I nod my understanding and she lowers her paw. A warning not to let anything happen to him. I wonder if Ghost is thought of in the same way for Cats as Jesus is for us? This is totally nuts.

I pick up Ghost and stroke him under his chin and around his neck. He starts purring loudly. Can you hear me Ghost?

Of course stupid monkey. Ghost for sure.

Good. I am going to go over to the last monkey introduced. Be ready to pop out if something goes wrong. I have a feeling that he is not as evil as Mei thinks.

I sit down next to him and let Ghost stretch on my lap. He sniffs Hei Long who breaks down and starts sneaking him scraps from the table. Soon his is sitting on Hei Long's lap purring very loudly.

Rachel gets up, "I would like to introduce Dorothy." Dorothy, who was she? I remember the name, but not the connection. So far they have chosen people who were useful in their own world as well."

Dorothy gets up, waves, "Very pleased to have meet all of you." British accent. Right, she was in South America. Born in the 1700's. Wow. A natural TK.

Owa looks nervous. I had better try what I had intended or it could all blow up on me. I turn to Hei Long. "Mr. Hua, please try the fry bread. Not the same as gindoi, but tasty all the same." He nods to me and

accepts my offering. I grab another one for myself. I continue, "I am really impressed by your robe. Did you design it?"

"Yes. Thank you. It is based on my name."

"Black Dragon Flower. Very beautiful. You are quite an artist."

"You know our language?"

"Alas, no. Ohio was not so fortunate as to have many from the Middle Kingdom. I picked up a few words when business men favored our small enclave."

"You should visit our country. If you know the cooking of the Guangdong Province you will find it much more to your liking at the place of origin."

"I have heard they ruin it here. 'Americanized'." I give a dirty look to show my distaste.

He smiles. It is a start. "So, what brings you here?" he asks me.

"I was kidnapped as well, by Owa in fact." I shrug in her direction. "I went along more or less willingly though. They caught me at a low point in my life. And I admit, I really enjoy the company of Cats, which I see you do as well."

"Great hunters and not so dependent on others. Dogs are so hopeless, don't you think?"

Ghost looks up from his meal, *Who would dare to think otherwise?* He looks around. The others have gone back to eating themselves. I guess there was no order or timing to the introductions.

"The cat talks? This is amazing." He holds up Ghost to look into his face. Ghost ignores him of course, looking everywhere except into Hei Long's face. "Still a cat I see." He smiles and sets Ghost back down on his lap, giving him another morsel.

"I have an idea. Why don't you join me in being trained by Owa. She is to be my ah, instructor." I roll my eyes for effect.

He laughs, "I would like that very much Doctor, but alas, the ugly gong to my left is not through torturing me yet." A play on Mei Ling's name, beautiful bell. And only a few words left in my Chinese vocabulary.

"So, you know who I am. Good. I would not want it to come out later and have you think I was manipulating you." I sigh relief. A person who feels they have been betrayed is very dangerous. "I am curious though. I did not know you would be here, but you knew of me. What did you hear?" I whisper the last question.

"Though I do not agree with your beliefs, you stuck up for what you believed in and accepted your fate gracefully."

"I also noticed that you also have not complained of your fate."

"I bide my time. Sooner or later they will grow careless. Baigui." I am not sure what that means, but I have heard it before. An insult?

"No discipline. More like a bunch of saps without a leader." He nods.

“I can relate. They do not know how to treat their help in this country. A lazy frightened overworked slave is not much use, not even for amusement.”

“How true.” He holds up Ghost. “I think you have had enough for now.” He puts Ghost down on the ground and immediately finds Ghost back up on his lap looking over the edge of the table for more fry bread. Hei Long looks shocked and carefully places Ghost back on the ground, but this time watches very closely while guarding his lap. Ghost pops back up on his lap, not jumping, using DS instead, right past his arms. “This is amazing. They have such abilities here and they sit around doing picnic.” He shakes his head.

“They say they are going to try and take over the network of someone named Sauron.”

“I have heard of him. This group does not have the gallbladder to do the job.”

“Not without your help anyway. I mean look at these robes they all wear.” I pull at mine. “These would not impress a pig. Owa threatened to eat me if I complained though. If they can't even do robes right, they are not going to be able to take on the network. I hear most of them cannot even read or write.”

“No! This is news. This is definitely a lost cause. We had better make plans to escape before we find ourselves dead.”

“And go where? We are in the middle of the South West of the United States. It is hundreds of miles to anywhere.”

“Could be a problem. I have seen nothing that looks like it will make it around here. None of our peasants are treated this badly.”

I am about to answer him when Mei interrupts, “Would you two stop your plotting long enough to show some respect for the others.” Ugly Gong has spoken. I don't really think that, but it is kind of funny. I smile in spite of myself.

There is someone I do not know with Yingui. I think I remember her being with him earlier. Looks to be about a hundred, but in this sun, she could be much younger. They seem to know each other, but no TK would look this old. Even Yingui only looks to be about fifty and I beginning to suspect that is by choice.

The introductions are going roughly in a circle, but I messed it up by moving over here to be with Hei Long.

“This is Angpetu. She will be helping us in scouting and surveillance.”

“Welcome Angpetu!” Strange name. Wonder where it came from and what it means?

Everyone is looking at me. What?

Yingui gets up. The old lady gets up with him. She says something and he bends his ear to listen to him. He nods and they both come

forward. I stand. I guess I am the last one anyway. He looks at Hei Long. He bows to him and at this Hei Long rises and bows to Yingui.

“You and the Doctor are the only two here to offer respect. Thank you.” He nods. I blush. Had not really thought of it. Mei Ling ignores us, taking over Ghost sitting, or stuffing as it looks like.

“Anikin. You have been talking with Hei Long now for some time. In your professional opinion tell me. Is Hei Long a threat to us?” He is very calm to be talking about someone like that.

I turn to Hei Long and take a deep breath. He watches me with some apprehension, but also remains calm. “We have all had a hard time getting to this spot and this time. Hei Long's journey is no different. His mother died when he was young. In the eyes of his father he was never good enough and being the second born, he would not inherit the family title. On his father's death bed, he was ignored and his brother assumed the regency of the district, though in Hei Long's eyes he was ill qualified for the task.

To make his way Hei Long had to work his way up. Born in the equivalent of the pear class in China, he was not allowed to choose what he really wanted to do, art and design. These professions were not dignified enough for the pear class. Only for those on the edge of society. Drunkards and addicts most of them.

Chinese society is structured differently than here. There are two paths to the top. The legal inherited way” I pause, “And the ruthless way. Hei Long was not given much choice. Too smart for a desk job or the part of a fat slob sucking at the residue. The second path is actually respected in a way. At least you did it yourself. No special favors or 'greased' palms by indulgent parents.

The downside is that Hei Long saw the underside of the Chinese pear society. He has also seen how the pears treat saps here.” Hei Long is watching me carefully. So far, so good. Even I am surprised at how much of this seems to fit. Years of practice and it all seems to gel.

“Sorry I was distracted.” I look to Yingui and his companion. “As to your question. I will answer your question, if you remove the limiter from Hei Long Hua.”

Yingui laughs, “I think that answers the question just fine, but for the benefit of the others, please go on.”

I turn to Hei Long and he nods. The limiter is gone and he still stands here, dignified. Not running, not fighting, not seeking revenge. Though I suspect even he knows that would be impossible with those assembled. No, they would let him go and he knows that.

I turn back to Yingui, “Hei Long Hua is vitally important to the success of this project. Think about it. He is TK2 and promised TK3. The one who made this offer therefore must be at least TK5. Now where did a TK5 come from? Sauron? No way. He does not share his power. But the

only other TKs are right here. Oh wait, what about Jesus' followers? Hardly. Though I am sure they could do the feat, now that they know it is possible, but they would not. Preferring the natural path of God's choosing. What does that leave us?" I have their attention. Hei Long is smiling now.

"We are not alone. You came from a different time and universe. It would appear, so has someone else. DS is TK6 at least. Tell me how hard was it to find this universe from your own? I suspect that it was very difficult. Very difficult indeed. Otherwise you would have noticed it long ago. The further a time split is, the easier it is to get to. That means another TK9 at least. One? or many?"

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in competition for Sauron's roost. That is why Sauron left me alone. He is not looking for a TK2 with a pet Puma. He is looking for the real threat, no offense Owa. Note also, that he did not recognize any of you. It could be that he never knew you directly, as your pre-TK lives were mundane. But it could also be because he was not the one who killed your counterparts here."

I turn to the one standing next to Yingui. I look into her eyes. "Pushy Paws, you knew this before they arrived." She smiles and nods. Yingui raises an eyebrow and looks at her. I laugh and shake my head. "They would need to find and guard the gateway. Always leave a way out. Yingui, you did not know. Interesting. That means you are not the Yingui of the journals. You are my Yingui and know no more of the Guardians that I do. Well, a little more, having spent three years with them and being TK longer than I. Your death faked to throw off our mystery TKs. Since I do not see another copy of you here, I suspect that the Guardian Yingui kept his promise to fuse with the magmotics."

I turn to Mei Ling, "You are also of this time and universe. Your experiences with Hei Long are too fresh and sore. The older Mei Ling would no longer see Hei Long as a threat. You are also smaller than the Mei I met earlier. The ones we seek did not know of you. The Guardian Mei Ling only came back just before they melded with the magmotics. To them, she was lost and not a treat IF they got to the others." I turn and find Daniel. "You also they would not know of as in the other universe you were part of the collective. Both of you came to earth by means other than the Beta transport ship. That means they did not come with the Guardians, but were of their time period. The only ones who could have witnessed the time dimension travel were the Betas. We are not dealing with TKs, but level ten Betas with a lot of psiotic tech."

Daniel comes out from a shelter and bows. I return the bow. No Mei Ling though.

I turn to Owa, "Owa Moosa, Queen of the Cats, will you accept a new student, Hei Long. I can highly recommend him. Together we will rule this place!"

She cocks her head and bows. High praise from a Cat. She then turns to the others and says, "I would be honored gentle men. I would be honored." She raises a paw with claws extended to the others. They all laugh.

Yingui turns and finds Ci'lan, "Almost daughter. I think he might give you a run for your money with some practice. However that is not a second Daniel, but K! acting like Daniel. K! was prepared to assume any identity we asked for." The second Daniel grins wider than humanly possible to prove to me it really is K!. "The one from your world did die in the Agent X plague. Mei Ling did die in an 'accident', she just adjusted her shape to her old one because she is more used to it. And I am the original Yingui, yours died also. We also believe that the Betas that we are looking for are not from either of our worlds. Yours because they could not have happened yet and ours because the only instance where Betas were able to make TKs of normal humans were destroyed by the 'thn collective. You could not have known of that. But otherwise we believe you are correct. The question is, is this some new TK talent or are you the reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes?"

"Indeed."

"You know Hei Long, I like being TK3. I can hardly wait for TK4."

He raises an eyebrow and smiles, "You are both wrong. Your adversary is not Beta." He pauses and lets that sink in. Who else could it be?

"They are Alphas, who have subjugated a group of Betas again." He is no longer smiling. No one else is either. Aggressiveness and tech together.

"May you live in interesting times." An old Arab curse. I suspect we really don't have a clue about what is going on. I forgot something. I thought they hated bullies with a passion. Why do they want to become the bullies? I may have been better off in the ditch as a dead sap. Oh, God. No offense Jesus.

None taken.